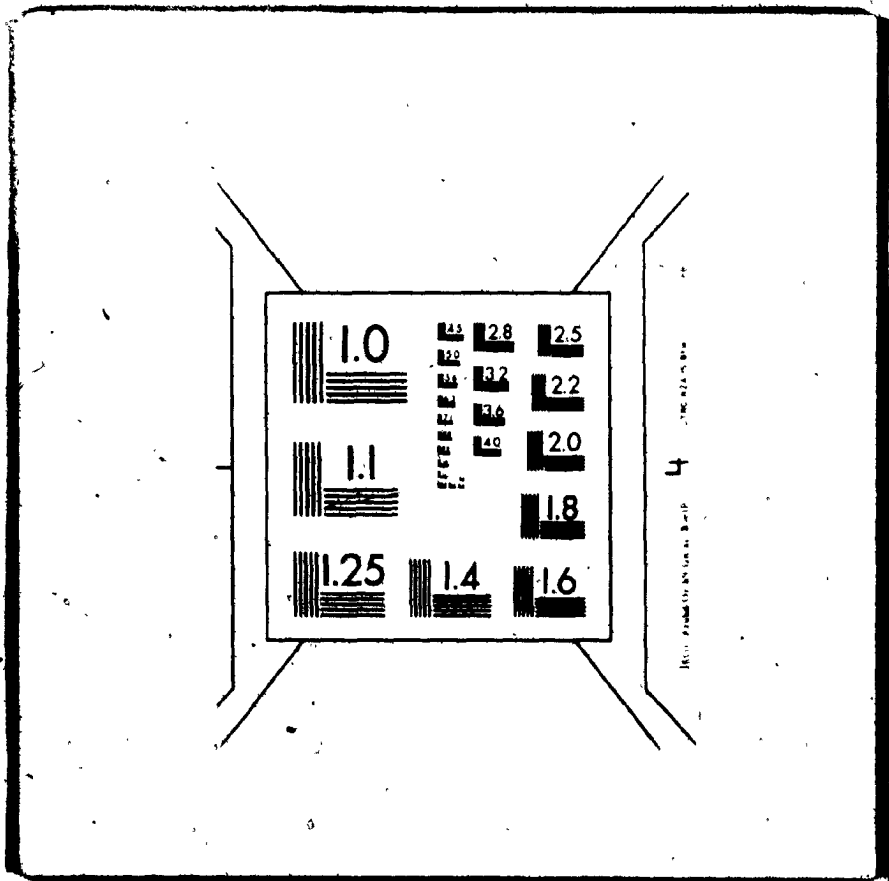


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TITLE OF THESIS/TITRE DE LA THÈSE Modern Nigerian Drama in English: A Descriptive
and Critical Survey

UNIVERSITY/UNIVERSITÉ The University of New Brunswick

DEGREE FOR WHICH THESIS WAS PRESENTED/
GRADE POUR LEQUEL CETTE THÈSE FUT PRÉSENTÉE Doctor of Philosophy in English

YEAR THIS DEGREE CONFERRED/ANNÉE D'OBTENTION DE CE GRADE Encaenia, 1979

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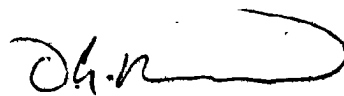
by

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A THESIS SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILMENT OF THE
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ABSTRACT

Modern Nigerian drama in English is an offshoot of preliterate traditional ritual and festival drama. Its history from the beginnings up to the early part of the 19th century remains sketchy and mainly conjectural. From the early 1880's, records of concerts sponsored by the Brazilian Dramatic Company in Lagos reveal the gradual development of stylized drama in Nigeria, though the dramatic productions were mainly of foreign material. The influence of the dramatic activities of the Brazilian settler population on the growth of various amateur concert groups in the major cities of Southern Nigeria was tremendous, but up till the early part of the 20th century the history of the theatre and drama in Nigeria could not be seen in a clear perspective. With the rise of Hubert Ogunde in 1944, however, the blurred outlines of this history grew distinct and traceable, though the first extant, truly Nigerian play in English, Henshaw's This Is Our Chance, was not published until 1956. It is this historical perspective of the origin and development of the theatre and drama in Nigeria that the introductory chapter of this thesis provides.

Although the plays published from 1956 to 1975 reveal no discernible literary movement, an attempt is made in this study to classify them into three convenient groups in chapters two, three and four respectively. Chapter two deals with selected plays in which the past is used, through myth and history, to appreciate the present. In the dramatists' response to myths and legends of Nigeria, an intent to instruct the society and to warn it against the recurrence of certain past events can be discerned. Six plays, including Eshu Elegbara,

Woyengi and The Imprisonment of Obatala, illustrate the didactic purpose of the integration of myths and legends into modern Nigerian drama. Two historical plays, Kurunmi and The Cassava Ghost, reveal the playwrights' commitment to critical comments on contemporary socio-political situations in the country.

Chapter three treats five plays set in the conflict-plagued transitional period between the past and modern times. Despite the variety of conflicts dramatized in these plays, each piece portrays certain undesirable aspects of the Nigerian culture, questions and condemns those values that have outlived their usefulness. These plays project the collective experience of a people in the process of change; and the resolution of the culture conflict in each play suggests the old order in transition, yielding place to the new.

Chapter four examines the tragic and comic, often satiric veins in which the ills of society are exposed and decried. While James Ene Henshaw's comedies mildly satirize the follies of modern Nigeria, Femi Osofisan's and J. P. Clark's plays reveal a tragic vision of man and of the absurdities of his life. An attempt is made to show that the localized tragedies and absurdities in the plays are, indeed, part of the universal experience of man.

The fifth chapter concentrates solely on Wole Soyinka's dramaturgy. The towering figure of this playwright among his contemporaries, the volume and the quality of his writing deserve separate treatment so as to reflect the true position of his work as the pinnacle of dramatic literature in Nigeria.

The concluding chapter attempts to provide a vision of the

future of the theatre and drama in Nigeria. But first, it examines in retrospect the practical problems confronting the growth of the theatre and drama, especially the problems of language. Then it looks into the dangers to which the playwrights are exposed when they sound too critical of the government, or of some powerful individuals or institutions in society. The study then ends on the optimistic note that, given the present crop of established and upcoming playwrights, and given the increasing popularity of drama, and the artists' invincible sense of commitment, the future promises to be bright for the theatre and drama in Nigeria, despite the competition offered by the movies.

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I wish to express my deep gratitude to both my supervisor, Professor Anthony Boxill, and Dr. M. Travis Lane, for their patience, understanding, suggestions and invaluable criticisms throughout the various stages of the preparation of this manuscript.

For help with photocopying of research materials, I am indebted to the staff of the Language Arts Laboratory of the University of Ibadan. For making available to me all the manuscripts of the papers on African drama presented at the First Ibadan Annual Conference on African Literature in July 1976, I am grateful to Professor M. J. C. Echeruo, then head of the English Department, University of Ibadan.

I must also express my gratitude to the University of Ibadan for an award from the Staff Development Fund in 1974-75. Profound thanks to the School of Graduate Studies and Research, The University of New Brunswick, for the generous Graduate Assistantship, Summer Supplements, and Travel grant, without which my studies at the university would have been impossible.

I must not forget to thank the Department of English, University of Ibadan for providing the typewriter on which the thesis was typed.

Finally, special loving tribute to my wife, Olanike, and to my brothers, sisters, and friends who, in more ways than one, have been instrumental in the successful completion of this work.

PREFACE

Full-length studies of modern Nigerian drama are hard to come by, though the volume of critical appraisals of selected works of individual playwrights keeps growing everyday. This study is, therefore, designed to provide a much needed critical and descriptive survey of modern Nigerian drama in English. In the execution of this task, it has been necessary to limit myself to a period from the beginnings to 1975 because of the staggering frequency with which dramatic literature is being produced in Nigeria. The limiting of my examination to selected plays published up to 1975 facilitates the bringing into focus the first thirty years, or so, of modern theatre and drama in Nigeria.

Although 1975 is the cut-off point in the selection of plays for the purpose of the survey, the bibliography has been made as exhaustive as possible to include plays published as recently as 1977, and background materials published in 1978, and also other texts which were still in the press at the completion of this study. Despite the extensiveness of the bibliography, the possibility of omissions cannot be ruled out.

In my attempt to put into proper perspective the various aspects of the origin and growth of Nigerian theatre and drama, the technique most of the way is exegetical, in the hope that some fresh light will be shed on the problems which have plagued critical comments that followed hard on the production and publication of individual plays. But in the main, the present study is only an introductory survey.

Certain parts of this thesis have been slightly revised for publication as indicated in the "Vita."

CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

THE THEATRE IN NIGERIA

Conflicting and often misleading assertions have been made concerning the origin and growth of the theatre in Nigeria. As recently as 1974, Egun Clark attempted "a historical documentation of the development of the theatre from 1946, the year he [Hubert Ogunde] formed his professional company, to the present day."¹ She makes it clear in her survey, however, that Ogunde's "theatre career began. . . in 1944 when he produced his first opera, The Garden of Eden and The Throne of God, by commission of the Church of the Lord, a Cherubim and Seraphim sect based in Lagos."²

J. A. Adedeji's opinion is at variance with Egun Clark's. He categorically states that Hubert Ogunde "founded 'The African Music and Dance Research Party' and launched himself into the theatre in 1945."³ But Egun Clark cites West African Pilot of 2 [57] March 1946 to support her claim that the "Tiger's Empire in which The African Music Research Party presented Hubert Ogunde, Beatrice Oyede and Abike Taiwo was the play that launched Ogunde Theatre, the first contemporary professional company in Nigeria; it was performed on Monday, 4th March, 1946."⁴

¹ Egun Clark, "Ogunde Theatre: The Rise of Contemporary Professional Theatre in Nigeria 1946-1972," Nigeria Magazine, No. 114 (1974), 3.

² Ibid.

³ J. A. Adedeji, "Oral Tradition and The Contemporary Theatre in Nigeria," Research in African Literature, 2, No. 2 (1971), 135.

⁴ Egun Clark, "Ogunde Theatre," 3.

Another report, by Sam Uba, reveals that Ogunde "worked as a policeman, but resigned in 1945 to form the Hubert Ogunde Concert Party--the first full-time concert group in West Africa."⁵ And so the controversy over the date of the establishment of the first professional theatre in Nigeria continues.

In another study, Adedeji declares: "Soyinka launched his idea of the Nigerian theatre when he presented A Dance of the Forests and a troupe, The 1960 Masks. This bold venture opened up a new vista in the history of the theatre in Nigeria. At once significant, this was the first initiative by a Nigerian towards the birth of the Nigerian theatre."⁶ Yet, elsewhere, the same critic maintains that Wole Soyinka "founded the Orisun Theatre in 1964 as the first professional theatre in English."⁷ But Wole Soyinka himself maintains that "by 1962 or 1963 we were able to bring out the first fully professional theatre still attached by an umbilical cord to the 1960 Masks. . . . And that was the Orisun Theatre Company."⁸

These statements reveal contradictions that are more than merely apparent. It is some relief, however, that J. A. Adedeji concedes that the "theatre has a long tradition in Nigeria. The contemporary

⁵ See "Every Woman Member of my Troupe is my Wife," The Guardian (Manchester), 14 Aug. 1968, p. 4. Cf. "Ogunde Festival '77: 33 years on the Stage 1944-77," Daily Times (Nigeria), 23 Dec. 1976, p. 28.

⁶ Adedeji, "A Profile of Nigerian Theatre 1960-1970," Nigeria Magazine, Nos. 107-109 (1971), 3.

⁷ Adedeji, "Oral Tradition," 135.

⁸ See "Discussion," in K. L. Morell, Ed., In Person: Achebe Awoonor, and Soyinka (Seattle: Univ. of Washington, 1975), p. 96.

theatre," he claims, "is exemplified. . . as the product of two theatrical developments which originated in the communities of the Yoruba peoples of southwestern Nigeria. The theatre in Yoruba language is the 'folk' theatre which originated from the society of masqueraders around the middle of the sixteenth century."⁹

An anonymous critic, writing in 1966 on "An Experiment in Drama," refers to the Yoruba Folk Opera as "barely twenty years old,"¹⁰ thereby implying 1944-46 as the probable date of the birth of the theatre in Nigeria. Also, Oyin Ogunba, who refers to the modern theatre of the proscenium stage as "borrowed mainly from Europe," believes that the "borrowing has been off and on for about a century, but it has in the past twenty years taken a definite shape, starting with the staging of musical works, like those of Handel and Mozart in Lagos, Abeokuta and Ibadan in the 1880's and leading on to the achievements of Duro Ladipo and Wole Soyinka in the present decade."¹¹

It was Echeruo who, in 1962, established the fact that in the early 1880's, the concert was popular in Lagos, much to the embarrassment and disgust of some puritanical missionaries. "At the Annual Conference of the Wesleyan Church in 1881," Echeruo notes, "an address was presented which among other things, expressed concern that 'some places, chapel and school premises, set apart as they are, for the

⁹ Adedeji, "Oral Tradition," 134.

¹⁰ Nigeria Magazine, No. 89 (June 1966), 157.

¹¹ Oyin Ogunba, "Theatre in Nigeria," Présence Africaine, 30 (1966), 65.

worship and service of God, have been unlawfully abused by the holding therein of entertainments which were not only devoid of religious tendency but seem to enter into undisguised competition with the music hall and the theatre."¹² This would suggest that the theatre, whatever its language and level of sophistication, was already part of the life of Lagos people, probably even before 1880. However, the first known organized theatre group in Lagos was formed by the Brazilian Community. According to Echeruo,

There are several records of concerts sponsored or performed by the settler-population. The Brazilian Dramatic Company, under the patronage of the German Consul, Heinrich Bay, performed a 'grand theatre' in honour of Queen Victoria's birthday, on May 23, 1882. The stage on the occasion, we are told, 'was tastefully decorated'; and the performances consisted of 'humorous, dramatic and other pieces, songs and performances on the violin and the guitar'. . . .

Brazilian interest in concerts and theatre appears to have originated from their earlier African experience previous to the slave period in South America.¹³

Although the Brazilian Dramatic Company is not a truly indigenous theatre group because it was made up of members of the settler-population, its contribution to the development of drama and the theatre in Nigeria is monumental. It became the major inspiration for the formation of numerous other entertainment societies. The successful premiere performance of the Ibadan Choral Society on 29 December 1886, the Breadfruit School Entertainment Society which received support from

¹² M. J. C. Echeruo, "Concert and Theatre in Late Nineteenth-Century Lagos," *Nigeria Magazine*, No. 74 (Sept. 1962), 69.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 69-70.

Mr. Charles Foresythe, Herbert Macaulay's concerts in 1889, and a number of other Dramatic Societies in Southern Nigeria,¹⁴ would show that the formal theatre in Nigeria was already on a fairly strong footing as early as the late 19th century. But, no doubt, the theatre in its crude form has always been with Nigerians who, naturally, are a musical people with traditional love of rituals and festivals in which impersonation (that is, masquerading), dance, song, and spectacle are indispensable ingredients.

The problem remains, however, that the whole history of drama and the theatre in Nigeria cannot be presented mainly because of the conspicuous lack of pertinent records. Literary critics have been hampered by this lack and by inadequate records which are, at best, reconstructed with fascinating conjectures in their endeavours to capture the entire history of drama and the theatre in the country. The contradictory assertions by the various critics cited above may be regarded, therefore, as faint streaks of illumination in the dark. Scattered pieces of evidence may exist to enable us to recognize the sketchy outlines of the history of the theatre in Nigeria before the 19th century. Unfortunately, the outlines are no better than mere silhouettes lacking distinct features that would place the entire history in a clear perspective.

The blurred outlines, however, began to grow rather distinct towards the end of the 19th century. But, like the "dingy somber-looking" Chinese lamps and the "suspending lamps" that half-lit the halls which

¹⁴ For a more detailed account, see Echeruo, "Concert and Theatre in Late Nineteenth-Century Lagos," 70-73.

passed for theatres at that time, the life of the 19th and early 20th century drama and theatre in Southern Nigeria was relatively short. In the words of Echeruo,

It is at first surprising that the tradition of the theatre which has grown during the 1880's should have suddenly died out. It would appear, however, that the enthusiasm of these times, in not being fundamental in concept and organic in its development, depended exclusively on the honest (if in other respects, misguided) endeavour of these 'Victorian' Lagosians to improve themselves culturally, through imitation, in order to be accepted. Especially as these concerts depended on the small middle-class elite, they could only survive as long as the intellectuals were willing to continue their support. The concerts, in other words, did not develop strong and independent roots in the Nigerian soil. When professional, commercial, and later political interests diverted the attention of the elite, the spirit of these concerts began to fade away.¹⁵

It was not until Hubert Ogunde rose in 1944 that drama and the theatre assumed a distinctive shape in Nigeria. Though Ogunde produced his plays predominantly in Yoruba, his early success as a dramatist and his popularity especially among the Yoruba paved the way for the keen interest in the theatre which present day Nigerian playwrights of English expression were to develop in the late 1950's and early 1960's. Ogunde it was who, through his humble beginnings, drew attention to the wealth of uniquely African materials waiting to be tapped for stylized drama on the stage.

The generating spirit of drama in Nigeria lies in the mode of living of the ancestors. Like men in any modern society, they sought to

¹⁵ Echeruo, "Concert and Theatre in Late Nineteenth-Century Lagos," 74.

"extend" themselves "beyond the stiff confines of the here and now. One of the most interesting extensions by which modern man has learned to share vicarious experiences and to catch a glimpse of something beyond himself has been through art and literature."¹⁶ Similarly, in Nigeria, as in other parts of Black Africa, our ancestors engaged in the art of story-telling, in songs (often in the form of native ballads and heightened lyrical poetry), music, dance, mime, and spectacle as various forms of relieving themselves of the boredom and monotony of their ordinary work-a-day pre-literate world.

The art of story-telling is of great significance to the development of drama particularly in Southern Nigeria. A skillful narrator would make his story much more interesting if he could intersperse it with songs and a dance or two, because this would enliven his story as well as draw his audience into spontaneous participation in telling and acting out the story. While he sings the solo, his audience takes up the refrain. He imitates the cries and songs of the animals and birds in his story, and uses mime and gesticulations to vivify the description of the actions of his characters. His rhetorical questions are often answered by his audience and their responses and occasional cryptic comments have come to be regarded as being ancestral to audience participation in, and reaction to, theatrical performances on the modern stage. It is this important relationship between the spontaneous behaviour of the audience of a story-teller and the noisy nature of the audience in a modern theatre that critics have failed to identify in

¹⁶ T. W. Hatlen, Orientation to the Theatre (New York: Appleton-Century-Crofts, 1962), p. 2.

their commendable attempts to explain the behaviour of the modern African audience in the theatre.¹⁷

In a sense, a skillful traditional story-teller is a performer, a "dramatist" whose act integrates impersonation (through role-play and imitation), dialogue (by the use of direct speech in reporting the conversation of his characters), and action (including mime and elicited audience participation), all of which constitute the essential ingredients of drama as we know it. Amos Tutuola strives to achieve this "dramatist" stance of the narrator in his novel Feather Woman of the Jungle (London: Faber, 1962), which tells of the suspenseful adventures of the 76-year-old village chief in ten nights, with the chief as the narrator who sustains the interest of his audience with songs, music, dancing and drinking each night.

Herbert Shore heads in the right direction when he states that

African dance and mime were never simply aesthetic. They were rooted in function and necessity. . . . Many of the very acts of African daily life are in themselves forms of theatre in the manner in which they are stylized and dramatized—the greeting from man to man, the breaking of land, planting the seed and harvest, the forms of courtship. . . birth, marriage, and death, prayers for rain. All these things and more, have their own dramatic rituals, each adding depth of meaning, emotional significance, and aesthetic quality to the activity

¹⁷ For example, see K. A. B. Jones-Quartey, "Tragedy and the African Audience," Okyeame, 3, No. 1 (Dec. 1966), 50-56; and "The Problems of Language in the Development of the African Theatre," Okyeame, 4, No. 1 (Dec. 1968), 95-102; T. D. Pawley, "The Black African Audience," Players, Aug. & Sept. 1971, pp. 258-61; and Sonny Oti, "Tragedy's Vocal Audience in Nigeria," Journal of Commonwealth Literature, XI, No. 3 (1975), 53-62.

itself.¹⁸

Implicit in a statement like this one is the indisputable fact that drama has always been a significant element in the culture of traditional Africa.

In Nigeria, for instance, the Yorubas (in the five southwestern States of Oyo, Ondo, Ogun, Lagos and Kwara), the Ijaws of the Delta area, the Igbo of Imo and Anambra States, and the Efiks of the Cross River State have often been cited in various studies to illustrate Nigeria's abundance in indigenous materials with high potentials for drama.¹⁹ Writing on "Aspects of Nigerian Drama," for example, J. P. Clark asserts that just "as the roots of European Drama goes back to the Egyptian Osiris and the Greek Dionysius so are the origins of Nigerian drama likely to be found in the early religious and magical ceremonies and festivals of the peoples of this country. . . The egungun or oro of the Yoruba, the egwugwu or mme masques of the Ibo, and the owu and oru

¹⁸ H. L. Shore, "Drums, Dances. . . And Then Some," Texas Quarterly, 7, No. 2 (Summer 1964), 225-26.

¹⁹ Ulli Beier, "Yoruba Folk Operas," African Music, 1 (1954); "The Egungun Cult," Nigeria Magazine, No. 51 (1956); "The Oshun Festival," Nigeria Magazine, No. 53 (1957); Robert Horton, "New Year in the Delta—a Traditional Festival," Nigeria Magazine, No. 67 (1960); "The Kalabari Ekine Society," Africa, 2 (1963); Ulli Beier, "The Agbegijo Masqueraders," Nigeria Magazine, No. 82 (1964); S. A. Babalola, The Content and Form of Yoruba Ijala (London: Oxford Univ. Press, 1966); J. P. Clark, "Aspects of Nigerian Drama," Nigeria Magazine, No. 89 (1966); Oyin Ogunba, "Ritual Drama of the Ijebu People," Unpubl. Ph. D. Dissertation, Univ. of Ibadan, 1967; Margaret Laurence, Long Drums and Cannons (London: Macmillan, 1968), esp., pp. 12-18, and 77-80; Ola Rotimi, "Traditional Nigerian Drama," in Bruce King, Ed., Introduction to Nigerian Literature (Lagos: Univ. of Lagos, 1971), pp. 36-49; M. J. C. Echeruo, "The Dramatic Limits of Igbo Rituals," Research in African Literature, 4, No. 1 (1973); and O. Fubara, "Owu Arusun Festival," Nigeria Magazine, No. 113 (1974).

water masquerades of the Ijaw are typical of the national repertory still generally unacknowledged today."²⁰ Some of the most fascinating of the ancestral or myth plays (which Clark cites and classifies as sub-divisions of traditional drama) include the New Year Festival of Buguma, Mingi Oporope (on the water pig), The Tight-rope Dancer, and other Efik or Ibibio plays, the Akan play Utughu or The Spider Play, the annual Igogo festival at Owo, the seasonal dance-dramas of the Ijaw, and the graduation drama of Isiji or Ipu Ogu performed by the Igbo people of Edda near Afikpo. The impression created in Clark's study is that the traditional plays, dance-dramas, rituals and festivals, like many other indigenous African "dramatic" productions, provide a rich background for the development of modern drama in Nigeria. Clark's unequivocal equation of these rituals and festivals with drama is, however, a bit misleading.

Another critic, M. M. Mahood, states that "There have always been forms of drama in Africa though the body of actual drama is small in comparison with the great quantity of pre-drama to be found, on the one hand, in religious ritual, and on the other hand, in the telling and singing of stories for entertainment."²¹ This view is indisputable. The contention, however, is that Clark's study pays little attention to the frontier between pre-drama and drama which Mahood points out, is not always easy to define.²²

²⁰ In G. D. Killam, Ed., African Writers on African Writing (London: Heinemann, 1973), p. 20.

²¹ M. M. Mahood, "Drama in New-Born States," Présence Africaine, 32 (1966), 23.

²² Ibid.

This difficult task of defining the border-line between rituals and festivals on the one hand and drama on the other is the basis of Echeruo's essay on "The Dramatic Limits of Igbo Rituals." He argues, for example, that a "New Yam Festival. . . is a great ritual and festive event. Behind the ritual activities of the festival is almost certainly a mythos of a returning and beneficent god who is both welcomed and propitiated. But the festival itself, together with its associated ritual acts, is not drama which only emerges from the selective elaboration, reenactment and reinterpretation of significant aspects of the festive myth."²³

Echeruo emphasizes the need to distinguish between drama and festival, and cites the Mbom Ama Festival of Umunumo, the Odo Festival and the Ojiyi Fertility Festival in Akp to illustrate the necessary distinction. The discussion of these festivals is preceded by a quick glance at the Sumerian Festival in which "the enactment. . . of the arrival of Marduk is embodied in the Festival itself as a ritual incident. That is to say, the drama is absorbed in ritual action and the mythos is subsumed in ritual. Hence, though the Festival has a great deal of dialogue, action, music, dance and decor, it does not crystallize in drama."²⁴ His conclusion, after examining the three Igbo festivals cited above, distinctly maps out the frontier between festival (pre-drama) and drama proper:

²³ M. J. C. Echeruo, "The Dramatic Limits of Igbo Rituals," 23-24.

²⁴ Ibid., 25.

The dramatic content of the Odo festival, like the other festivals of Igbo people is . . . buried in the ritual purity of the festival. What is needed then . . . is to force that ritual to yield its story; to cut through the overlay of ceremony to the primary events of the mythos. Ritual is, and has always been, a dead end; it cannot grow. It only shrinks steadily into inevitably inaccessible (though powerful) symbolism. The Igbo should do what the Greeks did: expand ritual into life and give that life a secular base. That way, we may be able to interpret and reinterpret that serious view of life which is now so dimly manifest in our festivals.²⁵

Echeruo's call on the Igbo to do what the Greeks did may be interpreted as a call for playwrights with a guiding intellect, who, by virtue of imaginative creativity, are capable of harnessing traditional myths, rituals, and festivals so that they transcend their delimiting confines and evolve into drama of considerable magnitude. Such dramatists had already emerged in Yorubaland where Hubert Ogunde, the late Duro Ladipo, the late Kola Ogunmola, and Obótunde Ijimere have been producing plays in the vernacular for about two decades. They represent the first crop of Nigerians to effectively interpret through drama the serious view of life which has for long been manifest in Nigerian myths, festivals and rituals.

Hubert Ogunde, Nigeria's foremost folk dramatist, has "written" about thirty plays to date, among them, The Garden of Eden (1944), Mr. Devil's Money (1946), Strike and Hunger (1946), Towards Liberty (1947), Yoruba Romu (banned by the N. N. D. P. Western Nigerian government in 1965), and recently, Aiya! One distinguishing characteristic of Ogunde's plays is that no full text of any of them exists, though the songs which

²⁵ Ibid., 30.

normally tell the story in each play are waxed on records, many of which are still available. His plays have definite plots but the dialogue is improvised most of the way. The result is that Ogunde's plays can be faithfully presented only by the Ogunde Theatre Group. Even then, no two productions of the same play can be exactly the same in terms of its dramatic dialogue.

Kola Ogunmola, a contemporary of Hubert Ogunde, wrote over ten plays before his death, including Love of Money, They Are Enemies, and the most popular of them all, The Palm-Wine Drinkard, which is an adaptation of Amos Tutuola's first novel of the same title. Oyin Ogunba, who rates this play as "about the best thing yet produced in Yoruba theatre, as a dramatization of a one-man epic," does not believe it can "really be called an adaptation since both Tutuola and Ogunmola draw from the [same] oral tradition and Ogunmola's play is significantly different from Tutuola's novel."²⁶

Duro Ladipo is a more serious playwright than Kola Ogunmola. He grew from a composer of Yoruba church music in Oshogbo to an accomplished playwright. His Oba Ko So brought him to limelight at the Berlin Theatre Festival in 1964, and at the Commonwealth Festival in England in 1965. This play, which deals with the tumultuous life, death, and

²⁶ O. Ogunba, "Theatre in Nigeria," 68. It is hard to accept Ogunba's argument. Jean-Paul Sartre's The Flies is as distant from Sophocles' and Euripides' Electra as modern existentialism is from Greek classicism; and nothing illustrates the gulf between Elizabethan and neo-classical drama better than Dryden's All For Love which transforms the political struggle between Antony and Octavius into a mere love-honour conflict within the framework of heroic tragedy. Yet, The Flies is as much an adaptation of Electra as All For Love is an adaptation of Shakespeare's Antony and Cleopatra. It is the prerogative of the playwright, I believe, to modify his source material to suit his purpose.

deification of Alafin Sango, derives from Samuel Johnson's History of the Yorubas (1921). His other plays include Oba Waja, and Moremi, which, like Oba Ko So, is a mytho-historical play modified for the stage from Johnson's book. Unlike Ogunde and earlier Ogunmola, Duro Ladipo, who "is as much a poet as he is a musician. . .and [who] first explored the wealth of traditional Yoruba poetry in his plays,"²⁷ has written texts for his plays. These have been translated into English by Ulli Beier.²⁸

Obotunde Ijimere is another playwright of Yoruba expression. Ulli Beier has published a collection of three of his plays in translation under the title The Imprisonment of Obatala and Other Plays. The two other plays in the volume are Everyman (Eda in the original Yoruba version), and Woyengi. Obotunde Ijimere got the inspiration to write from his experience with Ladipo's Company for which he wrote one of his plays Eda. The Imprisonment of Obatala remains his major play. It is based on a Yoruba myth of the creator-god, but made significant by its apparent political allegory. It "explores the philosophy of Yoruba [orisa] worship and tries to show the interplay of cosmic forces that are personified in the Yoruba imagination as [orisa]-supernatural beings, half human and historical, half divine and eternal."²⁹ Obotunde Ijimere has also got to his credit a fourth play entitled Born With the

²⁷ Ulli Beier, in "Introduction" to his English adaptation of Obotunde Ijimere's The Imprisonment of Obatala and Other Plays (London: Heinemann, 1966), p. v.

²⁸ One of these plays, Moremi, selected for treatment in this study, is published in Three Nigerian Plays, with introduction and notes by Ulli Beier (London: Heinemann, 1967).

²⁹ Ulli Beier, "Introduction" to The Imprisonment of Obatala and Other Plays, p. vi.

Fire on His Head,³⁰ the plot of which is taken from Johnson's History of the Yorubas.

Although the works of Hubert Ogunde and Kola Ogunmola deserve more attention than the cursory mention accorded them, it will suffice in this study to cite them mainly to show the important place they occupy in the evolution of the Nigerian theatre. The theatre which these two dramatists and playwrights developed grew out of the rough and ready traditional drama of the Yoruba people, with all the crudities, colour, and pageantry of local rituals and festivals. This theatre has, with justification, been termed as the "Folk Opera" theatre. According to Martin Banham,

The Folk Opera, as its name implies, relies greatly on local themes--in Ladipo's case a concern with the lore and details of Yoruba history--and, with Ogunmola and Ogunde, simple moralistic tales often vaguely biblical, told through song, dance and dialogue. The Folk Operas are often vehicles for fine theatrical display, not only of dancing and singing but also drumming, instrumental playing, acrobatics, clowning, mime, costumes and scenery. . . . [However], the Folk Operas have become a great deal more polished in the past few years, though their main audience still remains the popular audience of the towns and villages of the Western provinces of Nigeria.³¹

The explanation for the limited audience of the Folk Operas in Nigeria is simple: the "Folk Opera" theatre is invariably a "Yoruba"

³⁰ For a leisurely, yet critical, discussion of this play and its author, see "Discussion between Ulli Beier. . .and Gerald Moore," Cultural Events in Africa, No. 25 (Dec. 1966), III-IV.

³¹ Martin Banham, "Notes on Nigerian Theatre: 1966," Bulletin of the Association for African Literature in English, No. 4 (1966), 31.

theatre, and the language problem naturally restricts the audience to Yoruba-speaking people. This is why the "Folk Opera" theatre, despite its significant contribution to the growth of the theatre in Nigeria, cannot be called the Nigerian theatre. As Ogunba has observed, the Nigerian theatre "has not yet really come to stay: it still looks forward to the time when Nigerian peoples, other than the Yoruba, will develop dramas in their own languages."³²

Even if drama develops among every ethnic group the way it has grown in Yorubaland, it will still be drama in the various vernaculars, and the audience will continue to be restricted by language.³³ This is the agony of the multi-lingualism of the Nigerian society. However, the problem of language which limits the audience of the Folk Opera or Yoruba theatre—as it would limit the audience of the theatre in any of the other Nigerian tongues—has been considerably removed by the development of drama in English. This colonial master's language is more widely spoken in Nigeria than any of the indigenous languages and, therefore, any play written in English would enjoy a wider readership and attract a larger audience across the nation and outside it.³³ The only problem, of course, is that the Nigerian drama in English deprives a large number

³² O. Ogunba, "Theatre in Nigeria," 88.

³³ For fuller discussions of the problem of language in written African literature, see, for example, S. Acquaye, "The Language Problem of the Developing African Theatre," African Arts / Arts d'Afrique, 2, No. 1 (Autumn 1968), 58-59; K. A. B. Jones-Quartey, "The Problems of Language in the Development of the African Theatre," Okyeame, 4, No. 1 (Dec. 1968), 95-102; Chinua Achebe, "English and the African Writer," Transition, 4, No. 18 (1965), 27-30; and B. I. Chukwudere, "The Problem of Language in African Creative Writing," African Literature Today, 3 (1969), 15-26.

of non-English-speaking theatre-goers of the enjoyment and "education" they would normally derive from plays like Yoruba Ronu and Oba Ko So. It is understandable, therefore, that the "Folk Opera" theatre continues to thrive despite the rapid growth and increasing popularity of modern Nigerian drama of English expression.

In Oyin Ogunba's call for dramas in languages other than Yoruba, and in Echeruo's call on the Igbo to do what the Greeks did, the message is very clear: both critics clamour for indigenous drama. A similar call was made in 1950 when, according to Echeruo, "one enthusiastic Nigerian made an appeal through the Daily Times: 'Unless we are prepared to get down to it, unless we are prepared to put down on paper for posterity our traditional hymns and folk-tunes, unless we are prepared to CREATE, then we might as well rule out the word PROGRESS from our dictionary'."³⁴

"It is obvious that this call was not answered in 1950. But it is misleading that "It was not until 1960, the year of Independence, that the call was answered by Wole Soyinka."³⁵ The honour of answering the call deservedly belongs, not to Wole Soyinka, but to James Ene Henshaw. In the "Preface" to his first volume of three plays This Is Our Chance (1956), Henshaw stresses the need to preserve good traditions in all developing countries, including Nigeria. Henshaw may be likened, with some justification, to Christopher Marlowe whom John Gassner aptly describes as "a slightly sodden John the Baptist. . .who heralded one

³⁴ Echeruo, "Concert and Theatre in Late Nineteenth-Century Lagos," 74.

³⁵ J. A. Adedeji, "A Profile of Nigerian Theatre 1960-1970," 3.

greater than himself [that is, Shakespeare], though undoubtedly without knowing who it would be, or greatly caring."³⁶ However, the John-the-Baptist role of Marlowe is analogous to that of Henshaw only insofar as both are forerunners of greater artists than themselves.

Apart from his first three plays published in 1956, nothing establishes Henshaw as Nigeria's first playwright of any worth better than his own words:

In Nigeria. . . one occasionally sees well-known plays staged by good players, but the scenes of these plays always take place in surroundings far removed from the African's own. Often the things which are spoken about in the plays have no relationship with the problems which face the African audience.

Whilst it says much for these great works that they will always be staged in the world, there is nevertheless a need for plays to be written and produced in the African's own surroundings and with characters familiar to the ordinary African.³⁷

It must be admitted, however, that when Henshaw published his first three plays, there was neither a single professional theatre group performing in English nor a real theatre building in Nigeria. The proliferation of dramatic societies in the various secondary schools and teacher-training colleges only demonstrated the growing interest in dramatic productions which were, to say the least, amateurish. But at the University College, Ibadan (University of Ibadan, as from 1960), student dramatic activity, though far from being professional, was on a stronger

³⁶ John Gassner, Masters of the Drama (New York: Dover, 1945), p. 212.

³⁷ J. E. Henshaw, "Preface" in This Is Our Chance (London: Univ. of London Press, 1956), p. 5.

footing than in the secondary schools and teacher-training colleges. About 1957 an Arts Theatre Production Group was formed, composed mainly of the University staff and a few students. The Group produced plays ranging from the Classics to the Moderns, as the following record of productions shows:

- 1957 (April): Noah, by Andre Obey
 (Dec.): The Merchant of Venice, by Shakespeare
 1958 (April): The Government Inspector, by Nikolai Gogol
 (Dec.): Ring Round the Moon, by Jean Anouilh
 1959 (April): A Midsummer Night's Dream, by Shakespeare
 1960: An Enemy of the People, by Henrik Ibsen
 1961: The Crucible, by Arthur Miller
 1962: King Arthur and His Knights, by Dryden.³⁸

A group of Classics students known as "Hoi Phrontistati" produced in November 1958 Plautus' play Mostellaria (or The Ghost). Earlier in February that year, The Musical Society and The Music Circle had successfully performed Mozart's "The Magic Flute." Growing contemporaneously with these groups was The University College Ibadan Dramatic Society. Among the worthwhile productions of the early years of the Society were The Gentle People of Irwin Shaw in April 1958, Sophocles' Antigone in November 1958, Wole Soyinka's The Swamp Dwellers and The Lion and the Jewel in February 1959, and later on, Bertolt Brecht's The Good Woman of Setzuan, starring Wole Soyinka and Elizabeth Osisoma.

The experience and achievement of these amateur groups at the University College have been responsible in more ways than one for the establishment of a number of amateur theatre groups outside the University,

³⁸ Dapo Adelugba, "Nationalism and the Awakening National Theatre of Nigeria," Unpubl. M. A. Thesis, Univ. of California, Los Angeles, 1964, p. 34.

particularly in the principal cities. In Ibadan, for instance, a theatre group known as "The Players of the Dawn" was formed in 1958 by two young Nigerian broadcasters. It was on this group that Wole Soyinka grafted his wealth of experience at the London Royal Court Theatre to form a new group, "The 1960 Masks." This new semi-professional dramatic company consisted of well-placed senior "civil servants, businessmen, graduate teachers, radio and television directors in Ibadan and Lagos, and also... talented students in the University College, Ibadan, and in the Sixth form in [Secondary] schools in Ibadan."³⁹ Despite immense difficulties in getting the members together from Lagos and Ibadan for rehearsals, the company came up with a most successful production of Soyinka's A Dance of the Forests as part of Nigeria's Independence celebrations. Produced in Lagos and Ibadan, the play won the Encounter Independence play award.

Other theatre groups began to sprout in other parts of the country, such as the Theatre Express (1965) in Lagos, and the Eastern Nigerian Theatre Group in Enugu. The latter was a revival of the old group known as the "Ogui Players," and was championed by John Ekwere. According to Ernest Ekom, "despite limitations of theatre facilities, financial support, indifferent audiences and dilettantism, the amateur theatre in Nigeria gradually settled down to evolving into a modern theatre of indigenous experiences."⁴⁰

³⁹ Ibid., pp. 69-70.

⁴⁰ Ernest Ekom, "The Development of the Theatre in Nigeria 1960-1967," JONALA, Nos. 11 & 12 (1971), 37.

What was obviously missing, however, was an effective co-ordination of the efforts of individual theatre groups and artists spread all over the country. The annual Nigerian Festival of the Arts which was first held in 1950, and the Regional (now State) Festivals of the Arts and Culture, only brought together Nigerian dancers, musicians, craftsmen, and other artists to display their art. The Festivals usually lasted for only a few days. One such Festival, organized in 1975 by the Nigerian Broadcasting Corporation (West), and captioned "Cultural Festival," lasted from Monday, June 16 to Friday, June 20. It featured a cultural carnival, an Inter-University debate, a symposium on cultural revival as an anathema to modern civilization, traditional market fair and bargain, and to end the Festival, a concert of traditional dances, and a Yoruba play Baba Alado Esan, presented by The N. B. C. Theatre. Desirable as festivals of this nature are, they cannot and do not provide the all-year-round effective coordination that the steady growth of the theatre in Nigeria requires.

As early as 1961, the great need for such a coordinating nerve-centre was realized by a committee of artists, comprising Ezekiel Mphahlele (President), Wole Soyinka, Ulli Beier, Yetunde Esan, Frances Ademola, the late D. O. Fagunwa, Mabel Aig-Imoukhuede, Amos Tutuola, and later on, Demas Nwoko and John Pepper Clark. The committee approached the Paris-based Congress for Cultural Freedom for assistance in establishing in July 1961 the Mbari Centre⁴¹ in Ibadan, the first

⁴¹ "Mbari" literally means a meeting place, an assembly. The name derived from the Owerri Mbari Houses, shrines built for ritual activities, and dedicated to Ala (Mother Earth), the goddess of creativity.

indigenous cultural centre in Nigeria. The aim of the Centre was to promote "understanding and appreciation of permanent values and new trends in art, literature, music, and theatre, and to seek complete integration of these values into our stream of life."⁴² Both Wole Soyinka and J. P. Clark used the facilities available at the Centre to great advantage in developing their artistic talents.

Inspired by the atmosphere and achievement of the Ibadan-based Mbari Centre, Duro Ladipo started his own Mbari-Mbayo Centre in Oshogbo in 1962 under the influence of Ulli Beier. Another Mbari Centre came into existence in 1963 in Enugu, with John Ekwere as the brain behind its establishment. The short-lived existence of these Mbari Centres was not unlike the life span of the Mbari houses from which the Centres got their names. G. Parrinder points out that the "Ibo Mbari houses are only temporary temples, since though they are built at some specific command of a god, they are never repaired and soon fall to ruins."⁴³ Similarly, the Mbari (literary) Clubs were not revived once they folded for lack of finance or effective administration, or both.

Despite limited funds, and other practical problems, the Mbari cultural centres were largely instrumental in the growth of the consciousness for a National Theatre Movement. In 1964, for instance, the Mbari Centre in Ibadan "set the basis for thriving National Theatre and

⁴² "Forward" to Mbari brochure, cited by J. A. Adedeji, "A Profile of Nigerian Theatre 1960-1970," 5.

⁴³ G. Parrinder, West African Religion (London: Epworth, 1969; orig. publ., 1949), p. 61. Parrinder's statement has, however, been challenged by some Ibo people I spoke to on the issue. Their claim is that some people are usually detailed to keep the Mbari Houses tidy and shiny constantly.

fostered an atmosphere for the formation of the Drama Association of Nigeria in December of that year. The Association aimed to promote high standards of theatrical performances, advise the Nigerian Arts Council on all theatrical activities in Nigeria, and work immediately on the idea of a National Theatre, but it was still-born."⁴⁴

Wole Soyinka had his problems with the 1960 Masks, which he terms "a kind of community theatre but with a very strong sense of professionalism. . . . But this was not the theatre I wanted, and from the beginning they [that is, the members] understood that they were there to encourage a new younger group of fully professional actors and act[r]esses. . . . So that by 1962 or 1963 we were able to bring out the first fully professional theatre still attached by an umbilical cord to the 1960 Masks. . . . And that was the Orisun Theatre Company."⁴⁵ It was this new company that Soyinka used for his "very caustic political sketches," like The New Republican and Before the Blackout, things he could not do with the 1960 Masks because many of its members were civil servants. The Orisun Theatre fell to pieces, however, when, in August 1967, Soyinka was held in detention, and it never fully recovered, despite all the efforts made to keep the theatre group alive while Soyinka was in detention.

As Adedeji has correctly observed, the emergence of the theatre in Nigeria prospered more under the stabilizing influence of

7. ⁴⁴ J. A. Adedeji, "A Profile of Nigerian Theatre 1960-1970,"

⁴⁵ In K. L. Morell, Ed., In Person. . . , p. 95.

our universities.⁴⁶ In 1960, the University of Ibadan Students Dramatic Society was forced by the temporary closure of the Arts Theatre on campus to experiment with an itinerant theatre. The dining halls in the various halls of residence were converted to make-shift theatres. This inconvenient but inevitable arrangement enabled the Society to take the theatre to the student audiences. So successful was this experiment that it gave the Society the impetus to initiate the University of Ibadan Travelling Theatre in 1961. Its aim "was to spread the experience of good theatre to places outside the campus and to demonstrate to schools and colleges as well as community dramatic groups all over the country the idea, meaning and significance of the 'theatre in society'. In its operations, the theatre reached large communities. . . it used open spaces in the towns and the stadiums of the cities."⁴⁷

The itinerant venture of the Travelling Theatre experienced its major success in a country-wide tour with a brilliant adaptation of Molière's Les Fourberies de Scapin, under the new title That Scoundrel Suberu in March 1961. The adaptation was the brainchild of three students, Alfred Opubor, Brownson Dodo, and Dapo Adelugba. This initial success encouraged the Travelling Theatre to embark upon a second country-wide tour in March 1962 with A Taming of a Shrew, an adaptation of Shakespeare's The Taming of the Shrew. A third nation-wide tour followed during the Easter vacation of 1963 with an adaptation of another Shakespeare play, The Comedy of Errors. Another adaptation, Danda, was

⁴⁶ J. A. Adedeji, "A Profile of Nigerian Theatre 1960-1970," 7.

⁴⁷ Ibid., 8.

a foster-child of Nkem Nwankwo's novel of the same title. According to Adedeji, Danda, "with which the Travelling Theatre toured Nigeria in 1965 and 1966, was a significant experiment in 'total theatre',"⁴⁸ an admixture of Ibo dances, masquerades, customs, ceremonies and spectacular fanfare.

The University of Ibadan "Theatre-on-Wheels" had the rare opportunity of mounting on wheels "A Shakespeare's Festival" designed to celebrate the great playwright's fourth centenary in 1964. With sizable grants from the Rockefeller Foundation and the British Council, this huge experiment in play adaptation achieved its objective, which was "to show the Nigerian populace not only what spectacle Shakespeare's theatre was but also as a way of exposing the masses to the techniques and promise of Western theatre practice."⁴⁹

When the University of Ibadan School of Drama was established in 1962-63 with a generous grant of two hundred thousand dollars from the Rockefeller Foundation, its first project was a six-month professional training programme offered to the Ogunmola Travelling Theatre Company. The benefit derived from the training programme was demonstrated in the successful production of The Palm-Wine Drinkard, a Yoruba adaptation of Tutuola's novel of the same title. This daring experiment turned out to be a tremendous contribution towards the development of the professional theatre in Nigeria.

The theatre workshop of the School of Drama has since its

⁴⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁹ Ibid., 9.

establishment introduced both diploma and degree programmes, with concentration on practically all aspects of the theatre, including the history of the theatre, acting, set designing, choreography, playwriting, modern techniques of production, and directing. The first concrete evidence of the achievement of the School was the emergence in 1965 of the professional "Theatre Express," formed by three of the first graduates of the School. Before the devastating civil war broke out in 1967, another graduate of the "dramatic circus," Sonny Oti, had already started his own theatre in Port Harcourt.⁵⁰ By the time Wole Soyinka became the new Director of the School in 1967 the semi-professionalism of the School's dramatic productions had already been accorded international acclaim, first at the First World Festival of Negro Arts in Dakar in 1966, and then during the World University Drama Festival at Nancy, France, in 1967.

The School, now known as the Department of Theatre Arts, once maintained an acting company, the Theatre Arts Company. It was originally initiated by Wole Soyinka in his capacity as Head of the Department after his release from detention in October 1969. It was this group that Soyinka took to the United States in 1970 to perform his new play Madmen and Specialists at the Eugene O'Neill Theatre Centre, Waterford, Connecticut.

During the 1974-75 session alone, the group which has now assumed a new name, The Unibadan Masques, had a record of eight performances as follows:

⁵⁰ Ernest Ekom, "The Development of the Theatre in Nigeria 1960-1967," 37.

- 1974: November: Diagnosis, by Emmanuel Avbiorokoma
 December: Three Dances of a Man, and A Dance
 Workshop Creation, by Orville Johnson
 1975: January : Kolera Kolej, by Femi Osofisan and
 Dexter Lyndersay
 February: A Son, Come Home, by Ed Bullins
 March : Day of Deities, by Jimi Solanke and
 Wale Ogunyemi
 April : The Child Factor, by Emmanuel Avbiorokoma
 May : The Golden Curse [Now The Curse], by
 Kole Omotoso
 June : The Divorce, by Wale Ogunyemi

The significant thing about these productions is that most of the plays are written by Nigerians--a noticeable improvement over former years, particularly when it is realized that the Arts Theatre Production Group of the same University produced only foreign plays from 1957 to 1962 as has been earlier revealed.

While the theatre grew from strength to strength at the University of Ibadan, other Universities were not completely insensitive to the need to develop the theatre to a professional level in Nigeria. For instance, at the University of Nigeria, Nsukka which was established in 1960, the Music Department was responsible for the rise of an orchestra of talented students who initially supplied background music to dramatic productions. Early in 1965 the Dramatic Circle of the University started to experiment with the theatre-in-the-round, like the University of Ibadan Travelling Theatre. Unfortunately, however, dramatic activities did not have the opportunity to develop as they did at Ibadan. The University had to close down when, during the civil war (1967-1970), Nsukka town fell on 14 July 1967, and it was not re-opened until March 1970. A year after its re-opening, however, there was a revival of dramatic activities. Since then, the University theatre group has had

on record a series of successful dramatic productions.

The prospects for the development of the theatre were much brighter at the University of Ife, Ile Ife, than at the University of Nigeria, Nsukka of the pre-1967 era. There the Ori Olokun Centre has grown to be a sort of Mbari, a meeting place for writer, artists, and actors. The cultural centre is maintained by the University of Ife Institute of African Studies with grants from the Ford Foundation. In his capacity as Director of the Institute,

Professor Michael Crowder. . .with a coterie of staff, of artists, writers, musicians and dramatists, has inaugurated at Ife an annual Festival of the Arts aimed to bring together the works and ideas of some Nigerian creative artists and others, to identify the University with its belief in the quintessence of culture and remind the people [of] the merit and values of their great cultural heritage. The first festival was held in December 1968. But what has become memorable in the Ife Festival of the Arts is in the unique contribution of the Ori Olokun Company under the direction of Ola Rotimi to the development of the Nigerian theatre.⁵¹

Since its premiere production of Ola Rotimi's The Gods Are Not To Blame at the Ife Festival in 1968, the Ori Olokun Players, subsequently re-named as the University of Ife Theatre, has proved to be a versatile professional theatre group. One of its memorable productions was Kole Omotoso's play The Curse—originally The Golden Curse—in June 1975 at the University of Ibadan Arts Theatre. Billed for the same night, and preceding The Curse was a brief experimental pantomime on the peculiar problem of water shortage: "Buckets." Both "Buckets" and The Curse were

⁵¹ J. A. Adedeji, "A Profile of Nigerian Theatre 1960-1970," 11-12.

directed by Ola Rotimi. With the return of Wole Soyinka as Professor of Comparative Literature the future of the University of Ife Theatre looks all the brighter.

Ahmadu Bello University has recently joined the other Universities in Nigeria in the development of theatre arts. In 1972 the University established a Centre for Nigerian Cultural Studies. Its primary purpose was to promote the Performing Arts both within the University and in the Northern States. The first achievement of the Centre was a production in October 1972 of Shaihu Umar, an adaptation of Alhaji Abubakar Tafawa Balewa's novel of the same title. The adaptation was the work of both Umaru Ladan and Dexter Lyndersay, who were staff members of the Centre.

In January 1973 the Centre established a Dance Company, jointly directed by James Vilee and Peter Badejo, and financed by the Federal Ministry of Information (Cultural Affairs Division). It was this Dance Company that formed the nucleus of the Performing Arts Company which was established on 1 July 1975, and sponsored by the University.⁵² From the record of the productions of the Company, it is clear that concentration has been on plays in Hausa. The first play in English ever produced by the Company was Between Dusk and Dawn, by Bode Sowande. But the activities of the Centre have not been limited to stage presentation. According to Crowder,

the Centre [also] collaborates with the Adult Education and General Extension Services Unit in presenting ABU Theatre [Ahmadu Bello University

⁵² Michael Crowder, "Performing Arts at Ahmadu Bello," West Africa, 4 Aug. 1975, pp. 900-901.

Theatre] weekly on Radio-Television Kaduna. . . .

Perhaps the most exciting new venture in the field of the Performing Arts is the University's recent decision to mount a degree course in Drama which will initially be run by a Sub-Department of the English Department in close collaboration with the Centre. Ahmadu Bello University thus becomes the second University in Nigeria to offer a B. A. Honours Programme in Drama.⁵³

The development of the theatre in Nigeria has now reached a stage where the various professional and semi-professional theatre groups have at their disposal the rich experience and service of young graduates in Drama. Unless full and effective use is made of this crop of young talents, the professionalism that the theatre in Nigeria requires and deserves may remain an unrealized dream for years to come.

Acting, formerly looked down upon as a career, is becoming more respectable in Nigeria, and the masses are now more than ever before aesthetically oriented to appreciate good drama on the stage. Theatre-going is now accepted less as a luxury for the elite and more as an educational entertainment. Many there are who would be willing to pay one Naira (₦1.00) or more to watch a good play. There should not be much trouble, therefore, in maintaining a professional theatre group, provided there are good indigenous plays to be presented.

Fortunately, the spirit of the sixties had already brought about the awakening of national consciousness, not only among the promoters of theatre groups but also among potential playwrights. Weary of watching foreign plays which were not always immediately relevant to the

⁵³ Ibid., p. 901.

Nigerian situation, young Nigerians started to try their hands at writing plays based on materials drawn from their own backgrounds and experiences in the contemporary Nigerian society. Their latent energies, once released, produced a series of plays ranging from those derived from local folktales, myths, and legends, historical plays and adaptations, through pungent satires, some of which border on the theatre of the Absurd, to metaphysical probes into life and death, and the transition between the two states of existence. Wole Soyinka, by virtue of his productivity and the high quality of work, has emerged as the leading playwright in Nigeria. Other playwrights of English expression include J. E. Henshaw, Zulu Sofola, Femi Osofisan, Obotunde Ijimere, Wale Ogunyemi, Ola Rotimi, J. P. Clark, to mention only a few whose plays continue to be produced on stage, or on television.

In succeeding chapters, a study of the works of these and other playwrights will enable us to feel the pulse of modern drama in English in Nigeria, a pulse that began to beat audibly from the time Henshaw published his first three plays in the volume This Is Our Chance in 1956. The plays written since the appearance of Henshaw's first plays present an interesting pattern. Although they do not reveal the emergence of a literary movement when examined chronologically, they can be re-arranged into three convenient broad groups. The first group includes plays in which the past is recreated through myth and history in order to appreciate the present. The plays in the second group examine various aspects of the conflict between tradition and modernism; and the third group consists of plays treating modern and timeless themes.

It should be added that some of the plays in the third group take a serious look at society, its tragedy and absurdities. Although this classification is not without its problems, it provides a clear view of the Nigerian society from the past, through the conflict-ridden transition period, to the present. The clarity of this view is manifest in the thematic unity in each group of plays selected for study in the chapters that follow.

CHAPTER TWO

THE PAST IN MODERN NIGERIAN DRAMA

(i) The Use of the Past through Myth:

In his tireless pursuit of knowledge of himself, his world, his past and his future, man has always engaged in numerous metaphysical speculations. As far back as the time of Aeschylus, and probably before then, these speculations have been expressed through drama. Aeschylus, for instance, through his preoccupation with the relation of God to man, "succeeded. . . in establishing the tragic form of drama, for tragedy is in essence the theatrical representation of themes wherein man is set in relation to the universe. It is an essay, not in social relationships, but in the eternal problem of good and evil. Its quality is metaphysical. In tragedy the supernatural becomes, as it were, part of the natural: man and fate become one. How deeply Aeschylus was obsessed with such considerations is revealed in Prometheus Bound,¹ a play in which the confrontation between Prometheus and Zeus ferments into a crisis that will eventually bring about a reconciliation between the god and his enemy. Sophocles in Oedipus Rex and Euripides in The Bacchae have also given some serious attention to the fundamental and crucial question of the relationship between man and the gods.

Similarly, in Nigeria local mythological speculations have been integrated into dramatic works in a way that explains how Nigerians once sought, and to some extent still seek, refuge in a religion that accommodates monotheism as well as polytheism, owing to the nature of

¹ A. Nicoll, World Drama (London; Harrap, 1949), p. 39.

the African pantheon. This part of this study will, therefore, attempt to provide a general conspectus of the African pantheon as represented in a selection of Nigerian plays.

The African pantheon, like the Bible, has its own Genesis, featuring the creation myth, the various divinities and their relationship with one another and with man. It would be misleading, however, to talk of an African creation myth because such a myth varies, even within the same nation, from one ethnic group to another. Nigeria is a case in point, as will be shown later. It is helpful, therefore, to bear in mind the definition of the term "myth" as a guide in discussing any variety of African creation myths which may share certain common concepts.

Raphael Patai, in an attempt to isolate the mythical elements in ancient Hebrew and Jewish folklores, defines myth as "a traditional religious charter, which operates by validating laws, customs, rites, institutions and beliefs, or explaining socio-cultural situations and natural phenomena, and taking the form of stories, believed within a given society to be true, about divine beings and heroes."² Elsewhere, Robert Graves and Raphael Patai jointly define myths as "dramatic stories that form a sacred charter either authorizing the continuance of ancient institutions, customs, rites and beliefs in the area where they are current, or approving alterations."³ Although there are several

² R. Patai, "What is Hebrew Mythology?" Transactions of the New York Academy of Sciences, 2nd series, 27, No. 1 (Nov. 1974), 73.

³ R. Graves and R. Patai, Hebrew Myths: The Book of Genesis (Garden City, N. Y.: Doubleday, 1964), p. 11.

other definitions of myth by renowned scholars of mythology, the above two will suffice for the present inquiry into myth and the Nigerian drama; they contain the basic elements of myth: a sacred charter, dramatic stories about divine beings and heroes, and local currency of socio-cultural milieu.

Two fascinating Nigerian creation myths adapted for the stage present anthropomorphized divinities in close association with man in his terrestrial home. Wale Ogunyemi's Eshu Elegbara⁴ dramatizes "the coming to the world of the gods and goddesses," with Obatala as the Creator god. Obotunde Ijimere's Woyengi,⁵ another creation myth play, varies from Eshu Elegbara in that it features a Creator goddess, Woyengi, and concentrates on the crucial theme of predestination. These plays are worth examining together since they provide two variants of the creation myth in Nigeria.

For a play representing the Yoruba creation myth, Eshu Elegbara may be a misleading title. Yet it is significant. The play functions, in its own little way, as a means of justifying the ways of Obatala, the Creator god, to the lesser gods. To some extent, this is similar to Milton's purpose in Paradise Lost, which is to "assert Eternal Providence, / And justify the ways of God to men" (Book I, 25-26). Like Milton's Satan, Esu⁶ in this play is the perpetrator of

⁴ Orisun Acting Editions (Ibadan, 1970). All citations and page references are from this edition.

⁵ In The Imprisonment of Obatala and Other Plays, Trans., Ulli Beier (London: Heinemann, 1966), pp. 79-109.

⁶ This is the correct spelling that will be used in this study except where it is quoted as "Eshu."

the crisis that eventually leads to the exertion of divine justice. By naming the play after Esu's praise name, the playwright draws the audience's attention to the emphasis he places on Esu's role as an anti-hero who, like Satan, leads "a splinter coalition of fallen allies. . . against a celestial host,"⁷ but with only partial success.

Eshu Elegbara opens with Ogun's song in which the multi-functional divinity observes the contrast between Light which beautifies everything and Darkness that envelops the earth. The opening of Ogun's song is significant for two reasons: it roughly describes the pre-creation formlessness that is common to all creation myths; and it also reveals Ogun's ability to distinguish between darkness and light, and by inference, between evil and good. Ogun may be the god of iron and war who bathes in blood rather than water; but he is cautious enough to pray: "May I not stumble on thorns / For, the butterfly that runs into thorns will have its clothes torn" (p. 8). Ogun reverently appears before Obatala, who sits in all splendour on his throne. It is revealed that Ogun, the "Ambassador of goodwill" (p. 8), has just returned from an important mission to the terrestrial waste that is to become the home of human beings. Obatala expresses his appreciation for the job of pioneer explorer well executed:

Thank you for electing
To pave the way for us.
.....
It is your ability,
Lacking in the rest of us
To trace unexplored routes

⁷ H. E. Toliver, "The Splinter Coalition," in T. Kranidas, Ed., New Essays on Paradise Lost (Berkeley, L. A.: California University Press, 1971), p. 34.

That earned you this great assignment.
Which was so well performed. (p. 9)

As other divinities arrive at the assembly of the gods, the identity of each is revealed. It is hard to tell what source Ogunyemi used in portraying the gods. It seems strange that he completely leaves out Olorun, or Olodumare, who, among the Yorubas of southwestern Nigeria, is held as the Owner of the Sky, Owner of Spirit or Breath, the Supreme Being, invisible and unfathomable, and as the Almighty King, omniscient Owner and Creator of Heaven and earth and all that exist in both. The Yorubas strongly believe in Olorun as the Supreme God who has delegated some of his powers to lesser gods. As Geoffrey Parrinder correctly observes, Olorun

is believed to have dwelt formerly near to the earth, but to have retired to the distant heavens in consequence of human misdeeds. He is the judge of men, now and after death, 'the silent but active judge' [adake-dajo], and hence the giver and sustainer of the moral law. . . .

All lesser divinities depend upon God, so that he is supreme Lord and not just first among equals. Yet the strange fact is that there are no pagan temples in Yoruba country to which men may come to worship [Olorun]. Other gods have their temples and priests, but not the supreme God. Nor are there festivals held in his honour, either occasionally or annually, as they are held for the other gods.⁸

Parrinder goes on to wonder whether Olorun is just a remote God whose removal from the scheme of Yoruba theology would have no great effect on the people's practice of religion. William Bascom explains what seems to have baffled Parrinder:

⁸ G. Parrinder, Religion in an African City (London: O. U. P., 1953), pp. 7-8.

He [Olorun] created. . . all other deities, and, like Nyame among the Ashanti and other West African "high gods," he stands above and beyond them. Unlike other deities he has no special worshippers or cult; prayers are addressed to him, but no sacrifices are offered directly to him, and he has no shrines. Nevertheless he is neither so remote nor unconcerned that he does not intervene in affairs on earth, and most of the sacrifices by the babalawo are taken to Olorun by Eshu, after having been placed at one of Eshu's many shrines. As the deity who assigns and controls the individual destinies of mankind, Olorun can be considered as the God of destiny.⁹

The significance of these lengthy quotations is that they are helpful, among other things, in understanding why Wale Ogunyemi might have left Olorun out of the creation myth in Eshu Elegbara. Although there is no mention of Olorun in the play, there is a slight hint at his remote existence. In Part III, shortly before the trial and expulsion of Egu, Orunmila sings:

Tèní d'asegbe oo	I act with authority
Ọmọ Odu-are,	Son of Odu-are,
Age gbe ee	Acting with authority
Ọmọ Odu-are.	Son of Odu-are. (p. 33)

Orunmila's reference to himself of the "Son of Odu-are" (Olodumare) points to his acceptance of the remote existence of Olorun, God Almighty, whose power of creation has been delegated to Obatala. In this play, it is a bit confusing, however, that Obatala should also appoint Orunmila as his viceroy, thereby attributing to himself the major distinguishing characteristic associated with Olorun:

⁹ W. Bascom, The Yoruba of Southwestern Nigeria (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1969), pp. 78-79. Cf. G. Parrinder, Religion in an African City, pp. 8-9.

Welcome all and thanks for accepting
 To journey with me
 To establish the world.

.....
 I am encouraged by your
 Inclination to create and
 To immortalize yourself [sic]
 I, therefore, exercise no doubt that
 This task will be amicably accomplished.

.....
 However, I need someone
 As a relief, a deputy.
 Your king, to be exact.
 Someone in this company
 Learned, knowledgeable
 And versed in seeing into the future.
 Him you must recognize and respect.
 It is my great pleasure, therefore,
 To ask Orunmila to the throne. (pp. 14-15)

This is the decision which sparks off dissension among the deities,
 championed by Eṣu. He succeeds, despite an initial set-back, in per-
 suading Ogun, Osanyin, and Ile, into a conspiratorial demand for equality
 with Orunmila. But the authority of Obatala is not to be challenged,
 and he makes this very clear to the conspirators in an incantatory
 command:

When the bat came in here masquerading,
 I ordered him to remove his mask
 And he did without a counter word.
 Let the soil enjoy the fall of rain,
 I said. Without a word, he compromised.
 Therefore, compromise with me all of you
 And try to be one. Good morning. (p. 2)

Obatala's power as adake-dajọ (the silent but active judge)
 is demonstrated when the repercussions of the revolt of the gods begin
 to surface. Ironically, Ṣango, the first to warn Eṣu against starting
 off the world with bitterness and dissension (p. 18), is the first to
 feel the effect of divine justice. With tears in his eyes, Ṣango, the

god of thunder and lightning, complains to Orunmila:

But sickness has also taken possession of my
other child
And this has broken open the already healed
wound
Inflicted on me by the death of my first son.
Shame, oh the shame of coming to you
Contributed immensely to my loss. (p. 23)

Şango repents for flouting the authority of Orunmila and regrets his dealings with Esu. Convinced of the genuineness of Şango's repentance and goodwill, Orunmila sends him away with the assurance that his son will live.

Ogun comes in next to tell his troubles to Orunmila at the advice of Osanyin, the god of medicine, whose son has been cured by Obatala's viceroy. Like Şango, Ogun regrets his participation in the conspiracy against Orunmila, and promises to "quit all / Conspiracy against your good person" (p. 28). Again, Orunmila shows his magnanimity by forgiving Ogun and assuring him of the recovery of his son. But he warns Ogun: "Bitterness is what you must guard against / And, your association with Eshu" (p. 29).

When Ile (Earth divinity)¹⁰ arrives to apologize to Orunmila and to beg for forgiveness for his transgression, Esu strives to dissuade him. Ile however, disregards Esu's empty boast to help him in his predicament:

¹⁰ The Earth deity is usually a goddess. To make this deity a male, as Ogunyemi does, is to disregard the symbolism of the Earth as "womb" that gives life to the foetus, and hides the dead. The Earth is also normally noted for fertility and productivity, two important functions that are ordinarily associated with the female. See G. Parrinder, West African Religion (London: The Epworth Press, 1949), pp. 37-41.

You outrageous idiot!
 You shameless dog, was I not
 In the same pool with you when Ikutanle
 My son expired[?] Did you not prevent
 Me from washing the evil off my head
 Which caused Alengba, my beloved son to die
 Screaming back to heaven and
 Leaving me to grief[?]
 Now Teteregun,
 My only remaining son is rubbing
 Shoulders with death, still you can't do
 Anything about it. You keep on
 Belittling Orunmila who sees everything
 And knows everything. (p. 30)

Although this address is directed to Egu in the absence of Orunmila, it
 is enough to redeem Ile because Orunmila, the all-seeing and all-knowing
 deity, is fully aware of Ile's heart-felt repentance all along. Ile
 leaves Orunmila fully forgiven, and with the guarantee that

Teteregun will be well again
 And for ever be an immortal
 For upon him the entire world is built:
 Only from him sustenance shall come
 To survive [sustain?] the dwellers of the world. (p. 32)

What the foregoing scene reveals is a rhythm of action which
 is designed to move from transgression through repercussion and penitence
 to pardon. The significance of such a design lies in the explicit
 didacticism which can hardly be missed. The crime of prideful dissen-
 sion has been severely punished, and the process of self-redemption
 has been completed, except in the case of Egu. Obatala orders Osanyin
 to summon all the deities "to witness my / Judgement of Eshu" (p. 36).
 Although Egu's "trial" amounts to a travesty of legal proceedings
 (since he is not given any opportunity to defend himself after the
 charges have been read to him by Orunmila), one feels Egu deserves the
 verdict pronounced by Obatala.

We find you guilty of
 Jealousy, immorality,
 Causing confusion among the elements
 And immortals.

.
 You are therefore--rejected.
 Your home will be at the crossroads.
 The sun shall smite you by day.
 The rain will hit you hard on your head.
 You will live in discomfort
 Without sustenance except on
 The charity of whoever chances to pass. (pp. 37-38)

The ostracism of Esu is not unlike the expulsion of Satan and his demonic host from heaven in Milton's Paradise Lost. Esu has been condemned to eternal discomfort as an outcast at the crossroads, but he retains his divine powers even though depraved. It is this depraved divinity that he exhibits in Part Four of the play where he sets about confusing mankind, represented by Lagbaja, Lakasegbe, Lamorin, and Tamodu.¹¹ It is appropriate that the play ends with the comments of Ogun on the fight among the four humans, and on the character traits of Esu, so as to drive home the relevance of the play to contemporary

Nigerian society:

They do not know that
 It was the curse 'hunger will tame a lion'
 Which made Eshu elect
 To become Orunmila's errand boy.
 Eshu Laluu
 The crossroad's dweller
 The trickster god of mischief. . .
 The all powerful
 Jealous god
 Strong over mankind;
 Black cloth over cactus,

¹¹ Each of these four names is usually used in Yoruba for an unidentifiable person, or anybody who, for one reason or another, cannot or may not be identified by his name. It is not this anonymity, however, that Ogunyemi strives for. Lagbaja and the others could be anybody--mankind.

The versatile intimidator
 Who sympathizes with
 Whom he implicates.
 The brave do pray
 Not to be tripped by Eshu. (pp. 54-55)

Implied in this passage is the belief that dissension and strife are attributable to Eṣu. He is the instigator of man's fall from grace and therefore the agent of his destruction. Man has to watch and pray to avoid being the victim of Eṣu's trickery. More explicit in the play than this belief, however, is the moral lesson that pride goes before destruction. The lesser gods are mortified for their prideful dissension, and Eṣu, who remains recalcitrant, is condemned to eternal discomfort. The sinning divinities are like politicians and officers in contemporary Nigeria who are too proud and too ambitious to be anywhere except in positions of authority. The fall of such politicians and public servants, like that of the gods, is usually preceded by foolish and irresponsible moves to alter their positions by force or by treachery. But man, irrespective of his state in life, is naturally ambitious. It is when his ambition reaches inordinate heights that his fall becomes inevitable. This is the point that Eshu Elegbara end up making: and it shares this didacticism with Woyengi, another creation myth play in its own right.

Before discussing Woyengi, however, a final word needs to be said about Eshu Elegbara. The play is rather slight, with a slender plot. Eshu Elegbara, like The Scheme (1967), belongs to Wale Ogunyemi's period of apprenticeship as a playwright. It would have been more successful than it is if it had concentrated upon an aspect of the cosmic history of mankind instead of attempting to cram into such a slender play

the myth of Creation, the Fall (of the deities), their Redemption, and the Final Judgement (on Esu). Eshu Elegbara succeeds, however, in introducing some of the principal Yoruba divinities and their relations to man. In order to avoid repetition, a fuller discussion of these divinities will be saved for the treatment of plays in which they are more fully portrayed.

Unlike Eshu Elegbara, which seems to chew more than it can conveniently swallow, Obotunde Ijimere's Woyengi concentrates on the universal theme of predestination, based on the Ijaw creation myth.¹² To appreciate fully what Ijimere does with this Ijaw myth one needs to examine the concept of predestination held by other peoples of Nigeria besides the Ijaws. Among the Binis, for instance, a person is considered as an embodiment of two beings: the living being in this world—agbon, and the spiritual being in heaven—erinmwun. According to M. E. A. Omijeh, at incarnation, "the spiritual entity has a superior, supervisory role. It is believed that before a person is born into this world, he presents himself before God (Osa), his Creator, what he desires and wishes to be on earth,"¹³ that is, he predestines (hi) his own life. Omijeh goes on to explain that this done, God equips the person with the resources with which he is to realize his self-chosen

¹² See Gabriel Okara, "Ogboinba: The Ijaw Creation Myth," Black Orpheus, No. 2 (1958), 7-17. This is the source material for Ijimere's play. Also see "African Genesis" in this issue, pp. 5-6.

¹³ M. E. A. Omijeh, "Ehi—Some Notes on the Paradox of Self-predestination in Bini Religion," Nigeria Magazine, Nos. 110-112 (1974), 101.

destiny, the most essential of which is a spiritual guardian, ehi, a close parallel of the Christian guardian angel. "This ehi stands by him while the individual makes his request. It is to him that the fulfilment of the destiny which the individual has prescribed is entrusted. He is thus a link between the Supreme Being and the individual."¹⁴

The significant thing about the Bini conception of predestination is best recognized in the name "Aisagbonhi," which means that "Once one arrives in this world, one cannot hi for oneself." The implication is that once a person is born, what he predestined for himself in heaven cannot be changed, try as he may.¹⁵ The name "Aisagbonhi" therefore sums up the basic philosophy behind the Bini conception of predestination.

The process of predestination is more elaborate as mythologized by the Yorubas. The type of life a man lives in this world is inextricably bound up with his destiny which, according to Yoruba belief, is predetermined in one of three ways. Firstly, there is the Akúnleṣan method; that is, a newly "finished" person, before being born into this world, kneels before the Creator to choose his own destiny. Such a destiny is characterized by unrestricted choice of the person's free will. Secondly, a person's destiny may be God-ordained and handed over to him before journeying into this world to be born or reborn. This form of predestination is described by the Yorubas as akúnlẹ̀gbà---

¹⁴ Ibid., 102.

¹⁵ Ibid.

"that [destiny] which is received kneeling down." Thirdly, a person's destiny may be termed as àyánmó—"that [destiny] which is ingrained into one's being" at creation. In àyánmó, as in àkúnlẹ̀gbà, one has no privilege of choosing one's own destiny; everything depends on the will of the Creative Intelligence.

Common to this trimorphic conception of predestination is the belief that once determined a person's destiny cannot be changed. According to Idowu, as soon as the ritual of choice or reception of one's destiny is completed before Olodumare, "the person starts on his way into the world. He arrives at the gate between heaven and earth, and encounters On'ibode--'The Gate-Keeper',"¹⁶ who interrogates him in order to establish his identity, where he is going, and the purpose of his journey. The person who is soon to be born into the world will then give details of his destiny. Onibode's task at this point is to put his seal of approval. The implication is that the person's destiny is doubly sealed, first before Olodumare, and then at Ibode (Heavensgate). On crossing the void of transition between heaven and earth, the person loses all memory of his doubly sealed destiny. The Ifa oracle may reveal his destiny in part or in full to him, but any effort he makes to change it will be ineffectual.¹⁷

The foregoing outline of the Bini and Yoruba conceptions of predestination enables us to grasp the Ijaw notion of the subject as it

¹⁶ E. B. Idowu, Olodumare: God in Yoruba Belief (London: Longmans, 1962), p. 174.

¹⁷ Cf. Idowu, Olodumare, pp. 176-82, concerning the alterability of one's destiny.

is dramatized in Woyengi. This play has been wrongly identified as "a myth of creation, exploring the Yoruba belief in predestination."¹⁸ The myth is basically of Ijaw origin, though it bears a close resemblance in some details to the Yoruba conception of predestination. One significant difference between Ijaw and Yoruba creation myths is worth noting. Olorun (Olodumare), and his principal deputy Obatala, to whom is delegated the power of creation, are both masculine divinities in Yoruba mythology. But the Ijaw variant of the creation myth has a female deity as the creator--Woyengi (Our Mother). This unique conception of the Creator deity is likely to be frowned upon in a traditional society where male chauvinism cannot accommodate female leadership. The logic behind Woyengi as the Creator deity in Ijaw mythology derives probably either from the matrilineal structure of traditional Ijaw society, or from the natural role of the woman as procreator. It is understandable, therefore, that the play opens with the Swordbearers singing the praise of Woyengi as

Mother of the world,
 You are bright and radiant like the sun
 When it rises in the east.

 You made thousands of creatures
 From your single form.
 You create the child
 In the mother's womb.
 You make the seed flow in man
 And the blood in woman. (p. 81)¹⁹

¹⁸ D. S. Blair, A review of The Imprisonment of Obatala and Other Plays, in African Studies, 26, No. 1 (1967), 49.

¹⁹ All quotations and page references are taken from "Woyengi" in The Imprisonment of Obatala and Other Plays (London: Heinemann, 1966).

The sexual symbolism in the last four lines strongly suggests how the beauty of a woman created in Woyengi's image would normally arouse a virile husband to inseminate the wife's fertile womb in the process of procreation. But the woman still has to carry the baby for about nine months before she gives birth to it. Her role in the process of procreation is therefore more demanding than that of the man. She, rather than the man, bears the burden of giving life to the foetus. It is not illogical, therefore, to make a female deity the Creator in Obotunde Ijimere's Woyengi.

In scene i of the play, one of the five creatures, who kneel before Woyengi to choose their destinies, asks to be like Woyengi—a mother with numerous children:

Mother of the world—
 Let me be a mother.
 Let me be fruitful, and bear children
 One, two, six, eight—
 Let me bear children until my womb dries up.
 Let me teach them to walk and to speak,
 Let me live to see them bear children
 In their turn. (pp. 85-86)

This request by Lakpe contrasts remarkably with the desires of the other four creatures, particularly those of Ogboinba. Unlike Lakpe, Ogboinba wants nothing to do with children. All she desires is an unrivalled supernatural power to control the entire world:

Let me have power!
 Let me share your [Woyengi's] secrets.
 Let me be a woman—but let my womb be dry.
 Little I care for children or wealth.
 Let me learn the secrets of herbs and leaves;
 Teach me the language of the cockal and the
 hornbill.
 Let me have power to heal and to kill.
 Give me command over the word.

Let me mould the lives of men in my hand.

 Let me command the spirit,
 Let me be second only to you. (p. 86)

This is a most unusual destiny freely chosen; but Woyengi grants Ogboinba's request. The important thing to note in scene i is that all the five creatures make their choices of destiny with the full foreknowledge of the irrevocability of any chosen destiny. Woyengi has warned them all to choose their fate wisely because

Every wish you utter
 Before you wade into the world
 Through the river of life
 Must come to pass. (p. 83)

Scene i then sets the stage for the action in the remaining six scenes. In scene ii, the action focuses attention on the lives of Lakpe and Ogboinba. The former is happy and contented as she shares her life and joy with her children. The latter enjoys her powers, no doubt, but she is driven to extremes of jealousy because of her barrenness which she now regrets. She cannot bear to see her neighbour Lakpe surrounded by eight children while she herself cannot have even as much as a miscarriage. Consequently, she resolves:

I will not suffer it
 I will not bear my shame another day!
 I shall return to Woyengi and challenge
 my fate! (p. 92)

I may be too little for the other world--
 But I am much too big for this one!
 My heart is bursting with power:
 I must try my strength against Woyengi! (p. 94)

In her foolhardiness, she contemptuously disregards Lakpe's advice to refrain from her prideful determination to challenge Woyengi and coerce her into revoking her unalterable destiny. Scenes iii-v show Ogboinba

at the height of her power and victory over those who stand in her way. She triumphs over Isembi, king of the forest of transition, over Olokun, king of the sea, which is normally out of bounds to living human beings, and over the Cock who guards "the last kingdom of those who die" (p. 101), where only dead people are granted rights of passage. After having successfully crossed this threshold leading into Woyengi's heavenly abode, Ogboinba proceeds to confront her Creator, armed with eight "powers," six of which she has just confiscated from the spirits she has vanquished. The eight powers are to her what the eight children are to Lakpe.

Ogboinba's challenge of Woyengi recalls to mind an account of a powerful wrestler who overreaches himself by daring to challenge his personal god:

Once there was a great wrestler whose back had never known the ground. He wrestled from village to village until he had thrown every man in the world. Then he decided that he must go and wrestle in the land of the spirits, and become champion there as well. He went, and beat every spirit that came forward. Some had seven heads, some ten; but he beat them all. His companion who sang his praise on the flute begged him to come away, but he would not. He pleaded with him but his ear was nailed up. Rather than go home he gave a challenge to the spirits to bring out their best and strongest wrestler. So they sent him his personal god, a little, wiry spirit who seized him with one hand and smashed him on the stony earth.²⁰

Achebe, who gives this account, also adds the moral of the story: "no matter how strong or great a man was he should never challenge his

²⁰ Chinua Achebe, Arrow of God (London: Heinemann, 1964), pp. 31-32.

chi,²¹ that is, his personal god. To do so is to invite disaster on oneself.

Ogboinba has committed a crime worse than challenging her chi, and the repercussion is grave. She is not only divested of all her powers, personal and forcefully acquired; she is also chased in scene vii by Woyengi until she goes into hiding in Lakpe's eyes. Woyengi, whose intention is to annihilate Ogboinba, has to spare her life because she cannot harm Lakpe who is now expecting her ninth child:

WOYENGI: So there you are hiding!
 In a pregnant woman's eyes!
 Clever you are to the last,
 Knowing I will not break my own law
 And hurt a pregnant woman!
 Well then, so be it!
 Live you in the woman's eyes.
 But know that never more
 Will you lead a life of your own,
 Never be given another beginning.
 May you lead an existence of fear
 Peeping out of other people's eyes.
 And may you be a warning to mankind:
 When they look at each other's eyes,
 They will see you staring at them
 And remember your mad adventure
 Never more shall man be so bold! (p. 108)

Since what we see when we look into someone else's eyes is our own reflection, Ogboinba becomes, therefore, symbolic of man's pride which is the cause of his destruction. Ogboinba may be safe, but she is now condemned to eternal dependence upon man's eyes for her existence. This form of existence is a far cry from the citadel of power with which she is associated in the first six scenes. Her fall, like that of Egu in Eshu Elegbara, both of which are symbolic of man's fall from God's grace,

²¹ Ibid.

is the consequence of pride which prompts her to challenge Woyengi and to attempt to alter a destiny which has been irrevocably sealed.

The excellence of Woyengi resides not only in its swift and deftly handled plot, and well worked out didacticism, but also in its vigorous spontaneity of language, and in the skillful integration of incantatory verse and the voice of authority which emphasizes the irreversibility of Ogboinba's, indeed man's, destiny, once it is sanctioned and sealed in heaven. The success of Woyengi in dramatizing the universal theme of predestination is excelled in the repertory of modern Nigerian drama, perhaps, only by the more complex play The Gods Are Not To Blame, an adaptation of Sophocles' Oedipus Rex.

It should be stressed from the outset that Ola Rotimi's adaptation of the Greek play is no mere imitation. According to Ben Jonson, one of the four requisites of a poet, or maker, is Imitation, that is, the ability "to convert the substance, or Riches of an other Poet, to his own use. To make choice of one excellent man above the rest, and so to follow him, till he grow very Hee: or, so like him, as the Copie may be mistaken for the Principal."²² Rotimi's ability to imitate as Jonson recommends is what has enabled him to transform his source material, not only to reflect the Yoruba belief in predestination, but also to attempt a political interpretation (within the Nigerian context) of the classical Oedipus legend.

Like Oedipus Rex, The Gods Are Not To Blame presents the

²² Ben Jonson, Timber, or Discoveries, in Works, Edd., C. H. Herford, et. al. (Oxford: O. U. P., 1947), VIII, 738-39.

tragedy of a prince, fated to be both a patricide and a regicide, and eventually to marry his mother by inheritance. As a result of this irreparable disruption in the natural order of the universe, and the curse consequently incurred, the entire family is destroyed in the end. A bare-boned summary like this cannot claim to do any justice to the complex Oedipus story that has intrigued critics, playwrights, like Corneille and Voltaire, and psychologists, like Sigmund Freud for several centuries. As a critic argues, taken at the literal level, "the play is intelligible as a murder mystery." . . . But no one who sees or reads the play can rest content with its literal coherence. Questions as to its meaning arise. . . . The first, and most deeply instinctive effort of the mind, when confronted with this play, is to endeavor to reduce its meaning to some set of rational categories."²³

Corneille's and Voltaire's versions of the Greek play are manifestations of their understanding of the complex Oedipus drama "as a fable of the enlightened moral will, in accordance with the philosophy of that time."²⁴ Freud's reduction of the play to psychoanalysis is the product of the bias of his discipline. Philosophical, political, historical, and theological interpretations will continue to open up new perspectives worth exploring. One such perspective that will be closely examined in this study has been opened up by Ola Rotimi's political interpretation of the classical drama in his adaptation The Gods

²³ F. Fergusson, The Idea of a Theatre (Princeton, N. J.: Princeton Univ. Press, 1949), p. 16.

²⁴ Ibid.

Are Not To Blame.²⁵

Asked what prompted him to write the play, Ola Rotimi explains at length:

Foremost. . . was the prevailing situation in Nigeria at that time--namely, the civil war. The title. . . "The Gods Are Not to Blame" does not refer to the mythological gods or mystic deities of the African pantheon. . . Rather it alludes to national, political powers such as America, Russia, France, England, etc.--countries that dictate the pace of world politics. The title implies that these political "gods" shouldn't be blamed or held responsible for our own national failings. It [should] be recalled that during the Nigerian civil war, the Biafrans blamed Russia and Britain for aiding Nigerian Federalists in the attack against them. The Federalists, on the other hand, blamed France, and to some extent, America. . . for abetting the Biafrans' cause of secession. But the root cause of that strife. . . was our own lingering, mutual ethnic distrust which culminated in open hostility. The frightening ogre of tribalism stirs in almost every form of our national life. . . So long as this monster is allowed to wax and incite disharmony among us, we must not blame external political powers for their initiative in seizing upon such disunity for the fulfilment of their own exploitative interests. That's the message the play attempts to impart.²⁶

This lengthy answer is as illuminating in certain respects as it is disconcerting in others. No one would dispute the fact that tribal bigotry was the invincible monster that almost ruined Nigeria as a nation. Granted, the big world powers cannot and should not be blamed

²⁵ Ola Rotimi, The Gods Are Not To Blame (London: O. U. P., 1971). All quotations and page references are taken from this edition.

²⁶ Rotimi. Recorded interview at the University of Ife on 8 March 1973, in Dem-Say: Interviews with Eight Nigerian Writers, Ed., B. Lindfors, Occasional Publication, No. 9 (1974), 61-62.

for the devastating war which was triggered off by distrust and hopeless disunity among Nigerian leaders and their followers. The big question remains: does The Gods Are Not To Blame really carry this very important message across to the audience and the nation? A careful analysis of the play reveals that the answer to this question is in the negative. If anti-tribalism is all that Ola Rotimi intends to preach in the play, his efforts, unfortunately, have not been too successful.

The real achievement of The Gods Are Not To Blame is best identified when the play is examined as a work of art. The type of political message attempted by the playwright, as revealed in the lengthy passage quoted above, amounts to the imposition of an obtrusive element upon the play. Internal evidence will be cited to prove that such a political message is ineffectual. Meanwhile, the task on hand is the examination of the tragic movement which gives the play its meaning and form.

One interesting innovation in the play is the use of the Prologue, not found in Oedipus Rex. This prologue affords the Narrator the opportunity to furnish the audience with the background of the legend, the crisis point of which is dramatized in the play:

NARRATOR. The struggle of man begins at birth.
It is meet then that our play begin with
birth of a child.
The place is the land of Kutuje.
A baby has just been born
to King Adetusa and his wife Ojuola,
the King and Queen of this land of Kutuje. . . . (pp. 1-8)

This background would normally be known (in its Greek origin) to the Greek audience and would, therefore, be superfluous in Oedipus Rex. In

an adaptation, however, the Nigerian audience would require the briefing that this prologue provides.

Fergusson, in his study of the tragic movement in Oedipus Rex, has suggested "Purpose, Passion (or Suffering) and Perception" as the "tragic rhythm of action which is the substance or spiritual content of the play, and the clue to its extraordinarily comprehensive form."²⁷ A similar tragic rhythm is identifiable in The Gods Are Not To Blame.

In Act I, scene i, the townspeople suppliantly approach King Odewale to seek a solution to the epidemic that has defied all the potent curatives that the medicinemen can think of. King Odewale, in consultation with his chiefs, has sent for Baba Fakunle (the counterpart of Tiresias) and also "sent Aderopo to Ile-Ife, the land of Orunmila, to ask the all-seeing god why we are in pain" (p. 12). Aderopo arrives in scene ii to announce: "The oracle said that there is a curse in this land, and until that curse is purged, our suffering will go on" (p. 19). He adds that the curse is a man who has murdered King Adetusa, late king of Kutuje: "He was slain in violence, and it is fearful to know that that same murderer still lives in peace in this same land: The oracle warns us that we have left our pot unwatched, and our food now burns" (p. 21).

Odewale's inquiry into the manner of King Adetusa's death justifiably arouses in him the fear and suspicion that his predecessor was maliciously murdered: "My people, I fear and I tremble. Suspicions, heavy suspicions fill my heart. . . .When the frog in front falls in a

²⁷ F. Fergusson, The Idea of a Theatre, p. 18.

pit, others behind take caution. It would be me next. Me an Ijekun man, a stranger in the midst of your tribe. . . .When crocodiles eat their own eggs, what will they not do to flesh of a frog?" (p. 23). These fears and suspicions are genuine and logical. They serve as the catalyst for Odewale's determination to expose the regicide and make the criminal pay for his crime which has been the ruin of Odewale's subjects. Odewale's quest for the slayer of King Adetusa neatly parallels the quest of Oedipus for the slayer of King Laius. However, Rotimi's adaptation of the Greek legend transcends its source material by the additional ingredient of oath-taking at the shrine of Ogun.

Odewale's fatal oath is worth quoting in full because of its significance to later developments in the action which will be pointed out later:

Before Ogun the God of Iron, I stand on oath.
 Witness now all you present that before the feast
 of Ogun, which starts at sunrise, I, Odewale, the
 son of Ogundele, shall search and fully lay open
 before your very eyes the murderer of King Adetusa.
 And having seized that murderer, I swear by this
 sacred arm of Ogun [the machet of oath], that I
 shall straightaway bring him to the agony of slow
 death. First he shall be exposed to the eyes of the
 world and put to shame—the beginning of living
 death. Next, he shall be put into lasting darkness,
 his eyes tortured in their living sockets until
 their blood and rheum swell forth to fill the hollow
 of crushed eye balls. And then, the final agony:
 we shall cut him from his roots. Expelled from this
 land of his birth, he shall roam in darkness in the
 land of nowhere, and there die unmourned by men who
 know him, and buried by vultures who know him not.
 (Solemnly.) May the gods of our fathers—Obatala,
 Orumila, Sango, Sopponna, Eju-Ejegbara, Agemo,
 Ogun—stand by me. (p. 24)

This is dramatic irony at its best. Odewalé pronounces his own end

without knowing that he is the criminal he is searching for. The local gods are invoked as witnesses to an oath that, once sealed, cannot be reversed. An oath of this nature before the shrine of Ogun will not be taken lightly by any audience familiar with the wrath and rashness of the god of iron and war, and custodian of sacred oaths. Idowu makes the point that since "Ogun is ubiquitous and has his hand in every pie, he is regarded as a presiding divinity over oaths and covenant-making or the cementing of pacts. In our [law] courts, people who are neither Christians nor Moslems take their oaths to 'speak the truth and nothing but the truth' by kissing a piece of iron—a machete usually. The pact or covenant made before Ogun is considered most binding."²⁸ The Yoruba audience would normally be familiar with the finality of Odewale's type of oath and, therefore, expect every word uttered on oath before Ogun's shrine to come to pass as soon as Odewale detects the criminal in the midst of Kutuje people.

Act I which ends with Odewale's oath may be considered as the equivalent of the "Purpose" movement in the tragic rhythm of action in the play. Odewale will from now on stop at nothing in his search for the murderer of King Adetusa. Little does he know that his quest is to become a search for the obscure reality of his own past, and that he is the very criminal he is out to expose and destroy.

The whole of Act II is devoted to Odewale's quest. It is in this Act that Odewale's past gradually comes into focus, especially as from the moment that Baba Fakunlè is forced to reveal the cause of the

²⁸ E. B. Idowu, Olodumare, pp. 87-88.

misery of the people of Kutuje. It is essential to note that Baba Fakunle, the blind seer, is not a mere adaptation of the classical Tiresias. As noted earlier in Wale Ogunyemi's Eshu Elegbara, Orunmila is the all-seeing divination god, and his oracle is Ifa. According to Johnson, Ifa was introduced into Yorubaland by one Setilu, a Nupe man who was blind from birth:

Setilu's parents regretting their misfortune in having a blind son, were at first of doubtful mind. . . whether to kill the child, or spare its life to become a burden on the family. Parental feelings decided them to spare the child. It grew up a peculiar child, and the parents were astonished at his extraordinary powers of divination. At the early age of 5, he began to excite their wonder and curiosity by foretelling who would pay them a visit. . . and with what object. As he advanced in age, he began to practice [sic] sorcery and medicine.²⁹

This account of the legend of Setilu as a diviner strongly suggests that Ola Rotimi might have created Baba Fakunle as a hybrid of Sophocles' Tiresias and Setilu, the legendary originator of Yoruba Ifa oracle, who made Ile-Ife his permanent residence after he had been expelled from his Nupe home.

Pressured and insulted by King Odewale, Baba Fakunle finally reveals that Odewale himself is the murderer he seeks (p. 28), and that he is a "bedsharer" (p. 29). This revelation, considered by Odewale as a malicious accusation, marks the beginning of the king's suffering. Earlier, Aderopo had delivered the message of Ifa oracle, saying that

²⁹ S. Johnson, The History of the Yorubas (Westport, Conn.: Negro Universities Press, 1970; orig. publ., London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, Ltd., 1921), pp. 32-33.

the curse in the community was a regicide. Now Baba Fakunle confirms the oracle and even reveals the identity of the criminal. Aderopo had also earlier offered to summon Baba Fakunle: "My lord, may I go now to bring Baba Fakunle from Oyo?" (p. 32). Odewale pieces everything together in his mind, and, with justification, his earlier suspicions (p. 23) are reinforced by the latest development:

I should have known. The hyena flirts with the hen, the hen is happy, not knowing that her death has come. I am an Ijekun man. That is the trouble. I, an Ijekun man, came to your tribe, you made me king, and I was happy, ignorant that plots, subversion, and intrigues would forever keep me company. Oh, but you wait. . . you will know me. One by one I will catch you: one by one, I will fell you all. First, that boy, Aderopo or whatever he calls himself. He wants to be King, so what did he do? He bribed the Seer to come and insult me, to call me murderer of his father. (pp. 30-31)

Odewale, at this point, is worth comparing with King Oedipus. While Oedipus' suspicion of Creon as plotter against his life is unfounded, though understandable, Odewale's suspicion of Aderopo, even if wrong, is justifiable. The room for suspicion has been created by the fact that the move to go and call Baba Fakunle at a point in the play originates from Aderopo. While Creon is only a brother to Jocasta, Aderopo is a son to Ojuola. Among the Yorubas, Aderopo's lineage would normally make him a potential king, whereas Creon's position as brother to the Queen would not be considered by the Yorubas as constituting a serious threat to the reigning king. Odewale has a strong case, therefore, for basing his suspicions on Aderopo's alleged ambition to oust him as king of Kutuje.

The foregoing analysis of Odewale's suspicions should justify

his refusal to accept Baba Fakunle's revelation other than as spiteful and malicious. To clear his name, therefore, Odewale intensifies his inquiries as to the truth of the identity of the murderer of King Adetusa. A series of circumstantial evidence drawn from Odewale's past gradually gives the clue to the identity of the regicide he seeks.

In an attempt to circumvent Odewale's destiny that he would kill his father and marry his mother, his parents had arranged for the nine-day-old boy to be abandoned to die in the forest far away from Kutuje. But he had been picked up by a farmer, and had grown up with a couple whom he took for his real parents at Ijekun. When insinuations from neighbours prompted him to ascertain his true lineage from an Ifa priest, and his destiny was revealed to him, he fled from Ijekun in order to avoid the brutal fate revealed to him. These and other clues, when pieced together, give Odewale and his mother-wife the corroboration needed to ascertain Odewale as the man who killed King Adetusa at "the place where three footpaths meet" (p. 54). Odewale's account of his confrontation with an old man whom he killed confirms that the man he had killed was indeed his father, and, therefore, the woman by whom he has had four children is his real mother.

At this stage, the rhythm of tragic action changes from "Passion" (or Suffering) to "Perception." Tormented by the realization that he has been the cause of the curse in his kingdom, and stunned by the horrid suicide of his mother-wife, Odewale has no choice but to implement in every detail the oath which he swore before the shrine of Ogun. It is this tragic end that Odewale's oath ironically predicts.

If there is one important lesson derivable from the play, it is that striving to alter one's destiny, even if unwittingly, will only make things worse.³⁰ King Oedipus, in one of his rare moments of perception, laments:

It was Apollo, friends, Apollo,
that brought this bitter bitterness, my sorrows
to completion.
But the hand that struck me
was none but my own.

Curse on the man who took
the cruel bonds from off my legs, as I lay
in the field.
He stole me from death and saved me,
no kindly service.
Had I died then
I would not be so burdensome to friends.

Then I would not have come
to kill my father and marry my mother
infamously.
Now I am godless and child of impurity,
begetter in the same seed that created my
wretched self.
If there is any ill worse than ill,
that is the lot of Oedipus.³¹

Except for Aderopo's statement, "It is the way the gods meant it to happen" (p. 70), the insight of Oedipus in Oedipus Rex has been removed from The Gods Are Not To Blame. In its place, Ola Rotimi has substituted Odewale's regret for his precocious rage:

I once slew a man on my farm in Ede, I could
have spared him. But he spat on my tribe. He
spat on the tribe I thought was my own tribe.
The man laughed, and laughing, he called me a
'man from the bush tribe of Ijekun'. And I

³⁰ Cf. E. B. Idowu, Olodumare, pp. 176-82.

³¹ Sophocles, Oedipus The King, in D. Green and R. Lattimore, Eds., Greek Tragedies (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1960), I, 168-69.

lost my reason. Now I find out that that very man was my . . . own father, the King who ruled this land before me. It was my [flight] from the blood I spilled to calm the hurt of my tribe, that brought me to this land to do more horrors. (p. 71)

The emphasis in the above speech seems to be placed on Odewale's perception of his unbridled rage as the cause of his downfall. Several references have been made in the play to the temper of Odewale. Baba Fakunle makes him realize: "Your bad temper, like a disease from birth, is the curse that has brought you trouble" (p. 29). Alaka recalls: "'Scorpion' I used to call your King because of his temper" (p. 42). And to Alaka's cryptic remark that he did not teach Odewale his hot temper, Odewale replies: "No, no, Sango, the thunder lion, taught me that one!" (p. 44). But Odewale has once recognized this great weakness in him, in contradistinction to the virtue of patience demonstrated by Ojuola: "Give me some of her patience, I pray. Some . . . some of her cool heart. . . let her cool spirit enter my body, and cool the hot, hot/hotness in my blood—the hot blood of a gorilla! (Cleansing himself in the sacred water.) Cool me, Ogun, cool me" (p. 39). These passages, particularly the last one, reveal that Odewale has always known that he has a hot temper which, according to Alaka, has brought him trouble. But his own discovery towards the end of the play that his temper has contributed substantially to his undoing is a real revelation to him.

However, Ola Rotimi argues that tribal bigotry constitutes Odewale's tragic flaw, and rests his case on the following passage in the flashback scene:

ODEWALE'S VOICE: That is the end. I can bear insults to myself, brother, but to call my tribe bush, and then summon riff-raff to mock my mother tongue! I will die first. (p. 46)

Rotimi claims that Odewale "discovers that he is in fact a prominent part of that community, that very ethnic group which he has long suspected of tribal treachery against him. He could have found out his true identity earlier had he trusted the intentions of the chiefs around him."³² This is clearly a case of misplaced emphasis. Odewale's fight for the dignity of his "tribe" is provoked by King Adetusa's abusive tongue. His form of tribalism—if at all it is tribalism—is much closer to patriotism than to the monster which Rotimi wants to use as the symbol of tribal disunity in Nigeria. To rise in defence of one's motherland—be it a village, a tribe, or the entire nation—is plain patriotism. Rotimi is probably confusing tribalism and Odewale's form of patriotism as two species of the same monster.

The type of perception imposed on Odewale in the end is out of harmony with that rhythm of tragic action which has moved from "Purpose" in Act I, through "Passion" (or Suffering) in Act II, and to "Perception" in the third and final Act. The focus suddenly shifts away from the central theme of the irreversibility of Odewale's destiny as exposed in the Prologue to a political message for which the action in the play has not adequately prepared the audience. The impressive three-movement structure of the play tends to be slightly undermined by the overt introduction of an obtrusive political message.

³² Ola Rotimi, Recorded interview, in Dem-Say, Occasional Publications, No. 9 (1974), 62.

One has to turn to Obotunde Ijimere's The Imprisonment of Obatala, and Duro Ladipo's Moremi, for plays which effectively integrate contemporary politics with dramatized myths or legends. Both plays are related, not only because of their relevance to contemporary politics in Nigeria, but also because they originate from myths or legends connected with the people of Ile-Ife. Moremi is an important legendary figure, whose son's death and deification are commemorated annually in Ile-Ife. Of equal significance to Ile-Ife people, however, is the festival held every year in honour of Obatala, the Creator god.

According to a variant of Yoruba creation myth, Obatala was assigned to the duty of creation by Olodumare; but, feeling thirsty on his way to the world, he drank palm wine excessively. In his drunkenness, he created the albino, the hunchback, the cripple, the blind, and the deaf and dumb. For this abuse of the power of creation delegated to him, the Supreme God's viceroy, Obatala, was imprisoned in the sacred city of Ile-Ife. But this imprisonment, though well deserved, only brought creation to a halt. Pestilence, sterility, poor harvests, drought and famine all over the land marked his period of imprisonment. When he was finally released, life, peace, and plenty returned to the land; and his prison experience has made him a much reformed deity. This is the brief summary of the myth which Obotunde Ijimere dramatizes in The Imprisonment of Obatala.³³

One major difference between the account of the Obatala myth

³³ In The Imprisonment of Obatala and Other Plays (London: Heinemann, 1966).

given above and Ijimore's adaptation of it in his play lies in the location of Obatala's imprisonment. Unlike the myth which states that Obatala was imprisoned in Ile-Ife, the playwright creates a more plausible motive for the god's imprisonment at Oyo. Maybe Ijimore has used a different version of the myth for his play. After all, as Fergusson asserts, "It is the way with myths that they generate whole progenies of elaborations and varying versions."³⁴ However, Ijimore's version of the myth will suffice for the purpose of the study of the moral and political allegories in The Imprisonment of Obatala.³⁵

Obatala's impulsive decision (in scene i) to visit his friend Sango³⁶ creates a situation whereby Sango's fierce nature is exposed. Obatala himself acknowledges Sango as "the owner of the palace, / Who spits fire from his mouth, who darts fire from his eyes" (p. 5). But Yemoja (Obatala's wife) fears

this man,
Who rides fire like a horse,
This man who has water,
Yet takes blood to wash.
He covers himself with the cloth of death
He shaves his children's heads with lightning;
(p. 4)

The nature of Sango, the fierce god of thunder and lightning, is outlined to emphasize the justification for Yemoja's stern warning to her

³⁴ F. Fergusson, The Idea of a Theatre, p. 15.

³⁵ For other versions, see, for example, E. B. Idowu, Olodumare, pp. 20 and 71-74; G. Parrinder, West African Religion, pp. 20 and 27; W. Bascom, The Yoruba of Southwestern Nigeria, pp. 81-82; and J. A. Adedeji, "The Place of Drama in Yoruba Religious Observance," Odu, 3, No. 1 (1966), 88-94.

³⁶ The visit motif is another variant of the original myth.

husband against his proposed visit. In the argument put forth by Obatala resides the basic Yoruba philosophy of friendship, a philosophy that has some universal validity:

A friend is precious like a child!
 You cannot buy a friend in the market.

 A friend's temper cannot be so foul—
 That we should cease to love him.
 His actions cannot be so crooked—
 That we should cease to respect him.
 His face cannot be so ugly—
 That we should cease to admire him. (p. 5)

In short true friendship is not a function of material wealth, physical attributes and individual idiosyncrasies; and a true friend makes allowances for the human weaknesses of his friend. However, Obatala's argument does not seem to impress Yemoja, as the following speech shows:

Shango may be your friend,
 But he is surrounded by ruffians,
 By warriors who kill the owner of the house
 And paint the hearth with his blood.
 They kill on the left, they kill on the right,
 And they will not welcome you
 Bringer of peace. (p. 6)

Through this speech, Ijimere hints at the contrast between Sango and Obatala as a prelude to the characterization of Obatala in scene ii.

Ijimere discloses the nature and fate of Obatala through the divination of the Babalawo (the priest of Ifa oracle), and in the praise song of the women. The interesting thing to note in this scene is the way the Babalawo prophesies Obatala's success on his journey despite initial set-backs:

The river abuses the rock—
 The rock keeps quiet.
 The river attacks the rock—
 The rock does not fight back.

The river swallows the rock--
 The rock holds still.
 But when the dry season comes
 The river is lost in the sand
 His fishes turn white bellies to heaven,
 But the rock remains immobile
 Where God had planted it.
 Shango may thrive in war,
 Orunmila may thrive through wisdom
 But you will thrive in suffering. (p. 11)

This passage is crucial to a full understanding of the moral allegory in the play. The imagery of permanence, immobility and durability—the rock—bears a contradistinctive relationship with the imagery of instability and transiency—the river flow. This relationship represents the enactment of the virtue of patience as contrasted with the repercussions of rashness. Obatala is the "rock" who will be tricked and abused by Esu, and imprisoned ("swallowed") by Sango, following the trumped up charges of the theft of Sango's bedecked war horse in scenes iii and iv.

As the action progresses,⁶ the structural pattern continues to reinforce the meaning of the play. Yemoja's advice and warnings to Obatala in scene i finds a parallel in Oya's warnings to Sango in scene iv:

My Lord, Shango,
 Who rides fire like a horse!
 The man who thinks of nothing but the
 irritation of the itch
 Could easily scratch himself to the bone!
 Beware of rashness!
 The knife that thinks it is only destroying
 an old sheath
 Is in fact destroying its own house! (p. 23)

The beauty of a passage like this lies in its proverbial texture. The Yorubas say that proverbs are the horses of speech; only the wise and

the reasonable can ride them. In anger, man easily loses control of his reason and therefore shelves his wisdom. Sango is angry. He cannot ride the horse of speech provided by his wife in the warning quoted above. Consequently, like Obatala, Sango impertinently shuns his wife's words of wisdom. The difference between the two divinities, of course, is that Obatala neglects his wife's advice because he has made up his mind to accept his fate in the interest of friendship; but Sango turns down Oya's warnings out of blind fury and rashness. The repercussions of this rashness are best expressed by Oya:

But alas a curse has fallen on this city.
 Some women die in childbirth; they bleed
 Until their body is drained and dry.
 Or else the fruit rots in their womb
 Before it sees the light of day.
 For some time now, the swelling belly
 And the pendulous heavy breasts, a woman's pride,
 Seem like a death sentence.

 A curse has fallen on Oyo,
 The corn on its stalk is worm-eaten
 And hollow like an old honeycomb;
 The yam in the earth is dry and stringy like
 Palm wood.
 I fear that we are paying now
 For the king's injustice. (p. 31)

It is significant that Sango does not even notice the misery in his kingdom. His fury, pride, and power have blinded him, and alienated him from the realities of the doom of his subjects. But once these are made known to him, and the cause revealed by the Babalawo, Sango realizes his crime; and Obatala is quick to forgive and to forget:

He who admits his fault
 Will not be kept kneeling for long

 Shango
 My suffering was not your doing.

I had an account to settle
 With the God of fate.
 The owner of heaven has not forgiven me
 For in my drunkenness
 I had made the Albino
 Whose bleached skin is sore like the lepers,
 I had made the hunchback
 To whom women close their thighs
 And the blind man
 Who is helpless like a bat in sunlight.
 Eshu, confuser of men,
 Has brought my suffering about.

 But let us now rejoice:
 The taste of friendship lingers in the mouth
 Like bitter kola nut. (p. 30)

It has been necessary to quote Obatala's speech so extensively because it reveals not only his own magnanimity but also his own genuine repentance for the crime he had committed against Olodumare. His imprisonment is his penance, and his magnanimity a demonstration of his recognition of his own need for pardon. The play thus ends with the desirable reconciliation of Obatala to Olodumare, and of Ọango to Obatala. The experiences of Obatala and those of Ọango, and the resolution of the conflict of the gods adequately symbolize man's need for patience in suffering, particularly if such a suffering is the consequence of an offence committed. Besides, the play demonstrates the desirability of mutual trust, peaceful co-existence, and magnanimity when an individual is wronged. This is what makes the moral allegory in the play hardly separable from the political allegory.

The danger in attempting a political interpretation of The Imprisonment of Obatala is that the political allegory, once identified, may reduce the play to a topical drama. This danger is averted, however, by the fact that the myth of Obatala predates the contemporary

political event which has its parallel in the play, that is, the imprisonment of Chief Obafemi Awolowo.³⁷ A summary of the indictment, trial, imprisonment, and release of Chief Awolowo is essential as a basis for the political interpretation of Ijimere's play.

On November 2, 1962, Chief Awolowo, along with twenty-six other members of his party, was indicted on charges of plotting a violent overthrow of the constitutionally elected Nigerian Government. The marathon treason trial, which began in November 1962, came to a dramatic end on 11 September 1963.

Justice George S. Sowemimo, presiding at the Lagos High Court, found Chief Awolowo guilty of treasonable felony, conspiracy to commit a felony, and unlawful importation of firearms. He sentenced Chief Awolowo to ten years imprisonment. Jail sentences ranging from two to seven years were also handed down to seventeen others, while three were acquitted.³⁸

Before the sentence was delivered, Chief Awolowo made a dramatic thirty-minute speech that was as moving as it was portentous. He said: "It is an irony of history that as one of the architects of Nigerian independence I have spent almost half of Nigeria's three years' independence under one form of confinement or another."³⁹ He also

³⁷ A distinguished lawyer, national leader and President of the banned Action Group party, former Premier of Western Nigeria up till 1959. Until his imprisonment, he was the leader of the Opposition in the Federal Parliament. He has his eye on the Executive Presidency in 1979.

³⁸ "Nigeria's Awolowo sentenced to 10 years," Africa Report, 8, No. 9 (October 1963), 16-17.

³⁹ "Awolowo is given 10 years," The Times (London), 12 Sept. 1963, p. 10.

declared in part: "I have rendered service to this country which historians will regard as imperishable. I have known triumphs and setbacks, and I have met them with equal minds."⁴⁰ He expressed the great fear that "The twilight of democracy and the rule of law in Nigeria is changing into darkness. But in this very court and in the entire Federation the spirit of the new Nigeria is already active and at work."⁴¹

Perhaps the most ominous statement Chief Awolowo made was to the effect that his imprisonment would mean that his valuable services would be lost to the nation and that there might be a heightening of psychological tension which had already damaged the nation's economy. He concluded by prophesying that he was going to prison, leaving Nigeria in darkness, and that the nation would remain in darkness until he came out of jail.

It will be recalled that the turmoil that Nigeria experienced while Chief Awolowo was in prison was surpassed, in the entire history of modern Nigeria, only by the 1967-70 civil war.

Chief Awolowo was finally released on 2 August 1966, following the second coup of 29 July which sacked the Aguiyi-Ironsi military government that came to power in the dawn coup of 15 January 1966. Back in his home town, Ikenne, on 3 August, Chief Awolowo made another memorable speech which said in part that "instead of scheming vengeance against those who have wronged or harmed us, we should strive to see

⁴⁰ "Days of Judgment," West Africa, 14 Sept. 1963, p. 1035.

⁴¹ The Times (London), 12 Sept. 1963, p. 10.

what lessons we can usefully learn from the historic though calamitous and tragic events of the past four years."⁴²

Obotunde Ijimere may not have consciously written his play as an allegory of the indictment, trial, imprisonment, and release of Chief Awolowo. But the points of similarity between the experiences of Obatala and those of Chief Awolowo are too glaring to be dismissed as mere coincidence. Hubert Ogunde's play Yoruba Ronu had earlier satirized power politics in Nigeria leading to the enslavement of the Yorubas and their leader in the North. Its call for unity among the Yorubas is built into the title of the play—Yoruba Ronu (Think! Yorubas). The release of the Yoruba leader in the play is not unlike the release of Chief Awolowo. A sensitive audience familiar with Yoruba Ronu, and watching The Imprisonment of Obatala with full knowledge of the 1962-63 marathon treason trial in Nigeria, would have no difficulty drawing two conclusions. One is that the Action Group leader was in a way a metaphorical reincarnation of Obatala of Ile-Ife; the other is that Ijimere's play is an ingenious allegory of the Chief's indictment, trial, imprisonment, and release from jail, though not in all its fine details.

The argument may be raised that the release of Obatala brings back to the community of Oyo abundance, and the reign of peace and happiness—according to the dramatized legend, whereas civil unrest culminating in the Biafra war followed the release of Chief Awolowo. This argument is crucial to the validity of the political allegory I

⁴² "Gowon's Plan," West Africa, 13 Aug. 1966, p. 920.

have attempted to point out in the play. Such an argument loses its steam the moment one considers the Epilogue spoken by Esu:

Now they are happy.
Obatala rests in the sky like a swarm of bees.
He watches the world in silence
Ogun has retired to the dark forest of Ekiti.
.....
In Oyo the celebrants are sleeping
.....
They will wake up to times of plenty:
For years to come
The earth will never fail them
.....
Their women will conceive
As soon as they have weaned the other child.
These are the times for the weavers,
The goldsmiths and drummers and praise singers
To grow fat on the vanity of women. (p. 42)

This section of the Epilogue is full of the imagery of life, productivity, joy, and peace, and it points to the promise of affluence. But Esu is fully aware that this period of plenty is ephemeral, and may be replaced by strife and destruction, since life and death co-exist on earth. Consequently, he warns:

The time will come when the owner of Heaven
Will send me back to confuse the heads of men.
Then Ogun will burst out of his forest
To cool his parched throat with blood.
.....
For the owner of the world has interlocked
creation and death
Inseparably like mating dogs. (pp. 43-44)

Esu's words cannot be taken too lightly, considering his success in sowing the seed of discord in the play. The confusion and bloodshed he envisages and anxiously awaits are not beyond what he is capable of fomenting. His words should be taken seriously, therefore, as a warning "that the forces of War and Fate, who have temporarily retired. . . will

still triumph again."³

It is significant that Esu's warning is sounded at the conclusion of a play published in 1966 at a time when consultations were being held by Nigerian leaders to avert the national strife and bloodshed that were imminent. If Ijimeere wrote The Imprisonment of Obatala as a political allegory, the warning of Esu could then be the playwright's warnings against the outbreak of civil war and genocide.⁴

Esu is a malevolent force to be reckoned with in that his savage treachery does not necessarily have to be provoked. In Wale Ogunyemi's Eshu Elegbara, for instance, he maliciously incites the conflict of the gods and ensures the discomfort of the children of Ile who, out of ignorance, refuse to acknowledge Esu's divinity. Esu also features in The Imprisonment of Obatala as the confusionist and trouble maker. To defy his divinity either by disregarding his warnings as stated in the Epilogue in The Imprisonment of Obatala, or by neglecting to offer him regular placatory sacrifices, is to invite affliction and disaster in the community. This concept of the need to honour or to placate a divinity by regular sacrifices or festivals lies beneath the rhythm of the tragic action in another legendary play, Moremi,⁵ by Duro Ladipo.

Moremi, an adaptation of Samuel Johnson's account of the

³ D. S. Blair, A review of The Imprisonment of Obatala, 49.

⁴ The 1967-70 Biafra war has proved Ijimeere to be a playwright with the foresight of a "prophet."

⁵ In Ulli Beier, Ed., Three Nigerian Plays (London: Longmans, 1967). All references to Duro Ladipo's Moremi are from this volume.

Moremi's legend in Ile-Ife, focuses attention on three interwoven themes. These are: man's obligation to the gods, an examination of the relationship between the people of Ile-Ife and their gods; patriotism and sacrifice, as demonstrated in Moremi's offer of Oluorogbo as sacrificial lamb for the purpose of atonement; and peaceful co-existence.

The plot of Moremi may be slight, but this is fully compensated for in more ways than one. The first scene introduces the audience to the market at Ife, and ingeniously reveals that a native of Ife can be recognized by the absence of tribal marks on his face (p. 4). Even if he has tribal marks on his face,⁴⁶ these are hardly necessary to distinguish the Ifes from the Igbos who raid the market, and perform a triumphant war dance as they make away with women captives and easy plunder from the market.

The recurrent victories of the Igbos are rationalized in scene ii by an Ife Chief:

The Igbos are the owners of the land
on which Oduduwa built this town.
Let us propitiate them with presents
or else the spirits of the soil
will eternally work against us.

No human enemy is too strong for us.
But the Igbos invade our town
With the spirits of their ancestors,
Fearfully dancing in their midst.
We do not bow to human might
But to the sacred owners of the soil. (pp. 9-10)

This is a notable variation in Ladipo's adaptation of Johnson's

⁴⁶ S. Johnson, The History of the Yorubas, p. 108, claims that "Ife marks are three horizontal lines like those of the original Basorun's marks, each being shorter, about half-inch long. Otherwise Ifes are usually plain faced."

account which states that the Ifes "propitiated and called upon their gods for help, but received no response."⁴⁷ Ladipo provides some justification for the Igbo raids, but this is hardly plausible. The Ifes could not have conquered the Igbos and appropriated their land in the first place if the Igbos had always used their masquerades, or ancestral spirits, to set the Ifes in disarray. However, the case is made that the gods of the land frown upon the Ife people, apparently, for their failure to propitiate the deities after their conquest of the Igbos. This lack of cordial relationship between the conquerors and the gods of the land requires adequate reparation on the part of the Ife people.

It is this reparation, undertaken single-handedly by Moremi, that forms the basis of the action in scenes iii-viii. The river goddess, Esinmerin, enlightens Moremi on how to overcome the Igbos after extracting from her the covenant that she will sacrifice what she loves most "as atonement / to pacify the sacred ground of Ife" (p. 12).

Ulli Beier argues that in Johnson's account of the legend, "Moremi does not realise the gravity of her promise to the river goddess Esinmerin. Rather she is being tricked into the situation where she has to sacrifice her child. Ladipo on the other hand gains tragic and dramatic intensity by making the sacrifice a voluntary decision."⁴⁸ This is misleading. No one tricks Moremi into offering her son. She freely promises (in Johnson's account) to offer to the goddess the most

⁴⁷ Ibid., p. 147.

⁴⁸ Three Nigerian Plays, p. xi.

costly sacrifice if she is successful against the Igbes. It is her ignorance of the implication of her free choice that costs her her only son, who happens to be the most "costly" sacrifice Moremi could offer. But in the play, it is the goddess who demands:

What you love most
that alone
can be accepted as atonement.
to pacify the sacred ground of Ife. (p. 12)

If the goddess is to be judged as tricky and callous, it is Ladipo's version and not Johnson's that fits the description. Since Moremi is tricked into offering her only son, Oluorogbo, she demonstrates, through her compliance with Esimmerin's demand, that her patriotism transcends her maternal affection for her son. This, indeed, is where the tragic intensity of the play lies.

The strength of Moremi derives from its almost flawless integration of theme, plot structure, and language into a tragic rhythm that moves the soul and appeals to the intellect. Ladipo's division of the play into nine short scenes is as curious as it is interesting. A numerologist asserts that "Nine, the perfect form of the perfect three, was the number of the heavens and of the angelic hierarchy, which the virtuous human mind resembled. . . . Moreover, nine aptly symbolizes the goal or end of moral efforts, since it is the last of the digits."⁴⁹ Unfortunately, no consistent system of number symbolism exists among the Yoruba people. The point may be made, therefore, that Duro Ladipo's division of Moremi into nine scenes may have been merely expedient. All

⁴⁹ A. Fowler, Spenser and the Numbers of Time (New York: Barnes & Noble, 1964), pp. 55-56.

the same, it is quite interesting to note the relevance of the structure of the play to its meaning.

The deification of Oluorogbo in scene ix is a fitting conclusion to the rhythm of tragic action in the play. In his capacity as sacrificial lamb, Oluorogbo is like Christ, the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world. But Christ's saving mission would not have been completed without the Resurrection and the Ascension, the symbolic victory over death and the Devil. Similarly, Oluorogbo has to ascend to heaven, to the celestial sphere where he will eternally mediate between heaven and earth, and protect Ile-Ife:

WOMEN: Oluorogbo
fighter on earth and fighter in heaven!
Oluorogbo
Messenger between heaven and earth!
Oluorogbo
who will keep war from Ife in times to come! (p. 29)

In commemoration of Oluorogbo's death, an annual ceremony of ancestral mask dance is inaugurated at the end of the play. The death of Oluorogbo is the means by which the Ife people are delivered from, and reconciled with, the Igbo invaders. This is reminiscent of the redemptive mission of Christ, through suffering and death on the Cross, which reconciles mankind to God.

The parallel between Oluorogbo and Christ facilitates the establishment of the similarity between the music and dance with which the Igbos and the Ifes celebrated the deification of Oluorogbo and the settlement of the long-standing strife, and the "ninefold harmony [which] / Make up full consort to th'Angelike symphony"⁵⁰ when Christ's

⁵⁰ Milton, "On the Morning of Christ's Nativity," st. xiii.

birth is announced to the world. It is significant that this "music sweet / . . . As never was by mortal finger strook"⁵¹ is first mentioned in stanza ix of the Nativity Ode. Hardly can this be by sheer accident. It is the same music that was heard

While the Creator great
His constellations set,
And the well-balanc'd world on hinges hung,
And cast the dark foundations deep,
And bid the weltering waves their oozy channel keep.
(ll. 120-24)

This is the music of joy and peace. It brings reconciliation and salvation to mankind. It is the sweet music that replaces the "horrid clang" and "hideous humm," and the "voice of weeping. . . and loud lament" (l. 183) of the heathen gods as they retire to their groves. Similarly, in Moremi, the solemn and dignified Igbo drumming and dancing in scene ix mark the end of the strife and of invasion in Ife. Unlike former war cries, the final dancing and singing are akin to the harmonious music of the spheres at Christ's birth, and the reconciliation they celebrate is aptly demonstrated as the two kings embrace each other.

It can be deduced from the foregoing analysis that "Moremi shows a fine insight into the workings of Yoruba religion."⁵² However, the play is more than just an insight into the workings of Yoruba religion with its parallel in Christian theology. The Igbo raids of Ife people would have continued to promote inter-tribal animosities and to

⁵¹ Ibid., ll. 93-95.

⁵² Ulli Beier, in Three Nigerian Plays, p. xii.

threaten the security of life and property of innocent citizens had Moremi not made the move to end the misery of her people. The reconciliation which the sacrifice of her son fosters may, therefore, be considered as a symbol of the much desired reconciliation among tribally based political opponents in contemporary Nigeria.

The religious and political elements, which blend so smoothly in Moremi depend for their effect on the poetic element, and on the music, song and dancing which constitute the aesthetic principle in the play. Ulli Beier is correct, therefore, to observe that "On stage [Moremi] is a moving drama which depends heavily on its rich poetic texture and on the beauty of the music."⁵³

No study of the use of the past through myth in modern Nigerian drama would be complete without a close look at Clark's Ozidi.⁵⁴ The dramatic stature of this play derives from the fact that, although it is best studied as a revenge tragedy, it embraces almost all the major themes in the other five mythical plays already examined. The malicious incitement to conspiracy and conflict spearheaded by Eshu in Ogunyemi's Eshu Elegbara is surpassed by the sinister role of Ofe who uses the agitation for a new king in Orua as a mask to get rid of Ozidi. The prideful reliance of Ogboinba on her powers in strong-headedly confronting her creator in Ijimore's Moyengi is similar to Oreame's⁵⁵ excessive use of her supernatural powers which recoil on her in the end.

⁵³ Three Nigerian Plays, p. xii.

⁵⁴ Ozidi (London: O. U. P., 1966). All references to this play are taken from this edition.

Also, it should be noted that the theme of precious race that is central to the tragedy in both The Gods Are Not To Blame and The Imprisonment of Obatala contributes in large measure to the tragic action in Ozidi. And finally, Ozidi shares with Morogun the themes of war and feuding, and the concept of the need to honor a god through regular sacrifices and occasional commemorative festivals. All these make Ozidi the most significant of the mythical or legendary plays selected for treatment in this chapter.

Although the characters in Ozidi are predominantly human, the whole action is lifted above the ordinary plane of mortal life. According to Clark, the play is based on the Ijaw legend of Ozidi, narrated in seven days to dance, music and mime. Outlining the theme of the play, Clark writes: "It is the story of a posthumous son brought up by a witch grandmother to avenge an equally famous father killed at war by his own compatriots to spite the idiot king, his brother. But the hero overreaches himself in the course of his quest for vengeance, and in a turn of dramatic irony that knocks one over, he just narrowly misses his doom at the hands of Smallpox."⁵⁵

This synoptic outline strongly suggests that, even though Ozidi is a faithful dramatic re-creation of the Ijaw saga, and even though it is a recording of an Ijaw epic belonging to people who in all probabilities never read any Greek, or Roman, or English revenge tragedy, the play has a lot in common with both classical and Elizabethan revenge plays. This is not to say that Ozidi has for its prototype any of the

⁵⁵ Clark, "Aspects of Nigerian Drama," loc. cit., pp. 25-26.

established revenge tragedies. Ozidi is essentially an Ijaw play, and any resemblance between it and older plays of the revenge tradition should not lead any reader to the questionable, if not erroneous, conclusion that for its form and plot "Clark has returned to the Greeks and the Elizabethans, weaving one of the longest dramas . . . yet to come from modern Africa."⁵⁶ Clark himself has warned critics against assertions like this:

The implication is not that one group of people borrowed this and that property from another but that there can and in fact there do occur areas of coincidence and correspondence in the way of living among several peoples separated by vast distances and time, and who apparently are of distinct cultures, practices and persuasions. For example, the orchestra and the leader-chorus arrangement of characters occupies as much a principal part in Nigerian theatre as it did in Greek theatre. But this is not to say one is debtor to the other. It is a matter of correspondence and coincidence.⁵⁷

It is interesting, however, that Ozidi contains the major properties of revenge tragedy which A. H. Thorndike defines as "a distinct species of the tragedy of blood. . . whose leading motive is revenge and whose main action deals with the progress of this revenge, leading to the death of the murderers and often the death of the avenger himself."⁵⁸

The plot structure of Ozidi qualifies it to be classified as a revenge tragedy. Consequently, a structural analysis of the play is

⁵⁶ O. R. Larson, "Nigerian Drama Comes of Age," Africa Report, 13, No. 5 (May 1968), 55-56.

⁵⁷ Clark, "Aspects of Nigerian Drama," loc. cit., p. 24.

⁵⁸ A. H. Thorndike, "The Relations of Hamlet to Contemporary Revenge Plays," PMLA, 17, No. 2; new series, 10, No. 2 (1902), 125.

required in order to gain a deeper perspective of the legend it dramatizes. But before attempting a structural approach to the play, it is necessary to examine the mythical background that underlies its action.

Dan Ihevbaye correctly asserts that "Orua is an epic celebration of the engendering of evil and its purification. The process begins with a community which requires purification. But envy and malice prevent the purification and give birth to wrath and revenge."⁵⁹ The situation is more complex than this, though. The evil that befalls Orua is the direct result of the vaulting political and military ambition of the people of the city who, according to the oracle of Omni and Ifa in Ile-Ife, "have enslaved too many, / Ravished too many lands" (p. 7). Consequently, Orua has become "like a tree fallen in the open" (p. 6) without a king. The kings die no sooner than they are enthroned. Six such kings have died within four floods, that is, in four years.

The predicament of the people of Orua recalls to mind the misery of the Ifes in Moremi. Like the Ifes who conquered the Igboes and appropriated their land without any compensation, or propitiation of the gods of the land, Orua people have been extending their empire by force of arms. But Ofe sees nothing unusual in this:

It is not as if Orua
Were the first eagle ever to spread abroad
The shadow of its wings. (p. 7)

The repercussion of the military raids on neighbouring villages by Orua people is manifest, not only in the short-lived reigns of their kings,

⁵⁹ "The Poetry and Drama of John Pepper Clark," in Bruce King, Ed., Introduction to Nigerian Literature (Lagos: University of Lagos, 1971), p. 168.

It is also a social and economic occasion. To witness the celebration, the people of Orin have gathered the annual festival in honor of the "People of the Sea." In the words of the Story-teller:

After all, it is from you water people the wealth
Of the whole world flows. Indeed, why do you cut
us off,
Your sons, with left-eyes and offal? So,
This festival in honour of you has not been
celebrated
For long, how long now I cannot count on
The fingers of my two hands. Do you think
If we had money, we would not celebrate? (p. 4)

Such a nationalization like this may keep the argument going in a vicious circle. It foreshadows the nature of the controversy which torments the meeting of the Council of State of Orin summoned to choose a new king. The agitation for a new king is discouraged by an Elder who counsels:

Man, none of these men was common yam we
Buried with prospects of further yield.
Therefore, instead of choosing another
And having him planted long before his harvest,
why don't we
Go and find how we may wash
Ourselves completely clean and so dislodge dirt that
Now
Sets the permanent precedent of our time? (pp. 6-7)

Opposing this suggestion, Ofe argues: "We require a king to pour / Our fathers' litation to wash ourselves clean" (p. 7). The Elder concedes the truth in Ofe's contention, but points out:

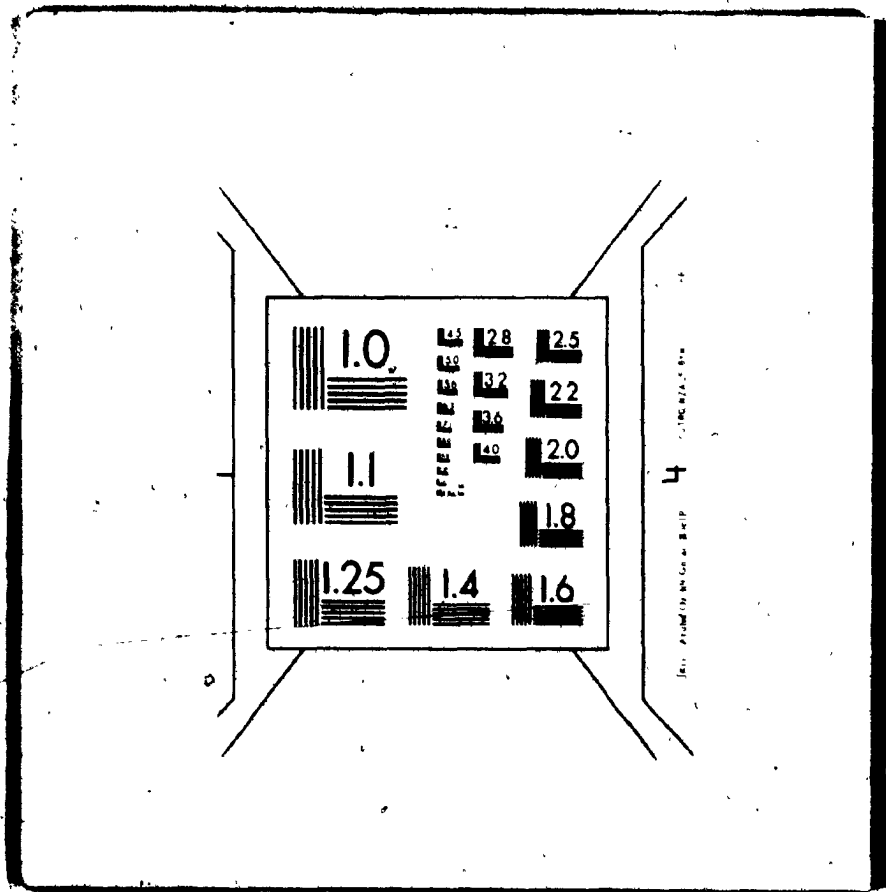
Ewiri as Amanana-oweri,
Or any elder for that matter, can offer
The same sacrifice in our name. Our gods and
Ancestors will not refuse offerings of food from
Our hands if these are clean. (p. 7).

And so, the controversy rages on as to which comes first--the enthronement

...king to the... that will... the...
...on the... of... stay the...
...kills the king prematurely. Led by Ofo, the agitators for a new king
...the voice of wisdom of the Elder, and...
...Ozidi's night and sleep, at war, enthrone Ozidi's idiot brother
Temugedege as king of Orua. Temugedege reminds one of Ibadan's Wale
Soyinka's The Strong Breed. It may be conjectured that Temugedege has
been chosen not necessarily out of desperation for a new king, but
because the enemies of his younger brother Ozidi require a "carrier" to
liberate the land from the curse that lies low upon it. The enthronement
of Temugedege sparks off a chain of events which bring disaster, not
only upon the Ozidi family, but also upon the entire community. The
disaster is the price which the entire city pays for skipping the
important ritual of purification that should normally precede the choice
and coronation of a new king. The social strife and death in the play
may be explained, therefore, as the revenge of the gods visited upon the
people of Orua.

In Ozidi, the fundamental motive for the tragic action is the
revenge of young Ozidi on the murderers of his father. The first six
scenes of the play are devoted to the plot against Ozidi's life for
insisting that tribute be paid to his idiot brother, the new king. Orea's
(Ozidi's wife's) premonition of the looming disaster prompts her to warn
her husband against participating in the "raid" purportedly organized to
fetch the king the tribute due to him. If Ozidi has any tragic flaw, it
is his contemptuous disregard for his wife's warning. He depends too

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heavily on his prowess. Not even the bad omen—a lizard scampering out of his shrine—will dissuade him from joining in the raid. Clark achieves the proper tragic and dramatic effect by providing Ozidi with a discernible tragic flaw.

Ofe, with the cunning of a fox, the monstrosity of a python, and a remarkable mob-psychology, secures the cooperation of two other intriguing villains to behead Ozidi. The severed head is then presented to the idiot king as his tribute, an act which is symbolic of the end of his reign as far as the villains are concerned. This act is as horrible as, if not in fact more frightening than, those found in Shakespeare's Titus Andronicus, and Webster's The Duchess of Malfi. As Adrian Roscoe observes, "Sixteenth-century productions of Seneca and his imitators are boldly outstripped in this orgy of blood and horror."⁶⁰

The crime is committed that is to be avenged, and the rest of the play invariably concentrates on the plans and progress of the revenge of Ozidi's death. One important Senecan property of revenge missing in Ozidi is the presence or appearance of the vengeance-seeking ghost. Although Ozidi has been maliciously assassinated in an encounter with his enemies, and although no obsequies have been performed to put his soul at rest in his grave, his ghost neither haunts his murderers as the ghost of Tantalus spreads its baleful influence over the house of Pelops in Thyestes, nor does it appear to young Ozidi as Hamlet's father's ghost does in Hamlet, crying for revenge. However, the Senecan ghost is not without its equivalent in Ozidi. Creame, the witch grand-

⁶⁰ Mother is Gold (Cambridge: O. U. P., 1971), p. 218.

mother, assumes the role of the spirit of revenge, training and inspiring fledgling Ozidi for the revenge of his father's treacherous murder. She reinforces her own training with the "mortar and pestle charm" (p. 43) which she obtains from Bouakarakarabiri, the old man of the forest:

Indeed, I would
Another served my child the fare before he
takes on
His father's foes.

My daughter [Orea] had a son for Ozidi after
His death, it is what I am telling you.
Now that issue must go forth and scatter
death among
His father's enemies.

(p. 44)

The period of training and preparation of young Ozidi is a peculiar variant of the period of procrastination in traditional revenge plays. Ozidi, during the period of his training, gets to know the actual murderers of his father through an unwitting revelation by the wives of the collaborators:

THIRD WOMAN: Look here, young man,
Nobody insults me, the wife of Azezabife,
And lives to tell the story. When Ozidi
Took on more feathers than the eagle's
My husband it was who first plucked off
His shock of feathers.

SECOND WOMAN: Who cut off his neck
But my man Oguaran?

FIRST WOMAN: And when it was time to pick up
His stubborn head and carry it
Into Orua for his idiot brother to drink from,
Who did, yes, who did? It was Ofe
My husband, it was he! And let me tell
You, foolish boy, my husband suffers no
Overbearing acts, and will punish you
For this.

(p. 70)

What these women have uttered is more than young Ozidi needs to know to

convince him of the identity of his father's murderers. This proof is essential to engender in him the full spirit of revenge. But instead of being overwhelmed by grief and becoming insane, as potential avengers are prone to be, Ozidi becomes precociously furious and possessed. All could have come to nothing, however, were it not for Oreama whose witchcraft continues to make more than a man out of Ozidi junior. Combining her witchcraft with elaborate trickery and the potent power she has obtained from Bouakarakarabiri, she ensures that Ozidi accomplishes his revenge as ruthlessly and as bloodily as his father had been murdered.

It should be noted here that Ozidi is not by nature a villain; neither has his honourable performance of a son's duty to his assassinated father made him one. It is understandable, therefore, that he begins to feel remorse after the death of his adversaries:

This course
I have followed without deviation
Doing my duty by my dead father. But now
Like a river at a whirlpool I am come to
A spinning stop. Worse, like a lion plucked clean of
His whiskers, I growl now only in my sleep. (p. 90)

Not even the purification rites performed seem to be efficacious enough to stop young Ozidi from having dreadful nightmares, following the revenge of his father's death. This is a new dimension to the plot structure of revenge tragedy. Perhaps the most Machiavellian of all of Shakespeare's revenge villains is Richard III. In the ghost scene, Richard is shaken to the point of despair, but rather than repent when his conscience with "a thousand several tongues" pronounces him guilty of stern murder, he scoffs at conscience, saying:

Soft! I did but dream.
O coward conscience, how dost thou afflict me!

The lights burn blue. It is now dead midnight.
Cold fearful drops stand on my trembling flesh.
What do I fear? myself?

(Richard III, V. iii, 178-82)

When Hamlet stabs the King, he rather triumphantly adds:

Here, thou incestuous, murderous, damned Dane,
Drink off this potion. Is thy union here?
Follow my mother.

(Hamlet, V. ii, 336-37)

Like Richard III and Hamlet, Hieronimo in The Spanish Tragedy and Barabbas in The Jew of Malta express no regrets at the accomplishment of their revenge plots against their enemies. Ozidi differs from any of these avengers whose conscience is not allowed to bother them after taking their revenge. He seems to crumble under the pressure brought upon him by his recurrent nightmares. These nightmares are designed for two purposes. Firstly, they betray Ozidi's timid nature, which could have stopped him from taking his revenge on his father's enemies had it not been for Oreame's witchcraft and the mortar and pestle charm that made him more courageous than he normally would have been. Ozidi's revenge is too honorable to generate any real guilt feeling, but the blood he has spilt is more than what his essential nature can cope with. Hence the nightmares. Secondly, the nightmares create a situation that will lead to further acts of violence through which Ozidi will overreach himself. One of his nightmares is a dream-attack by Engbesibeoru, the "great Scrotum King himself" (p. 91). This dream is interpreted by Ewiri as "signs and symptoms" that Ozidi should take a wife (p. 95). But first, he has to fight with and overcome Tebesonoma, the monster with seven heads who speaks in seven tongues. Gradually, the ground is being prepared for Ozidi's excesses.

The assertion has been made earlier that Ozidi is not a villain by nature. It should be pointed out, however, that he grows to be one under the influence of the witchcraft of Oreame. It is under the spell of Oreame that Ozidi, "like all villainous avengers, overreaches himself in the course of his revenge. He overcomes Tebesonoma with the help of his witch grandmother. Before his death, the monster threatens:

I shall be avenged. In the next town lives
 a woman
 Just delivered of a son. . . she is my sister
 . . . Take it from me, Ozidi, except you murder
 her too,
 Twenty years from now, as you did
 With your father's assassins, you shall be
 called to account,
 Compelled to cross the river against all tide. (p. 101)

The above threat points to the possibility of a vicious crime-revenge cycle; but this cycle is quickly broken, again, only with the help of Oreame. All this would show that beyond the revenge of his father's death, Ozidi now consciously depends on his grandmother for practically everything he does. Even his impulsive abduction of Odogu's wife is to be attributed to her influence. For example, when Odogu's wife finally gives up the struggle, she says to Ozidi:

Here, come and sit by me;
 Yes, like that, like that! How light you are!
 And is this how you tremble before battle?
 See, my palm can almost reach round your wrist;
 Indeed; you are not at all big of bones, Ozidi. (p. 109)

Ozidi's light weight, as noticed by Odogu's wife, is not to be taken only literally. Obviously, without Oreame's witchcraft to back him up, Ozidi has no "weight" at all. Also, that he trembles before a woman who lures him into sex should indicate that Ozidi is not a fully formed

man, as his physical attribute--a small-boned wrist--confirms.

As if Ozidi has not had enough conquests, he has to do battle with Odogu, as the Story-teller reveals:

. . . and now
We are in a field littered with bodies
Of supporters from both sides in the battle
Between Odogu the Ugly and
Ozidi over the woman he abducted. (p. 111)

Once more, Oreame takes over the fight, and confronts Odogu's witch-mother Azema in the battle of the witches, the outcome of which determines whether Ozidi or Odogu wins the fight. As soon as Oreame overpowers Azema, Ozidi, with the assistance of Oreame, cuts down Odogu. At this point, Ozidi is too possessed to be his real self. Blinded by the power of the herb that gives him victory over Odogu, Ozidi "mows down his own grandmother" (p. 114), his only accomplice in, and sole instigator of, the revenge of his father's assassination.

The death of Oreame is not merely in keeping with the demand that the accomplice in a revenge tragedy should meet his or her death. Oreame constitutes the deus ex machina that has propped up the action throughout and beyond the process of the revenge; and once her ambition has been realized, and the bounds of justifiable revenge outstepped, it is poetic justice that the evil she has perpetrated should recoil on her. She is destroyed by the very agent she has used to effect her plans of revenge.

The place of the death of the avenger, usually by suicide in traditional revenge tragedies, is taken in Ozidi by an unusual incident which gives the play its essential African outlook. Of course, it should

be borne in mind that the manner and circumstances of the revenge in this play make Ozidi more an agent of revenge than a principal avenger.

In the twin scene in Act V, Ozidi junior narrowly escapes death at the hands of the Smallpox King simply because his mother Orea allegedly mistakes him (the Smallpox King) for common Yaws. It is most unlikely that the visit of the Smallpox King would be mistaken for ordinary yaws. That the entire people of Orua have fled on the arrival of the epidemic King should make it clear that he is easily recognized by all. Orea is only fighting a psychological war against the epidemic "visitor." She evokes Tamara (or Oyin, the Ijaw Creator goddess)⁶¹ to come to her aid. Her scrubbing of Ozidi with water, soap and sponge is a symbolic purification ceremony; but she equally defies the Smallpox King by calling the rashes on Ozidi's body "a mere riot of yaws" (p. 120). She may have said this to negate the power of the disease over her son. Her incantatory command to the Smallpox King finally saves her son:

When a guest
Comes on a visit, he goes home after.
Return therefore, our late visitor, taking your flesh
With you, but leave behind for us
Our skin and bones. (p. 120)

And so, the Smallpox King departs in anger; and the protagonist survives what could have been otherwise a fatal attack. His world is, however, now a bleak and lonely one. The town of Orua has been deserted by the

⁶¹ See Clark, A Reed in the Tide (London: Longmans, 1965), p. 40: "Oyin is the creator mother of the Ijaw people in the Niger Delta. She is the Supreme Being with the second name of Tamara, that is, She who moulds." Cf. Obotunde Ijimere's Woyengi, based on Gabriel Okara's article, "Ogboinba: The Ijaw Creation Myth," which names the Ijaw creator mother as Woyengi.

townspeople, fearing the fatal epidemic brought by the Smallpox King and his entourage. The departure of the King and his retinue represents the final stage of purification which will redeem the people of Orua and future generations from their ancient guilt.

The foregoing discussion shows beyond doubt that, even though the theme and structure of Ozidi derive directly and exclusively from the original Ijaw saga of Ozidi of Orua, the play belongs to the revenge tradition, with which Clark is undoubtedly familiar. But the affinity between Ozidi and plays like Kyd's The Spanish Tragedy, Shakespeare's Titus Andronicus and Hamlet, and Webster's The Duchess of Malfi, is strictly coincidental because Clark mainly reproduces his source material in considerable detail, both in matter and form. And the coincidence proves the universality of the theme of evil and revenge. Ozidi, however, becomes more significant than conventional revenge tragedies in its preoccupation, not only with evil and revenge, but more importantly with the purgation of evil from the society. This is what elevates the status of Temugedege from that of an idiot King to that of the "carrier," that is, he, whose enthronement as King of Orua has brought about the chain of events that eventually fosters the expulsion of evil from the community of Orua.

The six plays treated in the examination of the use of myth in modern Nigerian drama provide a variety of myths and legends through which five playwrights endeavour to enquire into the various experiences of man in relation to the universe. The playwrights are not concerned in these plays with historical realities of the mythical accounts adapted for the stage. Theirs is not "the intellectual curiosity which today

motivates archeological and prehistoric research"⁶² into the dim dawn of the universe as conceived, and handed down to Nigerians by their ancestors. The mythological or legendary accounts at the disposal of the playwrights are transformed into a quest for a thorough understanding of man's relationship to the world in which he lives. The proven truth or otherwise of the playwrights' source materials is immaterial to the goal of their quest.

The true genealogy of the gods, for instance, is not crucial to the audience's appreciation of Ogunyemi's Eshu Elegbara, or Ijimore's The Imprisonment of Obatala. Despite the audience's awareness of Woyengi's omnipotence, her inability to destroy Ogbinba before the rebel has a chance to hide in Lakpe's eye is not queried. Rather these and other mythical speculations are accepted as adapted by the playwrights in their explorations of the past in order to explain and understand the present. Such speculations cannot be subjected to scientific investigation for any proof of historical accuracy. Yet, as Patai argues, "myths do have a historical kernel, [that is], historical traditions can and do assume mythical forms and survive as myths for a long time after the memory of the historical even itself has sunk into oblivion."⁶³ He goes on to explain that "When a historical even is transformed into myth it loses a lot in accuracy and in detail, becoming embellished in the process by many a fantastic feature that can render

⁶² S. M. Engel, The Problem of Tragedy (Fredericton: Univ. of New Brunswick Press, 1960), p. 39.

⁶³ R. Patai, Myth and Modern Man (Englewood Cliffs, N. J.: Prentice-Hall, 1972), p. 67.

the entire myth incredible to the critical outsider."⁶⁴

Like the playwrights, the audience and critics alike are less concerned with the credibility of the historical kernel in the myths transformed into drama in Nigeria than they are with the significance of the explicit exploration of ancient myths to contemporary Nigerian situations. The adaptation of myths and legends in some of Nigerian dramatic works reflects the new spirit which fosters the revival and preservation of the cultural past. It also indicates an increasing regard among creative writers for the myths and legends through which the ancestors characteristically expressed themselves. Dramatists, like other creative writers in Nigeria, continue to respond to the impulse of symbolic formulation which nourishes local myths and legends, not because of any enchantment with the magic quality of the myths, but because the myths and legends are replete with didacticism from which contemporary society can derive tremendous benefit. Where parallels exist between situations in mythology and contemporary socio-political events (as illustrated in The Imprisonment of Obatala), mythical plays are known to have been written and produced to instruct the society and to warn it against the recurrence of the tragedy of the past as recorded in myths or legends with some historical ingredient. It is this didacticism, among other things, that the mythical plays treated so far share with the historical drama that will be examined next.

(ii) The Use of the Past through History:

To define the Nigerian history play in terms of a clear-cut

⁶⁴ Ibid., p. 73.

genre is not an easy task. The hairline distinction between the history and some of the myths of Nigeria may be recognized in plays like Duro Ladipo's Moremi, Oba Ko So, and Oba Waja. These plays, particularly the first two, are more mythical than historical; yet, they deal with legendary figures in the history of the Yorubas handed down through generations by word of mouth until the accounts were recorded by historians and interpreted in dramatic forms. The actual historical events which inspired Oba Waja have also formed the basis of Wole Soyinka's Death and the King's Horseman. Historical in content as these two plays are, they still retain some mythical qualities in them. In plays like these, no rigid criteria may be outlined to distinguish the mythical from the historical. However, where the theme and the development of the action in a play grow out of an authenticated history of Nigeria, such a play may be deemed to belong legitimately to the dramatic genre classifiable as historical drama.

This section of this study will, therefore, examine some of those plays which deal with aspects of Nigerian history, be it oral, written, or reconstructed from available documents and other sources. It should be borne in mind from the outset that the emergence of historical drama in Nigeria is relatively recent. While the first known extant play in English, Henshaw's This Is Our Chance, appeared in 1956, the earliest known historical drama in Nigeria, Enwinma Ogieriaikhi's Oba Ovonramwen and Oba Ewuakpe⁶⁵ was not published until 1966. Since then, at least six historical plays have been written by Nigerians.

⁶⁵ (London: Univ. of London Press, 1966). All efforts to get a copy of this play were abortive. It would appear it is out of print.

These are Wale Ogunyemi's Ijaye War, and Kiriji; Ola Rotimi's Kurunmi and Oba Ovonramwen Nogbaisi; Esenta Eze's The Cassava Ghost; and Wole Soyinka's Death and the King's Horseman.

Ogunyemi's Ijaye War and Rotimi's Kurunmi are inspired by the same 19th-century political history of the Yorubas. These two plays are basically the same in spite of differences in minor historical details selected for dramatization, and despite the playwrights' deliberate modification of certain historical facts for dramatic purposes in both plays.

Written in 1968 and published in 1970, Ijaye War is the earlier of the two plays. Kurunmi was first performed in 1969 at the Second Ife Festival of the Arts, and was published in 1971. The temptation is to consider Ijaye War as the more authentic piece, which might have influenced the writing of Kurunmi. Even if this were true owing to some curious similarities between the two plays, the order of appearance is not enough a criterion for any judgment since it is possible that both playwrights might have collected their materials from the same sources.

Ogunyemi's play seems to be a series of episodes with very little overall integrating dramatic structure and hardly any principle of relationship other than the chronological. This makes Ijaye War more a dramatic history than a historical drama. In contrast, Kurunmi concentrates on the dramatic interpretation of the Ijaye-Ibadan warfare of the 19th century. In spite of the greater appeal of the dramatic structure of Kurunmi which makes it preferable to Ijaye War, both plays will be examined for the purpose of comparison.

Asked in an interview conducted by Bernth Lindfors why he started to write historical plays, Ola Rotimi declared that during the long vacation of 1968 he chanced upon a new publication by J. F. Ade Ajayi and Robert Smith, entitled Yoruba Warfare in the Nineteenth Century (Cambridge: C. U. P., 1964). He found the accounts of the raw belligerency of the Yoruba forebears at once frightening and captivating. This started him thinking of building a play around Kurunmi, one of the prominent figures involved in some of the internecine wars that tore the Yorubas apart. Rotimi added that Kurunmi had its premiere performance at the Second Ife Festival in 1969, and commented:

Our first performance in Lagos took place on the very day of Biafra's surrender—January 15, 1970 . . . a curious coincidence really. My research on the Ijaiye-Ibadan wars . . . revealed unbelievable similarities to the Nigerian civil war which was at its bloodiest peak at the time of my writing the play. There were striking similarities not only in the situations and principles that precipitated both wars almost a century apart, but also in the politico-economic strategies employed by both sides in the prosecution of the wars. Skeletally put, the war involved secession and counter-secession efforts in which the secessionist forces finally crumbled not so much from military pressure as from the dehumanizing atrophy caused by the effects of severe economic reprisals.⁶⁶

After a careful study of Kurunmi,⁶⁷ it becomes clear that, although this historical tragedy derives directly from the 19th-century Ijaiye-Ibadan warfare, it casts a suggestive glance at contemporary socio-political events not only in Nigeria but also elsewhere in Africa.

⁶⁶ "Interview with Ola Rotimi," in Dem-Say, p. 65.

⁶⁷ (Ibadan: O. U. P., 1971). All references to the play are from this edition.

The strength and beauty of the plot of *Kurunmi* are the outgrowth of Rotimi's proven ability to interpret history in such a manner that it is made relevant to contemporary events. The play transcends mere reportage of the headstrong confrontation between Ijaye and Ibadan forces and their allies. The subtle analysis of the political power struggles in the play is as relevant to Nigeria and, to some extent, Rhodesia, of the sixties as it is to the Yoruba kingdom of mid-nineteenth century. Just as the war between Ijaye and Ibadan was the result of the pride, implacability, and vaulting ambition of certain individuals, so can the civil unrests culminating in the Biafra war be traced to the unbridled ambition of some politicians to remain in power in Nigeria in the early sixties. The philosophical justification for the need to reform the traditional culture of the people without necessarily sacrificing their peace and solidarity is therefore geared towards the formulation of a moral and political doctrine which might guide future political leaders in avoiding political instability, and unnecessary strife and bloodshed.

Throughout *Kurunmi*, the atmosphere is tense even during the intermittent lulls at the various war camps. The mood is one of belligerency; and the message is destruction and death. It is impressive, therefore, that the play is appropriately structured to reflect the destructive conflict that underlies every action in it.

As the play opens with the bacchanal celebration of the feast of *Olorun*, Abogunrin's incantatory "prayer" at the shrine of Ogun, and the tone of the carousing of the crowd, give the premonition of civil strife. The announcement of the coming of *Kurunmi* puts a stop to the

carousing. The impression immediately created is that the relationship between Kurunmi and his subjects thrives on fear rather than on love and reverence. This is borne out by the litany of praise names chanted by Asunrara, the praise-singer:

Impish demon, gobbler of heads, sole husband
of Mosadiwin.

.....
Husband-in-chief among husbands; take away
your grit, and a battle dulls down

.....
A mountain, stiffly erect above ground, a
towering masquerade, a frozen grin on
its face, a ram in a grim duel, the
neck stiffening before a brutal butt.

.....
The child would eat with an elder, but fear
wouldn't let him.

And so instead of eating, child stiffens.⁶⁸ (pp. 14-15)

This is a realistic character sketch of Kurunmi. Through the praise-singer, Rotimi exposes the heroic stature and bellicosity of the Field Marshall of Ijaye before he puts in appearance on the stage. And when he shows up, his first speech (pp. 15-17) confirms Asunrara's portrayal of him and his implacability. The speech is replete with proverbs and maxims, illustrating the philosophy of succession in accordance with tradition:

KURUNMI: The gaboon viper!
When the gaboon viper dies,
its children take up its habits,
poison and all.

The plantain dies,
its saplings take its place,
broad leaves and all.

The fire dies, its ashes
bear its memory with a shroud
of white stuff.

(p. 15)

⁶⁸ Cf. Ijaye War (Ibadan: Orisun Acting Editions, 1970), p. 19.

The Yorubas would normally complete the above lines with something like "When I die, may my children live after me." But Kurunmi gives a peculiar twist to the maxims, using the philosophical concepts of succession to justify his clamour for the preservation of tradition.

Kurunmi states his case before his people:

. . .we have just come back from a meeting with Alafin Atiba in Oyo. Oni Ife was present, Timi Ede was sitting next to him, Bashorun Oluyole of Ibadan, on my left. . . Oba Atiba came down from his high throne. In his right hand, the sword of Ogun; in his left hand, the bolt of Sango.⁶⁹ He came towards us: 'Swear, my people,' said he, 'swear to Ogun and to my forebear, Sango, that my son, Adelu, will be king after me. . . .' 'Clown,' I yelled, 'out of my cursed sight!' (*Spits.*) 'I shall be no party to perversion and disgrace.' I picked up my staff and walked out. (pp. 16-17)

Kurunmi opposes Alafin Atiba's political move, arguing that "Whenever an Alafin dies, his first son. . . must also die with him" (p. 19). Therefore, should Atiba die, the eldest prince, Adelu, should accompany his father according to the tradition of the land. This is the firm stand taken by Kurunmi among all other important rulers in the kingdom. According to him, "A king, a ruler who sees truth but is too weak, too cowardly to uphold truth, that ruler has fallen low, lower than the most depraved slave in our bushland" (p. 18). Much as Kurunmi strives to strengthen his case in upholding the tradition of the land, he is a lone fighter and his voice is easily submerged by the consensus of the other

⁶⁹ The sword of Ogun, and the bolt of Sango are symbols of authority and divine justice respectively; but Alafin uses Ogun's sword for the purpose of oath-taking, and Sango's bolt to represent his deified ancestor, called to witness the oath-taking ritual. Cf. Odewale's oath before Ogun's shrine in The Gods Are Not To Blame, p. 24.

rulers who support the Alafin in his unprecedented move to reform the law of succession in his kingdom. Thus, in the opening scene of the play, the tragic conflict that will culminate in bloody warfare is set in Kurunmi's strong opposition to the proposed ascent of Adelu to the throne of Oyo.

The imminent disintegration of the kingdom is symbolically presaged in the violent clash between the Christian converts and the celebrants of the Egungun festival in Act I, scene ii. The appearance of Ijaye Christian converts at the Town Square--presumably the arena for the celebration of the feast of Ororun--is an ill-timed and ill-considered exercise which ought to have been limited to the Church. The significance of the public hymn singing on the day of Ororun festival is that the religious conflict that ensues points to the existence of internal conflicts in Ijaye. The impression created as the play progresses into the third scene of the first Act is that, like a house divided against itself, Ijaye is doomed to fall unless the solidarity of the people is ensured.

It is this pressing need for solidarity that Wale Ogunyemi strives rather overtly to dramatize by opening Ijaye War with a peace meeting, attended by representatives from Oyo, Ibadan, Ijaye, and Abeokuta. The peace meeting which ends in a conspiratorial resolve against Kurunmi provides the hint that there is no unanimity among the Yoruba people, and that the stage is set for a civil war that will further divide them.

In Kurunmi, the Ijaye leader's unilateral declaration of war against Oyo and Ibadan provokes a split within the army of Ijaye.

(pp. 37-41). Five lieutenants—Epo, Akiola, Asegbe, Fanyaka and Amodu—accuse Kurunmi of growing too powerful, so powerful that he has chosen to wage war against Adelu and his allies without first consulting his men. Kurunmi quickly senses the disaster that the dissent of five of his men could cause. Consequently, he sends gifts to Balogun Ogunkoroju and Areagoro Ajayi: "Tell them that Kurunmi almost shed tears when he saw sons of Ijaye prove that Ijaye, small though she is, will never be stepped upon" (p. 41). Kurunmi's concession and the taming of his arrogance at this point may be construed as a tactful move meant to ensure the solidarity of Ijaye people. He assures his men of his regard for them by swearing before the shrine of Ogun that he would henceforth always "seek the Elders of Ijaye for counsel in any actions I mean to take" (p. 42). But, as will be shown later, this move does not mend all the cracks in Ijaye's fort.

In Wale Ogunyemi's version, Ijaye War, Kurunmi does not need the threat of mutiny to recognize the need for solidarity among his subjects. Apart from the unsolicited support of Abu, his mother-in-law, Kurunmi seeks help, and is assured of the cooperation of his followers and of Labudanu, the royal diviner. The Kurunmi who appears in the opening scenes of Ijaye War is a man of action and determination, but he is not quite the rash and impulsive warmonger in Kurunmi, with his prideful ambition and jealous guardianship of tradition.

In his dramatization of the Ijaye-Ibadan warfare in Kurunmi, Ola Rotimi keeps in constant focus the conflict structure. Act I ends with Kurunmi's tactful arrest of the growing mutiny within his own army.

In contrast, Act II opens with clear indications of the lack of unanimity among the Elders and Warriors of Ibadan in their reaction to Kurunmi's decision to wage war against King Adelu. Ogunmola is the cantankerous individual who favours support for the young King against Kurunmi. The controversy almost breaks up Ibadan, especially when Ogunmola—"the hawk"—is symbolically contrasted with Ibikunle—"the black crow," as the "brave" is with the "cowardly."

Ibikunle's argument does not justify his being branded as a "coward." He points out that "of all battles, the battle against one's own blood-brothers, the agony of war brought upon one's own brothers, is most horrid and heart-breaking" (p. 50). The same rationality may be employed in viewing all civil wars. For instance, the 1967-70 Biafra war might have been averted had the type of logic and sentiments in Ibikunle's argument been allowed to prevail. Rotimi continues to emphasize this view as the play progresses.

In Act II, scene ii, attention is focused on Kurunmi's agbo'le once more. Kurunmi is being accoutred for battle. All efforts by Rev. Mann to stop the imminent war are abortive. The Christian missionary cites Luke 6: 27-29, and Matthew 5: 44 to preach peace, tolerance and patience to Kurunmi (p. 53), but these Christian views of life sound rather queer and unreasonable to Kurunmi who prefers the give-and-take philosophy of the frog:

. . . The philosophy of a frog is the true philosophy of life. Sit down, let me tell you, Ehn, whenever two frogs meet at night, do you know what they say to one another? Listen. . . The first frog will say to the second frog: 'Bu mi-i-i'. You know what that means? (Rev. Mann shakes his

head.) It means 'give me-e-e'. Now, the second
frog will answer: Mbu o-o-o'. . . .

'Give and take.' That, my friend, is the best
philosophy of life. (pp. 54-55)

It sounds more reasonable to Kurunmi that a man should hit back when hit
by an adversary than praying for one's enemy as counselled by Rev. Mann.

This scene has provoked a reviewer to write: "In all the
turbulence and the rumblings of war, there is an irrelevant talk of
peace--things like loving your enemies and doing good to them that
wrong you--by a white couple who are themselves irrelevant in every way
except in so far as they are the chroniclers of these bloody deeds and
the whetstone on which Kurunmi sharpens his brilliant wit."⁷⁰ Ola Oke,
the reviewer, seems to have lost sight of the significance of the
presence of Rev. and Mrs. Adolphus Mann in Ijaye within the conflict
structure of the play. Rev. and Mrs. Mann are more than mere chroni-
clers. It should be remembered that the Christian converts, whose clash
with the celebrants of Olorun festival sets the tone of conflict and
strife in the play, are followers of these missionaries. Their presence
and work in Ijaye are therefore responsible in part for the clash of
interests between the Christians and the traditional worshippers of
Olorun. The missionaries are therefore instrumental in the weakening of

⁷⁰ Ola Oke, "Tragedy beautifully rendered," Nigeria Magazine,
No. 102 (Sept.-Nov. 1969), 527. One wonders if Oke would have con-
sidered S. A. Aluko's "Plea for Peace," West Africa, 26 Aug. 1967,
p. 1102, as "an irrelevant talk of peace" when the Nigerian civil war
was tearing the nation apart. Cf. Oluropo Sekoni's review of Kurunmi
in Ba Shiru, 7, No. 1 (1976), 80-81. Sekoni argues unconvincingly that
"clarity of event and unity of meaning are adversely affected by Rotimi's
inclusion of Reverend and Mrs. Mann and other white characters in the
world of Kurunmi" (p. 81).

the solidarity of Ijaye people, a weakening that adversely affects the prosecution of the war against Ibadan and allied forces.

Rev. Mann's appeal to Kurunmi to be patient and to prevent the outbreak of war is not only in accord with his missionary responsibilities; also, it serves as a good counsel to soften the General's hard-heartedness. This counsel is shunned and the repercussion deepens the tragic history of Kurunmi's tenure of office. The care for the sick, wounded and famished by the two missionaries also enables the audience to watch them perform their duties among the people not only in the Church but outside it as well. In a way, this makes them an ally of Kurunmi, and therefore "actively" involved in the war. Besides, their advice to Kurunmi to stop the war may be likened to the various appeals which Col. Odumegwu Ojukwu disregarded before announcing the secession of Biafra, a move which amounted to the declaration of war on the rest of Nigeria. To miss all these points and term the Manns and their activities as "irrelevant" is to fail to appreciate the didactic and dramatic purposes which Rotimi strives to accomplish in making the Manns an integral and functional part of the Ijaye-Ibadan confrontation.

When the war proper begins in Act III, Kurunmi is shown as a strategist. He orders the fortification of Iwawun, the major source of food supplies for Ijaye. To ensure unflinching loyalty he details his five sons to "defend Iwawun or there die" (p. 61). Earlier on, he had issued an edict:

. . . henceforth no one sells food out of Ijaye.
 Secondly, all farm crops already plucked or
 unplucked will stay preserved in the land. Any
 man, woman, or beast that flouts this order,
 seeks instant death. (p. 29)

The embargo on the exportation of food is partly in defiance of King Adelu, to whom certain tributes are due. It also ensures adequate food supply for Ijaye people while the war lasts. Besides, it is an economic sanction which cuts off food supply to Oyo and would-be allies. These war measures are not unlike the steps taken by the Federal Military Government of Nigeria in 1967 to isolate and demoralize the secessionist Biafran forces. As most analytically minded observers would agree, it was not the guns, as much as the economic sanctions, that ensured the victory of the Federalist forces. However, the Ijaye forces require more than economic sanctions to win the war against a combined Ibadan-Oyo side.

The initial success of Ijaye against Ibadan (Act III, scene ii), ironically, leads them to their first crushing defeat. The Ijaye warriors beat back the Ibadan advance; but contrary to Ogunkoroju's specific orders—"Stay on this side of the river. No one - listen to me, everybody - no one crosses the river" (p. 62)—the Ijaye warriors chase Ibadan forces across the River Ose, only to discover that Ibadan soldiers have lured them into a death trap:

1ST WARRIOR: The bushmen started running back
after our first fight, so we . . . gave chase.

3RD WARRIOR: As we reached mid-stream—

2ND WARRIOR: They cut us off from the rear.

OGUNKOROJU: So out of a whole army of five
hundred, only three of you came back!

KURUNMI: Who ordered the chase?

OGUNKOROJU: I warned you not to pursue, did I not?
(p. 64)

The experience of the Ijaye army at this point in the war bears an intriguing parallel to the battle at Ore in August 1967, after the secessionist army had crossed the River Niger and advanced through the Midwest (now Bendel) State into the then Western State, only to suffer a crushing defeat at Ore.⁷¹ The hint of the imminent total collapse of Ijaye is given in Act III, scene v, where Rev. and Mrs. Mann read from their diaries that "Ijaye is no match for Ibadan, / either in human resources or in war material" (p. 66); and one may add, even in war tactics. Two dates are cited to emphasize that Ijaye will soon fall:

May 5.
Ijaiye arms are fast running out.
Food too is running short.

May 10, 1860.
The death of Ijaiye is any time now. (p. 66)

What makes these dates transcend mere chronicling is the fact that in actual history (Ajayi and Smith, pp. 88-89), Ijaye received no reinforcement from the Egbas until May 19, 1860. The dates then provide the pertinent historical sense of time lapse during which the hopes of victory for Ijaye continue to dwindle. Rotimi keeps to the historical sequence of events as much as possible; but his introduction of the two dates at this point in the play creates an important dramatic structural design because it immediately precedes the coming of the Egbas (in scene vi) to boost the strength and morale of the desponding Ijaye forces. The important thing to note in the scene of the arrival of the Egbas is that

⁷¹ See "The Conflict Widens," West Africa, 19 Aug. 1967, pp. 1069-70; Correspondent, "Nigeria War Diary," ibid., pp. 1070-71; Anon., "Benin Boomerang?" West Africa, 26 Aug. 1967, pp. 1097-98; and Correspondent, "Nigeria War Diary," ibid., pp. 1098-99.

not even the Egbas are in full accord about the war, or about the role they are supposed to play as an ally of Ijaye. By consistently emphasizing internal rifts among the various war camps, Rotimi successfully keeps the conflict motif and structure intact, irrespective of whether the action is in Kurunmi's agbo'le, on the battlefield, in the Ibadan war camp, or even at the Town Square. Consequently, the tension in the play hardly slackens.

However, in scene vii, there is a lull. The historical detail dramatized in this scene refers to the lull in the war during the rainy season, when fighting is impossible, or, at least, difficult. The playwright uses the lull to introduce a brief comic scene provided by the dialogue between Ibikunle and Ogunmola. The brevity of the comic scene is emphasized by Ibikunle's sudden change of mood as he dares Ogunmola to step out of the war camp (p. 69). The ensuing confrontation is, however, brought under control in order to enhance the consolidation of the strength and spirit of the Ibadan warriors. The duration of the comic relief creates an impressive structural design that emphasizes the nature of the business on hand. A lengthy comic scene in a play that deals with a devastating civil war would be out of harmony with the general tone of the play. Rotimi quickly drops the comic dialogue between Ibikunle and Ogunmola in order to introduce the strategy for victory which the Ibadans plan.

It would have been mere history re-enacted had the ultimate victory of Ibadan been attributed solely to military superiority. Rotimi therefore introduces a supernatural means of forcing the Ijays

and the Egbas into making a tactical error that costs them the war. Kujenyo, the aged witchdoctor, offers to lure the enemy troops with his magic spell to cross the Osé River, a thing forbidden Ijaye people in war. The motif of crossing River Ose in scenes viii and ix may have been taken directly from history⁷² but it is used in the play mainly to emphasize the fatal tactical error that destroys Ijaye's hopes of ever winning the war against a superior Ibadan side. River Ose is a natural geographical delimiting factor on the extent of Ijaye's pursuit of their enemies. Besides, the Ijayes are not supposed to chase their enemies beyond the bank of the river. Crossing the river, therefore, symbolizes Ijaye's excess which turns out to be as decisively destructive as the Ibadans would want it.⁷³

Unlike Rotimi, Wale Ogunyemi in Ijaye War attributes the victory of Ibadan and its allies to two factors. The first of these is the superstitious belief that "Kurunmi has a magic cloth which he ties to his staff on the battle field. As long as this cloth remains in his possession, success on [Ibadan] side is remote" (p. 37). With wife, Basorun Ogunmola secures this magic cloth, thereby depleting Kurunmi's powers (p. 45). More plausible than the dispossession of Kurunmi of his

⁷² For the historical details, see Ajayi and Smith, Yoruba Warfare in the Nineteenth Century, pp. 90-91.

⁷³ Cf. The battle for Onitsha during the Nigerian Civil War. See Griot, "The View from the Bridge," West Africa, 21 Oct. 1967, pp. 1355-57. Also see Correspondent, "War Diary," ibid., p. 1351: "Last week-end, federal troops appear to have mounted a crossing of the river Niger by boat, Biafran forces blew up part of the bridge at Onitsha end." It is believed that the Federal troops lost their lives in large numbers in this move which destroyed the £6 million (\$12 million) symbol of Nigerian unity.

"magic cloth" is Ibadans' tactic of laying in ambush for Ijaye warriors. Alore of Ibadan plays the Ijaye tune of a bátá drum, and with this familiar tune he lures the unsuspecting Ijaye soldiers into the trap set by Ibadan:

BASORUN OGUNMOLA: . . . (To Alore) You know their war tune; you heard them play it at Abeokuta, didn't you?

ALORE: I know the tune, Basorun.

BASORUN OGUNMOLA: Then play the tune. The fools will rush down thinking we are their men. Now, everybody hide and be ready to take them unawares. (Ijaye War, p. 45)

Ogunyemi and Rotimi may differ in their various accounts of the victory of Ibadan, but they both create the impression that the Ibadans are better strategists than the Ijayes. Also they both project the Yoruba belief in supernaturally potent medicines as essential supplements to material weapons in fighting an enemy. It is the Ibadans' skill in combining effective war tactics with moral and physical strength, and potent incantations that establishes their supremacy and victory over the Ijaye warriors.

In Kurunmi, when the Manns realize how hopeless Ijaye's position is, they decide to leave Ijaye for Lagos. It is this move, added to the demoralizing death of Kurunmi's five sons, that finally breaks the spirit of Ijaye and the Egba ally. When it becomes clear to Kurunmi, the "elephant," that the "bull-frog" he has contemned earlier on (p. 29) may soon ride rough-shod over him, rather than burst, there remains only one line of action for the General to take:

When a leader of men has led his people to disaster,
and what remains of his present life

is but a shadow of his proud past,
 then
 it is time to be leader no more.
 (Drinks poison from calabash bowl.) (p. 93)

With quiet dignity that betrays his pride rather than his cowardice, Kurunmi makes a final wish, addressed to Mosadiwin, his wife, and to Abogunrin, his aide-de-camp:

My curse upon you both,
 if my body stays here for the vultures of
 Ibadan to peck at.
 My curse upon you and upon your seeds for ever,
 if my skull serves as drinking-cup for Adalu.
 In the River Ose,
 where my honour was buried,
 there will you also bury my body.
 You will dam the river,
 and deep in the sand of its bed,
 you will hide my body.
 Then you will let the river flow again
 for ever,
 over the oneness of my body and my honour. (pp. 93-94)

In Ijaye War, Kurunmi, in his final moments of despair, blames the gods and his ancestors for his shameful defeat:

You gods, where are you? I was confident of my success; now the dawn has broken on me and left me naked on the street. A man no longer plants a seed and live [sic] to harvest it before the gods put a blanket of shame over him. My hope is gone, my light is put out, my tongue crushed between my teeth.
 (shouts) Why, should this happen to me, my ancestors?
 (p. 50)

The painful regret expressed by Kurunmi for "fighting a useless battle" (p. 50) in Ijaye War contrasts with the dignity with which Kurunmi dies in Ola Rotimi's Kurunmi. But whether Kurunmi commits suicide by stabbing (as in Ijaye War), or by poisoning (as in Kurunmi), the impression created by both Ogunyemi and Rotimi is that Kurunmi dies "honorably" after fighting gallantly in a war that he was doomed from the start to lose. In

Kurunmi, the honour of the General lies in the fact that he refuses to compromise his conviction that Prince Adelu ought to have died with his father, Alafin Atiba of Oyo. The audience, like the political and war leaders who oppose Kurunmi, may not see eye to eye with Kurunmi in his futile struggle against the violation of the tradition of the land; but Kurunmi has to be admired as a man who fights and dies for what he strongly believes. What remains questionable in Kurunmi is his approval of Somoye's plans to cross the River Ose. This concession is itself a gross violation of the traditional belief that Ijaye is sure to lose a war if the River Ose is crossed in pursuit of the enemy.

The death of Kurunmi precedes the departure of Rev. and Mrs. Mann from Ijaye in actual history.⁷⁴ But for dramatic purposes, Rotimi rearranges the order of events and brings his play to an end with the death of one of the most venerable and historic figures in Yorubaland. Ogunyemi, in his own play, remains more faithful to history than Ola Rotimi does by placing the death of Kurunmi before the departure of the Manns. This arrangement, though faithful to history, detracts from the dramatic worth of the ending of Ijaye War. The departure of the Manns after the death of the hero seems anticlimactic in the historic tragedy. It is understandable, however, that Ogunyemi's intention is to introduce a further historical fact—the arrest, detention, and final release of Mr. Roper—to emphasize the return of peace and unity, even if temporarily, to Yorubaland.

⁷⁴ Samuel Johnson, in The History of the Yorubas, p. 350, claims that Kurunmi "died of a broken heart in the month of June, 1861." Rev. and Mrs. Mann left Ijaye at 11 a. m. on Monday, 17 March 1862, according to Ajayi and Smith, p. 110.

In Kurunmi as well as in Ijaye War the outcome of the civil war seems to vindicate the need for the reformation of the tradition which requires the Crown Prince to commit suicide or be decapitated on the death of the reigning king. What constitutes Kurunmi's tragic flaw is his stubborn defiance of the resolution of the Elders of the kingdom to set aside a traditional practice that is believed to be capable of jeopardizing the solidarity of the Yorubas. Like the British Constitution, the tradition guiding the ascendancy to the throne of Alafin of Oyo is unwritten; and, therefore, operates on the principle of expediency. Kurunmi's refusal to adapt, regardless of the validity of his reasons, is what precipitates the bloody war out of which the Yorubas might emerge a more united people.

Ogunyemi's and Rotimi's didactic purposes cannot be missed. Kurunmi has been portrayed as the only big cotton-tree standing in the way, not only of the Egbas (Kurunmi, p. 91), but also in the way of an end to the war, in the way of the solidarity of the Yorubas, or the common leadership of the Alafin of Oyo. His removal (his death), which is more or less a sacrifice, paves the way for the dawn of a united Yoruba race. The relevance of this didacticism to contemporary Nigerian social and political situations cannot be over-emphasized; but it would be unwise to attempt to be too explicit about this relevance.

One of the most prominent assets of Kurunmi is its language. Virtually every time an elder or a leader speaks, he colours his utterance with rich proverbs or maxims that are loaded with connotative meaning. To the Yorubas, proverbs are the horses of speech; when sense

or meaning is lost, proverbs are used to retrieve it. Take for instance the maxim: "The day the tall iroko tree loses its roots / is the day the baby ant shits on its head" (p. 16). The iroko tree in this saying represents the Yoruba people, and its roots would be a metaphor for the tradition that nourishes the life of the people. To destroy or lose one's tradition is, like an iroko tree losing its roots, to be doomed. This explains why "Kurunmi will never prostrate himself to shoot a deer with a father one morning, and then squat with the son in the evening to shoot a goose!" (p. 21).

Elsewhere, Kurunmi, reacting to the demoralizing news of Ibadans' victory, consoles himself: "It is the water that is spilt. The calabash is still unbroken" (p. 89). This is the rough equivalent of "As long as there is life, there is hope." To lose the water in a receptacle is not the end of the world; it is when the container itself is destroyed that a real problem arises. Iwawun may be taken, but Kurunmi will not give in to defeat as long as his fighting spirit keeps him hanging on, even if desperately.

When Kurunmi refuses to toe the line of the other Elders of the land, Timi points out how the action of Kurunmi will ruin him rather than the kingdom of the new Alafin: "The cow defecates and thinks she is soiling the pasture; we shall see whose buttocks get soiled first" (p. 21). And Osundina makes the point that "like a baboon, Kurunmi cannot see the ugliness of his own buttocks" (p. 47). The implication here is that Kurunmi is too drunk with power to recognize the disaster he is courting for himself and the people he leads. These sayings, and others like "A stick

already touched by fire is not hard to set ablaze" (p. 48), "A roaring lion kills no prey" (p. 48), and "a man with grass on his buttocks must not forget himself when he goes to put out a neighbour's fire" (p. 74), give the dramatic dialogue the rhythm and potency it requires for effective communication.

Wale Ogunyemi's Ijaye War suffers from ineffective dramatic dialogue despite its use of proverbs and maxims. Hardly does the prosaic language ever transcend the narrative pattern of speech. Its communicative power relies heavily for effect on the actors rather than on the intrinsic potency of the verbal texture. In Kurunmi, Ola Rotimi avoids flat and drab prosody by assigning to each character a distinguishing mode of speech, and by balancing poetry against prose. The result is an infinite variety of speech rhythms, unlike the monotony that characterizes the tone and rhythm of Ijaye War.

A careful look at both Ijaye War and Kurunmi reveals that the essentials of good drama--action, character and dialogue--are integrated in proper balance more in Kurunmi than in Ijaye War. Here lies the dramatic richness which makes Kurunmi superior to Ijaye War, though both plays dramatize the same civil war that tore apart the Yoruba in the late 19th century.

One common characteristic found in practically all modern Nigerian history plays is civil strife. Wale Ogunyemi has written another historical play Kiriji (Lagos: African Universities Press, 1976), which dramatizes the continuing story of the internal strife in Yorubaland, and is based on the Ekitiparapo war in the late 19th century (1879-1886). The discussion of Ijaye War and Kurunmi, and the mention

of Kiriji, should not create the impression that only Yoruba warfare features in Nigerian historical drama.

In 1929, the Aba women's riot that spread over the major cities in the former Eastern Nigeria came as the climax of the people's prolonged resentment of the introduction of direct taxation by the Colonial government. This historic event provides Ezenta Eze with the material for his play The Cassava Ghost.⁷⁵ Unlike Wale Ogunyemi and Ola Rotimi who draw the material for their historical plays from events that predate the playwrights' time, Eze has the advantage of having been "educated at C. K. S. [Christ the King School], Aba about the time of the Aba women's riot."⁷⁶

The scope of The Cassava Ghost strongly suggests that Ezenta Eze is preoccupied with more than the historical Aba women's riot of 1929.⁷⁷ According to the back-page blurb,

Armed with no more than Cassava Sticks, standing both for weapon of defence and life giver, the women of Nagase march against the forces of colonial domination in a determined gesture that surpasses in scope the efforts of their menfolk. The women's organisation under the leadership of Tina, the heroine of this play, undertakes a movement of revolt that is to have unforeseen political consequences and which demonstrates

⁷⁵ (Benin City: Ethiope, 1974 [1973?]). All references to the play are from this edition.

⁷⁶ The Cassava Ghost, back-page blurb.

⁷⁷ For detailed accounts of the riot, see Report of a Commission of Enquiry appointed to inquire into certain incidents at Ojubo, Abak and Utu-Ekpo in December, 1929, Sessional Paper, No. 12 of 1930, Lagos, 1930; and Report of a Commission of Enquiry appointed to inquire into the Disturbances in the Calabar and Owerri Provinces, December, 1929, Sessional Paper, No. 28 of 1930, Lagos, 1930.

the power of their resolution and their great value to the nationalist struggle in Africa.

. . . But the play is not only a recreation of a significant incident in Nigerian history, but also a dramatic work whose characters and whose general sweep of action restores [sic] the fervour of the historical event it recalls.

It should be borne in mind that The Cassava Ghost was published in 1974, fourteen years after Nigeria's independence, and at a time when the most gory of all the disturbances in modern Nigeria--the civil war--was already becoming history. A mere dramatic re-creation of the Aba women's riot of 1929, which has been overshadowed by the 1965-70 civil unrests and warfare, would therefore make The Cassava Ghost both topical and insignificant. Eze Eze avoids both topicality and insignificance by making the theme of his play the general struggle for freedom, a struggle that was as important to the people of the Southern Provinces in 1929 (when Sir Graeme Thomson was Governor) as it was to the entire people of Nigeria in the post-independence years, particularly under Yakubu Gowon's military regime.

Eze's play may be temporally distanced from its historical source material by as much as almost half a century, but its relevance to contemporary Nigerian political situation is of a timeless quality. It should not be surprising, therefore, to find that The Cassava Ghost, though an outgrowth of historical events, is replete with satirical thrusts, aimed not only at colonialists and their form of administration but also at their Nigerian successors whose tyranny and corruption are an objectionable betrayal of the trust put in them by the people they rule.

In a play like The Cassava Ghost, the socio-political consciousness of the playwright cannot but surface from time to time, particularly in the views and sentiments expressed by some key characters who may appear as the playwright's mouthpiece. Leading characters like Tina and Kamanu and even the Governor General and Governor East often serve as transmitting media for Eze's occasional comments on persons and situations connected with the women's revolt. Yet, one should be wary of rushing to the conclusion that The Cassava Ghost is merely a political satire.

Reminiscent of Hauptmann's The Weavers, the action in The Cassava Ghost is, strictly speaking, the culmination and final eruption of a revolt among a pauperized people. The play deals with a community (not individuals, or small groups of people) involved in a socio-political conflict: the proletariat against Colonial administrators. The Cassava Ghost may be construed as an augury of a new order in Nigeria, on the "eve" of the bloodless coup of 29 July 1975. It articulates the destiny of all orders that are fated to pass away, and speaks for the humanity that has been subjected to oppressive rule, for all those who refuse to be exploited and trampled down by the few in positions of authority: in short, for the victims of history. This is what enhances the universality of the group situation in the play in spite of its localization in Nagase.⁷⁸

The play is divided into three Acts, each of which is subdivided into two scenes. This division fosters a dramatic structure

⁷⁸ An obvious fictionalisation of "Nigeria."

which is neither fully traditional nor exclusively innovative; yet it is convenient for eliciting the fundamental revolutionary essence of the play. In Act I, the playwright attempts to present the major characters in a stimulus-response situation in order to lay the ground for the final statements on the desirability of socio-political freedom.

In the opening scene, Tina and Kamamu hold a dialogue which reveals that there have been futile struggles in the recent past against unfair laws imposed upon the people of Nagase. It is also gathered that Tina's late husband, Kosoko, was killed in one of the disturbances connected with the fight for equitable law and political freedom. It is significant, therefore, that the action in the play opens on the eve of the third anniversary of Kosoko's cold-blooded murder.⁷⁹ The causes of former riots as well as the justification for the riot being planned to coincide with the third anniversary of Kosoko's death are carefully outlined. Tina's moral indignation against the unjust and exploitative tax law may be regarded as reflecting the general resentment of the people of Nagase:

Each governor becomes a millionaire when he retires. Their country is becoming more and more prosperous day by day. Think of it—two shillings six pence from 40 million people. . . 5 million pounds, every year, never accounted for and never to be. And yet there are no improvements in anything. The roads, the health, the standard of living—everything has

⁷⁹ Kunle Adepeju, a second-year history student at the University of Ibadan, was shot by police on 1 February 1971, during a student demonstration against inadequate cafeteria services. It is interesting to note that Eze's play was published in 1974, coinciding with the year of the third anniversary of the murder of Kunle Adepeju. Chances are that the third anniversary of Kosoko's death in Eze's play has been inspired by the annual commemoration of Kunle Adepeju's death.

remained the same or grown worse for the last two years. My God! This exploitation must end. (pp. 12-13)

Tina, like her womenfolk, is very bitter about "the inequality, disrespect and injustice to which the women of this country have been subjected" (p. 16). Women have been forced to pay taxes, but are denied representation in the running of the government at all levels. The government's underhanded plot to disorganize the Liberation Movement is now too clear to Kamanu and Tina:

KAMANU

Madam, the government is desperate—so desperate that the Governor General is sending an emissary to you. I have here a copy of the letter you'll receive.

(Kamanu produces the letter and hands it to Tina. She reads it to herself.)

It's all a trick—a plot to disorganize you. If you accept his offer, our hopes are gone.⁸⁰ (p. 17)

Consequently, Kamanu pleads with Tina (the women's liberation leader) for the formation of a common front. With the Liberation Movement under a united flag, the fight for political independence and against the taxation of women without any participation in the government would be much easier. The opening scene, it may be concluded, puts the upcoming action in its proper perspective before the audience, and reveals enough of past events to enable the audience to see the justification for the development that the playwright plans out in the play.

In Act I, scene ii, another character, Doctor Akri, is introduced to demonstrate the divide-and-rule tactic of the Colonial govern-

⁸⁰ Cf. Kengide's attack on the government in J. P. Clark's The Raft, in Three Plays (London: O. U. P., 1964), pp. 130-31.

ment. Doctor Akri is portrayed as a "stooge, traitor, murderer" (p. 24). A former liberation fighter along with late Kosoko, Doctor Akri has now been silenced by his appointments by the government as "chief medical officer, Member of the Legislative Council and [his decoration as] Member of The Distinguished Order of the [British] Empire" (p. 26). These honours have forced the "one-time strong, outspoken nationalist [to] capitulate" (p. 31) and to turn against his own people and their just cause.

To Doctor Akri, the demands of the women "are unreasonable and many. Why shouldn't you pay head-tax when women control 75 per cent of the wealth? Why should you want voting rights, when 99.9 per cent of you can't read or write? And then the freedom, whatever you mean by it? And if you get these, you'll ask for more" (p. 38). The "stooge" is not bothered that the government is not doing anything to rectify the 99.9 per cent illiteracy among the women. He has been brain-washed into opposing all that is for the good of his own people. So warped is his mind that politics has extensively corrupted his professional ethics. Frustrated by Tina's determination to execute the women's plans to riot, Doctor Akri declares: "When your dead and wounded reach the hospital, I'll probe and cut into them--not with love, nor with affection. But, I'll wash my hands with their blood, like the high priests of your native gods" (p. 39). It can be deduced easily from this speech that Doctor Akri has alienated himself from his own people's traditional way of life since he now regards the native gods as "your" deities, not his.

In the portrayal of Doctor Akri, there is a discernible intent on the part of the playwright to inveigh against the Akris, the political traitors in contemporary Nigeria, who are known to have sacrificed the welfare of their people to gain their own selfish ends. But the government itself is not exempt from Eze's invective. Shortly after the departure of Doctor Akri, whose presence and utterances have rekindled the revenge motive behind Tina's action, Inspector Allison arrives, accompanied by two policemen, to arrest Tina. She protests: "You break into my premises, tell me I'm under arrest and want me to surrender my hands to be handcuffed. What kind of law do you have in this country now-a-days? Where lies the justice?" (p. 45) Here, it is not difficult to see that Eze, through Tina, inveighs against the government's brazen betrayal of fundamental human rights.

All along, Eze has consistently impressed it upon his audience that the government has been using the natives against themselves. The three policemen who have come to arrest Tina are all natives, according to the stage direction on page 44. The women have come to realize this deplorable tactic of the government. But the arrest and detention of their leader would seem to have triggered in them their plans to riot.

Act I ends with Inspector Allison telling Tina: "If I were you, I'd prepare for a hard, long journey" (p. 46). This would be recognized immediately by the audience as a hint that Tina may be in detention for long in order to foil her plans and avert the riot before it gets a chance to spread. She may even be transferred to Fernando Po island into exile—a common fate suffered by "trouble-makers" in colonial

days. Inspector Allison's line may be considered, therefore, as forewarning Tina as to the next line of action. It keeps the audience guessing: What is the government up to? What would Kamanu do to forestall any harm to the person of Tina, and to the general cause of the people? Will he succeed? Will Tina die in exile? Is everything lost with her arrest? These are some of the questions which make Inspector Allison's foreboding statement succeed in building some suspense and creating a form of tension as Act I ends with a blackout.

There is very little action throughout Act II, except for a significant development which affects the direction of the course of action. In a letter signed by Dikeogu Kamanu on the behalf of the Amalgamated Workers Union of Nagase, an ultimatum is addressed to the Governor General:

"We demand the immediate release of Madam Kosoko at exactly 3 p. m. today. Failure to comply with this demand leaves our forces of liberation no alternative than the complete annihilation of you and your forces. Save yourself, save your country, save the empire. Dikeogu Kamanu, President of the Amalgamated Workers Union of Nagase."
(p. 64)

The matter, form, and tone of this ultimatum may seem ridiculous on first reading; but a careful analysis will show that everything is calculated to intimidate the Governor General. A successful riot by the Workers Union may mean the end of the career of the Governor General as an individual because he may get killed in the riot, or his home government may order his return to England for his failure to avert the upheaval. If the Colonial administration collapses by force of arms (cassava sticks), it may spell the doom of the Nagase sector of the

empire that was once thought of as imperishable. If the empire falls as a result of similar demonstrations in other colonies, the status and fate of the Governor General's country may be at stake since, according to Tina, his country feeds fat on the exploitative taxes collected from the colony of Nagase, and other colonies. The Governor General may not take the ultimatum given him too seriously; but it is doubtful if he does not understand the implications of the clauses that may sound unreasonable to the common man. The ultimatum serves as a new force, therefore, introduced to complicate the course of action in the play.

Although the action does not develop all that much in Act II, two important conversations provide the audience with an insight into what is happening elsewhere, and the attitude of the Governor General towards the whole situation. In scene i, the dialogue between Tina and Kamanu during the latter's visit to Tina's prison cell reveals that, with the exception of a few, all the members of the police force, the army, and the prison guards are members of the Liberation Movement. Kamanu informs Tina that he has enlisted their interest in the revolt that will unseat the Colonial government. Also, a cable has been sent to the Colonial Office in London demanding the release of Tina, and "immediate self-government for the country" (p. 56). The strategy of the Liberation Movement is that "Once the order to shoot [down the rioting women] is given, the guns will be turned on whoever gives or relays the orders. By God's help, this day, the third anniversary of the death of our master, a new nation will be born" (p. 56).

Scene ii focuses attention on the dialogue between the Governor

General and his wife, Mrs. London. The two-fold significance of this dramatic dialogue is that it affords the playwright the opportunity to satirize Colonial administrators, and by inference, political leaders in Nigeria generally. At the same time, it constitutes the first major crisis in the play. Mrs. London's impatience, her vaulting ambition and innate ruthlessness betray her as incompatible with her husband. Eze succeeds in portraying her as the symbol of colonial oppression, and as a representation of tyranny which has thrown the Governor General into a dilemma. Nothing short of force of arms would please her in dealing with the people of Nagase. In a domineering tone, she virtually orders her husband: "A duty is entrusted to you. That duty must be done. . . . Now, you're going to sit there (pointing to the Governor General's desk) and order the Army and the Police to smash this insurrection. When some of them die, the rest will behave" (p. 61).

Sir John Walter London's reaction to his wife's intractable aggressiveness leads to an amazing revelation which forms the basis of the satire in this section of the play. The first satire is on the nepotistic appointment of the Governor General of Nagase:

GOVERNOR GENERAL

I was a police. . . a sergeant. In nine years of marriage you've reminded me of it over a thousand times. . . the same stuff. . . the same stunt. . . . You've pulled it over and over again to get your way. You took me off the streets where I patrolled day and night. Your Father smuggled me into high society, pushed me up the ladder—

MRS. LONDON

(Sitting by the Conference Table). You should be grateful for that.

GOVERNOR GENERAL

Aren't you tired of repeating the same thing over

and over again? . . . Now, the world knows that a one-time Patrol Sergeant became a Governor General because his wife's father was a Lord.

MRS. LONDON

Oh, shut up! . . . And stop this ridiculous, silly behaviour.

GOVERNOR GENERAL

Governor General! The greatest man in the land. What a sham. . . . Look here Jessie (approaching her) I was much happier as a Patrol Sergeant—poor but happy. I was alive. . . . with feeling and sympathy for people. . . . I was a human being. But now, all that's gone—a thing of the past. With you as a wife, your great ambitions and this exalted Imperial Crown to uphold, I've become nothing but a heartless beast. (pp. 60-61)

The peculiar forcefulness of the satire in the above dialogue derives from the fact that it does not provoke a derisive laughter, at least not among an audience made up largely of people who have been subjects of colonization at one time or another. Instead, it may provoke a drawn out discordant hiss from a contemporary Nigerian audience whose wild furor may be set ablaze by their awareness of similar situations around them.

The Governor General considers himself as a misfit on his job. His self-reprimand and his criticism of the manner and circumstances of his appointment recall to mind Sidney Whitmer in Edgar Mittelhozer's A Morning At The Office.⁸¹ Sidney, it is stated, "had come to Trinidad in 1945, immediately after his discharge from the Army in which he had served since 1942." His uncle, Mr. Rostock Lenfield, one of the principals of the London office of the Tucurapo company, had arranged his

⁸¹ (London: The Hogarth Press, 1950).

appointment as overseer" (p. 25). Sidney's reaction later on—an invective that is as characterized by emotionalism as that of Sir John Walter London—is worth quoting from the letter he writes to his mother in Bristol:

"I'm absolutely fed up with Trinidad. The life on this estate is cramping my spirit. At first, the sensation of feeling like a king was novel and pretty good. In England I was a nobody, but the instant I arrived here my white skin alone was sufficient to give me entree into the best circles. . . . I've met chaps there who, in England, would be sniffed at by a Hoxton charwoman. . . .

"I'm seriously thinking of resigning, but before doing anything rash I'm going to take a trip to town this afternoon to have a chat with Eyerard Murrain. He's the chap I told you of who came out here, soon after the Dunkirk mess, to take up the post of assistant manager of Essential Products. He's supposed to be the Chief Accountant, too, but he's told me frankly he doesn't know a damn thing about accountancy."
(pp. 25-27).

So fed up is Sidney that when he goes to hand in his letter of resignation later in the day, he is too drunk to be bothered when he swears: "To hell with the bloody British Empire!" (p. 141), and calls Mr. Murrain an "Exploiting snob!" (p. 142).

The contents and sentiments of Sidney Whitmer's letter may be compared with an excerpt from the dialogue between the Resident and Simon Pilkins, the District Officer, in Wole Soyinka's Death and the King's Horseman:⁸²

PRESIDENT: Nose to the ground Pilkins, nose to the ground. If we all let these little things slip past us where would the empire

⁸² (London: Eyre Methuen, 1975).

be eh? Tell me that. Where would we all
be?
PILKINGS (low voice): Sleeping peacefully at
home I bet. (p. 47)

A place like this would probably draw a chuckle and a few rapid nods from the audience. In The Cassava Ghost, however, the satiric thrust cuts much too deeply to elicit anything short of an angry response from the audience. The satiric catharsis attempted by Eze in Act II, scene ii of his play would then depend for its purgative effect on the extent to which the elicited indignation jolts the audience to censure, not only the Colonial Administration of Nagase, but also contemporary Nigerian administrators whose life, and mode of appointment, are clearly mirrored in Sir John Walter London's.

It should be noted, however, that the Governor General is in a peculiar situation. He is not trained for the post he holds in Nagase; yet, the audience's indignation is directed not so much against him as it is against the colonial authority that nepotistically posted him to the colony of Nagase. Although the Governor General cannot be exculpated completely, he manages to win our pity, if not indeed our admiration, by his recognition of some ethical principles leading to his guilt-feeling. He condemns the so-called "eminent authorities in colonial policies, [the] hard-boiled patriots" (p. 72), including his father-in-law, who are responsible for the civil disorder that his wife now blames on his alleged weakness and cowardice.

Sir John Walter London's newly acquired moral rectitude clearly distinguishes him from his wife. For instance, Mrs. London claims: "Dr. Akri, Inspector Allison and many others are fine fellows,

They think Tina is simply out of her mind" (p. 71). Her intuition, which she displays on a few occasions, does not seem to help her in correctly analyzing the situation. The Governor General has to remind her that her "heroes" are indeed the real enemies of their own people: "Jessie, don't forget that back home Dr. Akri and Inspector Allison would have been hanged as traitors. They've been our agents. I don't respect them. . . don't like them either. I only use them" (p. 71). This disagreement between husband and wife creates the impression that the Governor General is gradually drifting farther away not only from his wife but also from the principles and ideologies of colonial authority.

Before the action picks up again with the report of the murder of Peterson (pp. 80-81), the Governor General declares:

But, we can't live with old ideas forever. . . .
trampling on others' heads. . . eliminating
oppositions and enslaving the weaker ones? What,
when the tide turns? The weak become the strong
and the oppressed the oppressors?

MRS. LONDON

(In an out-burst of scornful laughter) You're
dreaming. So, some day Africa will be the
power. . . . So powerful as to colonize Europe,
America and Russia?

GOVERNOR GENERAL

I don't care who colonizes whom. . . . What
frightens me is not the fear of their colonizing
us, but the fear that in attempting to set the
clock of history backwards we're not only doing
ourselves great harm, but also the entire civil-
ized world. (p. 75)

It should be obvious that the entire dialogue between the
Governor General and his wife in Act II has been designed primarily to

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afford Eze the opportunity to utilize his satiric weapon to effect. At the same time the dialogue prepares the audience for the Governor General's final self-purgation. By the end of the second Act, his mind has been disabused of all inclinations to oppressive rule. He has been so liberated that he now sees himself not any more like his own shadow, "Shapely, visible, but lifeless" (p. 80). He is a changed person. His metamorphosis is a clear-cut resolution of his earlier dilemma, and it constitutes a major turning point which paves the way for the final denouement in Act III.

The Governor General's transformation is only part of the general pattern of transition in the play affecting individuals in society and the society itself. Early in Act III, even Peter and Paul--Chauffeur and Cook respectively in the Governor General's employ--are not far from experiencing such a transition:

PAUL

. . . That woman [Mrs. London] throw whisky for my face this morning. When 'e finish abuse me proper, 'e call me old monkey. Hum! The one thing wey make I stay here and take all this nonsense don go. I think I don tire now.

PETER

Don't lose hope, man. You're not all that old. Soon, you'll be working under better conditions and making good money. You can marry three young girls. . . have many children. (p. 95)

Paul, who is only a domestic servant, considers Peter's optimism as only a dream calculated to make him feel good and forget his troubles.

PETER

You'll forget. We'll all forget our troubles some day. You see, when I was in Burma, I never thought that some day I'd forget the suffering. Days and days without food or water. . . the deafening blast

of shells and bombs and the noise of planes overhead. Yet, you crawled, not raising your head, even to kill a snake rolled around a branch above you.

PAUL

(Reacts frightfully) U-u-uh!

PETER

Oh, yes. Ahead of you, behind, or beside you, a comrade stops—blown to pieces. You wish it was you to end the suffering. Yet, the order is go, you go on—to your safety or destruction—you don't know. . . Mind you, this is nothing compared to what did happen—a story which no soldier can ever fully tell.

(pp. 95-96)

This dialogue, which is quoted only in part, could very well have been inspired by the experiences of the 1967-70 Biafra war, and its importance as a landmark in the process of the nation's transition from a dark and dreary state into a brighter new day.

One admirable thing about Ezenta Eze is his skillful integration of dramatic dialogue and action. The dialogue between Peter, Paul and Mark in Act III, scene 1 does not constitute a mere side comment on the experiences of domestic servants in the service of the Governor General. Rather, it serves as a prelude to the sweeping change that is to mark the end of the careers of colonial administrators in Nagase, as well as the close of the chapter of colonial rule in the nation. The birth of the new day which Peter hopes for in Act III, scene 1 forms the core of the action in the closing scene of the play.

The disintegration of colonialism, anticipated in Act II starts to be manifest in the discord that marks the informal discussion among the three Regional Governors, prior to their meeting with the Governor

General to discuss the affairs of state as a matter of emergency. Since only Governor East shares the pacifist views of the Governor General, the scale of any resolution (if there is one) passed at this meeting is bound to tilt in favour of the use of force against the rioting women of Nagase.

When the climactic confrontation takes place between the leaders of the Nagase Liberation Movement and the council of the Governors, the action dissipates disappointingly into schoolboyish display. This is a point where some swift and decisive action is expected on the part of Kamanu who now has control of the nation's armed forces. Instead, he engages in a rambling and pointless discussion with the Governors, Mrs. London and the Imperial boot-licker, Doctor Akri. The impression created in this scene is that it may be a sign of the playwright's loss of his grip on the plot. The exchange between Kamanu and those present at the meeting of the Governors is a damaging drag on the action.

The strength of the play tends to go limp towards the end, and the utterances and action of the freedom fighters constitute a mockery of the whole revolution. Tunde, Tina's houseboy, is dressed like the Governor General (p. 134). Even before true freedom is gained, the women have started to celebrate. The introduction of the drummers who supply the music is rather ill-timed, if not indeed pointless. Even in the speeches of Tina and Kamanu, the obtrusive voice of the playwright can be recognised easily. Besides, the characters can hardly be distinguished one from the other any longer by their style of speech,

except where names or other identifying clues are given.

Dramatic dialogue, which has been the strength of the play all along, suddenly goes flat and stale as Nagase is at the threshold of political independence. At a point, "Tina rises, stands behind Tunde, holding his shoulders" (Stage Direction), saying: "Here, we have one of posterity's leader [sic]. Let's hear his verdict" (p. 142). This turn of events is nothing short of a travesty of justice, power and authority. There are two ways of interpreting all this: it is either an indication of power slipping into the hands of unthinking rabble, or the playwright's ineptness in resolving the conflict set in the play. Either way, the conclusion of the play is somehow out of joint with the preceding parts. To create the impression that the new day fought for and achieved by the Liberation Movement is to be spent under the rule of no better than rabble-rousers is to make the achievement of independence the curse, the tragedy of Nagase of the new era. An alternative way of assessing the situation at the end of the struggle by the freedom fighters is that probably Ezenta Eze ends the play in order to launch a final satirical thrust on the mode of rule in post-independence Nigeria. Granted that this were the satiric design of the ending, Kamanu, rather than Tunde, would have been tipped for the post of Governor General. Besides, Eze would still need to tie a few loose ends together. The cablegram from the Colonial Secretary in London, for instance, is a case in point. The cablegram reads:

Office of the Colonial Secretary, Church House,
Great Smith Street, London, March 1955. His
Excellency, John Walter London, Governor General
of Nagase. You are authorized by the Prime Minister

to negotiate with the Liberation Party, and to prepare for a general election to be followed followed immediately by a constitutional conference in Dondon for Nagase's independence.
S. W. Peace-Jones, Colonial Secretary. (p. 144)

The contents of this cablegram are clear enough, though the logic behind preceding a constitutional conference with a general election which ought to be guided by the constitution of the country is questionable. The real problem, however, is that the cablegram does not seem to have any significant bearing on the action that follows its reading. There is no indication that Tina and Kamanu are as suspicious of the proposal in the cabled message as Tina was of the letter from the Governor General earlier in the play (p. 29). Since the Colonial Secretary's message is not opposed by Tina and Kamanu either verbally or in action, there is every cause to believe that the Governor General is still in power. But Ese seems to be in a big rush to end the play with the achievement of independence for Nagase. He creates the impression that the cablegram amounts to the granting of independence by tipping Kamanu as the newly Tina-appointed Prime Minister whose rule begins immediately as symbolized by the replacement of the Imperial Flag with Nagase's Star of David.

The hoisting of the national flag of Nagase, and the singing of what appears to be the national anthem, even before independence is granted, amount to a unilateral declaration of independence. This would normally be in tune with the spirit of revolt that pervades the play. However, the playwright fails to show the audience Tina's and Kamanu's disregard for the cablegram from the Colonial Secretary which favours

dialogue and systematic granting of independence to Nagase. Of course, Eze is using his prerogative as an artist to modify history. The extent of this modification, unfortunately, tends to undermine rather than support the dramaturgy of The Cassava Ghost.

From the foregoing discussion of historical plays in Nigeria it is obvious that the playwrights are not necessarily interested in their source material for its historical significance only. However faithful to the historical facts out of which their plays have grown, or whatever the modification of history they freely introduce, the playwrights are more interested in their source material for its dramatic worth. Historical facts may constitute a limiting factor in the writing of the plays, but the efforts of the playwrights to re-create history on the stage often result in works of art that profoundly entertain and educate. Also, the playwrights take advantage of available historical material to be critical of contemporary socio-political situations in the country. In spite of the tendency towards the satirical, however, none of the plays examined in this chapter can be classified as satirical drama, at least, not in the vein of Soyinka's The Trials of Brother Jero, or Henshaw's Dinner For Promotion, and others to be studied in succeeding chapters. It may be said in conclusion that whatever dramatic flaws may have detracted from the excellence of plays like Kurunmi, Ijaye War, and The Cassava Ghost, these plays are an invaluable contribution to the repertory of historical drama in Nigeria.

In the mythical and historical plays examined in this chapter, it is clear that no attempt is made by any of the playwrights to portray

the past with nostalgia, or to romanticize it. Rather, the artists endeavour to project the past in a manner that enriches our knowledge and understanding of the contemporary Nigerian society that grew out of the dim or recent past. Between this past and the contemporary society is a transitional period which is noted for its conflict of cultures. It is in this period of transition that the plays to be considered in the next chapter are set.

CHAPTER THREE

THE CONFLICT MOTIF IN MODERN NIGERIAN DRAMA

(i) The Conflict Between Tradition and Modernism:

The political "wind of change" which started to blow through Africa in the late 1950's has grown from strength to strength in recent times. Predating this political revolution that has fostered the attainment of nationhood in virtually all the former colonial territories, however, is the cultural revolution which is still at work today. In Nigeria, it was first noticed in literature with the prize-winning performance of James Ene Henshaw's The Jewels of the Shrine in 1952. But it was not until Achebe published Things Fall Apart in 1958 that the cultural revolution which started humbly in 1952 was accorded the full recognition it deserved. Critics were quick to discern in the novel Achebe's preoccupation with cultural, religious, and generation conflicts which set asunder the unity that once characterized the Igbo clan.

These conflicts soon emerged as the most recurrent in the early works of African writers. What distinguishes the writers, one from the other, is the individual's approach. Some, like Okot p'Bitek in his Song of Lawino, launch a satiric attack on the middle-class educated African who unreservedly abandons his native culture in favour of Western values and ways of life. Others, like Achebe in Things Fall Apart and Arrow of God, clamour for a workable compromise between the conflicting African and Western cultures. And there are those who, like Henshaw in Companion For A Chief and Children of the Goddess, use

the stage to decry the retention of certain aspects of the culture of the people of Nigeria.

In Nigeria, most of the earlier dramatic works attempt to capture the mood of a fast-changing society, representing the conflicts and tensions that were restructuring the society and affecting important changes in the individual. Among these earlier works are the plays of J. E. Henshaw, J. P. Clark, and Wole Soyinka. In this chapter, however, only selected works of Henshaw, Zulu Sofola, and Clark in their explorations of the conflicts between tradition and modernism will be examined.

Henshaw deserves a prominent place in the annals of modern Nigerian drama in English. Granted, he is by profession a medical practitioner who, in his own words, only "strayed into play-writing"; yet, his play The Jewels of the Shrine won the Henry Carr Memorial Cup at the All Nigeria Festival of the Arts in Lagos in 1952.¹ Henshaw is fully aware of the reciprocal relationship between the writer and his society. Consequently, he allows himself to be guided by this awareness in creating dramatic situations in which he fairly satisfactorily plays his role as a writer in the contemporary Nigerian society.

What initially motivated Henshaw to "stray into play-writing" was the pressing need in "all rapidly developing countries. . . to preserve good traditions, and at the same time to graft upon them, where appropriate, the best from other countries."² When Henshaw wrote his

¹ See the blurb, Children of the Goddess (London: Univ. of London Press, 1964).

² "Preface" to This Is Our Chance (London: Univ. of London Press, 1956), p. 5.

first three plays early in the fifties, African drama was seldom seen on the stage, and the call for a revival of the fast disappearing African cultural heritage was hardly above a whisper. According to Henshaw, "there was little organized effort to popularize African drama. Radio was a child, and television³ only a rumour. However, with the attainment of independence came numerous outbursts of latent energy and enthusiasm, among which was the awakening of great interest in drama, especially drama with an African background."⁴

Henshaw has always been fascinated by the tremendous "power of literature as an instrument for influencing people and effecting changes in society."⁵ He does not cherish the "art for art's sake" school of thought because he believes literature has a social function to perform. His views are similar to those of Keshokov. Leaning on Maxim Gorky, the father of Soviet literature who once said, "The writer is like the eyes and ears of his epoch," Keshokov claims that the writer

must sharply focus his vision in order the better to penetrate the profound process going on in his society, to see the struggle of antagonistic forces for what they really are and to remain perceptive to the social contents and features of his epoch. . . .He . . . is in constant interaction with the world, his social being, the morals of his time and the given social ambience. . . .The writer and society are two in one, indivisible. They do not merely co-exist at par. They represent one entity even in such cases where the two

³ The former Western Nigerian Television (WNTV) Service started operating in 1959, with the slogan "First In Africa."

⁴ "Preface" to Children of the Goddess, p. 5.

⁵ "Introduction" to Dinner For Promotion (London: Univ. of London Press, 1967), p. 5.

parts are in conflict.⁶

Keshokov goes on to contend that for a writer to grasp fully the social phenomena of his time, he needs to adopt the right viewpoint from which he can perceive all the complexities of the process of societal growth (or decadence), including class conflicts and the struggle of ideas.

As long as the writer cannot dissociate himself from the aspirations and the numerous problems of his own people, he ought to be a committed interpreter and witness of his time. He is duty-bound to contribute, through his literary work, to the growth and progress of his society.

It is from this point of view of the sociological approach to literature that one can best appreciate some of the plays of Henshaw, Sofola and Clark, which deal primarily with the theme of culture conflict, and the parent-child conflict.

Henshaw's first play This Is Our Chance⁷ explores the conflict of cultures that characterizes the bulk of early contemporary African literature. Set in the fictitious West African village of Koloro in the late nineteenth century, the play examines the conflict between tradition, represented by Chief Damba, and Ajugo, the Prime Minister of the village, and modernism which is championed by Bambulu, the village school teacher, and Enusi, the progressive second Court Minister. The division of the major characters into two opposing camps enhances the development of the action in the play.

⁶ A. Keshokov, "The Writer's Role in Society," African Statesman, 5, No. 1 (1970), 41.

⁷ This Is Our Chance (London: Univ. of London Press, 1956). This volume also contains The Jewels of the Shrine, and A Man of Character. All citations from these plays are taken from this volume.

The story is about two neighbouring villages, Koloro and Udura, that have been in a long-established hostile relationship. They hardly realize the force of the wind of change that is gradually removing the differences between them. In his capacity as the village school teacher and tutor to Princess Kudaro of Koloro, Bambulu has been preaching the need for peaceful co-existence and inter-village co-operation for the sake of progress and stability. Both Chief Damba of Koloro and Chief Mboli of Udura consider Bambulu's preaching as inimical to tradition, and, therefore, unacceptable.

However, Bambulu's ideas have begun to influence some of the progressive elements in the community. Secret inter-village marriages have started the two villages drifting closer together than ever before. One such secret marriage has been contracted between Prince Ndamu of Udura and Princess Kudaro of Koloro, both of whom should be sworn enemies. This gives rise to violent and frightening reactions from fanatical traditionalists who are opposed to any form of cordial relationship between Koloro and Udura. The lives of the newly married couple, as well as that of Chief Damba are at stake. Threats of inter-tribal warfare are in the air. But the anti-snake-bite vaccine produced by Bambulu miraculously saves the situation. The younger son of Chief Mboli is bitten by a snake. Princess Kudaro, who is held hostage in Udura, treats the young prince with Bambulu's antidote which she has taken with her when she eloped with her lover. The miraculous efficacy of the medicine prompts Chief Mboli to send an ambassador of peace to Chief Damba, with presents for the Chief and for the teacher who discovered

such a powerful remedy for snake bites. This friendly gesture from Chief Mbolli turns out to be the beginning of a lasting reconciliation between the two mutually hostile villages.

The message in the play is made quite clear. Chief Damba argues that "Tradition is sacred. Custom is above all. To question Tradition is sacrilege. If men do not respect Tradition how can society stand?" (p. 19). But Enusi, the progressive second Court Minister, tries to make the Chief realize how unprogressive his views are: "You may regard your daughter in this case as a pure young rose, or an early petal of delicate hibiscus, and Tradition as a sword with a burning and shining blade hanging over it ready to destroy it for ever" (p. 29).

At the end of the play, Bambulu is made to say:

We shall need the schools not only to teach the children how to read and write, but how to plant and reap better, how to play and sing better, and how to live and grow up happily. Our villages shall be friendly to each other. We shall not place the bar of traditional enmity in their path. Neither shall we henceforth allow the tyranny of ignorance and superstition to go under the cloak of Custom and Tradition. The world outside moves fast, my Lord, and we must move with it. This is our chance. (p. 38)

To throw away this "chance" is to close the door to education, growth, progress, peace, happiness, and stability, all of which can be achieved only through open-mindedness, love, and the spirit of co-operation and sacrifice. True enough, as Ogunba observes, "In concrete terms within the context of present-day Nigeria this play is an appeal directed towards the Ibos and Ibibios of Nigeria to mend their age-long quarrels and prepare for the greater task of the future." In the same

breath, however, the critic makes the questionable assertion that "the play's standing as a work of art is gravely compromised since it merely seeks to support a commonplace political philosophy of good neighbourliness."⁸

A careful analysis of the play would reveal that the appeal in it transcends the limits set by Ogunba. The play contains an appeal for peaceful co-existence and cooperation anywhere. It is applicable to peoples or nations with socio-political problems similar to those that have for a long time retarded the rate of progress and civilization in the villages of Udura and Koloro. The Arab-Israeli war is a case in point. Inter-tribal cold war and mutual distrust continue to constitute an irritating stumbling block to peace, progress, and stability in many African nations today. All this makes the play more relevant than it is given credit for.

Henshaw's perception of the social and political problems facing Africa, particularly Nigeria, is that of a writer who refuses to stand aloof at a time when the clamour for peace and progress, for trust and cooperation among peoples of different cultural backgrounds, and for the education of the masses, is on virtually every lip. Through This Is Our Chance and many of his other plays, Henshaw identifies himself with the struggle of developing nations for social, economic, and political advancement.

This Is Our Chance may be pacifist, as Ogunba remarks; but

⁸ O. Ogunba, "Modern Drama in West Africa," in C. Heywood, Ed., Perspectives on African Literature (London: Heinemann, 1971), p. 82.

rather than detract from the merit of the play, the pacifism reinforces its conflict-resolution structure. Ogunba calls it a "palpable design" which cannot be entirely admired because "in trying overtly to preach a political philosophy in this play, the playwright would appear to transcend the legitimate bounds of theatre. We recoil from his preaching and prefer the round-table conference for our political solutions."⁹ The critic's objection to the theatre usurping the function of the Church¹⁰ is quite understandable, but the didacticism in This Is Our Chance hardly assumes the tone or form of a sermon from the pulpit. Two villages are in mutual enmity. To resolve this conflict, another one is set up—the conflict of cultures—so as to open the eyes of the inhabitants of both communities to the silliness and self-destructiveness of their form of relationship. The culture conflict in the play may, therefore, be considered as designed to serve as an antidote to the antagonism which has poisoned the minds of Udu people against the inhabitants of Koloro.

If anything at all detracts from the excellence of the play, it is probably the playwright's handling of the plot, especially at the denouement stage. The major conflict in the play is between Tradition and Modernism. The development of the conflict is admirable up to the crisis point. The denouement, based on the efficacy of Babulu's anti-snake-bite vaccine, is too contrived to be convincing. However, the

⁹ O. Ogunba, "Theatre In Nigeria," Présence africaine, 5, No. 30 (1967), 80.

¹⁰ Ibid.

playwright's use of this deus ex machina further emphasizes the triumph of modernism over tradition where the latter is incapable of providing solutions to some aching problems. Yet, one is tempted to agree with Ogunba that "this kind of plotting. . . implies a falsification or oversimplification of the essential nature of things."¹¹

The language in the play is at times as disturbing as the handling of the plot. After reading Achebe's novels, or the plays of Soyinka and Clark, or even those of Ngugi, in which the language reflects the African mode of thought and speech rhythm, one can fully appreciate Axworthy's criticism of the language in This Is Our Chance. He observes that "all the characters. . . speak approximately Standard English; in ignoring the colourful varieties of West African English the author has denied himself that powerful device of characterization exploited by all our best authors--the colloquialism."¹² Henshaw's use of approximate standard English is probably a deliberate act designed to avoid the fate which Amos Tutuola's work had suffered; especially from the hands of Nigerian critics. But at least he could have done without clichés like "I have stepped into the ring. The die is cast" where they are least appropriate.

More disconcerting than the use of clichés is Henshaw's almost childish display of his vast knowledge of medical terms. The apparently unmotivated introduction of terms like "prophylactic

¹¹ O. Ogunba, "Modern Drama in West Africa," p. 83.

¹² G. J. Axworthy, A review of This Is Our Chance in Ibadan, No. 1 (October 1957), 28.

therapeutics," "asphyxia," "miotic," "pyretic," and "mydriatic" intrudes upon the simplicity of the dialogue in the play. The impression is not created at any point that Bambulu's level of education is high enough to justify his acquisition and casual use of these medical terms. Of course, Henshaw may be deriding the village schoolmasters of the past who used to memorize big words from the dictionaries in order to impress their listeners by inflating their sentences with high-sounding, but hardly appropriate words. Otherwise, the medical terms injected into the play betray Henshaw's pedantry, rather than Bambulu's. Nevertheless, beautifully rendered passages are not found wanting in the play, as the metaphor in the following speech illustrates. In reply to Chief Damba's accusation that Enusi trifles with "Tradition, which is the most important thing in the whole problem" (p. 29), Enusi declares: "You may regard your daughter in this case as a pure young rose, and Tradition as a sword with a burning and shining blade hanging over it, ready to destroy it for ever" (p. 29). The full impact of this passage is felt when, towards the end of the play, Bambulu pleads with Chief Damba for clemency over Ajugo, the vindictive traditionalist. He explains that Ajugo "performed without bias the bitter duty of his office which is dictated by Tradition and Custom. If there is any villain, therefore, it is Tradition, and not this man" (p. 37). The description of Tradition in terms of the metaphors of the villain, the tyrant, or a destructive sword gathers enough linguistic force that enables the playwright to relegate Tradition (or those aspects of it which are obnoxious) to the background, making change and modernism triumph over vicious

Tradition.

It has been necessary to talk of This Is Our Chance at such length because it is the play in which the playwright's basic dramatic philosophy is outlined. In the words of Bamalu, "The world outside moves fast, my Lord, and we must move with it" (p. 38). All the other seven plays, even Dinner-For-Promotion, which is a satire, operate in varying degrees on this philosophy.

Henshaw's Children of the Goddess¹³ picks up from where This Is Our Chance leaves off; but, as Ogunba observes, it "hardly shows any improvement in matter and form over its predecessor. There is the same puerile idea of showing an obvious, stereotyped clash of traditional and modern forms, the same overgenerous use of the deus ex machina and the same unedifying language."¹⁴ Ogunba's observation notwithstanding, this play is more ambitious than any of the three plays in the volume This Is Our Chance. What Children of the Goddess lacks in organic structure and language is somehow compensated for in its concentration on the theme of culture conflict and the effective resolution of the conflict.

Although the play is set in the imaginary West African village of Labana, names like Erpenyong and Effeiom strongly suggest that Labana is a pseudonym for any town situated in the old Calabar province. It is also significant that the action is set in the latter half of the

¹³ Children of the Goddess and Other Plays (London: Univ. of London Press, 1964). All references to this play are from this volume.

¹⁴ O. Ogunba, "Modern Drama in West Africa," p. 83.

nineteenth century, when inter-tribal war, slavery, cannibalism, and the killing of twins were all part of the life of some Nigerian peoples. In Children of the Goddess Henshaw attempts to expose the inhuman traditional taboo on multiple births, in this case, twins.

In his painstaking study of the ethnology of Southern Nigeria, P. Amaury Talbot observes: "There is inborn in the tribes of the Southern Provinces a great abhorrence of all births which are considered as abnormal."¹⁵ Multiple births were also considered as abnormal among the Yoruba, Edo, Ibo, Ijaw, and Ibibio. For instance, in Ondo, "twins were lifted into a pot, which was then thrown away in the bush. . . . Twins were always killed by the Ekiti; at a grove in Akure [not part of Ekiti any longer] no [fewer] than 333 pots, each containing the remains of twins, were found in 1897 by Rev. Ogunbiyi."¹⁶ A similar practice was common among the Ibibio who usually killed the twins before throwing them into the Bad Bush in pots. Alternatively, the twins were squeezed into the pots and left in the bush to die.¹⁷

By the time Henshaw wrote Children of the Goddess, the abominable custom of the murder of twins had disappeared practically everywhere. However, occasionally, shocking news of the destruction of

¹⁵ P. Amaury Talbot, The Peoples of Southern Nigeria (London: Frank Cass, 1969), III: Ethnology, 719.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 722. Also see 723-30 for the fate of twins and their parents in various Nigerian communities of the 19th century.

¹⁷ See "The Tragedy of Twins," an illustration in W. P. Livingstone, Mary Slessor of Calabar (New York: George H. Doran Co., n. d.), face page 164.

twins, particularly around the Calabar area, appeared in the newspapers. It was not without some cause, therefore, that Henshaw's play appeared in 1964.

Children of the Goddess is divided into three Acts. The first deals with the value placed on children in African marriages, and prepares the audience for the birth of Asari's twins who will become the centre of the culture conflict later on in the play. Asari, the youngest wife of King Amansa, has been unable to have children, and is about to be banished as the custom of the land demands. However, her sacrifice to Ndemeyo, the water goddess, is efficacious; and the Act ends with the welcome news of Asari's pregnancy. Consequently, Asari's banishment, already pronounced, is revoked.

It is in this opening Act that Henshaw introduces the prevaricating prophet, whose interpretation (or intentional distortion) of the Oracle reeks with vindictiveness, and spells nothing but doom for Amansa's kingdom. Apparently, the picture which the audience get of Effefiom is deliberately sketched by the playwright to discredit false prophets whose art, or quackery, fosters the retardation of progress and civilization. Effefiom's interpretation of the two white feathers in Asari's sacrificial tray, and the "two swallows [which] flew so low that one of them actually touched him with its wings" (p. 20), betrays his pretension to oracular skill. The proof of Effefiom as a sham comes early enough in the play. He divines for the king:

The goddess is not pleased with Asari Amansa. My Lord, do not harbour a woman with whom the goddess is displeased. Do not place yourself and this

kingdom in enmity with the spirits of our fathers on which rest the good fortune and prosperity of our people. My Lord, send Asari Amansa away. (p. 18)

Asari's pregnancy proves Efeffiom a false prophet who allows his prejudice and defective personal evaluation of a situation to intrude upon his office as priest of the Oracle.

As the play moves into the second Act, Efeffiom shows up, prophesying that the steamer that has just berthed on the shore "is a ship of war, and those white men are very dangerous people" (p. 27).¹⁸ However, in spite of the falsity of this prophecy, it prepares the audience for the arrival of the missionaries whose presence and activities in Labana will bring about sweeping changes in the people's lives and folk-beliefs.

Ogunba is critical of Henshaw's manner of introducing the two missionaries, Rev. and Mrs. McPhail: "as usual the Christian missionaries arrive almost from nowhere, they are left in a strange place by the captain of the ship that brought them because 'he must sail with the tide' and then they make straight for Labana where they are received with mixed feelings."¹⁹ This critical observation is not without its validity. It points out the ineptness of the playwright in handling a dramatic situation which has its source in history. Yet, the scene is not entirely dramatically pointless.

It is not certain what source Henshaw used for the introduction

¹⁸ Cf. Achebe's more effective and more convincing use of a similar oracle in Things Fall Apart, p. 125.

¹⁹ O. Ogunba, "Modern Drama in West Africa," pp. 83-84.

of the missionaries. What is unmistakable, however, is the fact that Mrs. Caroline McPhail is modelled after Mary Mitchell Slessor.²⁰ The account of the arrival of the McPhails in Labana is not unlike that of the arrival of Mary Slessor in Old Town (Calabar) on 11 September 1876.²¹ Henshaw's casual dismissal of the ship that brought the McPhails recalls to mind how the steamer Ethiopia which brought Slessor to Calabar fades into oblivion, in Livingstone's account, once Slessor steps out of it. Even the missionary activities of the McPhails are so similar to those of Slessor that the incidents which appear improbable in the second Act gain credibility if we are familiar with the history of Mary Mitchell Slessor in Calabar. However, since not every member of the audience may associate the McPhails with Slessor, Henshaw owes it to his audience to create a more convincing motive for the hasty departure of the ship that brought the McPhails, and to make the predicament of the missionaries more realistic and less arbitrary than they are, particularly in moments of crisis.

The real crisis in the play is reserved for the third and final Act. But Henshaw elects to precede this crisis point with the revelation of the identity of Otu (Abraham Wilberforce) as the long lost son of Ekpa Eteh, the king's third wife. Four proofs are used as the means of recognition: the scar on Otu's neck, "the ritual marks which only Amansa's children bear" (p. 51), the scar on Otu's right knee, and the

²⁰ Mary M. Slessor (2 Dec. 1848 - 12 Jan. 1915) is a Scottish factory girl who spent the last 39 years of her life in Southeastern Nigeria as a missionary (1876-1915).

²¹ See W. P. Livingstone, Mary Slessor of Calabar, pp. 21-24 for details.

little mole like a grain of sand under his left eye-lid. It is this last proof which convinces Anieye of Otu's true identity, and she apologizes to Caroline McPhail for having maligned her. Then comes a dramatic flaw which can hardly be missed:

CAROLINE: Of course you have a grievance. But why did you hate Asari Amansa too? She has done you no wrong.

ANIEYE: Since my cousin's son was lost, I've looked with jealousy on every woman with a child. But now that my cousin's son is back, I wish no harm to Asari Amansa's child. (p. 52)

This is a strange, illogical, and unconvincing explanation by Anieye. Asari has not got a child yet. Besides, the impression created earlier on is that Asari's childlessness is what has created in Anieye the unbridled ill-feeling towards her (p. 18). It could be that Henshaw wants the audience to see Anieye as a miserable liar, but the motive for such a characterization does not surface at any point in the play.

More bewildering than Anieye's illogical explanation is the hunting episode involving Rev. McPhail. This is ostensibly contrived to dismiss the superstition that Asari's spirit lives in an ailing leopard. Rev. McPhail and others have just returned from a hunting expedition:

MCPHAIL: Good day, Your Highness. My Christians and I have shot and brought home a leopard alive. (p. 57)

But the king does not consider McPhail's deed as heroic:

KING: You think you have shot a leopard. No, white man, you have not shot a leopard. You have shot Asari Amansa's spirit.

MCPHAIL: (too puzzled for words) I have shot at Asari Amansa's spirit? King Amansa,

please listen carefully to what I have done. I have shot a dangerous leopard which was always threatening your people's lives. (p. 57)

Yet, McPhail has brought the same "dangerous leopard" home alive, and wounded—which makes it a lot more dangerous than ever. All McPhail says sounds most unlike what a Christian missionary would do. It is doubtful if McPhail himself would bask in self-glory for wounding an animal and leaving it in the agony of slow death, no matter how dangerous such an animal may be. Henshaw seems to have been carried away by his intention to prove the absurdity of a superstition; and he ends up presenting Rev. McPhail, the Christian missionary, as a cruel man. His action in bringing home the wounded leopard is illogical; but Henshaw needs the animal alive to disabuse the minds of the natives of Labana of their superstitious belief.

Wilberforce (Otu), who is as much a "stranger" in Labana (his native land) as Rev. and Mrs. McPhail are, tries to explain the superstition to Caroline who considers the belief as "ridiculous nonsense!":

WILBERFORCE: It may be to us, sir [sic], but it is our people's fundamental belief here that everyone is born with two souls: one is in the person, the other is lodged in the heart of an animal or even in the trunk of a particular tree. Both souls are necessary, however, to keep the person alive. (p. 58)²²

Later on, he concludes another lengthy explanation, saying, "They now want the animal [the wounded leopard] alive so as to offer it to the goddess" (p. 58). Firstly, Wilberforce is the least qualified to talk

²² Cf. J. G. Frazer, The Golden Bough, ch. LXVII, esp. pp. 793-96.

of the traditional belief of Labana people because he has not lived long enough in the community to know so much about the cultural milieu. Secondly, Henshaw's logic in the passage quoted above is questionable since he is the one who devises the defective explanation for the boy. Every sacrificial animal is slaughtered before it is offered to a deity. If the leopard in distress has to stay alive so that Asari may live, where lies the logic in wanting to "offer" the leopard to the goddess? The muddled thinking assigned to Wilberforce becomes more confusing when later on the king tries to explain the people's abhorrence of Asari's twin children who are considered as a "horrible affliction."

KING: Each of us, stranger, has two souls; the good and the evil. With these twins the two souls have arrived together in human shape[s]. How are we to know which is the good and which is the bad soul? Not even the Oracle can tell us that. Since we do not know, our custom is to do the only thing which is sensible. (Raising his voice) Destroy both of them. (p. 64)

If "spirit" and "soul" mean the same thing—the essence of existence—Wilberforce's and the king's explanations of the duality of the spirit or soul are at variance. The king raises his voice to emphasize the inevitable action: "Destroy both of them." Yet, only a few minutes later, he explains:

KING: No harm shall come to them, yet. We shall first give them a chance to survive, for one week.

MCPHAIL and CAROLINE (together). One week?

KING: After one week they shall stand trial to clear themselves. If they succeed in the trial, then they shall live. (p. 64)

It would seem that the king wants to attempt what the Oracle itself is

not competent to accomplish. It is disconcerting that conflicting and inconsistent utterances like those in the above passages are built into the play mainly because the playwright wants to use the ordeal of the twins to vindicate the efficacy of the prayers of the Christians as they triumph over the vicious vindictiveness of Effefiom and the inhuman tradition he upholds.

In spite of all these defects in matter as well as in form, Henshaw manages to get his point across in the king's speech after both Peter and Paul (the twins) have miraculously outlived their ordeal. He kneels before McPhail (an unheard of gesture by a king), and declares:

Christian man, I want to join your rank. From now on, I promise you that no one will molest any twins in this kingdom or in any other place where I, King Amansa, have any influence. I, King Amansa, who would not give you these twins whom I believed to be evil, will now give you my whole heart to believe the things which you have brought from God to teach. (p. 75)

The interesting thing to note is that Asari remains unconverted to Christianity despite the safety of her twin children. With quiet conviction she asserts: "The goddess [Ndemeyo] has done it all for me. It was she who gave them both to me, and it is she who has saved their lives now" (p. 76). She promises: "I shall go tomorrow and give thanks to the goddess" (p. 76). This brings the play back to where it began; and the title of the play earns its significance when Caroline reminds Asari that the twins "are also the children of the goddess" (p. 76). Here lies the point of Henshaw's expressed conviction that "The events which the play portrays not only strengthen the faith of the 'young' Christians of Labana in their new religion, but also confirm the

children of the indigenous religion in their traditional worship."²³ This attempt at a compromise between Christianity and indigenous religion would have been more successful had efforts not been unduly concentrated on proving the absurdity of the fundamental beliefs in the indigenous faith.

More impressive than Children of the Goddess, and probably the most successful of Henshaw's plays dealing with the theme of culture conflict, is Companion For A Chief.²⁴ This one-act play, short as it is, succeeds where others have failed to integrate theme, action, and dialogue. The action in the play derives from the old tradition among the Ibibio (and, of course, among many other Nigerian ethnic groups) which accords the king, or an important chief, in death many of the privileges he enjoyed during his lifetime. These include wives, slaves, and material wealth. When the king, or a high-ranking chief, dies he is "accompanied" on his journey to the land of the dead usually by his best-loved wife, several slaves to carry his needs and favourite jewels, and some viands. The details of the funeral rites vary from place to place.²⁵ Henshaw bases his play on one of the variants of such rites, with considerable modification for dramatic purposes.

The plot of the story in the play is a simple one. The chief of Boka village has just died. As the custom of the land demands, a

²³ Henshaw, "Introduction" to Children of the Goddess, p. 11.

²⁴ In Children of the Goddess and Other Plays, pp. 79-96.

²⁵ For detailed accounts of a variety of Death and Funeral ceremonies among the Ibibio, see P. Amaury Talbot, The Peoples of Southern Nigeria, III, 468-537.

member of the village is to be decapitated, and his head buried with the chief. Tubaru, the fetish priest, takes advantage of this custom and vindictively chooses Adeigra, wife of Suoma (Tubaru's former rival in love), as the "companion" for the chief. Adeigra plots with the vengeful fetish priest to behead her husband in her place so that she can become the priest's wife, something that Tubaru has always wanted. But unknown to anybody, even the audience, Adeigra and her husband plot the death of Tubaru whose head is then buried with the late chief.

In Companion For A Chief, Henshaw is preoccupied with the variation of the theme of culture conflict, the exploration of which is more effective in this play than in any of the playwright's work examined so far. The play is divided into two scenes. In the first scene the action moves swiftly from the exposition of the abominable tradition of the land, through the immediate reaction of the entire community as the death of the chief is announced, to the malice-motivated action of Tubaru in presenting the fern of death to Suoma. Henshaw takes the trouble to state why the High Priest singles out Suoma's household to present the head that will "accompany" the dead chief. Asieno, Suoma's mother, points out the age-long enmity between the houses of Tubaru and Suoma; and explains at length why Tubaru will not spare Suoma (pp. 83-84). What emerges from Asieno's lengthy explanation and from Tubaru's traditionally unethical demand for Adeigra's head (p. 85) is Tubaru's deeply entrenched malice which will be condemned in the end, even if only implicitly.

The vindictiveness of Tubaru prompts the intrigues designed by

Adeigra to save her husband's life as well as her own. What slightly weakens the design of the intrigues is that the audience is as ignorant of the plot as the other characters in the play, except, perhaps, Suoma. A sly wink by Adeigra in the direction of the audience, after the departure of Tubaru, would have dropped the hint that Adeigra has other plans besides what she agreed to do with Tubaru's assistance. The playwright's intention to surprise the audience with the sudden turn of events in the end may have been responsible for the utter secrecy of Adeigra's plans. Henshaw succeeds, however, in keeping the audience in suspense at the end of the first scene.

Scene ii opens in an ominous atmosphere, with the hooting of the owl heightening the tense moment preceding the arrival of Tubaru. Adeigra's "gamble" pays off. Tubaru, we are informed after the unusual turn of events, has been murdered, and his head conveyed by Suoma for interment "as a Companion for the Chief" (p. 93). Henshaw's handling of the denouement may be a bit flawed by his failure to take the audience into his confidence on Adeigra's plot; but the explanation offered by Adeigra later on sounds acceptable:

Tradition called for blood, but it was vengeance which called for my husband. I turned the hand of vengeance against the person who wanted to destroy us. Long before Tubaru came to murder my husband I woke Suoma up, gave him a good knife and told him what to do. . . . When Tubaru entered my husband's room, the room was very dark and he could not see my husband behind the door. He moved towards the bed to kill Suoma. But my husband was ready for him.

ASIENO: But why did you not tell me?

ADEIGRA: Walls have ears, mother. I could not risk it.
(pp. 93-94)

It is clear from this explanation that Adeigra's consent to die (pp. 87-88), and her plot with Tubaru to behead Suoma, are only an ingenious ruse to make Tubaru's vindictiveness and inhumanity recoil on him. There is something Alcestian in Adeigra's pretended consent to die in place of her husband, and also in her fake farewell speech. Alcestis offers to die in Euripides' Alcestis in order that her husband, King Admetus of Thessaly (completely devoid of heroic nobility) may live; but she is redeemed from Death. Similarly, Adeigra is redeemed from death, but by her own ingenuity and with the full cooperation of her husband.

Many factors are responsible for the uniqueness of Companion For A Chief among Henshaw's culture-conflict plays. The playwright seems to have overcome the difficulty of handling his plot. All actions and utterances in the play are properly motivated; and the progress of the swift action is enhanced by practically every incident and by the dramatic dialogue. The use of intrigue to effect a sudden twist to the action keeps the audience in suspense until the final explanation disentangles the knot that has puzzled the audience ever since the action assumed complicated proportions. It is a big relief also that the playwright avoids in this play the overt didactic statements that characterize the other plays. The message in the resolution of the culture conflict in Companion For A Chief sinks deep into the audience's minds without any sermonizing. Tubaru, and the inhuman tradition he personifies, have been defeated; but the victors have to flee from the land for fear of repercussions. At least, the beginning of the end of an

undesirable traditional ritual has been marked. The flight of Suoma, Adeigra, Ainana, and Asieno "into the darkness outside" (p. 95) symbolically dramatizes the continuing struggle between tradition and change as caused by modernist tendencies in a growing society.

From the foregoing discussions, it is clear that Henshaw explores the theme of culture conflict to expose certain undesirable elements in the culture of the people of southern Nigeria, and to encourage the promotion of change, peace, and progress. The achievement of all these inevitably involves a continuing process of growth, not only of the social, economic, and political aspects of the Nigerian society, but also of the individual person, especially psychologically.

The mental growth of individuals in society often leads to conflicts between people of different convictions and inclination. One such conflict arises from the tradition of parents choosing a wife or a husband for their son or daughter. This parent-child conflict, which forms part of the conflict between tradition and modernism, is what Zulu Sofola and J. P. Clark strive to explore in Wedlock of the Gods and The Masquerade, both of which will be discussed next.

(ii) Marriage, and the Parent-child Conflict:

It was common practice among parents in Nigeria and other parts of Africa to arrange a wedding between their two young people without the one necessarily knowing the other as his or her marriage companion. This practice, which remained in force until as recently as the mid-twentieth century, particularly among the illiterates, derived

from the commonly accepted prerogative of the parents to choose a wife or a husband for their marriageable child. The consent of the prospective wife or husband was not sought because it was considered neither necessary nor important. Even where two young lovers were free to choose each other, the consent of their parents was mandatory before the wedding could take place. It was not unusual, therefore, to find the choice of the young lovers being tremendously influenced by the taste of their parents.²⁶ To defy the wish of one's parents in the matter of choosing a marriage partner was to commit a crime punishable by disinheritance, or in extreme cases, by exile or even death, very often of both defiant lovers. This is basically the cultural background upon which the parent-child conflicts in Wedlock of the Gods and The Masquerade are built.

Although the tragic action in Wedlock of the Gods²⁷ is motivated by spiteful revenge, the theme of revenge is considerably played down to give prominence to the theme of frustrated but indestructible love. This theme, according to the blurb, "is derived from the myth of the marriage between Thunder and Lightning among the Chima people of Mid-Western Nigeria," now Bendel State. The myth bears no resemblance to the Yoruba conception of Sango—the god of the sky, thunder and lightning, and his indispensable wife Oya, the goddess of the River Niger. No echoes are even heard of the sacred marriage of Zeus—"god of sky and

²⁶ Cf. E. Obiechina, Literature for the Masses (Enugu: Nwankwo-Ifejika & Co. Publishers, 1971), p. 21.

²⁷ (London: Evans, 1972). All references to the play are taken from this edition.

weather, wielder of the thunder, flasher of lightning,"²⁸ and Hera—goddess of marriage and the Home. Yet, Sofola finds this unique myth to be as deserving of serious attention as any other version of the myth of thunder and lightning in order to explore the theme of love in conflict with traditional taboos.

Asked in a tape-recorded interview²⁹ how faithful Wedlock of the Gods is to the original myth as known among the Chima people, 'Zulu Sofola declared that she only took the core of the myth to evolve her play. According to her,

The story simply says that Ogwoma [Lightning] was given to another man against her wish. She refused to marry that man because she was in love with Uloko [Thunder]. Every evening she would sit under a tree and cry to the gods to help her avoid the upcoming marriage. Uloko would come and join her and cry. The parents [of Ogwoma] would catch her and drive Uloko away.

Finally, the gods heard her cry and told her that when next she came under the tree and Uloko came, the tip end of the tree would come down and she should hold on to that tip. Then Uloko should hold on to her legs. Then the gods would make the tree rise up and take them into the sky. When they got there they would become Thunder and Lightning, never to separate again.

Sofola explained that the wrong impression has often been created that there was no real love relationship between men and women in the traditional Nigerian society. The myth of Uloko and Ogwoma (that is, Thunder and Lightning) aroused her curiosity and she thought:

²⁸ C. Seltman, The Twelve Olympians (New York: Thomas Y. Crowell Co., 1960; Apollo Edition, 1962), p. 32.

²⁹ This interview conducted by me at Ibadan on 21 August 1975 has been slightly edited to rid the text of slips and repetitions that characterize informal dialogues. It is not published.

"If the people were able to explain. . . why thunder and lightning are always together, through the idea of love that should exist between man and woman, then, it must be that our people in the past must have experienced love." So, she decided to use the myth "to explain and to expose other areas of our lives within the context of marriage, love, and death."

Before examining what Sofola does with her adaptation of the Chima myth of Thunder and Lightning, it is necessary to give a brief plot summary of the adapted version since the play is not as well known as the works of, say, Soyinka, Clark or Rotimi. In the "Production Note" preceding the text of the play the playwright states that

Ogwoma, the widow, had been forced by her parents to marry Adigwu because they needed money from her bridewealth to cure their son who was very sick. Ogwoma had nothing but hatred for Adigwu; she was intensely in love with Uloko whom she could not marry because he did not have the money that her parents needed. Fortunately for her the loathed husband died, and she considered herself freed. Rather than complete the period of mourning and be inherited by her husband's brother in the tradition of levitation, she became pregnant by her lover who eternally holds her heart. Taboos are broken, the parental families are disgraced and the mother-in-law is filled with a sense of vengeance for her son who she believes was intentionally killed so that the lovers might have their way. From then on it is a struggle for survival on the part of the lovers who die vowing to continue their love, impossible on earth, as thunder and lightning in the heavens beyond.³⁰

The significance of this lengthy summary is that it reveals, among other things, that Wedlock of the Gods is a polythematic play, juxtaposing one

³⁰ Wedlock of the Gods, p. 1.

theme with the other, and weaving everything into a fabric of enchanting design. If the play "is a tragedy which finds its roots in the ritual of death and mourning,"³¹ it certainly grows into a series of evil and revenge, human suffering, and conflicts which are resolved in the final symbolic triumph of love over the tyranny of traditional taboos and convictions.

Through the plight of the joint heroes of the play, the playwright achieves the proper tragic effect that would appeal to any audience anywhere. The success of the play derives from Sofola's skill in arousing the passions in the audience and appealing to their understanding in a single attempt to account for the misery and particular lots of Uloko and Ogwoma. She embodies in her short but ambitious play the protagonists' philosophy of life, especially in the scene of suffering that is crucial to the action. Sofola also succeeds in keeping a proper balance between passion and reason. This exemplifies the overall balance of design of the play itself.

The first balance noticeable in the play is in the composition of the characters, made up of six males and six females. This balance would have been insignificant had the playwright not skillfully divided the characters into camps which allow for parallels and contrasts to be drawn between pairs of characters. This balanced division of the characters into camps also enhances the proper balancing of action and characterization.

³¹ Wedlock of the Gods, p. 1.

As the play opens, Odibei is seen, distracted, searching for what she suspects to be the evil medicine Ogwoma used in poisoning her son, Ogwoma's late husband. Her suspicion is based on the fact that "Adigwu died of a swollen stomach. A man who dies like a pregnant woman [does] not die a natural death" (p. 6).³² The nature and circumstance of Adigwu's death serve as an inciting force for the evil that Odibei will perpetrate in the play.

In the same opening scene, Ogwoma, the target of Odibei's plot, explains her case. One of the aspects of the tradition to which she cannot reconcile herself is the general belief that "a man's daughter is a source of wealth to him" (p. 9). This makes a marriageable girl nothing better than mere merchandise to be sold off to a willing suitor, enriching the father's purse at the expense of her happiness. What aggravates Ogwoma's anger and blunts her conscience is the fact that she had been "tied like a goat and whipped along the road to a man [she] hated" (p. 9). The three years of her childless marriage to Adigwu have been no better than a bondage. This explains why she does not regret her pregnancy for Uloko, the man she has always wanted to marry. Indeed, she is excited that she is now carrying Uloko's baby, even though, as the custom of the land requires, she is still in mourning for the death of Adigwu.

The ground is thus prepared for the eternal antagonism between Odibei and Ogwoma. Sofola's skill in handling the plot in the play is

³² Also see pp. 19-20; and cf. Chinua Achebe's Things Fall Apart, pp. 16-17.

further demonstrated in her introduction of Uloko in this opening scene. Ogwoma romanticizes her love for Uloko, and only a few moments later, Uloko shows up, confirming to the audience by his good looks Ogwoma's mental picture of him that has shut practically everything else out of her mind and life. The radiant smile on her face on seeing Uloko sharply contrasts with the frown and fury with which she has spoken against her unhappy marriage to the late Adigwu. This brief scene is designed to set the spirit of revenge at work in Odibel. The playwright ensures that the two happy lovers are seen together in warm embrace by Odibel who feels incensed by what she considers to be outrageous, and the tension begins to rise.

What keeps the tension in constant ascent, yet in control, is the manipulation of the action and characters in parallel situations. For instance, Anwasia, a close friend and confidante to Ogwoma, rebukes her friend for being foolish and blind:

Don't you see anything wrong in a woman being pregnant for another man while she is still in mourning for her dead husband?

Never has it been heard that only a month after a man's death his wife is already pregnant for another man.

No matter how much a woman loves a man, the gods forbid what you have done. You seem to forget that you are still in mourning. (pp. 8-9)

In addition to being a rebuke, Anwasia's words unfold to the audience the custom which Ogwoma has flouted by her hasty pregnancy. This rebuke is also designed as a parallel to Udo's chastisement of Uloko for his over-zealousness in reclaiming Ogwoma at such an awkward time:

A woman mourns her husband for three months. Ogwoma has completed two, couldn't you have waited for the remaining one month?

What often destroys you young men is rash and hasty action. A woman who loses her husband must not be visited by any other man until she has been cleansed. Any action against this is an abomination and our gods deal very severely with such offenders. (p. 36)

This further explains the taboo broken by both Uloko and Ogwoma; and like the rebuke of Ogwoma by Anwasia, Udo's words reveal the three-fold purpose intended by Sofola: to educate the audience on the tradition within which Uloko and Ogwoma are expected to operate; to create parallel situations; and to keep the two lovers conscious of the "path to death" they are paving for themselves by their revolutionary action.

Once the path to death is laid, Odibei sets and controls the pace of the action until she takes her revenge. She vows to avenge her son's death not only on Ogwoma but also on Uloko. The balance of tension arising from Odibei's threat is supplied by a counter threat by Nneka, mother to Ogwoma, to fight Uloko and Ogwoma in order to save Ogwoma and the family's name and honour. These parallel situations are balanced off by another pair of scenes:

NNEKA. That Uloko will see. He will know that some medicines are stronger than others.
(Makes for the door.)

OGWOMA. (stopping her). Don't touch him. Don't dare let a pin scratch his body. (p. 20)

This scene should be placed side by side with that in which Nneka confronts Uloko:

NNEKA. You are evil. . . .And your life will see nothing but misery. That bastard which you

have planted in her will not see your face,
nor will he taste his mother's milk. . . .

Don't think I am powerless. Ogwoma will be
forced to vomit your medicine and your
bastard. . . .

ULOKO. Don't dare touch that child, you hear!
Don't dare touch either of them! (p. 38)

The significance of the similarity in Uloko's and Ogwoma's words is that they constitute parallel situations which are apparently designed as proof of the likeness in their thoughts, and love for each other, and, therefore, of their enviable compatibility. The instinct of protection that is at work in Uloko's and Ogwoma's addresses to Nneka can be seen also at work when the two mothers blame the despised potential son-in-law or daughter-in-law for the taboo broken.

Ogoli, Uloko's mother, attacks and blames Ogwoma for being responsible for the impending danger that looms large on her son. She feels shame for the ugly situation into which Ogwoma's love for Uloko has brought the family. On her part, Nneka, Ogwoma's mother, fights Uloko for debasing her daughter. Later on, the two mothers, Ogoli and Nneka, confront each other (p. 39), each expressing her disgust at what the son or the daughter of the other has done to bring shame on her own family. Their bickerings, however, do not solve any problem.

Sofola provides the forum for a possible peaceful settlement of the messy problem that is gradually going out of control. In Act II, scene i, Ibekwe summons a meeting of the Onowu family to which Ogwoma's father belongs. But instead of leading to a resolution that would have arrested the impending disaster, the meeting breaks up in

confusion, with charges and counter charges setting Ihekwe and the others in irreconcilable discord.

That the problem of Ogwoma cannot be solved within the Onowa family is a strong indication that the family meeting has been introduced primarily to expose the family feud that was partly responsible for Ogwoma being virtually sold away to Adigwu. The meeting provides a form of flashback, throwing some light on the remote cause of the present misery of the families of both Uloko and Ogwoma. Without the family feud, which comes to light in the mud-slinging meeting, Ihekwe would have been able to approach the members of the family for help when Edozie (Ogwoma's brother) was terribly ill. And this would have saved Ogwoma from an unwanted and disastrous marriage.

The timing of the meeting of the Onowa family is admirable. Not only does it show that a house divided against itself is doomed to fall; it also heightens the fear of the impending tragedy. The tension reaches its climax in the final scene (Act III, scene ii) of the play where Odibel succeeds in working her evil magic on Ogwoma. She prepares a deadly poison, and summons Ogwoma by means of powerful incantations (pp. 52-53), with an effect on Ogwoma that is very similar to modern hypnotism. Ogwoma drinks the poison unconsciously; but before dying, she manages to tell Uloko: "Meet me there" (p. 54). Uloko then dashes out with great determination for revenge on Odibel.

The point of the entire tragic situation to the lovers is summed up in Uloko's dying speech after drinking the same poisonous potion that had already killed Ogwoma. He addresses Ogwoma's corpse:

?

Your love will now come to you,
 Ours, is the wedlock of the gods,
 Together we shall forever be lightning
 and thunder—inseparable!
 Our love shall live forever;
 Your light to keep it aglow,
 My thunder to demolish all obstacles.
 We shall leave this cursed place;
 We shall ride on the cotton of the heavens;
 We shall ride to where there is peace!
 The rain shall cool our sweats and pains;
 The sun shall dry our tears;
 The stars shall crown our heads;
 The night shall hide and protect us.
 Over and around we shall together roam;
 Beautifying as we impress! (p. 56)

On the stage, Uloko's gradually failing voice as he holds Ogwoma's hands and falls to his death over his lover brings to a serene end an excellent play that depends for its dramatic effect partly on the well balanced parallel structure. Without such a structure, the conflicts between Uloko's and Ogwoma's families, between the demands of memorial rituals and Ogwoma's desire for freedom, between the claim of parents' rights to choose a spouse for their marriageable child and the children's preference for free choice, could not have been as dramatically exposed and resolved as they have been. In the play, the rhythm and syntax of the native tongue of the Chima people, the proverbs and the incantatory pronouncements, merge with the swiftness of the action to give to commonplace themes a fresh and stimulating treatment. The product is a brilliant piece in its own right.

The tragedy of Uloko and Ogwoma bears some resemblance to the development of the tragic situation in Clark's The Masquerade,³³ in

³³ In Three Plays (London: O. U. P., 1964).

which the action centres upon the parent-child confrontation over the choice of a husband. Like Sarif Easmon's Dear Parent and Ogre, The Masquerade deals with a young girl who chooses as her husband a man who is disapproved of by her father. Clark's interpretation of the father-daughter conflict is, however, more profound in The Masquerade than Easmon's treatment of the same conflict in Dear Parent and Ogre, and more naturalistic than Sofola's mythical approach to the same motif in Wedlock of the Gods.

Clark's handling of the conflict is reminiscent of Shakespeare's treatment of a similar situation in The Winter's Tale. Although Shakespeare's play is a pastoral romance while Clark's is a domestic tragedy, the two plays share a common motive behind the father-daughter or father-son confrontation. In both plays, the difference in social status is the key factor in the parents' opposition to the proposed marriage of their children, not political prejudice, as is the case in Dear Parent and Ogre, or the expedient greed for money, as in Wedlock of the Gods. In The Winter's Tale, for instance, King Polixenes' exception to the proposed marriage between his son Florizel and Perdita stems from the mistaken identity of the girl as a mere shepherd's daughter, whose supposed social status betrays her as too wild a stock to be grafted on to such a gentle and noble scion as Florizel. Similarly, in The Masquerade, Dibiri and Umuko refuse to accept Tufa as a son-in-law once they discover Tufa's illegitimacy. He is regarded in society as a "cur without pedigree" (p. 75). Judged in accordance with this peculiar social stratification, Tufa would normally

be regarded as being unworthy of Titi who "Was brought up on a sound family / Structure, the most solid in all the Delta" (p. 72).

Like the osu in Things Fall Apart, Tufa is looked upon as no better than an outcast and as fell contamination, not only by Dibiri but also by the neighbours who together reflect the consensus of traditional Ijaw society on the issue of illegitimacy. Since the father-daughter conflict in The Masquerade cannot be amicably resolved, the only way of averting the curse which the mismatch of Tufa and Titi would have brought to Ebiama village is to stop the proposed marriage. To do this, Dibiri shoots both his daughter and her husband-to-be Tufa, and considers this act as a completion of the process of cleansing the land of its pollution.

The dramatization of the father-daughter conflict in The Masquerade gains a significant additional dimension when examined beyond the domestic level. At first the courtship of Tufa and Titi seems un-African. Consider, for example, the following passage:

TITI: Oh, what magic moonlight! Look at the sands,
They are like a silver spawn
In their first outing with the tide.
And see how they glide to meet the moon!

TUFA: As I to you! Your flesh/under flush
Of cam flashes many times lovelier than gold
Or pearls washed up by the streams. And
The fire in your eyes is
Several suns by the moon. Let me feel
The unguent flow of your flesh, and I've drunk
For life. (p. 54)

The language and the sentiments in this passage are as affected as those found in the works of sonneteers like Petrarch and Sidney, and therefore, rather out of place in Titi's village. Even the eavesdropping

neighbours are quick to notice the foreignness in the lovers' pattern of courtship. One of the neighbours wonders: "Where did the young man grow his tongue of sugar?" (p. 57). The same neighbour later remarks that "Such wooing was never of these parts" (p. 59). Yet, however out of place the language and the sentiments in the young lovers' dialogue may be in the village of Etiama, they are relevant to the conflict motif in the play.

The courtship scene creates an atmosphere which emphasizes the conflicting pull between existing traditional (or tribal) customs, strictly upheld by the older ones in society, and the impassioned independence that marks the revolutionary attitude and priorities of the youths. This is noticeable in the reactions of the fishermen and the young lovers to the tidal waves and the position of the moon. Tufa and Titi see nothing but beauty and harmony in the atmosphere of the magic moonlight. The "silver spawn" sands are washed by the tide, and Titi remarks: "And see how they glide to meet the moon!" (p. 54). Peaceful cordiality is all the lovers can read into the phenomenon. But the neighbours see the rising tide and the tilting moon crescent as portending disaster:

SECOND NEIGHBOUR: Look up, and see! The moon's
fresh bowl
Is quite upturned. It is clearly
Spilling over towards my left.

FIRST NEIGHBOUR: Yes, that's right; the tilt is
prominent.
It is never so but there is disaster
General down the whole delta. (p. 51)

The young lovers find the atmosphere ideal for the celebration of the

eve of their wedding. The fishermen neighbours have a different explanation for what they consider to be an unnatural phenomenon:

FIRST NEIGHBOUR: . . . And don't forget
It is tomorrow the young dashing stranger
Carries the girl off to other creeks. Such
A mermaid of a girl. Now I get it!
It's on account of her abandoning us
Heaven and sea have put up this show
Of anger. (p. 53)

The contradistinction between the young lovers and the older fishermen in their choice of metaphors and imagery to express their reactions to a natural phenomenon is significant to the structure of the action in the play. It may be seen as designed by Clark to set the tone of conflict early in the play and to foreshadow the major tragic conflict between the young lovers and the disapproving parents of Titi. For example, arguing against the match between his daughter and Tufa, Dibiri asks:

Did he tell you also his father
Usurped the bed of his elder brother, yes
Brazenly in his lifetime, and for shame
Of it after hanged himself in broad daylight
While this unfortunate abused husband
Walked of his own will into the sea?

TITI: Well, is the seed to be crushed and cast
Away because of aberration
And blunder by those who laid out
The field? (p. 68)

Titi's reply to her father's question appears to be the question that lies beneath the tragedy in The Masquerade. Using the principle of "the-eye-of-the-beholder," Clark succeeds in juxtaposing the traditionalist conception of societal norms with the questioning spirit of the younger generation. Part of the highly charged argument generated by

this juxtaposition is worth examining because it paves the way for the inevitable catharsis.

The story is well known that Tufa is the fruit of an incestuous affair (in Song of a Goat). The real but lecherous father is dead; so is the man who ought to have been his father, had he been potent. Tufa is, therefore, in Umko's words, the "young husband without a broom / To his stock!" (p. 73). It is generally regarded as a misfortune for a girl, a virgin for that matter, to be married to such a man. Dibiri pleads with his determined daughter:

I know you
Have set your heart on this man. . .
But consider the taint,
The bad sap that must flow out
Of one bough into the other, no, pollute
The one stem that really is standing
To bear the graft, what will become
Of us all?³⁴ (p. 69)

Judged by the moral standards of Titi's society, her choice of a husband is, at best, a haphazard one. "Only a girl born of slaves / Or found without her flower" (p. 71) would foolishly plunge into marriage with a man of Tufa's lineage. It would amount to a "bitch" getting married to a "mongrel," or to a "cut without pedigree." Umko, moved by her sense of maternal responsibility, spells out the reasons for her

³⁴ Cf. The Winter's Tale, IV. iv, 92-97:

POLIXENES: You see, sweet maid, we marry
A gentle scion to the wildest stock,
And make conceive a bark of baser kind
By bud of nobler race: this is an art
Which does mend nature, change it rather, but
The art itself is nature.

disapproval of such an ill-match in a lengthy passage, addressed to Tufa in raging contempt:

Where, if you succeed in your scheme
 Would you have taken your bride? My daughter
 Was brought up on a sound family
 Structure, the most solid in all the Delta.
 Pray, what mother have you
 To fan her welcome, sing her beauties? Indeed
 Have you the mother or sister to
 Offer her home for the triple moon
 Before the bride moves to her own household?
 And what father-in-law had you in store
 To shower my daughter with gifts that are
 More than her due, the piece of land to farm,
 Not to talk of the umbrella for wife
 And grandchildren to take shelter in,
 When owls beat the air? (pp. 72-73)

Under normal circumstances, these loaded, insulting questions and other arguments put forth so far would dampen the great enthusiasm of any girl who hopes to marry a stranger of Tufa's cast. But the love-honour conflict which Umuko's words create in Titi is easily and irrevocably resolved in favour of marriage to Tufa. As proof of her determination to be Tufa's wife, she walks out on her parents, knowing fully well they are as resolute in their opposition to her choice of a husband as she is in her decision to honour her pledge to Tufa. She ends up being shot dead by her father for her intractability.

Considering the appeals of Dibiri to Titi and Umuko's impassioned speech disapproving of Tufa, one would tend to see Clark as committed to upholding a tradition. But this view alters as soon as one listens to Tufa's lamentation in his dying speech:

For I am that unmentionable beast
 Born of woman to brother and for whom brother
 Drove brother to terrible death. That's not

All. My mother who they say engendered
 The seed, on expulsion of it, withered
 In the act, and it was left of an old woman
 Without wit to pick me up and take
 Into another country. Why did she do it? Oh,
 Why did she escape their strangling me at
 . . . first cry?

.
 But I whose coming, right from deception,
 To this apparent deception, has
 Seen the draining of all that was pure and
 Lovely, how is it they left me loose
 To litter such destruction? . . . (pp. 86-87)

The imagery of the engendered seed and the metaphor of its expulsion reveal that Tufa himself is aware of the moral slip that attended his conception and the illegitimacy of his birth. Realizing the predicament of Tufa, one tends to sympathize with him in the above speech. Apparently, Clark's sympathy lies with his protagonist in whose dying words the tragedy of The Masquerade reaches its climax. The danger is that, once the assertion is made that Clark's sympathy lies with Tufa, the tendency is to feel that the playwright's tragic vision is directed at subverting the values and beliefs of the traditional society in which Tufa and Titi have come to their destruction.

Geoffery Brereton once asked whether a "tragic vision" is necessarily a "subversive" vision, and went on to assert that

the most direct intentional challenge to existing societies or sections of it [sic] are made through satire and comedy. . . . If one is simply looking for subversive voices, this is the richest field to explore. Tragedy, on this count, can claim no special relationship with the subversive view. It might, however, be said that the comic genres stop short at the more superficial aspects of society, while only tragedy is equipped to challenge the values behind it—in short, its gods. It is doubtful if such a challenge can be made without a spirit and an appearance of 'high seriousness', the element with

which tragedy is normally associated and which it reinforces by throwing in the highest stakes—human happiness and human lives.³⁵

Viewed in the light of Brereton's assertion, Clark's vision of life, as it surfaces in The Masquerade, cannot be regarded as being subversive. Rather, it implicitly questions the validity of any judgments made from any fixed moral standpoint upon a man for transgressions committed inadvertently, or for any violations for which he cannot justifiably be held responsible.

The Masquerade is Clark's simplest, yet most effective play in its use of domestic tragedy to project some features of African cultural heritage. The conflicts in the play—parent-daughter conflict, and tradition-free will conflict—are worked out to throw an indirect, though serious, challenge at some of the values which have for so long been cherished in society. But at no point in the play does Clark impose his views on the audience.

The three playwrights whose works are examined in this chapter are all preoccupied with questioning the rationality of some aspects of the Nigerian cultural heritage which are in conflict with modern views of man and his world. James Ene Henshaw is more explicit than J. F. Clark in his condemnation of certain inhuman practices in pre-literate Nigerian society. But Henshaw's handling of his plots betrays his amateurism as a playwright, except in Companion For A Chief where signs of improvement begin to appear. Even then, Henshaw is still

³⁵ G. Brereton, Principles of Tragedy (London: Routledge & K. Paul, 1968), p. 72.

outclassed by both Clark and Zulu Sofola in their exploration of aspects of the commonplace theme of cultural conflict. Clark emerges as the most successful of the three playwrights in his integration of language and action to achieve a proper tragic effect in The Masquerade. But Sofola's skillful blending of characters and dialogue in parallel situations recommends Wedlock of the Gods very highly.

Although all the five plays studied in this chapter are set in communities undergoing one form of transition or another in the past, and deal with commonplace themes that tend to have lost their popularity in recent works of African authors, one cannot fail to recognize the significant position they occupy in the development of modern African literature. They project the collective experience of a people who have reached a stage in the process of growth characterized by the struggle of antagonistic ideas and forces. The resolution of the ensuing culture conflicts usually reflects the old order in transition, yielding place to the new. Similarly, the culture conflict that pervades these plays has now been replaced in modern African works of literature with more timeless themes as will be seen in the plays which are studied next.

CHAPTER FOUR

MODERN AND TIMELESS THEMES

The general drift of recent works of African literature written in English is a living proof that an increasing number of African creative writers are emerging as the conscience of modern society rather than remaining as explainers of Africa to Africans and to the world. Themes of enduring and universal qualities, like the fallibility of human nature, social and political evils, the tragic vision of man and his world, and the astounding paradoxes and absurdities of life, now form the basis for a great amount of recent Nigerian literature of English expression.

The most common manner in which these themes are effectively explored is satire, be it through direct invective, or ironical moralizing criticism. An attempt will be made, therefore, in the first part of this chapter to examine three plays by Henshaw which are basically moralizing criticism. In the latter part, one play by Osofisan and two by Clark will be examined to reveal the playwrights' tragic vision of their society and of life generally.

(i) Moralizing Criticism:

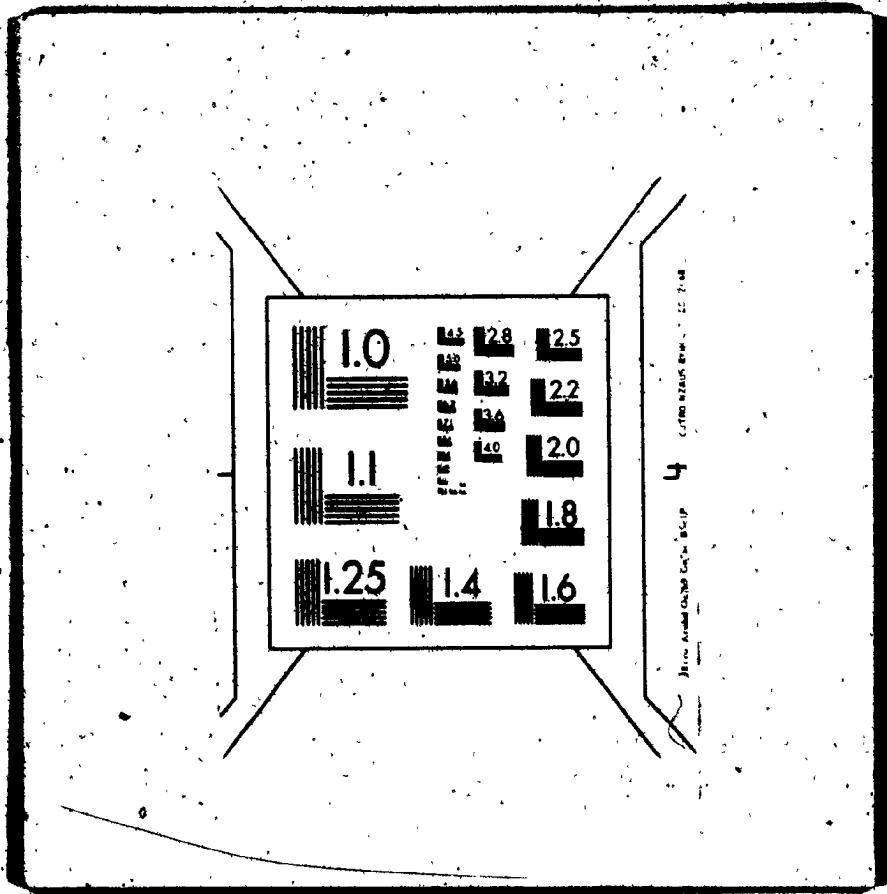
There is in Henshaw a strong desire to see some kind of change in his society. His aversion for the social evils of his time motivates him to attempt social reform through his satirical plays. The success of these plays in which he inveighs against objectionable human behaviour depends not necessarily on whether they effect the desired social change or not, but on the effectiveness of Henshaw's art.

In The Jewels of the Shrine, a play in which the conflict of generations plays a supporting role to the theme of moral decadence, Henshaw creates a dramatic situation in which both the "offended" (Okorie) and the "offenders" (Arob and Ojima) are equally guilty of dubious morals. What makes these three characters and the situation in which they are involved plausible is the fidelity of the playwright to the actual life of his time. Indolent youths who, like Arob and Ojima, are ambitious for easy wealth constitute a large proportion of the cross-section of the mid twentieth-century human scene in Nigeria. The old age of youths like these can hardly be different from that of Okorie. He who spends his youth in slothful vagrancy is bound to be poverty-stricken in his old age. This is the moral lesson that lies beneath the social criticism in The Jewels of the Shrine. But, rather than emerging as a tour de force, the social criticism in the play limps pathetically, particularly in the end, because of the questionable dispensation of justice which defeats the very moral rectitude that the overall satiric tone of the comedy strives to advocate.

Henshaw's attempt to present the crisis point of the story of Okorie and his grandsons hardly gets off the ground throughout the play. The role of the Stranger at the end of the play has little or no dramatic link with his dialogue with Okorie when the play opens. When the Stranger leaves Okorie early in the play, the latter bids his stranger-friend farewell, and adds: "If you call again and I am alive, I will welcome you back" (p. 41). An additional "Don't forget what we

¹ In This Is Our Chance, pp. 39-58.

3



have just discussed" would have dropped the hint that a deal has been struck between Okorie and the Stranger. As it is, the dialogue betrays a missing link which, had it been supplied, would have made the return of the Stranger more plausible.

The structure, the dramatic dialogue, and the scene of discovery in the play are flawed by Henshaw's ineptness, and by his sacrifice of dramatic effects for a moral lesson. Despite its shortcomings, however, The Jewels of the Shrine is not a complete failure on the stage. Perhaps the most significant statement in the play which implicitly condemns Okorie is the uncompleted benediction started by him: "May God--" (p. 54). Obviously, this incomplete prayer indicates the passing of Okorie. Its real significance, however, lies in the fact that Okorie is a decrepit, cunning rogue. Such a wily character cannot die with a genuine blessing on his lips. Whether Henshaw intends this perception of Okorie, or not, it is a strong point in the characterization of the senile old man.

Scene iv is probably the most successful of the four scenes in the play. A truly comic incident--the fight between Arob and Ojima over who did more for Okorie (pp. 55-56)--saves the play from being a total bore. The futile fight reveals the two grandsons at the peak of their expectations, and makes their shocking disappointment in the end more pathetic than it would otherwise have been.

Viewed as a popular comedy which should be taken lightly, The Jewels of the Shrine would have been more effective as a social satire had Henshaw endeavoured to extend the ridicule to Okorie. As

big a joke, as the play may be, the exposure and downfall of Okorie (the modified "Volpone" of the play) would have lifted it above the plane of mediocrity. Of course, it has to be admitted that the play is only a farce with a mildly instructive point.

Henshaw's third play, A Man of Character,² with all its faults, is not any more successful a social criticism than The Jewels of the Shrine. Set in a fictitious West African town, the play treats the conflict between open honesty and "get-rich-quick" corruption. Perhaps the most effective treatment of this theme in African literature to date is in Ayi Kwei Armah's socio-political satire The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born (1968). The vicious satire in this novel boldly outstrips Henshaw's mild attack on corruption in his play.

Axworthy observes that in A Man of Character Henshaw "draws lively characters and gives them witty things to say; but his didactic zeal sometimes treads heavily on his wit."³ What this perceptive statement overlooks is that Henshaw's characters are not always convincing. The characterization of Ayodele is a case in point. Her decision to walk out on her husband for refusing a bribe from Anosse contradicts her declared admiration for Kobina's uprightness. This creates the impression that Henshaw is a poor inventor of characters. When Kopechi and Diyego put in appearance in Kobina's house, for instance, Kobina offers them "Whisky, gin, or brandy" (p. 76). If

² In This Is Our Chance, pp. 59-93.

³ G. J. Axworthy, A review of A Man of Character, Ibadan, No. 1 (1957), 28.

Kobina can entertain very important guests with these drinks, he can hardly be living the wretched life the audience are made to believe he does by Serinya and Anosse (or Henshaw?).

What betrays Henshaw's amateurism more obviously than the depiction of his characters in this play is his use of a second plot which fails to serve as a sub-plot. Henshaw abandons the honesty-corruption conflict once Ayedele walks out of her matrimonial home. Instead of resolving the conflict between Kobina and his family by vindicating Kobina's honesty and exposing the corruption of the others to ridicule, Henshaw introduces an entirely different plot--the theft of £500 from the public safe--to prove Kobina's innocence and honesty. This second plot is so loosely linked with the primary plot that it is possible to isolate two independent plots in the play. Neither plot can be acclaimed as effectively handled. The one is abandoned while the other is considerably contrived. This weakens the structure of the play almost to the point of disintegration; and the critical voice loses its power with such a weak structure.

For a play which successfully blends the comic with the satiric, and keeps the audience laughing most of the evening in the theatre, one must turn to Dinner For Promotion.⁴ Though not without its own weak points, this play deserves a closer look than both The Jewels of the Shrine and A Man of Character.

In Act I, Henshaw exposes the antecedent financial problems facing Tikku and Seyil. This enables us to see a society in which

⁴ (London: Univ. of London Press, 1967).

corruption and its many attendant ills are a function of economic factors. It is in this opening Act that the satiric and comic tones that pervade the play are established. For instance, Henshaw creates a comic situation in which Seyil asks Toru for a kiss (p. 21). The dialogue between the two concerning Seyil's request would be recognized by the Nigerian audience as Henshaw's satire on the "foreign" culture of kissing, as blindly imitated by the young educated ones who are influenced by the kissing scenes they watch in the movies.

Among the more serious social ills which Henshaw condemns in his play is the practice of issuing false cheques. In Senka's refusal of a cheque from his two insolvent tenants, Tikku and Seyil, the joke on "rubber-ball cheques" can hardly be missed. Although Henshaw's satire is predominantly mild in this play, the playwright succeeds in exposing to ridicule many of the social ills in his society. One of the impressive satirical thrusts has for its target the moral depravity of the boss in the office. Toru's dialogue with her long-lost and newly returned actor-lover, Koyeh, provides the satiric comment. Toru has just left her secretary-typist job because her boss always wanted her to sit on his lap (p. 29). This is an obvious gibe at highly placed officers who take advantage of their female workers' need for job security and advancement to coerce them into an affair.⁵

Toru's account of her unemployment days also reveals the plight of the job-hunter in Nigeria:

⁵ Cf. Mannan's plight in J. C. de Graft, Sons and Daughters (London: O. U. P., 1964).

TORU: Then I drifted all over the place. Always passed the interview but never got the job. Something always went wrong. In one case they said I had failed my medical. But I knew I had passed.

KOYEH: Wasn't it confidential?

TORU: Yes, but the good doctor showed me the result before putting it in the confidential envelope. (p. 30)

To secure a job in Nigeria of the fifties and sixties, it was not enough to be qualified for the post. One also had to have a big brother, or be prepared to "grease" the palm of the recruiting officer, or, if the applicant was a young lady, very often she had to be prepared to yield to the advances of prospective employers. Very rarely was a position filled without the "successful" applicant having been drawn into one form of corruption or another. It is this form of nepotism and corruption that Henshaw ridicules through the Toru-Koyeh dialogue cited above.

The strength of Dinner For Promotion lies in its dramatic dialogue. However, the power of the satire is limited by the author's mildness. Henshaw's critical voice lacks the emotional potency that one finds in Soyinka or even in Femi Osofisan, but his indignation at the follies and frailties of his people is quite clear.

It is worth noting that dialogue is not the only feature that distinguishes Dinner For Promotion from Henshaw's other comic plays in which he criticizes the society. The appearance of the characters also provokes some derisive laughter among the audience. The disguise of Toru as "Alice" is a case in point. According to the stage direction, "She wears a large oversized black wig which covers most of her face and which continues as a pig-tail long enough to reach her

seat" (p. 53). The general appearance of "Alice" is designed to poke fun at ladies who, in their wigs, look awkward and ridiculous though they strive to look sophisticated. She is indeed a caricature of the modern, "westernized" Nigerian ladies in big cities who end up as laughing stocks when they parade themselves down the street as models of new trends in fashion.

After an evening full of laughter-provoking incidents and the exposure of the intrigues and counter-intrigues which practically ruin Tikku's and Seyil's dinner for promotion, and after the characteristic Henshawian untangling of the knots, the comedy folds up with Toru's announcement of her secret wedding to Koyeh, providing a happy ending to the play. Dinner For Promotion provides a pleasant evening during which the audience are given a glimpse of themselves. The playwright takes a long view of the plight of poor city dwellers in modern Nigerian society, and attempts a mildly shocking exposé of human follies and frailties. Granted, Henshaw's view of the poverty of low-income city dwellers in his play hardly ranks with the hard look which a playwright like Errol John takes at the agony of the poor in Trinidad in Moon on a Rainbow Shawl. Nevertheless, Henshaw's play is as revealing of the laughable social ills that poverty may prompt frustrated young people to perpetrate in modern Nigerian society as John's play is of the pitiable plight of some West Indian communities. At the same time, by putting the words in the mouth of the talkative Una, Henshaw satirizes the rich (represented by Sipo) who use, or abuse, their wealth and positions of power to hinder the advancement of the poor in society:

If you are having a dinner to get something from us, then you are wasting your time, because people like us who have found our way to the top can be ungrateful, you know. . . . Some of us had to struggle so hard that by the time we get to the top we have become so dissatisfied that nothing can really please us. (pp. 66-67)

The impressive thing about Dinner For Promotion is the playwright's ability to assemble together a variety of characters picked from a cross-section of the society: the young spendthrift whose ambition for easy wealth drives him into chronic insolvency, the wealthy businessman, the indefatigable rent (or debt) collector whose method of operation apparently derives from the "Osomalo" group of traders,⁶ the nagging sister-in-law, and elderly people and their idiosyncracies.

There is ample evidence from the three plays treated above that Henshaw considers himself as a "physician" to his society, that he sets himself the task of purging it of what he "diagnoses" as social and moral ills through his plays. Although these plays are essentially comic, they contain extensive satirical comments on contemporary society. Explicit as he makes his social criticism in these plays, Henshaw emerges more a comedian than a satirist. Yet the limited social satire in his plays deserves to be discussed even if only as a prelude to the discussion of more serious works by more talented playwrights like Osofisan and Clark, in which the tragic view of society is more profound than Henshaw's vision.

⁶ These itinerant Ijèsa traders were noted for their unremitting patience as they sat in a crouching position at the doors of their debtors until the money owed them was fully paid up. They would resort to any act to disturb the peace of their debtors so as to hasten the payment of their money.

(ii) The Tragic View of Life:

Creative artists who give expression to their tragic view of life often share with satirists a disenchantment with the world around them. What distinguishes the satirist from those who articulate a tragic vision of man and his world is the tone of their condemnation of social evils. Very often, however, the dramatization of the tragedy of man and his world is interspersed with venomous satiric comments which are designed to heighten the audience's tragic sense on seeing the tragic consequences of some of their own frailties presented on the stage. When properly introduced, such comments have the effect of providing a more sustained catharsis. This is the case, particularly in Femi Osofisan's A Restless Run of Locusts.⁷

Osofisan's play is a serious indictment of political malpractices in Nigeria. The tragedy of the play is that of the entire nation, brought about by a system of government that is as alien to the people as the language of the colonialists who introduced the political system into the society. In the play, Osofisan sets out to expose and to condemn in strong terms the deplorable intrigues of Nigeria's former partisan politicians, represented by Chief Michael Kuti and Sanda Adeniyi. But the playwright's task in the play transcends that of the satirist because the focus of his attention lies in the tragic consequences of the political intrigues he condemns; and the tragic note is reinforced by the playwright's effective use of invectives and provocative irony.

⁷ (Ibadan: Onibonoje Press, 1975).

The play opens (in Drama One) with Sanda Adeniyi lying wounded and unconscious in the corner of a room that is in complete disarray. Sanda's condition exposes the thuggery and violence that usually attended electioneering campaigns, and the partisan political rivalry in Nigeria before the military coup of 15 January 1966. On recovering from his unconscious state Sanda discloses:

Sanda: (Coming back into the room). You want to know what happened here, so I will tell you. No, it was not a hurricane that swept this place and knocked things all over. No, it was not the wind. It was your father's thugs!

Iyabo: No, that's not true!

Sanda: Isn't it? They swooped on us before we could defend ourselves. They were many and well-armed. We had no chance. You can see the results yourself. (p. 3)

At first one may charge that it betrays poverty of invention to open the play with Sanda in his serious condition while his brother, who was also a victim of the same Kuti-instigated thuggery, is reported to have been taken away for emergency treatment at the hospital. It may be argued that the Party Leader's "Ah, Sanda, you're up!" (p. 3), provides enough evidence that he was aware of Sanda's condition, but intentionally chose to leave him unattended. However, a careful look at the ironic tone in the play reveals that the design of the opening scene is of vital significance to the structure of the tragedy. The point seems to be "save the party's candidate first; it does not matter who else may be in danger of death." In the pre-military regime, the party was supreme and therefore the end-all of all political affairs. The emphasis ironically placed on the party as the only real thing that matters dovetails with the ending of the play where the same

concept is evoked to demand coldly the forfeiture of the terms of Sanda's oath of allegiance to the party. This is one of the political atrocities which Osofisan decries in his play.

Drama One is a very short scene which sets the tone of conflict and tension underlying political rivalry during the elections to the parliament in the play. It also exposes the open confrontation that leads to the tragedy of both the Adeniyi and the Kuti families. The bitter irony in this opening scene makes more glaring the malpractices of politicians and the repercussions of these on individuals, on families, and on the nation.

The rivalry between the political parties to which the Adeniyis and Chief Kuti belong is a microcosm of the nation-wide political rivalry, particularly among the former three major political parties⁸ and their allies during the civilian rule era. In the play, the immediate evil effect of such a rivalry is demonstrated through the relationship between Sanda of the Adeniyi camp and Iyabo, daughter of Chief Kuti. The devoted lovers are set one against the other by partisan politics:

Iyabo: Don't you love me again? Have you forgotten me already? Listen, leave my father and your brother to their fighting. It does not concern us. We have love. Don't let their hatred contaminate us.
Sanda: Tunde shall be avenged! Go away, you are nothing to me now but my enemy's daughter.

⁸ These were the Northern Peoples Congress (N. P. C.), the Action Group (A. G.), and the National Council of Nigerian Citizens (N. C. N. C.).

Iyabo: (Broken) No, no. Say you still love me.
 Say you're still my Sanda!
 Sanda: Go away. Your Sanda is dead. Your
 father killed him too. (p. 4)

Under normal circumstances, the love between Sanda and Iyabo should reflect the friendly relationship between the Kuti and Adeniyi families. However, politics has so set the two families one against the other that it now threatens the romance of the young lovers. The dialogue between Sanda and Iyabo cited above seems to make the point that love conquers all except political enmity. If the love between Sanda and Iyabo cannot reconcile their families, it should at least be given a chance to grow despite political enmity, as Iyabo pleads with Sanda. From the tragic experiences of the Adeniyi and Kuti families, the audience get a taste of the national chaos which sworn political enmity is capable of engendering.

In his attempt to expose the tragedy of politics in Nigeria, Osofisan isolates a few specific malpractices, and often assumes the stance of a satirist, as is manifest in the following dialogue:

Sanda: Yes we shall go on! . . . Tell your father, he may win, he may reach parliament, but he will have to pass first over my dead body!

Iyabo: Sanda, you!

Sanda: Yes, me. As from this moment if the Leader will agree, I am going to replace my brother on the soapbox. I am going to stand in his place.

Party Leader: Hurray! Take my hands boy! Thank you, thank you. I was afraid that we'd never find another candidate to match him. . . . (p. 5)

Sanda is a self-nominated candidate approved of executively by the Party Leader. The opinion of the party caucus does not seem to count.

This indeed is an example of an undemocratic process of nominating a candidate for election. Irregularities like this, or the kidnapping of rival candidates, or the flagrant rigging of election results were the root causes of the disastrous coup of 15 January 1966, and of the three-year civil war and carnage that almost destroyed Nigeria. When Osofisan assumes the stance of the satirist, however, his intent is not necessarily to provoke any derisive laughter among the audience. Rather, he is ironically emphasizing how follies like slogan chanting by the masses who hardly know what they are shouting for, the blackmailing of political rivals, and other deplorable tactics are responsible for the tragedy in the play as well as in the nation.

In Drama Two, the action shifts to Kuti's living-room. The invective in this second part, as in the rest of the play, is directed against individuals and politicians generally. In the looks and actions of Chief Kuti, the audience can easily discern the diverse effects of unbridled political aspirations and intrigues. Politics has changed Kuti's personality, temperament, and general outlook on life. Just as Sanda is to notice the change in himself in a mirror (p. 32), so is the changed person of Chief Kuti reflected in the mirror-image of his wife. Like all desperate election candidates, Chief Kuti is under stress, and the tension in him is fast draining his self-confidence and increasing his desire to resort to violence and underhanded means of getting rid of his political opponent who poses a serious threat to his political career.

The pressure on Chief Kuti to gain political power arises

primarily from the stakes involved. He has thrown into the campaign the entire life savings of the family and a heavy loan, the size of which is too staggering to reveal (p. 16). In Nigeria, candidates have been known to have committed suicide after suffering a crushing defeat at the polls. The high hopes of becoming parliamentarians prompted the candidates to keep investing large sums of money on the campaigns to bribe the voters (as Kuti confesses in the play). This is what makes the political party nothing "but a group of swindlers and bankrupts. . . all fighting to grab something for themselves!" (p. 16). Osofisan's characterization of Chief Kuti and Sanda may be seen, therefore, as a caricature of some politicians of his time.

It was not enough to spend large sums of money to win an election. The services of thugs were secured to coerce opponents into submission, or to remove them by force from the political race, as demonstrated in the following report:

1st Thug: All done, Chief.

Chief Kuti: You got him?

1st Thug: Sure!

2nd Thug: Him an' three other bastards.

1st Thug: Yes.- And his brother too.

Chief Kuti: You mean Sanda?

1st Thug: Yes sah! An' the house too, we finish am.

Chief Kuti: Sure there was no mistake?

1st Thug: No worry, ogah. We sabi our job well. See?

(They show him their daggers, blood-stained). (p. 12)

This passage prepares the audience for the complication and the awful discovery when Iyabo comes in at the point where her father assures her mother that he will refund every penny he has withdrawn from the family account once the election is won:

Chief Kuti: The stakes are too high. I must win. And at all costs. By all means!

Iyabo: Including murder, father?

(The parents start in surprise. Mother is shocked). (p. 17)

After revealing that Chief Kuti is responsible for the "death" of Tunde (who, unknown to Iyabo, is still alive), Iyabo decides to go where she belongs, "To those who fight clean" (p. 21). The dramatic irony in this statement is not made manifest until the shocking revelation in Drama Four exposes the treacherous plans of the Adeniyi political camp to cover up the recovery of Tunde and to publicly charge Chief Kuti with his murder in order to ruin his chances of winning the election. Neither Kuti's party nor Adeniyi's may be said to fight clean. Osofisan is therefore using the dramatic irony in Iyabo's speech as a whetstone for his invective against politicians, a majority of whom, in Osofisan's view in the play, are despicable crooks.

Mrs. Kuti's appeal to Sanda at the end of Drama Three—"Come with me and talk to Iyabo. Help me persuade her to remove the child." (p. 40)—may therefore be seen as of great significance to the bitter ironic tone that pervades the tragedy of A Restless Run of Locusts. Her desire to terminate her daughter's pregnancy vividly demonstrates her determination to stop the generation of politicians in the family. Besides, she fears that Sanda will be to Iyabo what Chief Kuti has been to her (Iyabo's mother): an incompatible marriage partner. This parallel is borne out by the aversion for politics which both mother and daughter express, as opposed to the die-hard obstinacy with which Chief Kuti and Sanda determine to stick to politics regardless of

whoever is in distress, or whatever else suffers.

Osofisan effectively gives a sample of the tragedy of politics in Nigeria from the tragedy that befalls the Kuti and Adeniyi families. For instance, in Drama Four, in which the action shifts to Kuti's house, the bare living-room (as indicated in the stage direction) serves as a dramatic re-creation of the desolation which "jungle" partisan politics could bring to families and even to entire communities. The head of the Kuti family has been destroyed by politics. What is left for the surviving dependants to do, in Mrs. Kuti's words quoted by Iyabo, is to go "Wherever go the homeless and the forsaken. With the wind and the dust of the roads" (p. 42). These are weighty words coming from a woman who hates politics and politicians with venom. Through her invective against Sanda, Osofisan bitterly inveighs against politicians whose abominable acts bring nothing but "agonies that pierce a mother's womb at the sight of each new dead" (p. 40):

Mrs. Kuti: Don't make me laugh! You marry my daughter! By what scale do you weigh yourself for such an honour? You politician, with your obsession [for] votes and ballots and banners! You employer of thugs, no better than a thug yourself! You with no human decency, no human feeling, just savage beast! You wrecker of homes! You lowest dog! You mud! You dirt! I could kill you! (In fury she has advanced on him, taken him by the collars, and is shaking him violently. He struggles free).

Sanda: Let me go! Please!

Mrs. Kuti: (she pursues him). What virtues are left in you, you scum? You with your tale of love and sacrifice and pain! . . . What makes you think you are clean enough to marry my daughter? . . . The child I brought up in tenderness! You want to further corrupt her, you filth! You everything that is hateful

and despicable!
 Sanda: Mother. . .!
 Mrs. Kuti: All I ever hated in my husband, I
 heap it on you now! For ever! I curse you
 as I cursed him even there by his dead body!
 Let the town be clean of you, of you both
 and men like you! (pp. 38-39)

Here lies the burden of the indictment and condemnation of ruthless politicians in A Restless Run of Locusts. Every action and its consequences in the play are geared towards the expression of the playwright's tragic view of politics and politicians in Nigeria of the fifties and sixties. Osofisan may be seen, therefore, as using Mrs. Kuti as a mouthpiece to condemn political ills that brought tragedy to individual homes, and chaos and carnage to the entire nation.

Both Chief Kuti and Sanda may be considered as tragic figures because their death results from an irrepressible ambition to become Members of Parliament, which constitutes their tragic flaw. However, considered in terms of the bitter irony that pervades the play, their death represents the purging of their type from the society. Given this premise, one may conclude that there exists in Osofisan's play an intent to reform society, to purge it of political crooks who are instigators of civil unrests and therefore perpetrators of national strife. This task is similar to that of the satirist even though A Restless Run of Locusts is basically a tragedy. Mrs. Kuti's "Let the town be clean of you, of you both and men like you!" becomes significant as an expression of the playwright's wish which confirms him as a social reformer in his articulation of his tragic view of his society.

This is not to say that the play is a simple didactic drama.

Osofisan's preoccupation with the problem of evil as manifested in Nigerian politics exemplifies the concern of literary artists who dramatize the tragedy of man and of his world. As a rational, gregarious animal, man has always been involved in politics. Politics in itself is not evil since human beings need one form of government or another to coexist peacefully. However, the practice of modern politicians, which of course is not new, is what makes politics look evil. Osofisan's invective on politicians and their mode of operation is as applicable to Nigeria of the fifties and sixties as it is to any nation at any given time as long as there exist situations similar to those dramatized in A Restless Run of Locusts. The concern of Osofisan in this play, though prompted by a specific experience that is identifiable in time and place, transcends temporal and local limitations. Political chicanery and the tragic consequences of political rivalry and enmity are still very much with the people of Nigeria and elsewhere. This is what gives Osofisan's play a timeless and universal quality.

A similar quality is very much in evidence in J. P. Clark's incisive articulation of his tragic vision in both Song of a Goat and The Raft. These plays provide what may at first be regarded as two alternative or contradictory visions of man and of life. The first of these is based on the theory that man is the architect of his own fortune, ill or good. His tragedy normally comes as a result of a tragic flaw in his otherwise essentially good nature. The second is nourished by the belief that man's life has been pre-ordained by God, or by the gods. Given this concept, man's tragedy is regarded as the

fulfillment of the predestined terms of his existence, with Fate, the gods, or the ancestors as the agent or agents of implementation. An attempt will be made in the study of Clark's plays to show that these two visions are not necessarily contradictory as they appear to be.

One has to be very sensitive to the language in Clark's plays to appreciate fully how these two alternative visions of man and of life are ingeniously blended in each of the plays to be discussed.

In Song of a Goat, for instance, Clark examines a situation in which Zifa, the protagonist, is tortured by his helplessness in the face of adversities which he regards as a penalty imposed upon him by some malevolent god for a crime he cannot fully discern. However, Clark makes Zifa's fatalist view of his life more plausible by not attributing the tragedy of Zifa solely to oppressive Fate; he provides the protagonist with a discernible tragic flaw. But the tragic flaw in Zifa is all part of the fulfillment of his destiny which has been sealed in a family curse that has irrevocably doomed the Zifa family two generations back. It can be seen, therefore, how Zifa's tragic vision serves as a take-off point for Clark's dramatization of his own vision in Song of a Goat.

The play, like Clark's other plays, has often been regarded as being imitative of Greek and Elizabethan tragedy. Echoing the views of critics, for instance, Nkem Nwankwo asserts that "the structure of Song of a Goat is derived from Greek Tragedy."⁹ Hilary Spurling

⁹ N. Nwankwo, Review of Song of a Goat, Nigeria Magazine, No. 72 (March 1962), 80.

implies that Clark borrows the title of his play, his chorus, gods, messengers, prophecies of doom, fearful crimes, and a family curse in Song of a Goat, and states that "Mr. John Pepper Clark makes no attempt to disguise the apparatus of Greek tragedy; if anything, he emphasises it so that we may enjoy his borrowings as old friends in a fresh setting."¹⁰ An anonymous reviewer of Clark's Three Plays maintains that the vision of an inescapable doom manipulating events in Song of a Goat and The Masquerade reminds us of the Greeks.¹¹

Contrary to what these and other similar remarks suggest, Clark is not a servile imitator of the Greeks or of the Elizabethans. It is misleading, for example, to consider Clark as merely Nigerianizing the classics, as suggested by Frances Ademola in her review article, "J. P. Clark and His Audience."¹² As Clark himself has pointed out, the question

is not that one group of people borrowed this and that property from another but that there can and in fact there do occur areas of coincidence and correspondence in the way of living among several peoples separated by vast distances and time, and who apparently are of distinct cultures, practices and persuasions. For example, the orchestra and the leader-chorus arrangement of characters occupies as much a principal part in Nigerian theatre as it did in Greek theatre. But this is not to say one is debtor to the other. It is a matter of coincidence.¹³

¹⁰ H. Spurling, Review of Song of a Goat, in The Spectator, 24 Sept. 1965, p. 380.

¹¹ The Times Literary Supplement, 13 Aug. 1964, p. 728.

¹² African Forum, 1, No. 2 (Fall 1965), 85.

¹³ Clark, "Aspects of Nigerian Drama," loc. cit., p. 24.

This explanation notwithstanding, the title of the play strongly indicates that the playwright is familiar with the origin of tragedy in Greek rituals. The appearance of "goat" or references to it about thirty-five times in the play should start one thinking about its many levels of meaning. "Goat" in the play may mean the sacrificial animal, or the victim of a crime, or the cuckolded husband. This last level of meaning creates the impression that there is something of the Elizabethan conception of the goat as a symbol of lust in the play, particularly when the blood of the sacrificial goat stains Ebier's dress, and in a symbolic manner betrays the guilt of the two adulterers.

The title of the play hints at the tragic action which depends for its effect on the various levels of meaning of the key-word "goat" at definite points in the play. The tragic action is divided into four movements, each contributing in a cumulative manner to the forceful expression of Clark's tragic view of life. In the First Movement Clark exploits effectively the imagery of the seasons to expose the plight of Ebier and Zifa. Ebier's last "harvest" was Dode, whom she had a difficult time bringing into this world. Her "harvest" season has since then been succeeded by a series of "dry" seasons. The approach of each new "planting" season and of "spring" brings nothing but agonizing thoughts to Ebier and her husband. Owing to Zifa's impotence, his piece of land (Ebier's womb) has been lying fallow for three floods. This is the painful plight recognized by Massur when, in the course of his dialogue with Zifa, he remarks:

If your wife has
Been faithful to the point of folly, that

Is your business and hers. But why must you
 Send her on to me to take the birth cure
 When the fault is not with her? (p. 8)¹⁴

This passage provides the evidence that Zifa is unwilling openly to admit his sexual inadequacy. In anguish he continues to wear the mask which has increasingly become more transparent:

What I want is
 A way out, a way to lead me
 Out of this burnt patch of earth. (p. 10).

Zifa's "patch of earth" which he refuses to give up is neither "burnt" nor barren. All it requires is effective cultivation and seeding. Accordingly, Etiere is aptly described in terms of the imagery of the hen that is "in a state for brooding" (p. 10). In contrast, Zifa, whipping himself into a frenzy, sees himself as

the cock with the flaming red crest
 But touch the thing and you'll find it
 Colder than a dog's nose. (p. 11)

Here lies the complex which will not let Zifa consent to Masseur's proposed solution to his and his wife's problem. By emphasizing this complex, Clark systematically builds up in his protagonist a tragic flaw.

The foregoing discussion shows that the First Movement is an embodiment of four aspects of dramatic plot: exposition, discovery, point of attack, and foreshadowing. The exposition manifests itself in the revelation of the crucial problem which is to foster the tragedy in the play. The unravelling of the root of Zifa's problem is made

¹⁴ Song of a Goat, in J. P. Clark, Three Plays (London: O. U. P., 1964). All page references are to this edition.

through the dialogue between Zifa and Masseur. The charge against Zifa is that he has brought his father back home among his people a little too early "For one who died of the white taint" (p. 10). And for this alleged "crime" Zifa has been subjected to the anguish of impotence.

Zifa could do one of two things: either learn to live with his predicament and suffer in silence as suggested by the "experts between swamp and / Sand" (p. 9) whom he has consulted; or agree that Tonye, his younger and virile brother should "Take over the tilling of the fertile / Soil" (p. 11), as proposed by Masseur. This second alternative has earlier been suggested to Ebriere for consideration.

And let me tell you, my child, for
Every ailment in man there is
A leaf in the forest. If both families
Cherish each other so much, a good proposition
Would be for your husband to make you over
To another in his family. (pp. 4-5)

He should make you over
To his younger brother. That'll be a retying
Of knots, not a breaking or loosening
Of them. (p. 5)

This proposal marks the beginning of real action in the play. Masseur emerges as the inciting force whose suggestion triggers off the course of action that is to be fully realized in the Third Movement. Masseur, through his "good proposition" early in the play, is therefore responsible for throwing the first pitch which sets in motion the mechanism that will precipitate the tragedy of Zifa, Ebriere and Tonye. He is fully aware of the dilemma which his proposed "cure" must have instilled into Ebriere's mind. Consequently, at the end of the First Movement he makes a statement which hints at the action that will lead to the crisis

in the Third Movement, and bring the action to its catastrophe in the Final Movement:

Well, there goes a man deep and furious as
A river underground. I hope he keeps
The lid down on his wife for I fear
She is fretting already. (p. 13)

This prefiguration of what is to come does not end with the completion of the First Movement. Just as the first four aspects of the plot outlined above flow into one another in the First Movement without any obtusion, so does the Second Movement dovetail smoothly with the First Movement through the expression of another character's fears of an impending disaster.

Basically, the entire Second Movement is devoted to Oruko-rere's ominous presage. The first real intimation of impending tragedy is contained in the apparently unintelligible articulation of her "double vision," foretelling the fate of the family. In her customary frenzy, she claims that she hears the anguished cry of a goat and that "A leopard has the poor thing in his grip" (p. 15). The significance of this imagery of the beast of prey and its victim is not immediately understood by the members of the Zifa family. Even among the neighbors who function as the chorus in the play, only one is sensitive enough to believe that in

A family like that there always will spring
Up leopards. But that they have goats
In their midst one may as well go
And seek eggs among cocks. (p. 18)

The identity of the leopard-figure, or the goat-figure in the play is not made too explicit. One may conjecture, however, that if the goat

is the cuckold then Zifa is the "goat" in the play. Alternatively, Zifa, who is honoured for collecting leopards' scalps. (p. 19), is the strong man of the family who will destroy not only his brother but also his wife in his "hunt" for the daring violators of the moral norms of Deinogbo society. The prime he-goat that will be despoiled will then be Tonye.

The logic behind this assertion does not fully unfold itself until the rhythm of the tragic "Song" rises to a crescendo later in the Third Movement. It is in this Movement that complications set in as a new force affecting the direction of the course of the action which now progresses rapidly, propelled by the charged emotion of Ebiere. Her frustration has been bottled up in her for too long, and has now reached such a proportion that her beating of Dode, whom she is bathing, is obviously a case of transferred aggression. This aggression if further transferred to Tonye when he rebukes her for knocking Dode on the head. She picks a quarrel intentionally with Tonye so as to create a confrontation during which she can effectively express her frustration and desire for sexual fulfillment.

Ebiere controls the speed and direction of the dialogue with a proficiency that compels Tonye to trail behind her wit. Playing the embittered coquette itching for sexual gratification, she lures Tonye into sex in a most dramatic manner. This further complicates issues and brings the plot to a crisis point. Ebiere's last speech in this Third Movement is most revealing:

So I am crazed, completely gone leaves-plucking,
And you? Aren't you shuddering too, Oh,

So shuddering in your heat of manhood you
 Have thrown me? Now, hold me, do hold on and
 Fight, for it is a thing not forbidden!
 (Cock crows beyond.) (pp. 27-28)

There is enough evidence in the play to show that what Ebiere and Tonye have done is forbidden in their society. The expiation suggested by Masseur, which would have placated the gods and ancestors of Deinogbo community to accommodate the taboo broken, has been left unperformed:

Blood of goat
 So large a cowrie may pass thro' its nose,
 A big gourd of palm wine and three heads of
 Kola-nut split before the dead of
 The land, and the deed is done. (p. 5)

The ominous cock-crow that greets Tonye's and Ebiere's sexual union may have for a moment awakened in both of them a sense of guilt, but their betrayal of Zifa does not seem to foster in them any real compunction, at least in Ebiere who is only too happy to feel like a fulfilled woman once again. This notwithstanding, the Tonye-Ebiere affair is a betrayal not only of the blood relationship of the adulterers to Zifa but also of the ancestors and of the race. Speaking in riddles to young Dode, Orukorere remarks:

My son, I have seen a sight this dusk to make
 The eagle blind. I heard the cock crow
 As I woke up from sleep. That was sign
 Of omen enough but little did I know
 It was this great betrayal of our race.

And what is your poor father
 To do should he hear that the liana has
 Entwined his tree of life? I said there was
 A serpent in the house but nobody as usual
 Will take me seriously. Yet the hiss of the creature
 Was up among the eaves, down under the
 Stool. (pp. 28-29)

Orukorere's quiet lament that her warnings have all along been dis-

regarded is appropriately articulated as the action approaches the concluding moment of the most intense emotional strain in the play, that is, the dramatic climax. As the Final Movement sets in, Zifa's soliloquy reveals his suspicion of the incestuous relationship between his wife and his brother (p. 30). Although he is convinced of their guilt, he requires a definite proof, which he gets during the supposed cleansing ritual:

ZIFA: You shall

Be satisfied with all that I do today,
Mother. Here, Tonye, hold the goat by
The feet and I will by the horns. And you,
My wife, see how with one stroke of my knife
I sever the head from the trunk.

ORUKORERE: A brave stroke, my boy, a brave stroke!
There was only one man in all the creeks
Who could do it like that, but he died many
Years ago.

ZIFA: See how erect

The blood spurts! It should cleanse the compound
Of all corruption today. But hold on,
One little detail more and we shall begin
In real earnest.

TONYE: What is that?

EBIERE: The blood, it has soiled my clothes.

ZIFA: Well, never mind that. A little soap soon
Washes that off. Here, Tonye, hold forth
The head with all its horns.

TONYE: There!

ZIFA: Good. Now, put it inside the pot.

ORUKORERE: What is it you ask of the boy?

EBIERE: The man is mad!

TONYE: Why, the thing is impossible.

ZIFA: It is not. I said put the head in the pot.

TONYE: I will if you so desire.

ZIFA: Yes, I not only desire it, I demand
It. That's right, just like that.

TONYE: It won't go in any further.

ZIFA: Who told you? There, push, brother, push
Oh push with all your might!

TONYE: The pot will break if I push harder.

ZIFA: So you know that? But never mind. Push
I say, till the head enters in, horns
And ears, all of them.

ORUKORERE: The woman has fainted!

ZIFA: Has she? Let her then, and you my
Brother, you see how the pot is broken!

TONYE: This was a trap, a trap, and you think
You have caught some grass-cutters.

ZIFA: Haved't I? You just wait and see. (pp. 36-37)

This passage is the most symbolic and most ritualistic point in the play. It represents the crisis point where extreme emotion and tension culminate in the catastrophic end of the three principal characters. Zifa's decision to hold the horns of the sacrificial goat while Tonye holds the legs demonstrates Zifa's acceptance of having been cuckolded. Accordingly, he demands a ritualistic and public re-enactment of this cuckoldry when he compels his brother to push the severed head of the goat with its horns (a phallic symbol) into the sacrificial pot, which symbolizes the womb. By forcing Tonye to act out publicly and ritualistically his incestuous relationship with Ebere, Zifa ingeniously exposes the aberration of the adulterers through what is as much a travesty of the cleansing rites, and a desecration of the day's sacrifice, as it is a travesty of the sexual act itself.

Ebere's failure to placate the gods and the ancestors of the land with the sacrifice of the "Blood of goat / So large a cowrie may pass thro' its nose" (p. 5) before her sexual union with Tonye is a tragic error of omission which may be attributed to her pride and selfishness, both of which constitute her tragic flaw. It is through her error of omission that she contributes to the disaster that befalls the family.

In the death of Ebere through miscarriage, and in the suicides of Tonye by hanging and of Zifa by drowning lies the focus of

Clark's tragic view of man and his life. Although Zifa's reaction to given situations in the play are primarily guided by the Ijaw community code of honour, his self-pride, which has been crushed by his impotence, drives him to extreme desperation and violent tragic passion that matches that of any classic tragic hero.

The death of the three major characters may be considered as ritualistic, cleansing the family of its curse only partially. The process of cleansing does not run its full course until another tragedy takes place in The Masquerade, a brilliant sequel to Song of a Goat. Yet, Song of a Goat is a complete play in its own right, with a full message communicated effectively to the audience. Dan Izevbaye does not share this view. According to him, the tense situation in the play is that "inability to have children often has the consequence of sin." He asserts that the play "does not succeed because of the failure to communicate this tense situation. Its highly metaphorical and evasive language which states by analogy is obviously meant to approach the situation obliquely because of the delicacy of the problem, but it is a drag on the action."¹⁵ It is interesting to note Clark's explanation, which may have inspired Izevbaye's criticism. Clark draws the attention of the reader to the language device which he calls

that of indirection which features prominently in my own play Song of a Goat. That the doctor and patient [and, of course, other characters] in that play do not approach the business on hand with the directness of an arrow does not mean the

¹⁵ D. Izevbaye, "The Poetry and Drama of John Pepper Clark," p. 168.

playwright is unappreciative of the importance of speed and despatch. Rather, it is a recognition by him of a living convention observed among the people of the community treated in the play, namely, that you do not rush in where angels fear to tread. . . . Accordingly, delicate issues are handled delicately by these people. This approach is evident in their manner of negotiating marriage between one family and another and of announcing the news of death to the persons most affected.¹⁶

From the foregoing explanation, it is obvious that Clark has been deliberate in his choice of language for his characters. He has carefully and vividly presented the people of Deinbo community in their true light. Their beliefs, inclinations and aversions are portrayed artistically. Seen against the background of the collective consciousness of his society, Zifa's tragedy exemplifies that of the common man. Rather than accepting a practical solution to his great problems, he considers himself as the victim of the arbitrary malevolence of the gods, and of his ancestors. Here lies the core of the tragic view of man which Clark effectively communicates in the play through the medium of "metaphorical and evasive language." But the tragedy in Song of a Goat transcends that of Zifa the individual. The movement of the action in the play shifts the emphasis from the tragedy of an individual in society to the tragedy of humanity in general.

The darkness at the end of the play--"Let there be no light again in this house" (p. 45)--is an appropriate atmosphere for the end of a tragic situation in which the audience is left in the dark as to

¹⁶ Clark, "Aspects of Nigerian Drama," loc. cit., pp. 31-32.

what follows. The second Neighbour's closing remark--"Come away, tomorrow is a heavier day" (p. 45)—at best, hints at a further tragedy that lies ahead. Nothing is certain except that which has happened; and this is what makes man incapable of controlling his future. In the alternative close to the play, the notion of man's helplessness in the hands of Fate cannot be missed. It seems that Clark can hardly dismiss the notion in Song of a Goat that there also exists a real monster in the guise of blind Fate which persistently activates the beast in man and drives him to his destruction with provocative indifference:

MASSEUR: This was no fire begun
 By ordinary hand. All fire comes
 From God, else why the thunder?
 The young woman, being tinder,
 Caught it first, consuming farmer
 And helpmate in the process. I sought
 To bring them water but all
 I had was a basket. Now, see
 How burnt to charcoal the land
 Lies, even to the shrubs on the hedge. (p. 47)

All efforts to solve Zifa's and Ebijere's problems only lead to their destruction, and inescapably to the ruin of the illegitimate offspring (Tufa in The Masquerade). Zifa's plight, it would seem, has been predestined through the curse that hangs low on the family. His self-pride which is his only discernible tragic flaw is only a function of the curse; and his destiny exemplifies the lot of man in this transient world. As Masseur philosophizes:

A child,
 Once out of the womb, will shout,
 Even like the chick or seedling
 Out of its shell. And whether
 For pain, for laugh, who can tell? But now you
 Have lived to this day, perhaps you are ripe
 To hazard a crack at life's nut. Still,

Do not, my people, venture overmuch
Else in unravelling the knot, you
Entangle yourselves. It is enough
You know how that each day we live
Hints at why we cried out at birth. (p. 48)

In this passage, Masseur shares the anguish of the victims of the whims of Fate in the play, and brings to final focus the tragic sense of life which Clark obliquely but forcefully presents in Song of a Goat, and continues to explore in its sequel The Masquerade.

Clark's tragic view of life in these two plays gets more frightening in The Raft.¹⁷ Like the first two of his plays, The Raft affords Clark a lens through which he takes a critical look at man and society. Irreversible destiny, man's helplessness in adversities, hostile and uncompromising society, the malevolent forces of the gods working against man, and man's own imperfect nature—all these and other unpleasant experiences of man in his journey through life add up to shape Clark's cumulative tragic vision of life in The Raft.

Various critical opinions have been expressed on the dramatic worth of The Raft. Peter Kennard, for example, contends that the play "is not really a drama at all but a series of fables heavily overlaid with symbolism and half perceived ideas... it merely selects the most obviously suggestive incidents omitting a whole host of undigested symbolism."¹⁸ Martin Esslin, who implicitly shares Kennard's view, comments that the "four men on the raft could only be individualized

¹⁷ In J. P. Clark, Three Plays (London: O.U.P., 1964).

¹⁸ P. Kennard, "Recent African Drama," The Bulletin of the Association for African Literature in English, No. 2 (1965), 11.

and fully motivated by being treated far more realistically. Left as stylized generalised figures their actions seem unnecessarily arbitrary."¹⁹ And like Kennard, who argues that the play has no unified structure, Dan Izevbaye considers the play as "a series of anecdotes and local gossip loosely strung together," adding that the style of the play is digressive.²⁰ However, a careful analysis of the predominant issue in The Raft reveals that the play is more logical in its structure than the allegations suggest. There exists a synthesizing element, a common thread that runs through the apparently unconnected anecdotes, idle talk, and even the satirical comments that intersperse the play. This common thread is the tragic view of life which Clark consistently explores throughout the play.

Through the fate of the raft and its crew, Clark dramatizes the misery of man adrift on a ship of destiny, floundering under inexplicable forces. It is man's ignorance of these forces, and his inability to solve the problems that beset him on his journey through life that make his world miserable to live in. He merely drifts along helplessly, but not necessarily aimlessly.²¹ Any efforts he makes to

¹⁹ M. Esslin, "Two Nigerian Playwrights," in Introduction to African Literature, Ed.; Ulli Beier (London: Longmans, 1967), p. 260.

²⁰ "The Poetry and Drama of John Pepper Clark," p. 169.

²¹ T. O. McLoughlin, "Three Plays of John Pepper Clark," English Studies in Africa, 18, No. 1 (1975), 34, asserts that Kengide "repeatedly sees the journey on the raft as symbolic of his people's aimlessness." The truth is that the course down the Niger to Burutu is well known to the lumbermen, but the storm sets them adrift. Their failure to steer the raft back to its course does not show their aimlessness; rather, it reveals the helplessness of the men under the circumstance in which they sail their raft down the River Niger.

bring the forces militating against him under control will only aggravate his misery, particularly where his optimism runs counter to his predestined pattern of life. This view is common in Nigerian literature: it is developed in Ijimere's Woyengi and in Ola Rotimi's The Gods Are Not To Blame. The same concept of predestination seems to underlie Clark's dramatization of the ill-fate that bedevils the journey of the lumbermen despite their efforts to solve their problems.

For example, in the second movement of the play, "Wind-Lash," a storm develops and the winds get violent. Olotu quickly suggests: "Gather up the baskets then, and roll up / The mats. A wet bed we can at least save ourselves" (p. 110). But Ogro orders his mates to stop rolling up the mats, and points out: "Don't you see you can string / Them into sails and so pull out of this tangle?" (p. 111). As soon as Ogro's suggestion is implemented, the raft is released from the giddy spin of the dreadful Osikoboro whirlpool. But, as fate ordains, in man's life, moments of joy are often juxtaposed with moments of sorrow. No sooner has the raft started to drift again, to the lumbermen's great delight and relief, than tragedy strikes. According to the Stage Direction, there is "a loud creak, then a brief cracking sound, and the raft breaks in two, the portion with the billowing sail pulling furiously away. On it is Olotu" (p. 111).

It is through this incident that Clark illustrates the ambivalence of nature. There is a similar ambivalence in Synge's Riders to the Sea in which the tragic intensity centers on the helplessness of man in a cruel world, regardless of his efforts to make the best of

a life that is doomed from the start. The sea which sustains the family of Old Maurya (and the entire society of the island off the West of Ireland) turns out to be the death of her six sons, her husband, and her father-in-law. Derek Walcott treats a similar theme in The Sea at Dauphin. Clark's treatment of the same theme in The Raft emphasizes that life can be a structure of ironies. The benevolent force of nature that enables the lumbermen to escape from the dangerous hold-up in the whirlpool of Osikoboro later turns out to be the malevolent power that breaks up their raft and sends their captain Olotu to his destruction.

The violent splitting up of the raft in the storm, and the consequent separation of Olotu, may take on an additional dimension if interpreted in political terms. Eldred Jones observes that "Clark finds that his play is being taken as a symbol of Nigeria adrift," and contends that such an "interpretation may not be far fetched after all."²² But Clark denies that the play is an allegory of the Nigerian situation:

It is a play which has been seen by some critics as being an allegory of the Nigerian situation—one of the four old regions breaking away, seceding, when the raft breaks up. I tell them I wrote it in 1963, and don't remember trying to write a political thesis. But then they insist that the seeds were already there by 1963, that there were signs and symptoms of distress that were to lead to the threatened break-up of the nation. So, maybe sub-consciously I was thinking about all this. But essentially I was trying to create a human condition

²² E. D. Jones, "African Literature 1966-67," African Forum, 3, No. 1 (Summer 1967), 5.

which I knew existed not only in Nigeria but elsewhere. The play may, however, have at the same time some remote or close connection with political reality in Nigeria at one time, though basically it's an invention, a work of my imagination.²³

The above explanation leads Clark's readers and audience to believe that The Raft is essentially a dramatic re-creation of the miserable plight of human beings "not only in Nigeria but [also] elsewhere." By the time Clark wrote his play in 1963, quite a number of African States had attained independence. This independence, however, was, and still is, constantly threatened by occasional coups and counter coups. Political instability and widespread civil unrest besmirch the pages of Africa's post-independence political history. With all its growing political freedom, Africa continues to grope for a direction. Clark's "raft" may, therefore, be justifiably interpreted as symbolizing any of the independent African nations adrift. This is why the human conditions which the playwright portrays in The Raft cannot be divorced completely from political implications. But, given a political interpretation, the raft would symbolize, more than anything else, the weakening and disintegration of the ship of state which has been subjected to unmitigated strains for too long. Such a disintegration need not take the form of secession, although the secession of the defunct Biafra state seems to have vindicated the views of critics who see a forecast of secession in the breaking up of the raft.

Probably more rewarding than an attempt to impose a theory of

²³ Clark, in "Interview with John Pepper Clark," Palaver, 3 (1972), 17.

secession upon the play is the examination of the dramatic significance of the lack of cooperation among the lumbermen. The unity of the raftsmen has been threatened by the divergent views held by Olotu and Ogro concerning a number of issues, including the reliability of Olotu's wrist watch. The first evidence of non-cooperation among the lumbermen may be found at the end of "ONE: TIDE-WASH," when the raft drifts into the spin of the Osikoboro whirlpool:

KENGIDE: It means we are in the arms
Of the great Osikoboro whirlpool
Itself, you fool!

IBOBO: Right in the pit--

OGRO: And we may never find release
From its vice!

OLOTU: Is that all? I think
You are all gone soft and possessed. Even
Kengide's head seems to have filled out
In fear of some undiscovered merpeople
Supposed to inhabit the place. But you wait
And see: we'll row ourselves out of here
Quick enough, will punt the raft free as
sure as the sun
Sucks up the morning mist--yes, you wait
And see!

KENGIDE: Now I see why we of the Delta
Never will make good. You believe all
The tales tampering with the stars
That are told you abroad, but never any one
At home about your own rivers. Truly
We are a castaway people.
(Olotu has already whipped out a bamboo pole
and is all set to punt.)

OLOTU: Ogro, will you add your hand? And
You, Iboho, if that man over there will not.

IBOBO: Stop! You stir up more trouble.

OGRO: Oh, doesn't he know? Ten such poles,
Tied end to end, will not plumb the floors
Of Osikoboro!

(Olotu flounders on with the plumbing, all
others looking on, each in his own shade of
shock.) (pp. 101-102)

The above passage has been designed, among other things, to exemplify

the disagreements among the men which have been allowed to blunt their sense of cooperation in the face of difficulty. The leaving of Olotu to the task of punting the raft out of the whirlpool betrays the men's lack of the spirit of cooperation. This lack is a negation of the much desired coordinated efforts which the men require to ensure the success of their trip down to Burutu. This is the tragic flaw which is responsible in part for the tragic end of the lumbermen.

If the raft is accepted as a symbol of the ship of state in any African country, then the floundering of that ship, particularly in Nigeria, may be attributed to the disunity and poorly coordinated efforts of the political leaders who are charged with the onerous task of steering the fragile craft safe to port. In Nigeria where the national coat of arms bears the impressive inscription "Unity and Faith," the relationship among the lumbermen in The Raft would be seen as a symbol of the betrayal of the motto on the nation's coat of arms. This betrayal has contributed in large measures to the sinking of the ship of the first Republic.

One more issue of interest raised in The Raft is worth examining for the serious comment the play passes on society, with its impact on man, both individually and collectively. The microcosmic world of the lumbermen on the raft is set against the society from which they have been temporarily separated by the nature of their occupation. In that society, the have-nots live in growing hardship, while those in high places enjoy increasing affluence. The government and other employers of labour are nothing better than what Kengide aptly

describes as "two faces to one counterfeit coin." According to him,

It was

In the furious forties—at the time of the Great
Strike. Now, you didn't know I worked
For the Niger Company at one time did you? Always
Making moneys for some man other
Than myself, that has been my fortune. Well
You didn't possess a wife as mine and forget
About finding some extra funds. That was how,
Personally, I got in the strike deep to my neck.
But you know how like the waters at Bussa
The whole thing went. The politicians
And papers who had promised Jericho itself,
By their own divisions, caused a breach
In the wall we workers had at their incitement staked
All to build. So, Government or Niger
Company, two faces to one counterfeit coin,
As usual won the field. Not only that,
They went on to raise taxes and prices on
Everything money could buy in the shop—from buckets
To umbrellas—they raised them all, while lowering
Those on our crops. (pp. 130-31)

Clark, through Kengide, inveighs not only against man's inhumanity to man as practised with impunity by those in positions of power, but also against the widening gulf between the rich and the poor, against the disruptive yet continued co-existence of abject poverty and limitless affluence, against an aggravation of social injustice and inequality, all of which enhance the acceleration of the destruction of a society in which corruption in all its ramifications, political victimisation, oppression of innocent citizens, and insecurity of life and property are the rule rather than the exception.

It may be inferred from The Raft that Clark's tragic vision of life grows out of his conviction that man is but a helpless creature, no better than a puppet for Fate to manipulate at will. His is a fore-doomed existence that he can do very little to alter. Man's quest

for some meaningful and purposeful existence as he journeys through life is often frustrated by circumstances that are beyond his control. This is what makes us all like the lumbermen on the raft, always drifting, waiting for the journey (to be over, or for the fog to clear. Very often man recognizes the danger in his path, but like the raftsmen, he is unable to avert it by his own actions. In short, as Clark would put it, man is like a reed in the tide.

This tragic view of man as a helpless drifter through life is appropriately reflected in the structure of The Raft. The play is designed without a "plot." The whole of the action, it would seem, is intentionally made to be arbitrary and unmotivated, at least on the surface. It should be noted that the world of The Raft is populated with characters who remain without any development through relationships. Like the characters in the theatre of the Absurd, they are, strictly speaking, "human beings who, in their daily lives confront a world that has split up into a series of disconnected fragments and lost its purpose, but who are no longer aware of this state of affairs and its disintegrating effect on their personalities, are brought face to face with a heightened representation of this schizophrenic universe."²⁴ Viewed in this light, the action in The Raft is not without a discernible structure, though it does not develop along the conventional beginning-middle-end pattern of plot. The action gradually evolves into a complex pattern which adequately communicates the tragic.

²⁴ M. Esslin, The Theatre of the Absurd (New York: Doubleday, 1961; Rev. Ed., 1969), p. 363.

poetic vision which Clark strives to communicate to his audience.

The fragmented world of The Raft may be seen, therefore, as one of absurdity, as a stage on which men are merely players, each acting out his own part in a universal tragedy. Life in such a world is nothing more, nothing less, than a play, a tragedy, in which man's daily experiences are but acts and scenes already pre-designed to end on a catastrophic note. What the audience are presented in The Raft is a rough slice of such a life. It is in this light that one should interpret the various incidents in The Raft instead of summarily dismissing them as merely arbitrary, unmotivated, and even nonsensical. Indeed, the play provides the cumulative climax of the tragic sense of life which Clark has systematically developed from Song of a Goat through The Masquerade.

The foregoing study of the plays of Henshaw, Osofisan, and Clark reveals that the social phenomena in Nigeria are an integral part of the Nigerian theatre. These playwrights are conscious of their role as the conscience of their society. This awakening consciousness has urged them to look at their society and, whatever their level of achievement as artists, to evolve a dramatic expression that reflects how they relate to the society.

Henshaw, for instance, assumes the function of a "physician" whose diagnosis exposes certain social ills, and whose intent is to reform society by means of the derisive laughter provoked by the satiric comments in his plays. His success as a social critic is, however, limited by his ineptness in artistically reproducing life in

"play." His lack of professionalism in play-writing becomes glaring when his work is placed side by side with that of Osofisan and Clark.

Osofisan's confident dramatic expression of his vision of politics and politicians in A Restless Run of Locusts has a greater impact on the audience than all the satiric comments of Henshaw put together can achieve. Although Osofisan's play is a tragedy, its bitter irony and provocative invective strongly suggest that Osofisan's intent is also to reform the society. The development of the action, the method of characterization, and the manipulation of the dramatic dialogue in the play point in the direction of a play meant to effect an important change in the attitude of Nigerians towards politics. However, the lesson in the play will be of tremendous value to other nations at any given time in history where the peace, progress and prosperity of the people are jeopardized by unhealthy political practices.

Clark's mission in Song of a Goat and The Raft is to examine the crucial question of the tragedy of man, of life, and of society. The vision that emerges from his examination of all these is a careful blend of two apparently contradictory concepts of man's life: first, that man comes to a tragic end through a flaw in his essentially good nature; and second, that man's life is predestined by God, or by the gods. The artistry with which he evolves his tragic vision of man, of life, and of society in the above two plays can be excelled among Nigerian dramatists only by Wole Soyinka's ingenious theatrical skill, a unique skill which has necessitated the treatment of his plays separately in the chapter that follows.

CHAPTER FIVE

SOYINKA'S DRAMATURGY

(i) Introduction:

No serious survey of modern Nigerian drama in English can fail to recognize the uniqueness of Soyinka's dramaturgy. His dramatic works, like most of his other writings, reveal "the season of a mind,"¹ fully committed in its perception of a society which has its roots in shared mythical, historical, and ritual experiences. The perception, as projected in his writings, has been moulded and reshaped by his immediate social and political environment, and by his metaphysical excursion into life through myth and ritual. To appreciate fully his creativity, therefore, one needs some initiation into the culture, mythology, and traditional social milieu of the Yoruba race. Without such an initiation, in whatever form, any criticism of Soyinka's work runs the risk of misleading interpretations and assertions which will at best be only half-truths since the richness and subtleties of meaning will remain undiscovered.

The atmosphere of myth and ritual that pervades the world of some of Soyinka's plays attests to what Soyinka himself describes as "a complete immersion in my traditional world view and values of social cohesion."² However, Soyinka's careful integration of myth and ritual into plays like A Dance of the Forests, The Road, The Strong Breed, The

¹ Soyinka, "Massacre, October '66," in Idanre and Other Poems (London: Eyre Methuen, 1967), p. 52.

² Soyinka, "Drama and the Revolutionary Ideal," in In Person: Achebe, Awoonor, and Soyinka at the University of Washington, Ed. K. L. Morell (Seattle: Univ. of Washington, 1975), p. 68.

Swamp Dwellers, and Death and the King's Horseman should not mislead us into classifying these plays as mythical ritual drama. Rather, the myths and rituals in them provide an immediate, definable, and tangible frame of reference for Soyinka's utilization of the roots of African drama. It should be noted that not all of Soyinka's plays feature a probe into life and man's psychic experiences. Common to most of them, however, is what Soyinka identifies as "an active, creative, and translatable tension,"³ rooted in man's liberating awareness. Soyinka refers to "the tensions created by two, three, or four beings of another culture and values struggling to free themselves from any form of incubus" and goes on to note that "these tensions tend to find a complete visceral identity with humanity's internal process of struggling free."⁴ It is not surprising, therefore, that conflicts generated by a craving for self-liberation by "the individual assertive will within even a conditioned consciousness"⁵ underlie the rhythm of tragic action in plays like The Strong Breed and Camwood on the Leaves. Other forms of opposing forces and values are found in The Lion and the Jewel and The Swamp Dwellers. These four plays will be the focus of attention in the next section in an attempt to show Soyinka's attitude towards change as provoked by the inevitable clash of values and other social forces.

(ii) The Conflict Motif:

Conflict in some of Soyinka's plays is probably best treated

³ Soyinka, "Drama and the Revolutionary Ideal," p. 65.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Ibid., p. 66.

under three headings: the society in transition; the parent-child conflict; and the city versus the village.

(a) Society in Transition:

Of all the twelve plays of Soyinka published to date, The Lion and the Jewel⁶ contains the most direct statements on society in transition. The play is laden with implicit questions challenging not only some of the values of tradition and conservatism, but also those of modernism and change. Critics have often identified the theme of this play in a variety of ways. S. Akanji, for instance, claims that the play "is a hilarious comedy about a proud young village girl, Sidi, who is finally brought to fall."⁷ The back page blurb of the twelfth impression (1975) claims: "How the Lion hunts the Jewel is the theme of this ribald comedy." Timothy Holmes holds that the play "is ostensibly a story about the wooing of a pretty girl by two very different men, with a dramatic interest created by the choice that Sidi . . . has to make."⁸ Bernth Lindfors, who sees the action in the play as a battle of the sexes, points out: "The play recounts how wily, old Baroka, through a clever ruse, succeeds in seducing young Sidi, a conceited village girl who has refused to marry him."⁹ Kay McNeive argues that

⁶ (London: O. U. P., 1963). All references to the play are taken from this edition.

⁷ A review of The Lion and the Jewel and The Swamp Dwellers, Black Orpheus, No. 6 (Nov. 1959), 50.

⁸ T. Holmes, "Five Soyinka Plays: a review," The New African, 2, No. 6 (July 1963), 112.

⁹ B. Lindfors, "Wole Soyinka and the Horses of Speech," Spectrum, 3 (June 1973), 82-83.

the play "is a three-act comedy about a sophomore youth of modern mechanized world who is the rival of an older, more roguish man, not formally schooled but wise in the ways of human nature."¹⁰

What these capsulizations lack is a proper perspective of Soyinka's preoccupation in The Lion and the Jewel. The playwright is interested in the story of the love-triangle involving Baroka, Lakunle, and Sidi only insofar as it serves as a means of exploring certain ideas. Presenting the play at the quadrangle of the Continuing Education Centre, University of Nigeria, Nsukka, in March 1971, Kalu Uka wrote in a production note:

Essentially Yoruba in inspiration, employing some of the happiest elements in Yoruba myth, such as the fabled virility of the 'mighty race of lions', the play touches chords that vibrate still in every heart in whatever part of the country or world. It is a charitable play, beginning with issues that are vital to its immediate setting in a period of change, transition and conflict, then reaching out to the universal oppositions between youth and age; between experience and pedantic idealism.¹¹

This is a commendable insight into the major issues in the play; but it seems to lose sight of the umbilical cord to which the issues isolated in the above passage are inextricably attached. Oyin Ogunba sounds quite convincing in his recognition of the central issue in the play as "the dilemma of choice between the rival worlds of tradition and

¹⁰ K. M. McNeive, "Wole Soyinka, Nigerian Dramatist," Unpubl. M. A. Thesis, Univ. of Kansas, 1967, p. 28.

¹¹ Cited by Kalu Uka in "New Directions in theatrical practice at Nsukka, 1970-75," a paper presented at the First Ibadan Annual African Literature Conference, 6-10 July 1976, p. 5.

modernism."¹² This dilemma, as viewed by Soyinka, is what enhances the tension that gives life, structure and meaning to the play.

The world of The Lion and the Jewel is allegorical of Nigeria of the second World War years, when socio-cultural re-orientation was creating considerable problems of taste and priorities not only among educated Nigerians, but also among the illiterates. He was singled out as prosperous and civilized who could speak the English language, light his living room with an "Aladdin," or a "Tilley" pressure-gas lamp instead of the smoky hurricane lamp, eat with silver cutlery and china-ware, and afford to wear coat and tie and imported "Lennards" shoes. These and other items such as three-speed "Raleigh" bicycles were the yardstick of wealth and progress.

Soyinka takes an amusing but a critical look at those World War years, recaptures the spirit and social milieu of the notable period of transition, and invites the audience to witness the level of progress attained. He re-creates the "past" in order to appreciate fully the "present" as a means of envisioning the "future." The "past" (the pre-colonial and early colonial days), is set against the "present," the late colonial and pre-independence era. From the tension between the two periods and their entrenched values, there emerges the picture of the "future" which promises to be as tension-ridden as the preceding eras.

With characteristic humour, Soyinka creates three characters—

¹² Oyin Ogunba, The Movement of Transition (Ibadan: Ibadan Univ. Press, 1975), p. 32.

Baroka, Lakunle, and Sidi—to illustrate his complex point of view which has baffled many a critic. As Howard Taubman has observed, in the play, Soyinka "is not an angry man on a soap box urging his compatriots to hasten change. He writes about 'progress' with humor and joyous folk wisdom."¹³ His three principal characters represent three points of view about "progress"; an analysis of these viewpoints cannot be fruitful unless the audience possess a proper perspective of the characters, as individuals, and in relation to one another.

The play opens with Lakunle berating Sidi for carrying heavy loads on her head—"It is bad for the spine. / And it shortens your neck" (p. 2); and for being "so unwomanly" in her dress. Whatever point Lakunle may have in his criticism of Sidi, he does not emerge as the "saint" he pretends to be.¹⁴ The jealousy that surfaces in his denouncement of Sidi's seductive manner of dressing betrays him as being just as vulnerable as the "good-for-nothing shameless men" (p. 3) who would lose their heads on seeing the partially exposed upper torso of a teenage girl. Lakunle is as much a self-opinionated individual as he is a male chauvinist. He regards the villagers, who misunderstand him, as belonging to the "race of savages" (p. 3); and, to Sidi who feels like pulping his brain because of his airs, he has this to say:

A natural feeling, arising out of envy;

¹³ H. Taubman, "A Nigerian Looks at 'Progress'," The New York Times, 18 April 1965, sect. 2, p. 1.

¹⁴ For a further proof of Lakunle's hypocrisy, see the mime show in "Morning," where Lakunle, playing the role of the Stranger, "Examines the wheels, pressing them to test the pressure, betrays the devil in him by seizing his chance to pinch the girl's bottoms" (p. 15).

For, as a woman, you have a smaller brain than mine.
 The scientists have proved it. It's in my books.
 Women have a smaller brain than men
 That's why they are called the weaker sex. (p. 4)

Lakunle dreams of a society in which a pounding machine and a blender would replace the mortar and pestle and grinding stone. Such a society would do away with the payment of the traditional bride price. But Sidi insists:

I tell you, Lakunle, I must have
 The full bride-price. Will you make me
 A laughing-stock? Well, do as you please.
 But Sidi will not make herself
 A cheap bowl for the village spit. (p. 7)

This provokes Lakunle to release a barrage of nonsensical utterances. He rejects what he terms as a savage, barbaric and out-dated custom. But the Western values that go with modernity which he believes will transform Ilujinle are all the insignificant trimmings of civilization. There is something of Herold Newton Day in Claude McKay's Banana Bottom in Lakunle. Newton Day is given to false values, shallowness and artificialities in his desperate attempts to impress Bitá Plant. Similarly, Lakunle is engrossed in his dream of an ideal society where he and Sidi would set the pace of progress:

Within a year or two, I swear,
 This town shall see a transformation
 Bride-price will be a thing forgotten
 And wives shall take their place by men.
 A motor road will pass this spot.
 And bring the city ways to us.
 We'll buy saucepans for all the women
 Clay pots are crude and unhygienic
 No man shall take more wives than one
 That's why they're impotent too soon.
 The ruler shall ride cars, not horses
 Or a bicycle at the very least.
 We'll burn the forest, cut the trees

Then plant a modern park for lovers
 We'll print newspapers every day
 With pictures of seductive girls,
 The world will judge our progress by
 The girls that win beauty contests.
 While Lagos builds new factories daily
 We only play 'ayo' and gossip.
 Where is our school of Ballroom dancing?
 Who here can throw a cocktail party?
 We must be modern with the rest
 Or live forgotten by the world
 We must reject the palm wine habit.
 And take to tea, with milk and sugar. (pp. 36-37)

It has to be conceded that Ilujinle cannot afford to remain an isolated community much longer. But Lakunle's plan for a new Ilujinle hardly promotes true civilization and progress. The adoption of city ways with the accompanying corruption, the replacement of productive farmlands with barren, though aesthetic, lovers' parks, the abolition of the payment of dowries, the preference for tea and sugar over the yeast-rich palm wine, and the introduction of monogamy in a predominantly polygamous society, may do more harm than good to Ilujinle. Besides, Lakunle plans to "print newspapers every day / With pictures of seductive girls." This is inconsistent with his idea of "modest women" (p. 3) who must cover their shoulders in order to look decent and respectable.

Lakunle's absurd contempt for the community of Ilujinle and its savage tradition exposes him as a comic, indeed ludicrous character. His disgust with the unprogressive culture stubbornly upheld by Baroka and Sidi makes him a grotesque rather than a realistic reformer. He is dominated by a conviction which sets him at odds with, and makes him guilty of excessive opposition to, the spirit of his age. But Lakunle cannot be completely condemned for ramming his head against the wall of a society that, under the leadership of Baroka, is not yet ready for

the pace of progress planned out by the village teacher. Baroka poses as the force of resistance frustrating Lakunle's plans, but his opposition to progress in the village tends to be eclipsed by Lakunle's headstrong and often confused vision.

In the mime used as a flashback technique in "Noon," the Bale's use of bribery and corruption in halting progress and civilization is acted out to confirm Lakunle's allegation "Of how he foiled the Public Works attempt / To build the railway through Ilujinle" (p. 24). The mimed scene, described in detail in the Stage Direction on pp. 24-25, and Lakunle's subsequent disgruntled comments, are a serious indictment of the Bale, even if the village teacher's distressed idealism is often misplaced. Soyinka does not fail to provide Baroka with a defence which, of course, does not necessarily exonerate him:

For a long time now,
 The town-dwellers have made up tales
 Of the backwardness of Ilujinle
 Until it hurts Baroka, who holds
 The welfare of his people deep at heart.

 I do not hate progress, only its nature
 Which makes all roofs and faces look the same.
 And the wish of one old man is
 That here and there,
 (Goes progressively towards Sidi, until he bends
 over her, then sits beside her on the bed.)
 Among the bridges and murderous roads,
 Below the humming birds which
 Smoke the face of Sango, dispenser of
 The snake-tongue lightning; between this moment
 And the reckless broom that will be wielded
 In these years to come, we must leave
 Virgin plots of lives, rich decay
 And the tang of vapour rising from
 Forgotten heaps of compost, lying
 Undisturbed. (p. 52)

Baroka, certainly, is not as sincere as he sounds. All he says tends

to be geared towards seducing Sidi:

The old must flow into the new, Sidi,
Not blind itself or stand foolishly
Apart. . . .

Yesterday's wine alone is strong and blooded, child,
And though the Christians' holy book denies,
The truth of this, old wine thrives best
Within a new bottle. (p. 54)

Sidi, with her "simple mind" (p. 53), may confirm Lakunle's chauvinistic claim that she has a smaller brain than he if she fails to recognize the sexual overtones in Baroka's ostensibly innocent appeal for compromise. But she may also be fully aware of the ulterior motives of Baroka and only succumbs to temptation. After all it was her idea to check the Bale out, a common reaction among girls when the rumour is spread that a man is impotent. Whichever way it is taken, Sidi's fall proves the Bale to be as crafty as he is fraudulent. So thoroughly executed is Baroka's plan that, even if Sidi had been sensitive to his trickery, she could hardly have seen through his fraud when he panders to her vanity:

BAROKA: (very gently.)

I hope you will not think it too great
A burden, to carry the country's mail
All on your comeliness.

(Walks away, an almost business-like tone.)

Our beginnings will
Of course be modest. We shall begin
By cutting stamps for our own village alone.

(pp. 51-52)

Sidi is easily taken in by Baroka's flattery, and her gullibility confirms Lakunle's remark that she is an uncivilized, ignorant bush-girl (pp. 8-9). The production and sale of postage stamps are the sole responsibility of the nation's government. This fact is well known to the Bale, but not to Sidi; and Baroka takes advantage of her blissful

ignorance to sell her the lofty idea that the image of the "jewel" of Ilujinle will henceforth appear on all postage stamps to be manufactured in the village. Ludicrous as Lakunle may be, he is apprehensive of the Bale's wiliness, particularly when Sadiku brings the Bale's marriage proposal to Sidi, saying, "Baroka wants you for a wife."

LAKUNLE: (bounds forward, dropping the wood.)

What! The greedy dog!

Insatiate camel of a foolish, dotting race;

Is he at his tricks again? (p. 19)

But Sidi is too naive and, too full of pride to take a hint from the teacher's apprehension. The ground is thus laid early in "Noon" for her "fall" in "Night."

A careful analysis of the utterances and motives of Baroka reveals that he does not really have the welfare of his people at heart. Properly understood for what he is—a corrupter of the agents of progress, a schemer, and a selfish and roguish rake—he cannot be anything but the enemy of progress that Lakunle terms him. To see him differently is to view him from the wrong end of the lens. His wiliness indeed reduces him from the status of a "lion" (king of the beasts whose image is usually associated with the natural ruler in Yorubaland) to that of a "fox" who succeeds only by selfish guile.

Caught between the world of Lakunle, the young but ambitious village teacher, and that of Baroka, the crafty village chief, is Sidi, the simple-minded jewel of Ilujinle. She is neither impressed by the vision of Lakunle and the values he cherishes, nor capable of understanding Baroka who speaks and acts from behind a thick mask. As she struggles between the two mutual antagonists, she emerges as the

awakening ingenue who falls prey to the wiles of Baroka, though she has nothing to regret for being tricked into having sex with the "lion." The irony of it all is that Sidi, who would not marry Lakunle unless her bride-price was paid fully, gets deflowered by Baroka without so much as a tip. This emphasizes Baroka's dubious character, and points out how his cunning conservatism has already started destroying the innocence of the younger generation he pretends to be protecting against destructive modernism. Baroka has long been planning to "take" Sidi as his wife by seduction, and yet he accuses Lakunle of trying "to steal our village maidenhead" (p. 17).¹⁵ This makes him very much like Satan reproving sin.

In order to appreciate fully Soyinka's message in his portrayal of his major characters, one has to regard Baroka and Lakunle as personifications of conservatism, and of modernity and change respectively. Sidi then represents the misguided new breed faced with the choice between the two. None of the three can be said to be flawless. But Baroka seems to be the most deplorable of the intensely individual trio. He betrays himself as an unprogressive conservative. Sidi is unfortunately misled by her blind self-pride to take a retrograde step into the unprogressive past. She may not feel the impact of her choice until she is five months old in Baroka's fool's paradise, and the Chief starts thinking of taking another wife whose arrival will automatically cause Sidi to fade into the background.

¹⁵ It should be noted, however, that this allegation is made, in the first instance, against the Stranger whose role is appropriately being played by Lakunle in the mime. The ambiguity in the accusation makes it possible for us to recognize Baroka's insinuation that Lakunle is also planning to marry Sidi without paying the bride-price..

Lakunle, with all his lofty and often mixed-up ideas of civilization, may be the most ludicrous of the major characters, but it would be a mistake to single him out as the principal butt of Soyinka's joke in the play. He is a comic figure whose action and utterances evoke a reaction of amusement rather than indignation, though his pomposity may strike the audience as somewhat contemptible. If there is any satirical intent in the creation of Lakunle, it is directed against the excesses of the propagandist manifesto for a sweeping change of indigenous tradition which his notion of a new Ilujinle represents. The question which Soyinka seems to be asking is: Does change (progress and civilization) have to be an uncompromising adaptation to foreign values and ideas? But Baroka who opposes Lakunle's vision of civilization, jaundiced as it may be, has nothing positive to offer that will foster the transformation of the society from its insularity to a less provincial state. He sees the school (significantly located at the edge of the town), the education of the youths, the proposed railroads, and other forms of civilization as posing a big threat to his security as the overlord of Ilujinle. Once Baroka is stripped of his mask and is exposed for what he really is, he arouses in the audience a feeling of indignation because of his pretentiousness and cunning.

The play which dramatizes a "day" in the life of Ilujinle ends at "Night" when the treachery of Baroka flourishes most. The tone of the play, however, is not as pessimistic as the deceptive victory of Baroka over Lakunle may suggest. The "night" of Baroka's life and of all he personifies is fast approaching, and his death may remove the

stumbling block in Lakunle's way. Lakunle's loss of Sidi to Baroka will probably make him a wiser man at the break of the new day. Sidi will soon discover, to her dismay, that the glamorous life she hopes to enjoy as the favourite wife of Baroka cannot last because Sadiku will be out in five months or sooner to look for another wife for the Pale. The promise of the new "day" then rests in Lakunle's recognition of the need not to move too fast for his own good and that of the society he once planned to turn inside out within a year.

As Taubman puts it, "What is attractive and delightful about The Lion and the Jewel is its point of view. Although Mr. Soyinka obviously believes in a future that will transform his country, he appreciates ancient traditions and old values. He reminds his countrymen and the white world outside, if it cares to listen, that the new ideas imported from abroad are not the only valid and enduring ones."¹⁶ It is obvious from the play also that Soyinka does not condone Baroka's intransigent conservatism.

One may conclude, therefore, that Soyinka endeavours to resolve the culture-conflict in the play (personified in the Lakunle-Baroka struggle for Sidi) in favour of compromise between the old and the new, between the unyielding traditionalism of Baroka and the sweeping changes projected by Lakunle. This compromise is demonstrated in the choice of Sidi which enhances the union of the old and the young. The union would have been more positive and more meaningful if Lakunle had conceded to pay Sidi's bride-price, thereby marrying his new ideas

¹⁶ H. Taubman, "A Nigerian Looks at 'Progress'," sect. 2, p. 1.

of progress with the old notions of tradition. Here lies the message beneath Soyinka's critical look at his society in the continued process of transition.

Out of the struggle for supremacy between traditionalism and modernism arises a tension which assumes a greater revolutionary dimension in The Strong Breed than is noticeable in The Lion and the Jewel. Acclaimed the most compact and most symbolic of Soyinka's plays, The Strong Breed¹⁷ deals with the traditional ritual involving human sacrifice during the annual festival of the expulsion of evil from the society. Although this is the central theme, the play is so complex that other important themes like self-sacrifice, alienation, and the conflict of cultures do emerge, and are hardly separable one from the other in their common focus on the society in transition.

The achievement of Soyinka in The Strong Breed is probably best described by adapting to the play Soyinka's critical views of Ben Caldwell's The Fanatic. Soyinka, like Caldwell, achieves "a successful integration of form, that is the ritual, and matter (story), character, conflict, social moralities within a dynamic of revolutionary tension, culminating in the ritual [murder of Egan],"¹⁸ a revolutionary idealist whose assertive will is set at odds with the collective will of the people of his native and adopted villages. Through the alienation of Egan and Sunna, Soyinka creates a synthesized structure that reveals,

¹⁷ In Soyinka, Three Short Plays (London: O. U. P., 1969), pp. 79-120.

¹⁸ Soyinka, "Drama and the Revolutionary Ideal," p. 77.

even if obliquely, a tension-ridden society caught in the throes of the process of transformation.

Sunma, who is convinced that "there could be no peace in the midst of so much cruelty" (p. 89), has earlier told Eman: "I wonder if I really sprang from here. I know they are evil and I am not. From the oldest to the smallest child, they are nourished in evil and unwholesomeness in which I have no part" (p. 88). This sense of alienation gradually prepares the ground for Sunma's total break with her society and her father. When Eman points out to her that she is needed at home and that she has a part in the end-of-year festival, she snaps back: "I have renounced it; I am Jaguna's eldest daughter only in name" (p. 90). Her determination to break with her people and their evil ways is demonstrated in an open confrontation with her father:

(Jaguna turns just in time to see Sunma fly at him, clawing at his face like a crazed tigress.)

SUNMA: Murderer! What are you doing to him[?]

Murderer! Murderer!

(Jaguna finds himself struggling really hard to keep off his daughter, he succeeds in pushing her off and striking her so hard on the face that she falls to her knees. He moves on her to hit her again.)

OROGE: (Comes between.) Think what you are doing Jaguna, she is your daughter.

JAGUNA: My daughter! Does this one look like my daughter? Let me cripple the harlot for life. . . .

OROGE: Nothing in anger—do you forget what tonight is?

JAGUNA: Can you blame me for forgetting?

(Draws his hand across his cheek—it is covered with blood.) (pp. 106-107)

The physical struggle between father and daughter in this scene demonstrates the antagonism between the evil conservatism of the village (represented by Jaguna), and the forces of change (personified by Eman

and Sunna). Unless one recognizes this significant clash of forces and attitudes, one may miss the pervasive revolutionary stance of the ritual tragedy in The Strong Breed.

When the play opens, the annual end-of-year festival of the expulsion of evil from the society is about to begin. It is significant that the community where the festival is to take place is unidentified. This anonymity immediately suggests the universality of the ritual that forms the core of the festival. There are some interesting similarities between the ritual dramatized in the play, and Horton's account of the New Year festival in Ijawland.¹⁹ J. G. Frazer, in his study of the public expulsion of evils, refers to the occasional and periodic ritual, among other places, in various parts of West Africa.²⁰ The ritual is fundamentally the same despite minor local peculiarities. The relevance of such purification rituals to drama has been pointed out by Sypher:

Behind tragedy and comedy is a pre-historic death-and-resurrection ceremonial, the rite of killing the old year (the aged king) and bringing in the new season (the resurrection or initiation of the adolescent king). Associated with killing the old king and devouring his . . . body was the ancient rite of purging the tribe by expelling a scapegoat on whose head were heaped the sins of the past year.²¹

What is abhorrent in this ancient purification ritual is the

¹⁹ Robin Horton, "New Year in the Delta," Nigeria Magazine, No. 67 (1960), 256-96.

²⁰ The Golden Bough, pp. 633-79. See, esp. pp. 637, 643-44, 659-60, and 669-71.

²¹ W. Sypher, "The Meanings of Comedy," in Comedy: Meaning and Form, Ed., R. W. Corrigan (San Francisco: Chandler Publ. Co., 1965), p. 34.

use of human beings as scapegoats, or carriers. This is the aspect which The Strong Breed implicitly denounces. As the hour of the rites approaches, a mysterious young girl drags an effigy towards Eman's house. As the stage direction puts it, "The girl is unsmiling. She possesses in fact, a kind of inscrutability which does not make her hard but is unsettling" (p. 84). The role of the girl in the play is a major one even though she appears only occasionally and briefly. She is used as a "bait" to lure away Ifada, the idiot, to be kidnapped for preparation as the "carrier" at the festival (p. 92). The effigy she drags behind her is a symbol not only of her own illness, but also of the evil of the society to be purged at midnight. The effigy becomes more significant when the girl slips on it the buba given to her by Eman. With Eman's buba on the girl's "carrier," there is an ironic presaging of the fate of Eman as the "carrier" at the festival. In fact, the girl's "carrier" at once becomes Eman's effigy, especially when it is left hanging from the sheaves of Eman's house to symbolize the manner of his death. The mysterious girl has been identified by critics as a Judas-figure, betraying Eman, the Christ-figure.²² It is logical, therefore, to consider her as "the play's most sinister character, since she seems to represent corrupted innocence and a mute indifference to sorrow and suffering."²³

The tragic situation gathers momentum when Eman, contrary to

²² See, for instance, E. B. Jones, The Writing of Wole Soyinka (London: Heinemann, 1973), pp. 49-51; and O. Ogunba, The Movement of Transition (Ibadan: I. U. P., 1975), pp. 115, and 121-22.

²³ Gerald Moore, Wole Soyinka (London: Evans, 1971), p. 55.

Sunma's repeated warnings (pp. 94-95), harbours Ifada who has escaped from his captors. The reprisal for such an act is made clear to him by Jaguna: "A carrier should end up in the bush, not in a house. Anyone who doesn't guard his door when the carrier goes by has himself to blame. A contaminated house should be burnt down" (p. 97). But Eman is not a total stranger to the custom of the people, as shown in the dialogue that ensues between him and Jaguna and Oroge (pp. 97-99). What differentiates their rites from those in force in his native village is the disposition of the carrier, who, he maintains, should be a willing scapegoat. "A village which cannot produce its own carrier," he claims, "contains no men" (p. 98). This prompts Jaguna, an impatient man of action and few words, to insinuate, after recovering Ifada:

You say there are no men in this village because they cannot produce a willing carrier. And yet I heard Oroge tell you we only use strangers. There is only one other stranger in the village, but I have not heard him offer himself (spits.) It is so easy to talk is it not? (p. 99)

The return of Ifada later on strongly suggests that he has been released in lieu of Eman who must have volunteered in the place of Ifada as the "carrier." This initial self-sacrifice makes Eman a Christ-figure, who willingly offers to carry away the sins of the village. The details of his suffering, his betrayal by the girl, his complaint of thirst, his death by hanging on a tree after being caught in a trap—all these recall the passion, betrayal, crucifixion, and death of Christ. But Eman is not the martyr one is led to believe him to be.

Margaret Laurence, for example, asserts that the play "is about the nature of human sacrifice where there is an unwilling victim

who is rescued by a martyr."²⁴ Similarly, Jones argues that "Eman's substitution of himself for Ifada, and his assumption of the role of the willing carrier of the evils of the village, [constitute] a decision which leads to his martyrdom."²⁵ It should be noted, however, that Eman, like Ifada, eventually becomes an unwilling victim who escapes from the priest preparing him for his role as "carrier." As he crouches beside some shrubs, torn and bleeding (p. 102), his mind goes back to his home from which he has fled. The vision he sees is that of his father, who impresses upon him that he (Eman) belongs to the strong breed, and asks him to take over his role as "carrier." Eman's answer is very significant: "I am unfitted for your work father. I wish to say no more. But I am totally unfitted for your call" (p. 104).

This scene—a peculiar form of a flashback—reveals Eman's state of mind. Though he belongs to the strong breed by birth, he runs away not only from his call to be a "carrier" by inheritance, but also from his volunteered role as "carrier" in place of Ifada. He now detests being a carrier having tasted of the bitter "pill" administered to would-be scapegoats. In other words, Eman admits by his flight that he is unfitted for the role he has volunteered to play. No martyr runs away from his death the way Eman does; and one wonders if he is really of the strong breed.

Christ may have called on Eli in moments of extreme agony on the Cross, but this does not amount to an attempt to discontinue his

²⁴ Long Drums and Cannons (London: Macmillan, 1968), p. 28.

²⁵ E. D. Jones, The Writing of Wole Soyinka, pp. 50-51.

saving mission. He dies in total submission of his will to God's on the Cross. Unlike Christ, Eman resolutely flees from death, and dies only when he is caught in the trap set by his enemies. The manner of his death undermines his martyrdom.

Eman's flight from the festival priest is, however, more than a mere show of cowardice as Jaguna alleges. It demonstrates his rejection of a system of ritual sacrifice similar to that which he has denounced by running away from home. Further "flashbacks" reveal that Eman has once been disillusioned by the religious hypocrisy of his Tutor who took charge of the rites of purification and initiation to manhood, performed on adolescents before they could take wives. The "flashbacks" show that Eman's break with tradition (or those aspects of it which reek with religious hypocrisy and inhumanity) starts early in his life, and that it only reaches a point of no return when he is confronted with the callousness demonstrated by the villagers in the play. His is a revolt that has developed over a long period and that has been expressed in a variety of ways. If his opposition to what he regards as an obnoxious tradition has been without much effect, his death certainly brings about a change of attitude among some of the villagers. At the close of the play, the dialogue between Jaguna and Oroge points out the guilt-feeling of the villagers:

JAGUNA: I am sick to the heart of the cowardice
I have seen tonight.

OROGE: That is the nature of man.

JAGUNA: Then it is a sorry world to live in. We
did it for them. It was all for their own
common good. What did it benefit me whether
the man lived or died[?] But did you see
them? One and all they looked up at the man

and words died in their throats.

OROGE: It was no common sight.

JAGUNA: Women would not have behaved so shamefully. One by one they crept off like sick dogs. Not one could raise a curse.

OROGE: It was not only him they fled. Do you see how unattended we are? (p. 119)

This scene is preceded by a stage direction which states that "the villagers begin to return, subdued and guilty. They walk across the front, skirting the house as widely as they can. No word is exchanged" (p. 119). This silent but unmistakable reaction of the villagers clearly indicates that there is an unusual dimension to the year's rites of expulsion of evil from the society. The villagers might have witnessed the ordeals of carriers in previous years and felt guilty after the rituals were over. But from all indications, never has there been a carrier of Emen's disposition toward his role. The uniqueness of his death lies in the negative function it serves. Rather than cleansing the society of its ills, it further pollutes it. The customary ritual curses heaped on the carrier as he is driven out of the community are stuck in the throats of the villagers who watch Emen's body as it dangles on the tree. In short, the rites are not completed, and the evils of the dying year remain in the village, worsened by Emen's unprecedented manner of death.

But Emen's death is not the only additional pollution in the community. Jaguna's wrath during the festive ritual is in itself forbidden.²⁶ Oroge reminds him: "if you want the new year to cushion the

²⁶ Cf. Okonkwo's anger which disrupts the Week of Peace in Chinua Achebe's Things Fall Apart (London: Heinemann, 1958), pp. 27-29.

land there must be no deeds of anger" (p. 98). Jaguna's disposition, which is obviously detrimental to the spirit of the festival, has been prompted by Eman's revolt against the manner in which Jaguna handles Ifada's case. But this revolt clearly signifies a new spirit being generated in opposition to the existing collective consciousness of the society. The reaction of the villagers to Eman's unusual death may very well be an expression not only of shock and disgust at the further pollution which his death constitutes, but also of an awareness of their man's excesses which have sullied the purification ritual. In their reaction, therefore, there is a demonstration of tension and conflict which mark out Jaguna and Oroge as alienated from the rest of the villagers at the end of the unsuccessful ritual: "It was not only him they fled. Do you see how unattended we are?" (p. 119).

Everything in the play—the rhythm of tragic action, characterization, dialogue, manipulation of symbols, the peculiar flashback technique—may be seen as contributing to the solidification of the conflict structure of the action. The conflict within Eman is complemented by the conflict of interest between him and Sunma. Sunma's relationship with Eman expresses her opposition to the view of her father, and the struggle arising therefrom is demonstrated in the violent confrontation with her father who is bent on destroying her lover. The characterization of Oroge as a check on, if not as a foil to, Jaguna points to an existing weakening of the solidarity of the villagers, a weakening which suffers a further blow in the silent protest of the villagers who refuse to curse Eman the carrier as custom demands.

Even in the "flashback" scenes, differences are exposed between Eman and his dead father, and between what Eman desires and the call of duty he has shunned. And finally, there is a remarkable discrepancy between the tradition of the villagers at the end of the purification rites and their actual reaction to Eman's body hanging high on the tree. All these conflicts, tensions, divided loyalties, and discrepancies that infest the world of the play confirm the existence of a process of transition, which is set in high gear by the catalytic force of the end-of-year ritual. The somber tone on which the play ends is not without some promise or hope. As Oyin Ogunba comments:

It looks as if something carrying a permanent effect has happened to the conscience of the people and that the community will never be the same again in respect of the treatment of carriers, strangers, idiots. . . .

Soyinka may be saying that what the transition period in Africa needs is a man. . . who would sacrifice himself the way Eman does, since it is the greatness of his suffering that will prick the conscience of our strange world. Such a man will have to be prepared to endure dislocation and other sufferings, as well as the risk of being forever branded abnormal since, as Oroge says, no man in his proper senses will consent to be a carrier.²⁷

This observation, whatever its limitations, brings into focus Soyinka's preoccupation with the agonies that plague the life of an individual whose assertive will is at odds with that of his society. The tensions and conflicts attending the process of transformation in the society may be made manifest and may be resolved, as in The Strong Breed, in the "abnormal" character who ends up being the sacrificial victim,

²⁷ O. Ogunba, The Movement of Transition, p. 116.

whose death brings about some change in the society. The resolution of such tensions and conflicts may take a surprisingly different turn, as it does in Camwood on the Leaves, where Soyinka explores the parent-child confrontation to articulate man's struggle for freedom.

(b) Parent-Child Conflict:

Originally, Camwood on the Leaves²⁸ was written for radio, and was first broadcast in November 1960, shortly after Nigeria's independence, by the Nigerian Broadcasting Corporation. According to the note on the page that immediately follows the fly leaf,

Subtitled 'a rite of childhood passage, for radio' Camwood On The Leaves explores the tensions of adolescent awakening set against the internal conflict of generations in a modern Yoruba family, against pressures of European Christianity on the traditional cultural pattern of West African life. In this play these tensions are expressed in terms of a conflict between Reverend Erinjobi, a severe minister, imbued with a sense that his own family's conduct must be beyond reproach, and his son, Isola, who revolts against his father's religion as well as his authority and defies them obsessively in defence of his own independence and that of the girl whose lover he has become.

Unlike Achebe's Things Fall Apart, or Henshaw's Children of the Goddess or Companion For A Chief, all of which concentrate on situations in the 19th century when Christianity was just beginning to take root in Nigeria, Soyinka's Camwood on the Leaves is set in 20th-century Nigeria when the Christian faith has become widely accepted. The tension created by the meeting of Christianity and traditional religion was by 1960 no longer as pronounced as it was in the late 19th century, except

²⁸ (London: Eyre Methuen, 1973).

among fanatics on both sides. Devout Christians, for instance, freely participated in traditional festivals like Igogo in Owo, egungun in Yorubaland generally, and Iromo (the festival of the palm fronds) in Igede Ekiti,²⁹ without incurring the wrath or curse of the Bishop of the diocese. Such participations nowadays do not necessarily make one a less devout Christian. One only has to regard the festivals as an annual re-enactment of socio-cultural events in the history of the people rather than as a rejection of the Christian faith.

This was the attitude, at least among the Yoruba people, when Soyinka wrote Camwood on the Leaves. The tension in the play cannot be restricted to the differing religious views held by Reverend Erinjobi and his defecting son, Isola. To limit the theme of the play to this tension, or even to say the theme "is the conflict of generations explored. . . on a domestic plane,"³⁰ is to scratch the surface. At the other extreme is the impressive, but rather stretched, criticism which leans on the sub-title of the play—"a rite of childhood passage"—to suggest that

Camwood on the Leaves. . . can be seen as a straightforward statement of the violence necessary to project a novice into adult-hood. If we relate this to the artist; the play celebrates the moment of transformation from received education to personal creativity and the release necessary to achieve this transmutation. But the circumstance of the writing and broadcast of this play (Nigerian independence celebration) suggests that Soyinka's purpose transcends a mere exploration of

²⁹ See A. O. Olofinlade, "Iromo Festival in Igede Ekiti," Unpubl. Cert. in Educ. thesis, Univ. of Ibadan, 1974.

³⁰ O. Ogunba, The Movement of Transition, p. 229.

a domestic issue. . . . Just as Isola comes of age and has to destroy the Serpent, that is, the father-figure, in the same way Soyinka appears to suggest that it is necessary for Nigeria, now independent, to fashion itself anew and attain real adulthood by rejecting the dubious father-figure of the former colonial master.³¹

This is an interesting analysis. But its validity is undermined by the fact that it raises the question as to whether "violence" is really necessary, and, therefore, recommended as the only mode of growth from novice to adulthood. Besides, Isola's disposition hardly qualifies him as an allegory of the creative artist.

Internal evidence clearly shows that the play is a psycho-social study and not a treatise on political revolution. Only remotely does the play work as a metaphor for political problems. The danger in the interpretation cited above, illuminating as it may seem, is that it diverts one's attention from the crucial issue in the play. A careful analysis of the action reveals that the conflict of generations within Reverend Erinjobi's family is only the consequence of a much deeper psycho-sociological problem.

The spirit of revolt in both Isola and Morounke is fairly similar to that generated in the world of Joseph Okpaku's Born Astride the Grave. Although Soyinka's and Okpaku's missions differ in approach and artistic achievement, the factors which prompt the spirit of revolt among the youths in their two plays are much alike.

In Carwood on the Leaves Soyinka uses Isola's three nightmares as a flashback device to reveal, even if obliquely, what prompted

³¹ Ibid., pp. 229-30.

Isola and Morounke to run away from home. In the first dream (pp. 25-28), Reverend Erinjobi emerges as a puritanic clergyman who is so taken up with the Christian upbringing of his children that, among other things, he gets them involved in choir practices and regular prayers at home and in church. Isola finds these exercises distasteful, and does not hide his feelings about them. Of course, Reverend Erinjobi is the negative exemplum of the mode of life he wants his children to live. Unduly severe and repressive, he creates the impression that he is insensitive to the strong feelings of his son. His inability to control his anger is not Christianlike. Without giving Isola the opportunity to know his offence (if at all Isola considers it as an offence), he begins to flog him. Isola, who apparently has become immune to irrational flagellations like this, sheds no tears. This aggravates his father's rage, and earns him a slap while at the same time he is ordered to put up his hands. It should be noted that the punishment is already meted out before the charge is laid: "You dressed yourself as an egungun masquerade and paraded the town like a pagan" (p. 28). Even this charge is accompanied by a blow, leaving Isola no chance to deny the charge were it false, or to defend himself even if it were true. Unable to bear the beating that accompanies the reprimand, Isola groans so loud in his sleep that Morounke has to wake him up.

The action of Reverend Erinjobi in this flashback scene strongly suggests that the clergyman is not equipped with the Christian virtues needed to deal with an erring child like Isola. Erinjobi's obsessive drive to steer Isola off the path of damnation is misdirected.

He hardly understands the problems of the son he sets out to reform. The second dream reveals how Isola's freedom has been unduly restrained. He is scolded and beaten by his father for wandering among gravestones in the churchyard, and for being in the company of a childhood friend, Morounke. Erinjobi's action confirms his own claim that he "was never one to spare the rod" (p. 17). His excessive rage is also exposed in the third of Isola's nightmares. The "abominable" crime for which Isola is tortured in this flashback scene is that he has impregnated Morounke, the fifteen-year-old daughter of Mr. and Mrs. Olumorin. The end of this third dream is significant enough to be reproduced here:

ISOLA: Morounke, so you do bear my child, my own child?
 MRS. OLUMORIN: Help! Help! Don't touch her. Get away, you shameless boy! Get him away from her.
 ERINJOBI: Get my stick. Where is my stick?
 MOROUNKE: Leave him. . . oh, leave him. Don't beat him. Isola, run away.
 OLUMORIN: In my presence, holding her hand in my presence. After what he's done to her? The devil's own offspring. . . the devil's own misbegotten fruit!
 MOROUNKE: I can't. . . I can't. . . .
 (Footsteps running off.)
 MRS. OLUMORIN: Morounke, come back. Come back here. Bimpe! Where is that maid? Bimpe. . . bring her back. Bring her back.
 ISOLA: Father, I. . . .
 ERINJOBI: Don't call me father. . . (He brings down the stick.)
 ISOLA: No!
 MRS. OLUMORIN: Help! Help! He's going to beat his father. Help! Neighbours! Help!
 ERINJOBI: (sternly): Isola!
 ISOLA: No! No!
 (Sound of brief struggle. A cane snaps. Isola wakes up, leaps up, breathing heavily.) (p. 33)

The brief struggle that ends this scene is as symbolic as that between Sunma and her father in The Strong Breed. Isola's struggle, however,

signifies his determination to break free from the stifling and hypocritical mode of life imposed upon him by his father. It is this struggle that forms the core of the tragic action in the play.

Olumori is as restrictive as Reverend Erinjobi. Instead of encouraging the friendship between his daughter and Isola to foster a closer relationship between the two families in the spirit of Christian brotherhood, he is driven by some distorted standard of morals to cage his daughter, but not for long. Erinjobi and Olumori may be seen, therefore, as representing authority, guardianship and leadership by the older generation. But their encroachment on the fundamental freedom of their children has produced only negative results that are as harmful to the youths as they are agonizing to their parents, who see their children as devils. These parents seem to be tortured by their realization that the evil they recognize in their children is a reflection of the devilry in themselves which they are determined to get rid of. For example, Erinjobi has fears and jealousies about the animal passions in himself as he sees a reflection of these vices in his son; he reacts almost to the point of insanity as he strives rather hypocritically to "redeem" his son from perdition. Erinjobi exhibits a peculiar kind of madness created by his distorted religion which fosters the unproductive madness of his son. Isola's type of insanity is an expression of his revolt against his father's form of madness.

Isola's revolt swiftly moves towards its peak when he runs away from home and builds himself a hut in the middle of the forest where he keeps as a pet a tortoise named "Moji" after his mother.

Across the stream lives a boa, which he christens "Erinjobi." His only desire is to kill this monstrous snake whose wickedness keeps reminding him of his father, as the following dialogue shows:

ISOLA: . . . Thinking of Erinjobi makes me uncomfortable.

MOROUNKE: Your father? Don't you ever stop thinking of him?

ISOLA: Oh, I didn't mean him. I mean the boa. I call him Erinjobi.

MOROUNKE: Isola, do you want to be a wicked son?

ISOLA: No, but it is a wicked snake. Remember those tortoise eggs? Moji hatched them all and sometimes they would swim across the stream. The snake can't swallow them, so he would pick them up and dash them to pieces against the rock. (p. 18)

The boa now becomes for Isola the disgusting father-figure that must be destroyed: "I cannot live here unless it's dead" (p. 18). Isola sees himself as the newly hatched tortoise craving for freedom as it swims in the refreshing stream, while "Moji" looks on helplessly as the boa destroys it on the other side of the stream. The fate of the helpless young tortoise is very similar to the experience of Isola whenever his father beats, kicks, and slaps him, and even drags him on the ground, and his mother cannot do anything to rescue him. Isola recognizes in the snake the type of threat which his father poses to his life. When, in the end, his father approaches through the bush to take Morounke away from him, the "Erinjobi" which Isola sees is not his father but that vicious boa-father-figure he has always wanted to kill:

ISOLA: Erinjobi, don't come in here! Go back to your chruich!

(Steady motion through the bush.)

Stay away, Erinjobi, stay away. . . if your head appears, Erinjobi, if your head shows once between the leaves. Erinjobi!

(He fires, MOROUNKE screams, begins to cry.)

Approaching footsteps running.)

ISOLA: Hush, girl, hush. . . why, it is only
Erinjobi. . . were you afraid? (p. 41)

Erinjobi's death comes as no surprise to the audience. It has been
presaged earlier on when Isola aimed at the snake:

ISOLA: Get me my gun. . . Quickly!³² It's
Erinjobi, I'll get him tonight. . . .
MOROUNKE: It looks horrible. Why don't you
shoot? Kill it at once, Isola.
ISOLA: I must wait for the head to appear. . . .
Just watch for the head, between the leaves.
MOROUNKE: There! There it is. It looks so
ugly. . . Isola, I'm frightened.
ISOLA: Don't touch me or I'll miss. . . there it
comes again.
(He pulls the trigger, only a click.) (p. 34)

It will require the reproduction of the entire play to illustrate fully
Soyinka's skill as an artist. But this foreshadowing scene will suffice
to show how Soyinka can raise a simple story to a symbolic height,
integrate what may first appear as arbitrary actions into a unified
fabric, provide a pertinent motive for every action and utterance of
his characters, and get his message across to the audience without
preaching.

Camwood on the Leaves is too complex a play to be given a
simplistic analysis. But, as will be shown shortly, it is obvious from
the play that Soyinka has nothing against authority, be it parental, or
any other form. It is the misuse or abuse of authority that he, like
Isola, revolts against. True enough, the bad parents in the play fear
and detest their children as "damned"; and it is the parents' reaction
to childish or pagan or sexual naturalness that Soyinka portrays as

³² Cf. Isola's father's "Get my stick" (p. 33).

both devilish and as creating madness in the young. However, Soyinka's preoccupation in Camwood on the Leaves, as in many of his other plays, is with the liberation of the individual who is caught between the tensions of a cultural world in the process of transition. The emphasis is on Isola's and Morounke's struggle for freedom. The problem of sex, the clash between the conservatism of the old and the revolt of the young, and the distinction between the hypocritical puritanism of the parents and the realistic though depraved views of life held by the children in the play, are only drawn upon by Soyinka to articulate the individual's inalienable right to freedom from oppression and misguided control. Soyinka once gave a lecture during which he digressed into

A discussion [that] took place over a play about a family in the grip of the familiar dilemma of social conscience. On the one hand there were the conservative parents; on the other the troubled son torn between a safe existence and his duties toward the revolution. On the level of character study, the interest of the play was indeed the process which led to the son's conversion from the parental, conservative attitude. It was spiced with a suggestion of historic determinism, a pattern of the social forces which firstly made the son what he was, then turned him into what he would become. It was a fascinating revolutionary inevitability. However, and this was the disturbing thing, at the point of his conversion the son quite suddenly, savagely, and arbitrarily struck his father, not just once but again and again. The father had made a mild move to stop him when he had finally decided that his destiny lay at the side of his embattled comrades. It was not a case of the violence occurring in an active moment of the struggle. Our hero simply hit the old man and hit him again. . . .

Now, I asked a beefy militia man, a revolutionary member of the proletariat, for his reaction. He had also seen the play and admitted that he had been profoundly shocked. . . . I played the devil's advocate for a while. I suggested that the essence of revolution is self-liberation, that partial self-liberation is dangerous and merely renders the individual

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susceptible to retrogressive influences which claim authority from traditional concepts such as family pietism, that the striking of the father by the son was therefore a symbolic and definitive severance of the entire family pietistic hold. Our friend used one expression which he reiterated again and again; it is sacrilege, he said, and it had nothing to do with revolution.³³

The foregoing lengthy quotation should make it clear that Soyinka's idea of drama and the revolutionary ideal would make Camwood on the Leaves a drama of revolt in which the action focuses on the protagonists' struggle for freedom. Any other theme that surfaces in the play is secondary to the major concern with the struggle for self-liberation. Consequently, Erinjobi's death does not symbolize the victory of paganism over Christianity. Rather, it emphasizes the triumph of the forces of revolution and liberty over repression and authoritarianism.

The struggle for self-liberation has emerged as a prominent motif in Soyinka's dramatic work. Particularly in the plays dealing with the various aspects of the theme of conflict, the struggle for freedom is articulated in forceful terms. In the next play, The Swamp Dwellers, it will be shown how Soyinka approaches the problem of striving for survival and freedom through an examination of the socio-psychological dilemma of the protagonist.

(c) The City versus the Village:

It has been shown in The Lion and the Jewel, where the village of Ilujinle is portrayed in transition, how Soyinka highlights in comic terms the tension created by the opposing values of modern civilization

³³ Soyinka, "Drama and the Revolutionary Ideal," pp. 66-67.

and traditional village life. In The Swamp Dwellers³⁴ Soyinka sets himself a similar task, but the tone is considerably more somber than that of The Lion and the Jewel. Igwezu, the central figure in The Swamp Dwellers, is caught in a perplexing double approach-avoidance conflict. His struggle to resolve this dilemma constitutes the core of the action in the play. Given the foregoing premise, The Swamp Dwellers may be regarded as a socio-psychological drama in which the playwright presents Igwezu's response to the stimuli provided by the mode of life in the city as set against that in the swamps. The socio-psychological mould of the play aids us in appreciating its complexities and tightness—which have often been misunderstood.

The city has often been contrasted with the country in African literature. It is an important motif in Ngugi's The Black Hermit; and Cyprian Ekwensi focuses attention on it in People of the City. In The Swamp Dwellers, however, the theme assumes a new dimension. Instead of depicting city life in preference to village life, or vice-versa, Soyinka creates a complex situation in which the evils of the city and those of the village in the swamps are portrayed as equally destructive to the aspiring youth. Similarly, the attractions of the city and the attachment to the village are equally tempting. This is what creates in Igwezu the double approach-avoidance conflict.

In order to understand fully Soyinka's artistry in handling the commonplace theme in The Swamp Dwellers, it is essential to realize

³⁴ In Soyinka, Three Short Plays, pp. 1-42. All references to the play are taken from this volume.

the central position accorded the Serpent figure in the play. According to Ogunba, the image of the Serpent in the play

can be given a two-fold explanation. First, there is the idea of the Serpent in traditional African thinking as the original owner, the landlord of the swamps whose tenants the human community is and who therefore demands sacrifice and veneration de jure. In this role the Serpent can be a benevolent spirit, though often capricious. Secondly, there is the more universal idea of the Serpent as a creature of prey, a malicious trickster and an enemy—physically and spiritually—to man, for the Serpent misleads man into false hopes and expectations only to betray him at the crucial time. It looks as if this author deliberately combines these two elements—the capricious landlord and the inveterate enemy—in this particular Serpent in order to emphasize man's predicament.³⁵

It is this hybrid figure of the Serpent that Soyinka presents as the evil force frustrating the efforts of the people whose village is situated in the heart of the swamps of the Delta region. In the world of The Swamp Dwellers, however, this evil "deity" does not exist as a truly mythical divinity. As the play reveals, the Serpent is the creation of the "tribe" of the Kadiyes, the self-styled high priests of the Serpent of the Swamp. It might have been worshipped with due reverence in the past; but at the time of the Kadiye in the play, the worship of the Serpent has become the worship of the Kadiye himself. This fact remains unknown to the frustrated swamp dwellers who continue to offer placatory but ineffectual sacrifices to the Serpent so that the crippling flood may recede and leave behind some fertile farmland.

For a long time, the Kadiye has been enjoying his position of

³⁵ O. Ogunba, "The Traditional Content of the Plays of Wole Soyinka" (Part II), African Literature Today, No. 5 (1971), 110.

power, but the force that will liberate the swamp dwellers from psychological enslavement by the Kadiye resides in Igwezu. This youth finds himself in a hostile world whichever way he turns. His eight-month sojourn in the city has opened his eyes to the harsh realities of city life. His vision of the city before he left his village is not made too explicit. However, other characters in the play articulate their own mental picture of life in the city. Makuri, for example, believes that "The city is a large place. You could live there all your life and never meet half the people in it" (p. 6). The city, according to the Kadiye, is a place where people make easy money and become filthy rich. Coaxing Igwezu, he says: "Admit you've made enough [money] to buy this village—men, livestock and all" (p. 35). Igwezu must have lived, at one time or the other, under the impression that the city gates are wide open to all newcomers in search of money: if Awuchiike, his twin brother, could make it in the city, he too should soon rise to a position of affluence. No sooner had he reached the city than his dreams vanished before him. For eight months he tried in vain to live with his plight in the hopes of a lucky break which never came. Igwezu's reaction to his experiences in the city are best put in his own words:

When I met with harshness in the city, I did not complain. When I felt the nakedness of its hostility, I accepted it. When I saw its knife sever the ties and the love of kinship, and turn brother against brother. . . . (p. 30)

This is the beginning of a shocking revelation which, among other things, points to the playwright's sombre look at the absurdities of human life. Asked whether he met his twin brother in the city or not, Igwezu

grows cynical, but later relieves his parents of their anxiety:

IGWEZU: I lived under his roof--for a while.

MAKURI: (shouting at the departed Alu.) Did you hear that? Did you hear that you stubborn old crow?... Was he... Did... er...? You did say he was in good health?

IGWEZU: Healthier than you or I. And a thousand times as wealthy.

MAKURI: There! (shouting out again.) Did you hear? Did I not always say so? (more confidently now.) How did he make his money?

IGWEZU: In timber. He felled it and floated it over the seas... He is wealthy, and he is big.

MAKURI: Did he ever talk of his father? Does he remember his own home?

IGWEZU: Awuchike is dead to you and to this house. Let us not raise his ghost. (pp. 31-32)

The real shock is still to come; but Makuri is already sitting on the edge of his seat, almost unable to trust his ears:

MAKURI: (stands bewildered for a moment. Then, with a sudden explosiveness...) What did he do, son? What happened in the city?

IGWEZU: Nothing but what happens to a newcomer to the race. The city reared itself in the air, and with the strength of its legs of brass kicked the adventurer in the small of his back.

MAKURI: And Awuchike? Was he on the horse that kicked?

(Igwezu is silent.)

Makuri's sensitivity to Igwezu's language enables him to recognize the figure of Awuchike suggested by the metaphor of the wild, kicking horse. The language of indirection with which Igwezu tells his tale of woe intensifies the severity of the shock that Makuri receives:

MAKURI: Did your own brother ride you down, Igwezu?... Son, talk to me. What took place between you two?

(Igwezu is silent again, and then)

IGWEZU: The wound heals quicker if it is left unopened. What took place is not worth the memory... Does it not suffice that in the end I said to myself... I have a place, a home, and though

it lies in the middle of the slough, I will
go back to it. (p. 32)

But before deciding to return to the swamps, Igwezu has had more than
his share of the dehumanizing forces of the city:

IGWEZU: I'm afraid I have had my turn already. I
lost everything; my savings, even my standing
as a man. I went into debt.

KADIYE: Impossible!

IGWEZU: Shall I tell you what I offered as security?
Would you like to know, Kadiye?

KADIYE: Not your pretty wife, I hope (guffawing.)
I notice you had come without her.

IGWEZU: No, holy one. It was not my wife. But
what I offered had a lot in common with her.
I put down the harvest from my farm. (p. 35)

The dialogue is admirably designed here, because Igwezu will return to
this frustrating experience to turn the Kadiye inside out and also to
destroy the Kadiye myth of intercession between the swamp dwellers and
the Serpent of the Swamp. Meanwhile, the dialogue extensively dispirits
Alu (Igwezu's mother), and, as she cannot absorb the shock any longer,
"she turns round slowly and goes into the house, more slouched than
ever before" (pp. 35-36).

Igwezu's disenchantment with the city and its corrupting
influences hits its worst mark with the loss of his wife to his twin
brother. All these bitter experiences in the city have caused him to
have a view of the city similar to that held by the Romantic poets.
Just as the Romantics decry the stifling influences of the city, as
distinct from the noble bliss and innocence of rustic life, so does
Igwezu bewail the forces of impoverishment, frustration, corruption and
destruction, all of which he sees at work in his own twin brother
Awuchike, a personification of the city.

The great let-down which Igwezu experienced in the city has driven him back to the village with the optimism of recovering his lost fortunes and lost manhood through a bumper harvest from his farm. But as it turns out, neither the city nor his farm in the swamps favours him. According to him, his business in the city has thriven "No more than my farming has done" (p. 34). Igwezu may have run to the city, but he has all along remained attached to the swamps. He has already sent his father a barber's swivel chair (p. 20). By this gesture, he demonstrates how city life and the world of the swamps can be integrated without necessarily creating any friction. But the symbolic contact of the artificialities of the city with the naturalness of the swamp almost sparks off a disastrous scene, as the following dialogue reveals:

KADIYE: (patting the arm of the chair.) Didn't he send you this chair within a few weeks of his arriving in the city?

MAKURI: Yes, he did. He's a man for keeping his word. Before he left, he said to me, With the first money I make, I am going to buy you one of those chairs which spin like a top. And you can put your customers in it and spin them until they are giddy.

.....
MAKURI: . . . And when they were bringing it over the water, it knocked a hole in the bottom of the canoe and nearly sank it. . . . But that wasn't all. The carrier got stuck in the swamps and they had to dig him out. . . . (p. 20)

This inauspicious incident demonstrates that the sophistication of the city poses a big threat to the simple mode of life in the swamps.

The simplicity of the life of the villagers has been imposed upon them, in part, by the brilliant fraudulence of the Kadiye, the priest of the so-called Serpent of the Swamps. Of all the characters

in Soyinka's work who stand between progress and the society in the process of transition, the Kadiye emerges as the most guilty of criminal deception. In reality, there is no such deity as the Serpent of the Swamps. The Kadiye, like his predatory predecessors, is not an intercessor between the swamp dwellers and the Serpent; he is the Serpent, as exposed by Igwezu.

On returning to the swamps after a disastrous sojourn in the city, Igwezu is completely shattered by the condition of his

little plot of land which has rebelled against the waste that surrounds it, and yields little fruit for the asking. I sowed this land before I went away. Now is the time for harvesting, and the cocoa-pods must be bursting with fullness. . . . I came back with the assurance of one who has lived with his land and tilled it faithfully. . . .

It was never in my mind. . . the thought that the farm could betray me so totally, that it could drive the final wedge into this growing loss of touch. . . (p. 32)

The truth, of course, is that it is not the land that has betrayed Igwezu; and he knows it. The real "traitor" is the Kadiye. This realization prompts Igwezu to dare the Kadiye and his office, and to subject him to a most revealing interrogation which is worth quoting in full because it constitutes the major crisis in the play:

IGWEZU: With you, holy one, my questions must be roundabout. But you will unravel them, because you speak with the voice of gods. . . ?

KADIYE: As I said before, I am ready.

IGWEZU: Who must appease the Serpent of the Swamps?

KADIYE: The Kadiye.

IGWEZU: Who takes the gifts of the people, in order that the beast may be gorged and made sleepy-eyed with the feast of sacrifice?

KADIYE: The Kadiye.

IGWEZU: (His speech is increasing in speed and intensity.) On whom does the land depend for the

benevolence of the reptile? Tell me that, priest.
Answer in one word.

KADIYE: Kadiye

IGWEZU: Can you see my mask, priest? Is it of this village?

KADIYE: Yes.

IGWEZU: Was the wood grown in this village?

KADIYE: Yes.

IGWEZU: Does it sing with the rest? Cry with the rest? Does it till the swamps with the rest of the tribe?

KADIYE: Yes.

IGWEZU: And so that the Serpent might not vomit at the wrong season and drown the land, so that He might not swallow at the wrong moment and gulp down the unwary traveller, do I not offer my goats to the priest?

KADIYE: Yes.

MAKURI: Igwezu, sometimes the guardians of the air are hard to please. . . .

IGWEZU: Be quiet, father! . . . And did he offer them in turn to the Serpent?

KADIYE: He did.

IGWEZU: Everything which he received, from the grain to the bull?

KADIYE: Everything.

IGWEZU: The goat and the white cockerel which I gave before I left?

KADIYE: Every hair and feather of them.

IGWEZU: And he made it clear—that the offering was from me? That I demanded the protection of the heavens on me and my house, on my father and my mother, on my wife, land and chattels?

KADIYE: All the prayers were repeated.

IGWEZU: And ever since I began to till the soil, did I not give the soil his due? Did I not bring the first of the lentils to the shrine, and pour the first oil upon the altar?

KADIYE: Regularly.

IGWEZU: And when the Kadiye blessed my marriage, and tied the heaven-made knot, did he not promise a long life? Did he not promise happiness?

(Igwezu has shaved off all except a last smear of lather. He remains standing with one hand around the Kadiye's jawl, the other retaining an indifferent hold on the razor, on the other side of his face.)

KADIYE: (Does not reply this time.)

IGWEZU: (slowly and disgustedly.) Why are you so fat, Kadiye?

(The drummer stares, hesitates, and runs out.
The servant moves nearer the door.)

MAKURI: (snapping his fingers round his head.)

May heaven forgive what has been uttered here tonight. May earth reject the folly spoken by my son.

IGWEZU: You lie upon the land, Kadiye, and choke it in the folds of a serpent.

MAKURI: Son, listen to me. . . .

IGWEZU: If I slew the fatted calf, Kadiye, do you think the land might breathe again? If I slew all the cattle in the land and sacrificed every measure of goodness, would it make any difference to our lives, Kadiye? Would it make any difference to our fates? (pp. 37-39)

The scene of interrogation may be compared to a piece of music, moving up to a crescendo. Igwezu's questions may also be regarded as a large mirror set before the Kadiye. On recognizing the ugliness of the reflection in the mirror, the Kadiye reacts with a mixture of wrath and self-disgust. As a face-saving move, he swears that Igwezu will pay for making an ass of the Kadiye and for his sacrilegious utterances. But it is evident from his reaction to Igwezu's threat on his life that he is scared as he scrambles to his feet and makes for the door. Despite the tenseness of the scene of interrogation, the Kadiye's timorous exit serves as a comic relief from the somber tone of the play.

The Kadiye's mask has been torn off rather rudely by Igwezu, and the departure of the Kadiye is a symbolic victory for Igwezu, though he knows very well that the Kadiye may retaliate by stirring up the entire village against the Makuri family. He has at least successfully exposed the criminal falsehood of the Kadiye. He confidently claims:

I know that the floods can come again. That the swamp will continue to laugh at our endeavours. I know that we can feed the Serpent of the Swamp and kiss the Kadiye's feet—but the vapours will still rise and corrupt the tassels of the corn. (p. 39)

The searching cross-examination of the Kadiye serves a four-fold function. Firstly, it is a fundamental questioning, not necessarily "of the validity of the traditional African philosophy of sacrifice,"³⁶ as Ogunba suggests, but of the authenticity of the Kadiye's priesthood upon which the belief-structure of the society has been operating. Secondly, in addition to the exposure of the quackery of the Kadiye, it ridicules the priest who, until this crisis point, has been a sacred figure in the community. Thirdly, it provides a psychological release for Igwezu. And fourthly, the uncompromising protest tone of the interrogation paves the way for the development of a questioning spirit among the swamp dwellers who may see some sense in Igwezu's action, and rid themselves of their gullibility.

Igwezu's revolutionary spirit, which earns him the title "slayer of serpents" (p. 40), grows out of despair. He has remained in the dark for too long. His "blindness," paralleled by the blindness of the Beggar, is effectively cured by the light of revolution. He can now say with conviction that no amount of sacrifice to the Serpent will solve the problem of flood in the swamps. The message in his protest may be lost to Makuri, his father; but it will continue to stir in the younger swamp dwellers questions which will gradually enfranchise the community from psychological enslavement by the Kadiye. Igwezu realizes that it will take some time before the liberation can be achieved fully. Meanwhile, his "blasphemous" confrontation of the Kadiye requires only one line of action, as his father admonishes him:

³⁶ O. Ogunba, The Movement of Transition, p. 19.

This is your home, Igwezu, and I would not drive you from it for all the world." But it might be best for you if you went back to the city until this is forgotten. . . .

BEGGAR: I think that the old man was right. You should go back to the city.

IGWEZU: Is it of any earthly use to change one slough for another? (p. 40)

Igwezu's crucial question depends for its effect on the pronunciation of the word "slough." Much as Igwezu loves to remain in the slough [slɔ̃], meaning "swamp," and attempt to reclaim part of the flooded farmland for cultivation, there is no guarantee that his efforts will yield any fruit more than the land had produced in the past. To go to the city, however, is to leave one unproductive land for another. Given the pronunciation [slou], the "slough" within the context of the play would mean degradation and hopeless dejection, both in the swamps and in the city. But if the word is pronounced [sluf], it would suggest a reference to the cast-off outside layer of the serpent's skin, used as a synecdoche for the Serpent-Kadiye.³⁷ Whichever pronunciation is adopted, Igwezu still has to change one "slough" for another. If he remains at home, the Kadiye will continue to threaten his life. But to head back to the city amounts to avoiding one Serpent only to run into the snare of another one because Awuchike is to the city for Igwezu what the Kadiye is to the Swamp. The significance of Igwezu's question—"Is it of any earthly use to change one slough for another?"—becomes more obvious, therefore, when the three possible meanings of

³⁷ The problem we are facing here arises from the fact that we are dealing with the printed rather than the spoken word; and, unless we watch the play on the stage, there is no way of knowing precisely which of the three possible pronunciations: [slɔ̃], [slou], [sluf] is intended. Igwezu's predicament allows for the use of all.

the words "slough" are applied to emphasize his dilemma. If neither the village swamp nor the city has promise for Igwezu, his future is bleak, and the wasteland before him becomes intractable.

In the end, however, Igwezu heads back to the city; and as he walks off slowly, he utters his final words in the play: "Only the children and the old stay here, bondsman. Only the innocent and the dotards" (p. 41). The impression created by this valediction is that Awuchike and Igwezu are not the only sons of the soil who have opted out of the hostile village. Even Makuri has remarked that "these young people. . . are no sooner born than they want to get out of the village as if it carried a plague" (p. 10). It may be surmised that as the innocent children grow into adolescence, they will probably move to the city, like Awuchike and Igwezu, and others before them. The old dotards will probably gradually grow more receptive to some of the revolutionary ideas of the younger generation. Whichever way the swamp dwellers direct their energies, the open ending of the play strongly suggests a probable reorientation in the offing. The tension created in Igwezu, which is bound to affect the world view of his parents, conservative as they are, will eventually bring the community one step forward in the process of transition.

No attempt is made in the foregoing discussion to suggest that Soyinka advocates that the swamp dwellers should leave their village en masse for the city. The city which has corrupted Desala (Igwezu's bride) cannot be an ideal alternative to the stifling situation in the swamps. The ideal thing to do would be to give up the futile sacrifices offered to the Serpent, and strive to reclaim the

land from the swamps for the purpose of growing some food crops. The blind Beggar will be too glad to do this if only the older generation of swamp dwellers will modify their faith in the so-called benevolent Serpent.

It should be pointed out that life in the swamps is not all agony. There is some element of romanticism, especially in the life of the old people. Part of the pride of the swamp dwellers lies in the tradition of taking one's bride-to-be to the swamps, to the depths of the natural world, to enact the ritual of marriage: Alu recalls how her mother had taught her to say on her bridal bed: "Where the rivers meet, there the marriage must begin. And the river bed itself is the perfect bridal bed" (p. 9). Such a ritual emphasizes the sense of spiritually belonging to the swamps. The irony, of course, is that the twin children (Awuchiike and Igwezu) begotten on the ritual bridal bed in the swamps have severed themselves from the land of their ancestors, and to live in the city. The fates of these twin children had been symbolically shown during the ritual love-making of their parents:

MAKURI: Think hard woman, Do you not remember?
We did not know that the swamp came up as far
as that part of the stream. . . The ground. . .
gave. . . way beneath us!

ALU: (beginning to laugh.) It is all beginning to
come back. . . yes, yes, so it did. So it did!

MAKURI: And can you remember that you were left
kicking in the mire. . . ha ha!

ALU: (no longer amused.) I was? I suppose you never
even got your fingers muddy? (p. 9)

This is not just the height of fun; it is also a premonition which the passions of the couple at this time cannot recognize, much less analyze. As Cartey observes, "the swamp became threatening and the bed of con-

ception fell in over them."³⁸ If the ritualistic sex in the swamp is usually marked by the symbolic collapse of the bridal bed, it is understandable then why children born of such a ritualistic union may revolt against the traditional belief of the society. It makes sense, therefore, that although Awuchike and Igwezu are "the very colour of the swamp" (p. 10) they turn out to be victims of the hostility of the swamp, something they have been from the moment of their conception.

The foregoing examination of the conflict in The Swamp Dwellers, as in the other three plays studied in this section, should justify Povey's observation that Soyinka's "theme is always some aspect of African struggling with the social and religious problems arising from the transition from tradition to modernity. Sometimes his tone is cheerfully comic [as in The Lion and the Jewel], at others the situation becomes a vehicle for high tragedy,"³⁹ as it does in The Strong Breed and Camwood on the Leaves. At other times still, Soyinka's tone reveals a serious attempt to assess the intrinsic values of modernity (represented by the city) and traditionalism (represented by the village), as exemplified in The Lion and the Jewel and The Swamp Dwellers.

In these plays, Soyinka makes no overt attempt to propose a fixed or preconceived solution. Rather, he forcefully demonstrates the tension which one form of conflict or another may generate in the individual. This tension may reveal the strong convictions of the

³⁸ W. Cartey, Whispers from a Continent: The Literature of Contemporary Black Africa (London: Heinemann, 1971), p. 334.

³⁹ J. F. Povey, "Wole Soyinka and the Nigerian Drama," Tri-Quarterly, No. 5 (Dec. 1965), 131.

individual in opposition to the collective consciousness of the community in which he lives. Consequently, the tension gives rise to a spirit of revolt, and struggle for self-liberation. The process of this liberation may not necessarily run its full course in any given play, but the openness of the endings of the conflict plays points in the direction of an active evolutionary process at work in the society.

(iii) Satire:

Soyinka uses satire more effectively than most other Nigerian writers. Satire in his work reflects, more intensely and more extensively than in the work of his contemporaries, the shortcomings in the nature, form and direction of the society's social, economic and political orientation. His satirical pieces, like those of his contemporaries, fall within the mainstream of a literature that closely follows and documents the problems of a society in transition. However, unlike the others', his satirical works scrutinize the society's social, political and economic reorientation, and expose the various ills which lie at the base of the moral decadence that threatens the progress, stability, and security of the Nigerian society. It is this moral decadence in its many facets that Soyinka and his contemporaries seek, through their satirical pieces, to reform as much as possible.

In this section of this study, six of Soyinka's plays will be examined to illustrate his use of the satiric weapon to reform the world around him, a world that is gradually falling apart because of its susceptibility to corruption. For the purpose of convenience, the six plays will be classified under social and political satire, although the satire in each play is not exclusively social, or political.

(a) Social Satire:

The amusing story of Brother Jeroboam, prophet and swindler, is the lightest of Soyinka's satiric comedies. However, like the farcical The Lion and the Jewel, The Trials of Brother Jero,⁴⁰ which features the intriguing roguery of Jeroboam, has a touch of serious social comment. Short and slight as this play is, it does not deserve to be termed as a "side-show-without-substance."⁴¹ The several themes in the play may be "merely mentioned or treated briefly rather than fully developed,"⁴² as Ogunba observes; but beneath the superficiality of these themes lies Soyinka's social and political satire.

Yet, one does not have to take the play too seriously. While Soyinka does not invite the audience to pass a moral judgment on Jero who is a "forthright" and clever crook. He does not offer a criticism of Christianity or of the Cherubim and Seraphim sect, which would have made the play a thesis drama. All that is given the audience in the play is an opportunity to see on the stage a brilliant re-creation of their society as it is, so that they may laugh at their own follies and delight in Brother Jero's, indeed Soyinka's wit.

The opening lines of the play immediately expose the astonishing growth of the population of self-styled "prophets" in Nigeria, particularly in the late fifties and the early sixties. Jero has risen to increase the tribe of these quack prophets who have made "spiritual

⁴⁰ In Three Short Plays, pp. 43-77.

⁴¹ J. M. Gibbs, "Aspects of the Nigerian Dramatic Tradition," Unpubl. M. A. Thesis, American University, 1967, p. 151.

⁴² O. Ogunba, The Movement of Transition, p. 63.

healing" their lucrative stock-in-trade. Jero's confessional statement in the opening scene reveals, among other things, that the glamour of the prophets' "trade" has been dulled by the dwindling population of converts, lately won over by the television and the "Highlife" music at the bars. Like the other prophets, Jero has lost a large number of his congregation, presumably, as a result of the discovery of his quackery. The action, however, does not reflect this depression period in the prophet's trade. Rather, it presents a "once-upon-a-time" story of Jero's successful day when his trade was still flourishing.

Wole Soyinka's artistic purpose in the play is set out in Jero's announcement:

my whole purpose in coming here is to show you one rather eventful day in my life, a day when I thought for a moment that the curse of my old Master was about to be fulfilled. It shook me quite a bit, but . . . the Lord protects his own. . . . (p. 46).

Jero's role in the opening scene may be likened to that of the Stage Manager in Thornton Wilder's Our Town. Like the Stage Manager, Jero is the narrator of the story which the audience are about to watch dramatized. Also, his character is very much like Chaucer's Pardoner. Like him, Jero introduces himself as well as his roguish trade with a straight face; and one looks forward to the re-enactment of the protagonist's roguery in the same way that one waits for the Pardoner to practise his trade which he boasts of so brazenly.

The Trials of Brother Jero has been discussed rather extensively, but hardly has any critic given Brother Jero the full credit he deserves as a dramatic character rather than as a representation of

a type in a real situation in a given society. It is through his manipulation of the other characters that one gets to know the society of which he is a product. Soyinka himself once said that Brother Jero does not have to be taken too seriously. In a stimulating televised discussion, Soyinka asked the participants:

What of this society he [Brother Jero] represents? Do you find him a creature of this society, a representative of that society? What feelings do you get about a society which has produced and nourished and maybe deserves Brother Jero?⁴³

To answer these questions satisfactorily, one needs to be quite familiar with the Nigerian society in which the play is set. Fortunately, the playwright provides a fairly good picture of the society through the characters he creates.

After the first expository scene in which Soyinka introduces the idiom of the masquerade whose face-behind-the-mask is revealed to the audience, the action moves on to what Soyinka himself describes as "a very light recital of human evils and foibles."⁴⁴ Scene ii marks the beginning of the dramatic action proper. This scene, which may be termed as the Amope scene, describes in hilarious terms the "strained" relations between Amope and her husband Chume. The dialogue between the couple reminds one of the Makuri-Alu dialogue which opens The Swamp Dwellers. The haggling husband and wife are created to demonstrate a type of tension which at the same time alienates the husband from the

⁴³ Soyinka, "Televised Discussion," in Ia Person, p. 90.

⁴⁴ Soyinka, in an interview conducted by Lewis Nkosi, in African Writers Talking, Eds., D. Duerden and C. Pieterse (London: Heinemann, 1972), p. 174.

wife, and reveals the psychological release experienced by each of them after letting off some steam. The overall effect is the emergence of a charming couple who, despite the pressure that sets one against the other, can withstand the storm and grow wiser and more understanding.

The characterization of Amope is not without some significance. Asked in a televised discussion whether Amope reflects some idea that Soyinka has of women, the playwright replies that Amope

is taken straight from women I know in my society. My own mother, for instance, was a terror. Not by nature, but she was a trader, and I know that, even she, who was a rather gentle person, when she got fed up and she wanted to collect her debts from her customers—it is no joke—suddenly she was transformed. I think most of our . . . petty trader character is very strong in a lot of our women. They are not quite as down-trodden as some people will have the world believe in these days of women's revolution. They know how to handle themselves.⁴⁵

Amope may be considered as an Osomalo type cast⁴⁶ in her determination to collect her money from Brother Jeru. But she also exhibits some of the quality of the sharp-tongued market woman in her altercation with the fish-seller. Like Sophia and the Fishwoman in Errol John's Moon on a Rainbow Shawl,⁴⁷ Amope and the Trader bandy words over the price and quality of smoked fish. The Amope-Trader confrontation is worth quoting in full because it typifies a realistic situation in the society.

⁴⁵ Soyinka, "Televised Discussion," in In Person, p. 93.

⁴⁶ See footnote No. 6 on p. 190 above.

⁴⁷ (London: Faber and Faber, 1958). See pp. 30-31.

which Soyinka represents in his play:

AMOPE: Ei; what are you selling?

(The trader hesitates, decides to continue on her way.)

AMOPE: Isn't it you I'm calling? What have you got there?

TRADER: (stops, without turning round.) Are you buying for trade or just for yourself?

AMOPE: It might help if you first told me what you have.

TRADER: Smoked fish.

AMOPE: Well, let's see it.

TRADER: (hesitates.) All right, help me to set it down. But I don't usually stop on the way.

AMOPE: Isn't it money you are going to the market for, and isn't it money I'm going to pay you?

TRADER: (as Amope gets up and unloads her.) Well, just remember it is early in the morning. Don't start me off wrong by haggling.

AMOPE: All right. (Looks at the fish.) How much a dozen?

TRADER: One and three, and I'm not taking a penny less.

AMOPE: It is last week's, isn't it?

TRADER: I've told you, you're my first customer, so don't ruin my trade with the ill-luck of the morning.

AMOPE: (holding one up to her nose.) Well, it does smell a bit, doesn't it?

TRADER: (putting back the wrappings.) Maybe it is you who haven't had a bath for a week.

AMOPE: Yeh! All right, go on. Abuse me. Go on abuse me when all I wanted was a few of your miserable fish. I deserve it for trying to be neighbourly with a cross-eyed wretch, pauper that you are. . . .

TRADER: It is early in the morning. I am not going to let you infect my luck with your foul tongue by answering you back. And just you keep your cursed fingers from my goods because that is where you'll meet with the father of all devils if you don't.

(She lifts the load to her head all by herself.)

AMOPE: Yes, go on. Carry the burden of your crimes and take your beggar's rage out of my sight. . . .

TRADER: I leave you in the hands of your flatulent belly, you barren sinner. May you never do good in all your life.

AMOPE: You're cursing me now, are you? (pp. 52-53)

The beauty of this alteration is that it provides a highly comic scene. Amope blames the fish-seller for Jero's escape. However, the trader was gone by the time Amope flares up: "Do you see what you have done, you spindle-leg toad? Receiver of stolen goods, just wait until the police catch up with you" (p. 53). As if Amope's day has not been sufficiently ruined by the escape of Jero, an urchin shows up to tease her with his talking drum after failing to receive some aims from her, and Amope grows wild with fury:

I don't know what the world is coming to. A thief of a Prophet, a swindler of a fish-seller and now that thing with lice on his head comes begging for money. He and the Prophet ought to get together with the fish-seller, their mother. (p. 53)

Amope's notion of Brother Jero is meant to create in the audience a picture that transcends a mere mockery of Jero because it also shows a wide range of characters--from an urchin to the Prophet--whose mode of operation in the society is put up for ridicule in the play.

The rest of the play focuses attention of Brother Jero at work. Scenes iii-v are an ingenious exposé of a society which is so materialistically oriented that it produces gulls and charlatans in great numbers. In such a society, charlatans like Brother Jero usually prosper, even if for a limited time; and their "trade" flourishes on the worldly needs of their gullible followers.

At the beginning of scene iii, Soyinka provides a stage direction which is an impressive realistic description of the beachside "church" where self-styled prophets like Jero preach to dupes who respond to prayers and sing in soulful frenzy. The Bar Beach at Lagos has long been an ideal resort for such "churches" because of the great

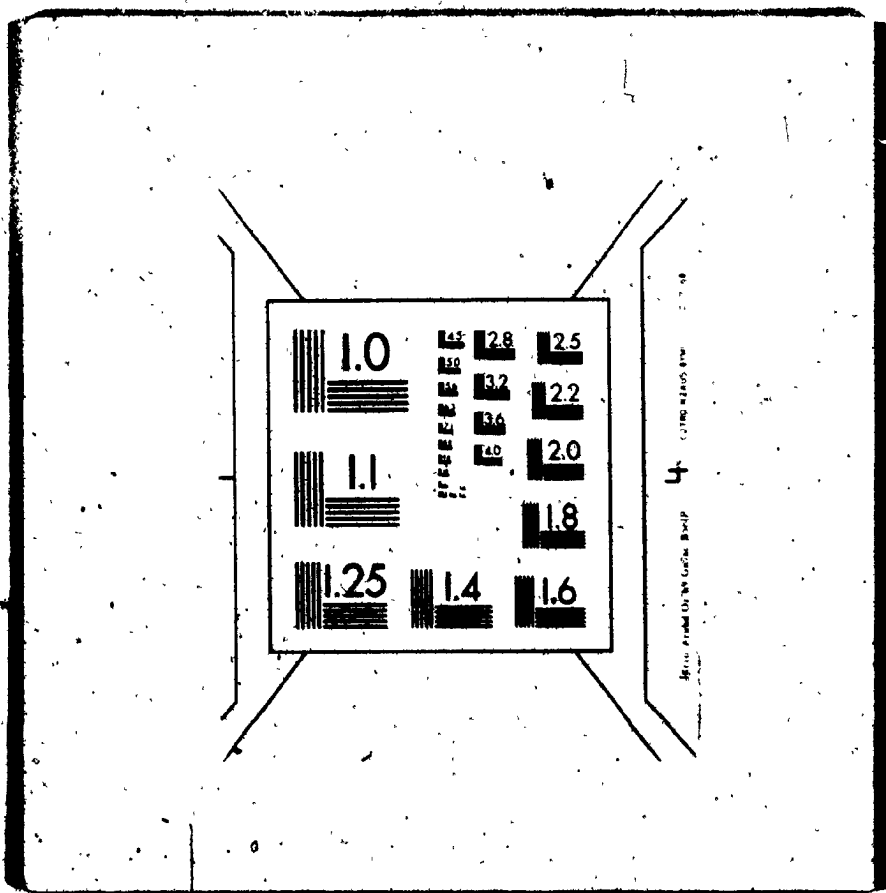
attraction, it has for leading roles, drummers, dancers, and pick-
neters, "not unlike what the "prophets" usually do with their "converts."
The truth about these churches is that they exist as long as there are
people to swell their congregations. Although the churches are erected
ostensibly for spiritual purposes, most of the worshippers are, in
reality, "customers" who approach the supposed prophets for miraculous
solutions to their worldly problems. In the church, these "worship-
pers" are a fascinating group: their singing, drumming, rhythmic clap-
ping, the dances, the ecstasy, and what Jero correctly describes as
"that initial jabber" when some of them attain their so-called spiritual
possession—all these make a captivating spectacle. However, contrary
to Gerald Moore's belief that the creeds upheld in these beachside
churches "offer to their faithful supporters the twin attractions of
success in this world and salvation in the next,"⁴⁸ the churches do not
offer any real success in life or spiritual salvation. The prophets
are more interested in the tithes they collect from the worshippers
who, in their gullibility, hope for material wealth, for children, while
they pray hypocritically for the salvation of their "sinful" souls.

In a highly comic scene, for instance, Jero demonstrates his
religious hypocrisy when he is confronted with the seductiveness of a
teenager who has just had her swim:

JERO: (following her all the way with his eyes.)
Every morning, every day I witness this divine
transformation, O Lord.
(He shakes his head suddenly and bellows.)

48 G. Moore, Wole Soyinka (London: Evans, 1971), p. 20.

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Pray Brother Jeroboam, pray! Pray for strength against temptation.

(He falls on his knees, face squeezed in agony and hands clasped. Chume enters, wheeling his bike. He leans it against the palm tree.)

JERO: (not opening his eyes.) Pray with me, brother. Pray with me. Pray for me against this one weakness. . . against this one weakness, O Lord. . . .

CHUME: (falling down at once.) Help him, Lord. Help him, Lord.

JERO: Against this one weakness, this weakness, O Abraham. . . .

CHUME: Help him, Lord. Help him, Lord.

JERO: Against this one weakness David, David, Samuel, Samuel.

CHUME: Help him. Help him. Help 'am. Help 'am.

JOB: Job Job, Elijah Elijah.

CHUME: (getting more worked up.) Help 'am God. Help 'am God. I say make you help 'am. Help 'am quick quick.

JERO: Tear the image from my heart. Tear this love for the daughters of Eve. . . .

CHUME: Adam, help 'am. Na your son, help 'am. Help this your son.

JERO: Burn out this lust for the daughters of Eve.

(pp. 55-56)

The above prayer against temptation must be seen as a travesty of what should normally be a fervent supplication; it cannot be taken too seriously, especially when it is offered by a self-confessed rogue whose "mask" is too well known to the audience to fool them as to the sincerity of his utterances and actions. White cassocks and velvet capes are the paraphernalia with which some prophets and other clergymen cover up their outrageous immorality and other social evils. Through Jero's own "mask," Soyinka satirizes the clergymen who, like Jero, would preach against the commission of venial sins, but who themselves are guilty of some of the seven deadly sins. But Jero surpasses all of the clergymen and prophets through his brilliant display of business acumen. He possesses the ability to psychoanalyze his

prospective "customers," and to identify what appeals to them that will pull them out of the folds of other "scums" to swell his own congregation.

Jero is willing to invest heavily in anticipation of a huge turnover; but the success of his "trade" requires the growing patronage of "customers." Among his gullible followers are type characters like Brother Chumé, whose next goal is the post of Chief Clerk; someone who sets his eye on a chieftaincy title in his home town; a politician who hopes to become the first Prime Minister of the new Mid-North-East State when it is created; and, at the end of the play, Jero adds a back-bencher in the Federal Parliament who aspires to a ministerial post. The common thread that unites all these type-characters is that none of them seeks any spiritual regeneration from Brother Jero. What they all want is material wealth or children, and Jero takes advantage of their needs to boost his own trade. With type-characters like these, it becomes clear that Soyinka's satire in the play is directed not only at the quackery of Brother Jero, but also at the vanity of human wishes which the aspirations of Jero's followers represent. Chumé articulates these wishes in his earnest supplication which follows the penitent's paroxysm:

Tell our wives not to give us trouble. And give us money to have a happy home. Give us money to satisfy our daily necessities. Make you no forget those of us who dey struggle daily. Those who be clerk today, make them Chief Clerk tomorrow. Those who are Messenger today, make them Senior Service tomorrow. Yes, Father, those who are Messenger today, make them Senior Service tomorrow. (The Amens grow more and more ecstatic.) Those who are petty trader today, make them big

contractors tomorrow. Those who dey sweep street today, give them their own big office tomorrow. If we dey walka today, give us our own bicycle tomorrow. I say those who dey walka today, give them their own bicycle tomorrow. Those who have bicycle today, they will ride their own car tomorrow. (The enthusiasm of the response becomes, at this point, quite overpowering.) I say those who dey push bicycle, give them big car tomorrow. Give them big car tomorrow. Give them big car tomorrow, give them big car tomorrow.

(pp. 63-64)

Chume's desires betray the materialistic, rather than the spiritual needs of the "worshippers." Here lies the point of Soyinka's satire on false prophets and their customers, and on the trade that brings them together. No doubt, Chume's prayer for the advancement of the members of the church is a projection of his own needs. He owns a bicycle and would like to drive his own car some day. He is a Chief Messenger, hoping to become a "Senior Service" (senior civil servant) in future. But Chume is characterized mainly to typify the majority in the society that produces and sustains quacks and dupes alike.

The exposure of Jero's quackery at the end of scene iv places the denouement in the play at a point where no coup-de-théâtre is either possible or desirable. It has been mentioned at the beginning that Brother Jero's day was almost ruined by the daughters of Eve, and that the curse of his mentor (the old Prophet) "was about to be fulfilled: . . . but the Lord protects his own" (p. 46). Therefore, the play is not expected to end with any severe sentence passed on Jero. In the place of a concluding denouement, Soyinka provides a situation whereby Brother Jero is given a further opportunity to ply his craft.

In a remarkable turn of events, Jero outsmarts Chume who

rushes in brandishing a cutlass in an attempt to get even with a man who, he strongly suspects, has been his wife's lover rather than her debtor. Jero's escape from Chume would have been less significant had Jero not earlier convinced his new convert—a back-bench Member of Parliament—that he would be appointed the Minister of War when the nation was plunged into strife:

I saw this country plunged into strife. I saw the mastering of men, gathered in the name of peace through strength. And at a desk, in a large gilt room, great men of the land awaited your decision. Emissaries of foreign nations hung on your word, and on the door leading into your office, I read the words, Minister for War. . . .

(The Member turns round slowly.)

. . . It is a position of power. But are you of the Lord? Are you in fact worthy? Must I, when I have looked into your soul, as the Lord has commanded me to do, must I pray to the Lord to remove this mantle from your shoulders and place it on a more God-fearing man?

(The Member moves forward unconsciously. The Prophet gestures him to stay where he is. Slowly--)

Yes. . . I think I see Satan in your eyes. I see him entrenched in your eyes. . . .

(The Member grows fearful, raises his arms in half-supplication.)

The Minister for War would be the most powerful position in the Land. The Lord knows best, but he has empowered his lieutenants on earth to intercede where necessary. . . .

(p. 74)

Jero's success at this point is manifest when his flight from Chume is interpreted by the Member as a miraculous assumption of the Prophet into heaven: "Vanished. Transported. Utterly transmuted. I knew I stood in the presence of God" (p. 76). Jero returns on cue to draw the attention of the audience to his latest achievement. Meanwhile the Member awaits "the second coming" of the Prophet: "I must hear further from him. Perhaps he has gone to learn more about this ministerial post" (p. 76).

Jero rounds off the play, in his characteristic self-confessed roguish manner, by revealing his plans to have Chume certified:

I have already sent for the police. It is a pity about Chume. But he has given me a fright, and no prophet likes to be frightened. With the influence of that nincompoop [that is, the Member of Parliament] I should succeed in getting him certified with ease. A year in the lunatic asylum would do him good anyway. (p. 77)

What Soyinka wants the audience to admire in Jero is his warped genius, which keeps nourishing his survival instinct⁴⁹ in a society which is so decadent that its social ills are progressively pushing it towards national strife. It is not without some seriousness, therefore, that Soyinka makes Jero say: "I saw this country plunged into strife" (p. 74). This is more than Brother Jero prophesying war. Soyinka's analysis of the affairs of state is obvious here; and the social and the political are blended in his satire on a corrupt society, and on its equally corrupt leaders. Characters like Brother Jero will always rise and prosper in such a society. As Eldred Jones observes:

Brother Jero ends the play a more sinister figure than he began. His roguery is now allied to power. He can easily eliminate ordinary mortals like Chume, and, contrary to his deserts (but in keeping with the ways of the perverse world) he survives his day of ordeals and lives to plague his deluded countrymen further. For Brother Jero is a false prophet. His people look pathetically to him for leadership and he replies with deceit. The situation is capable of wider and more sinister applications.⁵⁰

A discussion of The Trials of Brother Jero cannot be complete

⁴⁹ Soyinka, "Televised Discussion," in In Person, p. 91.

⁵⁰ E. D. Jones, The Writing of Wole Soyinka, p. 60.

without some mention of its language. Commenting on The Road, Susan Yankowitz asserts that its "literary distinction resides in a skillful manipulation of speech rhythms as well as a highly provocative usage of Nigerian-English dialect." She then goes on to remark that "Soyinka has used this sort of dialect in the short comedy The Trials of Brother Jero with even greater success. Here is a subtle interplay between the rhythms of conventional speech and those of the popular vernacular to which the characters return at moments of stress and excitement."⁵¹

The pidgin-English spoken by Chume is not a "Nigerian-English dialect" as Yankowitz states. Rather it is a form of patois which is not native to Nigeria, though its usage has become so popular that the "jargon" nature of the language has established an acceptable speech pattern which is spoken throughout West Africa. Every Nigerian who has a smattering of English finds no problem understanding pidgin-English even if he or she cannot speak it fluently. Its use in the theatre creates a sensation that enlivens dramatic dialogue when skillfully spoken, and brings the characters closer to the audience than the standard English language can.

A Nigerian whose knowledge of the English language is limited to the patois called pidgin-English will never say something like "satisfy our daily necessities," or "those of us." But for someone who has an appreciable command of English, these expressions may easily be mixed with pidgin-English. Chume, a Chief Messenger in a government

⁵¹ Susan Yankowitz, "The Plays of Wole Soyinka," African Forum, 1, No. 4 (Spring 1966), 132.

office, is such a Nigerian. It is incorrect, therefore, to say that in Chume's prayer for advancement (pp. 63-64), "Soyinka's ear is still not completely sure in his shaping of pidgin dialogue (for instance, the ponderous 'satisfy our daily necessities' and the unlikely circumlocution, 'those of us who')." ⁵² However, Moore returns to the right path in his praise of Chume's "adroit use of pidgin as part of the verbal texture of the play." ⁵³

Eldred Jones correctly points out that the "burden of the language [in The Trials of Brother Jero] is carried by a colloquial form which varies according to character and situation." ⁵⁴ The querulous Amope spices her utterances with curses and abuses. Even when addressing her husband in a plaintive tone, she could be deprecative. Brother Jero, when not operating within the norms of ordinary dialogue, heightens his speech with the professional rhetoric of the prophet, or of the well-practised rogue. Chume adds to his mixture of standard English and pidgin-English the "animal jabber" to which only "possessed" worshippers revert in their paroxysm. But when Chume is furious or distressed—as he is when he discovers Jero's fraudulence—he displays his command of pidgin-English, and the implication would seem to be that this patois is more natural to Chume than standard English:

Almighty! Chume, fool! O God, my life done spoil.

⁵² G. Moore, Wole Soyinka, p. 22.

⁵³ Ibid.

⁵⁴ E. D. Jones, "Wole Soyinka: Critical Approaches," in The Critical Evaluation of African Literature, Ed., Edgar Wright (London: Heinemann, 1973), p. 62.

My life done spoil finish. O God a no' get eyes
for my head. Na lie. Na big lie. Na pretence 'e.
de pretend that wicked woman! She no' go collect
nutin! She no' mean to sleep for outside house.
The Prophet na 'in lover. As soon as 'e dark, she
go in go meet 'in mah. O God, wetin a do for you
wey you go spoil my life so? Wetin make you vex
for me so? I offend you? Chume, foolish man, your
life done spoil. Yeah, ye. .ah ah, ye-e-ah, ye-e-ah,
they done ruin Chume for life. . . . (p. 75)

This variety of verbal texture in the play attests to the versatility of the language which constitutes a major asset in Soyinka's satire on a variety of characters in the society. The skill with which he portrays each character through the pattern of his or her speech facilitates the recognition of the traits which Soyinka mocks in the characters. The distinctive quality of the language in the play may be sampled from the word that ends it. Jero watches the Member of Parliament as the latter slowly falls asleep. Jero is convinced that

When I appear again to him he'll think I have just fallen from the sky. Then I'll tell him that Satah just sent one of his emissaries into the world under the name of Chume, and that he had better put him in a straight-jacket at once. . . . And so the day is saved. The police will call on me here as soon as they catch Chume. And it looks as if it is not quite time for the fulfilment of that spiteful man's prophecy.

(He picks up a pebble and throws it at the Member. At the same time a ring of red or some equally startling colour plays on his head, forming a sort of halo. The Member wakes with a start, stares open-mouthed, and falls flat on his face, whispering in rapt awe--)
'Master!'
(p. 77)

The politician's reverential acknowledgement of Jero as "Master" at the end of the play represents the recognition which the audience are bound to accord Soyinka's most roguish comic character to date.

Such is the success of Brother Jero as a tool for Soyinka's

satire in The Trials that the playwright elevates him to a higher status in Jero's Metamorphosis.⁵⁵ The survival instinct in Jero continues to motivate his actions in this play. However, his skill in manipulating people has become advanced because the people he operates upon are far more intelligent, or at least are supposed to be more intelligent, than the dupes in the earlier play. He has grown more proficient in disarming whoever poses as a threat to the security of his person, position, and "trade," as exemplified in his confrontation with Ananias early in the opening scene. Despite all this, Jero is basically the warped genius of The Trials.

Although considerable attention is still focused on Jero's character and mode of operation in Jero's Metamorphosis, Soyinka's mind seems to have shifted away from the fun of exposing a charming charlatan at work to an indictment of a disintegrating society under incompetent and corrupt leadership. The dramatic link between The Trials and Jero's Metamorphosis is not so much the meeting of Jero and Chume in the middle of scene ii of Jero's Metamorphosis as it is Jero's vatic pronouncement towards the end of The Trials:

I saw this country plunged into strife. I saw the mustering of men, gathered in the name of peace through strength. And at a desk, in a large gilt room, great men of the land-awaited your decision. Enissaries of foreign nations hung on your word, and on the door leading into your office, I read the words, Minister for War.⁵⁶

⁵⁵ In Soyinka, The Jero Plays (London: Eyre Methuen, 1973), pp. 45-92.

⁵⁶ The Trials of Brother Jero, in Three Short Plays, p. 74.

This was the prophecy of Brother Jero (or was it Soyinka's?) published in 1964, two years before the first military coup in Nigeria. Between the publication of The Trials and of Jero's Metamorphosis (1973), the Nigerian society in which both plays are set actually experienced the most devastating civil war that any African nation had ever known in modern times. In a strategic move to win back Chume, Jero prophesies the meteoric advancement of Brother Chume, and asks: "Do, you doubt my prophecy? Has your sojourn among lunatics made you forget who prophesied war and have we not lived to see it come to pass?" (Jero's Metamorphosis, p. 70). If Jero's prophecy of war is accepted as representing Soyinka's prediction, the 1967-70 civil war in Nigeria has fulfilled Soyinka's fears of disintegration. It is understandable, therefore, why "much of what Soyinka has written ever since the traumatic impact of the experience of 'a brother's war' shows evidence of a touch of bitterness and total disillusionment."⁵⁷ However, the humour and gay laughter that characterize Soyinka's plays up to The Trials have not completely gone out of his satire in Jero's Metamorphosis as Ogude contends.⁵⁸ The first half of scene ii, for instance, provides a hilarious comedy in the confrontation between Major Silva and Corporal Chume during a musical rehearsal (pp. 61-67). Even in scene iii, where the satiric tone gets most manifestly serious, provision is made for some humour in the drunken hiccups of Caleb, and in the altercation

⁵⁷ S. E. Ogude, "Aspects of the political and social satire in the plays of Soyinka," A paper presented at the First Ibadan Annual African Literature Conference, Ibadan, 6-10 July 1976, p. 27.

⁵⁸ Ibid.

between Matthew and Isaac. Rebecca mistakenly calls Isaac "Matthew," and the dialogue that follows Isaac's protest provides some comedy:

MATTHEW (nettled). May one ask just what you have against being Brother Matthew?

ISAAC. I know all about Brother Matthew, and that should be enough answer for anyone with a sense of shame.

REBECCA. Forgive my unfortunate error. Don't start a quarrel on that account.

ISAAC. And to think he has the nerve to show his face here. Some people are utterly without shame.

CALEB. Hear hear.

MATTHEW. And others are poor imitation Pharisees.

CALEB. Hear hear.

ISAAC. Better an imitation Pharisee than a sex maniac.

MATTHEW. I take exception to that!

ISSAC. Very good. Take exception.

MATTHEW. Dare repeat that and see if it doesn't land you in court for slander. Go on, we are all listening. I have witnesses. Come on I dare you.

ISAAC. I don't have to. We all know the truth. You may have been acquitted but we know the truth.

MATTHEW. Coward!

ISAAC. Fornicator.

MATTHEW. Drunkard, con-man. Forger.

CALEB. Three to one. Foul play. (pp. 75-76)

Apart from providing a comic scene, the petty quarrel between Isaac and Matthew serves as an exposé of the seed of discord that thrives among the foundation members of the Church of the Apostolic Salvation Army of the Lord (CASA), whose solidarity is being threatened by internal strife and suspicion. Shadrach puts it succinctly. Looking towards Caleb and then Ananias, he warns: "We foresee problems in banding together with certain members of the calling" (p. 79). All this illustrates Soyinka's skill in throwing a comic veil over a serious social criticism. The significance of the above exposé becomes manifest once it is realized that the composition of the CASA is designed

as a deliberate caricature of the military regime which is the target of Soyinka's satire in scene iii.

In scene i Jero's survival instinct and his thirst for power prompt him to summon a meeting of "brother prophets" to plan a fool-proof strategy for securing a "monopoly on spirituality" made out to the "Church of the Apostolic Salvation Army. CASA" (p. 88). Jero's intent, of course, is to ensure that the Local Government Council declares "that all land actually occupied as of now by the various religious bodies would from now on be held in trust, managed and developed by the newly approved representative body of all apostolic bodies, CASA" (p. 88). Jero is fully aware that he is inviting to the "spiritual assembly" a host of "cut-throats, dope-pedlars, smugglers and stolen goods receivers" (p. 49). Some of them are ex-convicts "while some are long overdue for the Bar Beach Spectacular" (p. 49). But Jero finds it expedient to fraternize with these crooks some of whom may one day face the firing squad at the Bar Beach Show.⁵⁹ It is ironic that these are the same people who, as CASA members, will be granted the concession of spiritual monopoly empowering them to hold religious rallies, and supply the music any time there are public executions at the Bar Beach. The satire in all this depends for its effect on the knowledge that, at times, some of the condemned armed robbers were

⁵⁹ The anti armed robbery decree promulgated in 1970 in Nigeria, establishing the Armed Robbery Tribunal, stipulates that any armed robber found guilty by the Tribunal shall be sentenced to death by facing a firing squad. The Bar Beach in Lagos was one of the "amphitheatres" for public executions under the provisions of the decree. Other State capitals were also public execution grounds.

actually members of the Armed Forces; and at the celebrated public executions, the music to which members of the firing squad marched to take their positions was supplied by the Army.

The irony in Soyinka's satire is not limited to the fact that the members of the newly formed CASA are indeed potential subjects of public execution. It is significant to note that this

new-formed religious body has prophesied a long life to the regime. . . this mysterious body has declared that the Lord is so pleased with their er. . . spectacular efforts to stamp out armed robbery, with the speed of the trials, the refusal of the right of appeal, the rejection of silly legal technicalities and the high rate of executions, that all these things are so pleasing to the Lord that he has granted eternal life to their regime. (p. 81)

The irony in this passage can hardly elude the audience, especially a Nigerian audience. Soyinka is fully conscious of the dangerous grounds he is treading by coming close to being explicit. His denouncement of the 1967-70 Biafra war has been articulated on more occasions than one.⁶⁰ Except for The Man Died in which names, facts and figures are dropped with impunity, Jero's Metamorphosis contains the most daringly explicit references to what Soyinka considers Gowon's corrupt and oppressive regime. In scene iii of the play, his low opinion of Gowon and his government can be discerned in his satiric reference to a "titular head. . . who gives the orders and keeps close watch on the church treasury. Purely ceremonial."

⁶⁰ See, for instance, L. S. Gates, "An Interview with Wole Soyinka," Black World, 24, No. 10 (Aug. 1975), 30-48; Soyinka, The Man Died (New York: Harper & Row, 1972); and The Daily Sketch (Nigeria), 4 Aug. 1967.

ISSAC. Yes, but who? Who do you have in mind for Captain?

JERO. Captain, Brother Isaac? No, no, not captain. We must not cut our image small in the eyes of the world. General, at least. (p. 83)

Jero who manipulates the others into accepting him as the "General" of CASA has earlier roused everybody to action: "Behold the new body of the Lord! Forward into battle, Brothers!"

ISAAC. Against what?

JERO. Precisely.

SHADRACH. (disdainfully). Precisely what? He asks, against what? You say, precisely.

JERO. Precisely. Against what? We don't know any more than our secular models. They await a miracle, we will provide it.

SHADRACH. (indicating CHUME). With lunatics like him. You fancy yourself an empire-builder. (p. 82)

Soyinka does not bother to provide any more than a thin veneer to hide the target of his satire in the above passage. The "secular models" referred to by Jero are the military rulers in Nigeria. Soyinka's condemnation of the civil war in the country is echoed in Jero's admission that they "don't know" precisely against what they should surge "forward into battle." Soyinka incorporates into the play his conviction that civil war was not the solution to the problems that threatened the unity, peace and security of Nigeria. Soyinka once declared that the real motivation of his visit to the East (Biafra during the war)

was to present viable and very concrete alternative solutions to the solution by war. . . . Secession was merely a sort of critical event in their long line of national betrayal, desecration of values in the community, an inequitable society, clannishness, petty chauvinism, personal ambition. But most important of all, the emasculation, the negation, of certain restraining and balancing institutions within the society, by cliques and caucuses within the community. All of which were, definitely inimical to

the aspirations of the masses of the people.⁶¹

In his denunciation of the civil war, therefore, Soyinka castigates the military leaders for their simple-minded option for a march "forward into battle" where a practical political solution was most desirable if "the very fundamental disjunction within the total society"⁶² was to be identified and rectified.

Viewed against this background, Jero's Metamorphosis, particularly scene iii, may be regarded as a telling satire on the military regime headed by Yakubu Gowon. The satire gets closer to the bull's-eye in Jero's arbitrary handing out of ranks to the CASA members. There is in this action a direct satiric comment on the mass promotions within the Nigerian army, especially after the civil war. The rise of Chume from Corporal (p. 62) to Colonel (p. 85), and then to Brigadier (p. 91), is not unlike the accelerated promotions of certain officers in the army, many of whom did not deserve the higher ranks in which they suddenly found themselves. Jero himself, a skillful caricature of a military leader, rises from practically nothing to the self-designated rank of General because, according to him, "We must not cut our image small in the eyes of the world" (p. 83).

It is interesting to note that Jero cautiously distances himself from the rest by not having a Lt.-General or a Major-General. Yet, he appropriately re-christens his deputy (Chume) as Joshua, an obvious biblical reference to the successor of Moses who led the Israelites

⁶¹ L. S. Gates, "An Interview with Wole Soyinka," 33.

⁶² Ibid., 34.

into the Promised Land. It is understandable, therefore, why Jero charges the "Brigadier" to lead the Christ Apostolic Salvation Army of the Lord (p. 91). But this is all part of the corruption which the playwright exposes to ridicule in the play. For example, Jero assures the Chief Executive Officer:

. . .we will preach at you. Every Tuesday at twelve o'clock the Church of Apostolic Salvation Army will preach outside your office. The subject of our sermons shall be, the evils of corruption--of the soul. We intend to restrict ourselves to spiritual matters. We will not contradict the secular image. (p. 90)

The irony in Jero's speech is that no attempt will be made by CASA to rid the society of material corruption which itself is a manifestation of spiritual corruption. The CASA members are as corrupt as, if not more corrupt than the subjects they plan to preach at. In other words, the "spiritual" activities of the CASA members are no better than a hypocritical attempt to eradicate the corruption of the soul. Like these hypocrites who preach against the evils they are guilty of perpetrating, the military regime of July 1966 - July 1975 was found to be practising the very vices it preached against in the newspapers, on radio and on television. The purported attempt to wipe out corruption and injustice from the society was in fact a ruse to cover the bewildering corruption of most of the rulers. The police were equally guilty. And so, towards the end of scene i, Ananias, a kettle calling the pot black, offers to pray for the soul of the policewoman who has come to help recover the confidential file in the possession of Jero:

ANANIAS. Policework is evil, oh lord, policework is evil.

REBECCA. Halle-Halle-Hallelujah. (And continues the chorus.)

ANANAIAS. Save this sinner, Lord, save this sinner. Protect her from bribery, oh Lord! Protect her from corruption! Protect her from iniquities known and unknown, from practices unmentionable in thy hearing. Protect her from greed for promotion, from hunger for stripes, from chasing after citations with actions over and beyond the call of duty. Save her from harassing the innocent and... from prying into the affairs of men and nosing out their innocent practices. Take out the beam in thine own eye, said the Lord.

REBECCA. Hallelujah! (p. 60)

A Nigerian audience will easily recognize Ananaiás' prayer as Soyinka's direct invective against the Nigerian police. It is curious that the policewoman does not utter a word in the play. Her appearance, it would seem, functions only to provide an opportunity for a castigation of the corrupt police, whose contribution to the institutionalization of corruption is, to say the least, deplorable. Soyinka's satire on a corrupt society would not have been all-inclusive without some mention of the police.

At the end of the play, Soyinka brings his satire to a climax by demonstrating the tyranny of Jero's new "Salvation Army":

JERO. Sergeant Ananaiás!

ANANAIAS. My General?

JERO. When Joshua blows the trumpet, it will be your duty to make the miracle happen. The walls shall come tumbling down or you will have some explaining to do.

ANANAIAS. Leave it to me, my General.

JERO. Just lean on the rotting walls Ananaiás and the Lord will do the rest. By dawn the entire beach must be cleansed of all pestilential separatist shacks which infest the holy atmosphere of the united apostolate of the Lord. Beginning naturally with Apostate Shadrach's unholy den. The fire and the sword, Ananaiás, the fire and the sword. Light up the night of evil with the flames of holiness!

(pp. 91-92)

Jero's call for the consecration of the grounds for the Bar Beach

Spectacular reveals the tyranny and oppression to which all opposing camps will be subjected. The eradication of corruption proposed by the CASA members--"Swing against Corrup. . . tion!" (p. 92)--only means the elimination of all non-conformists. According to Jero, the "Army hierarchy is for foundation members only. We hold office by divine grace, in perpetuity" (p. 84). All those who are not with the CASA are against it, and must be destroyed. This is the principle upon which Jero's "regime" operates. While the tyrannical march against corruption is in full swing, with Chume playing "Joshua Fit the Battle of Jericho," Jero only watches "the Army march-dance out into the night" (p. 92). Given a proper stage effect, this march into the night gains some symbolic significance in that it hints at a march into the ominous unknown future; it also strongly suggests the dawn of an era when the atmosphere will be right for the commission of atrocities cleverly covered up, acts which are best perpetrated in the dark of the night. In short, the march into the night by Jero's "Army" marks the beginning of the reign of terror of a subtle type.

Curiously enough, instead of leading the battle himself, Jero stays at home. The stage direction has it that Jero "seats himself at the table and pulls towards him a file of two, as if to start work. Looks up suddenly and on his face is the amiable-charlatan grin" (p. 92). In this position, Jero ends the play with the cryptic comment: "After all, it is the fashion these days to be a desk General" (p. 92). The portrayal of Yakubu Gowon and his regime towards the end of the play will be obvious to those who followed the 1967-70 Nigerian crisis.

and who have read Soyinka's The Man Died. However, the significance of the socio-political satire in Jero's Metamorphosis lies in the fact that, though Soyinka aims his satiric thrust at a particular military leader and his government, his indignation is in fact directed at tyrannical regimes, especially in Africa, as exemplified by Gowon's dictatorship. When Soyinka places Gowon on the same level with General Franco,⁶³ the Spanish General who led the fascist revolt against the republic, and became its dictator in 1939 until his death, he provides his readers with a hint of the character of Gowon which he satirically portrays through Jero in Jero's Metamorphosis.

The foregoing ostensibly random discussion of Jero's Metamorphosis has been deliberately structured to reflect the plotlessness of the play. Instead of imposing a plot on the play, Soyinka creates a situation which derives from his reaction to widespread corruption in a society under the oppressive dictatorship of a military regime. A play recreating what Soyinka calls the fundamental disjunction in the society can hardly afford not to reflect through its structure the phenomenal disintegration of such a society. This is why the scenes in Jero's Metamorphosis tend to be grafted one upon the other. The play therefore depends for its effect not on a logical story told in a fluid sequence, but on a combination of factors. These include skillful characterization, especially the use of the multi-functional role of Jero as a satirical tool, the use of the uniformed figure as the dominant visual as well as symbolic image in the play, the careful

⁶³ Soyinka, The Man Died, p. 310.

design of the Church of the Apostolic Salvation Army of the Lord as a caricature of the military regime in Nigeria, and the resort to direct invectives on the corrupt police and the army to supplement the ironic tone that pervades the play. All these and other identifiable intrinsic values make the play Soyinka's most pungent satirical comment on military regimes which are as tyrannical as Gowon's.

A close look at the structure and language of Jero's Metamorphosis reveals Soyinka's departure from the traditional exposition-crisis-denouement pattern of plot. This demonstrates a gradual "metamorphosis" of Soyinka as a dramatist. According to Ogude, "the peculiar experience of Nigeria, of Africa, of all the countries where tyranny has become the pattern of life, has altered the course of the dramatic development of Wole Soyinka."⁶⁴ The near-Utopian society which Soyinka subtly rejects in The Lion and the Jewel has found no worthwhile replacement in the world of The Trials of Brother Jero. Much worse than both of these societies is that of Jero's Metamorphosis in which tyranny and oppression succeed in encouraging official and individual corruption in society. Gradually, Soyinka's amusement at the follies of man gives way to a tragic view of the "modern" Nigerian society, and accordingly his satirical language gets more caustic. This fact is borne out in the play which Soyinka published before Jero's Metamorphosis appeared in 1973.

Shortly after the war, Soyinka added Madmen and Specialists

⁶⁴ S. E. Ogude, "Aspects of the political and social satire in the plays of Soyinka," p. 38.

to his repertory of dramatic works. In it he depicts his disgust with the insanity of the civil war and its repercussions. Madmen and Specialists⁶⁵ deserves a climactic position in the discussion of Wole Soyinka's social satire because it is manifestly his most angry play, his most piercingly harsh satire. The play may be regarded as a preview of the shocking revelations in The Man Died. If both works had been published anonymously, there would have been little problem establishing their common authorship because of the striking similarity in the style and method of exposing the phenomenal brutishness that constitutes the quintessence of an oppressive regime. Besides, the materials in both works strongly suggest a common source of inspiration. One would agree with Banham that "Madmen and Specialists is not only a fearful study of the corruption of mankind, and thus relevant to so much of the contemporary experience, but is also a deeply personal comment upon Soyinka's suffering in the specific circumstances of the Nigerian tragedy of the last few years."⁶⁶

Like The Man Died, Madmen and Specialists may be classified as "protest" literature denouncing the degrading imposition of an obnoxious system of government upon the people of Nigeria. Soyinka could very well have addressed this play, as he did The Man Died,

to the people to whom I belong, not to the new elite,
not to that broad stratum of privileged slaves who
prop up the marble palaces of today's tyrants. I
testify from my personal experience and in so doing

⁶⁵ (Ibadan: O. U. P., 1971).

⁶⁶ M. Banham, "Darkness and Threat," Journal of Commonwealth Literature, 8, No. 1 (July 1973), 125.

accuse them of the crime of war profiteering. I do not mean in material terms—that fact is too well known, too easily absorbed into the shock system of a materialist society. There is, however, a greater humiliation which appears too tenuous to challenge the will of a war-weary people, and this is power profiteering from the common disaster and mutual sacrifice of war.⁶⁷

Soyinka's dramatization of the humiliating post-war agonies of the Nigerian people in Madmen and Specialists owes its effect to the use of symbolic characters who fit into the "masquerade" technique with which he deflates the hypocritical self-righteousness of the regime he sets out to satirize. The four mendicants who represent the common people in society are the victims of Dr. Bero's war crime and power profiteering. However, it would be misleading to consider the mendicants as the only victims. All the characters in the play, including Bero himself, are victims of war. As Clark puts it in "The Casualties,"

THE CASUALTIES ARE not only those who are dead;
They are well out of it.
The casualties are not only those who are wounded,
Though they await burial by instalment.
The casualties are not only those who have lost
Persons or property, hard as it is
To grope for a touch that some
May not know is not there.

.....
We are all casualties,
All sagging as are
The cases celebrated for kwashiorkor,
The unforeseen camp-follower of not just our war.⁶⁸

In a situation like the one in Madmen and Specialists, however, it is the "underdogs" who normally get the worst of the deal.

⁶⁷ Wole Soyinka, The Man Died, p. 15.

⁶⁸ In Casualties: Poems 1966 / 68 (London: Longman, 1970), pp. 37-38.

In the Blindman's words, "when things go wrong it's the lowest who get it first" (p. 13); and this is evident in the opening of the play. The cynical abandon with which the mendicants put on their macabre act by the roadside portrays the inescapable resignation of the men to their fate brought upon them by the authoritarian "System." Of course, these men are not ordinary street beggars. They are disabled and deformed casualties of war, sent by Bero from the war-front to spy on Si Bero and to ensure that she does not discover the presence of the Old Man (Bero's father) who has been virtually kept in detention in Bero's cellar (p. 23). Their deformities symbolize the mental, physical, economic, social and ethical degeneracy that followed the civil war in Nigeria. Nothing in the play represents the reality of the plight of Nigerians after the war better than the condition of these mendicants.

To illustrate fully the inhumanity depicted in the mendicants, one needs to reproduce the entire play. However, a few examples will suffice. Aafaa who has little regard for Si Bero alleges: "She's a witch. When she spirits out a foetus from the belly of a pregnant woman she pickles it with the herbs and it goes into a bottle for her brother's experiments" (p. 12). This unsubstantiated statement reveals Aafaa's malice which is nurtured by the System of "As." The Priest later remarks that "it's strange how these disasters bring out the very best in man--and the worst sometimes" (p. 33). In Aafaa's case, it is the worst. The war has reduced him to the level of a ravaging beast. His malicious pronouncements and the frequent threats he poses to his colleagues attest to the fact that the war has brought the beast out of him. But he is not much worse than the other mendicants. Both their

language and physical appearance confirm them as a grotesque lot; and before the end of Part One of the play, some measure of insanity can be discerned in their actions, particularly in the action of the Cripple:

CRIPPLE (picking a flea from his rags). Got him!
 SI BERO (turning sharply). What!
 CRIPPLE (throwing it in his mouth). A fat one.
 GOYI. Greedy beggar.
 AAFAA. Did you choose it?
 CRIPPLE. It chose me.
 BLINDMAN. Choose? An enemy of As.
 AAFAA. Sure? Not a disciple[?]
 BLINDMAN. An enemy. Subversive agent.
 AAFAA. Quite right. As chooses, man accepts.
 Had it sucked any blood?
 CRIPPLE. It tasted bloody.
 GOYI. Accept my sympathies.
 CRIPPLE. Not needed. The blood is back where
 it belongs.
 AAFAA. The cycle is complete. (p. 39)

The Cripple's brand of insanity should not be regarded as Soyinka's mere attempt to introduce the absurd into Madmen and Specialists. The world of the play is sufficiently absurd as it is. The flea-eating scene seems to be designed to foreshadow the fate of the "As" regime. Like the flea, As chooses; and like it, As is a blood-sucker, a plague-carrier, which, in the Cripple's action, is symbolically destroyed by the very insanity it has generated in its victims.

Probably more shocking than the action of the Cripple and the insanity of the other mendicants is the barbarity of Dr. Bero the Specialist. Seconded from the Medical Corps into the Intelligence Section during the war, Bero, like the "Big Braids" whom he calls "sub-mental apes" (p. 31), finds the right atmosphere to unleash the devilry in him. In his position of power as a military Intelligence Officer, he has caused the death of many individuals, and is opposed to the

rehabilitation of war victims. According to him,

Father's assignment was to help the wounded readjust to the pieces and remnants of their bodies. Physically. Teach them to make baskets if they still had fingers. To use their mouths to ply needles if they had none, or use it to sing if their vocal cords had not been shot away. Teach them to amuse themselves, make something of themselves. Instead he began to teach them to think, think, THINK! Can you picture a more treacherous deed than to place a working mind in a mangled body? (p. 37)

Bero would rather have the victims dead than merely wounded. That way, "the raving beast can feed fat on human flesh. He declares, to the astonishment of the Priest who has come to welcome him and his father back from the war: "I give you the personal word of a scientist. Human flesh is delicious. Of course, not all parts of the body. I prefer the balls myself" (p. 35). Insulated by his cannibalism from all that is humane, he justifies his actions:

What is one flesh from another? So I tried it again, just to be sure of myself. It was the first step to power you understand. Power in its purest sense. The end of inhibitions. The conquest of the weakness of your too human flesh with all its sentiment. (p. 36)

This may sound too unsavory and nauseating, but Soyinka offers no apologies. Like Ayi Kwei Armah's extensive use of the imagery of filth to provoke the reader's disgust for the corrupt society he satirizes in The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born, the macabre language of Bero and of the mendicants is meant to lay bare the bestiality of those whom Soyinka describes as "the historical throw-ups that had taken power,"⁶⁹ and "whose philosophy poisons the hope of this country's future and

⁶⁹ The Man Died, p. 24.

condemns a large section of its people to casual and premeditated murder and mutilation in the name of unity."⁷⁰

Soyinka's indignation in Madmen and Specialists may have been aggravated by his personal experience in detention, echoes of which are heard from time to time in the play. The cunning and high-handedness with which he claims to have been interrogated in prison seem to have inspired the dialogue between Bero and his father (pp. 49-51 and 61-63). Si Bero's difficulty in seeing her father in the cellar (p. 52) recalls Soyinka's wife's frustrated attempts to visit him in detention. And finally, the ordeal to which the "underdog" is subjected by a tyrant is given an undisguised re-enactment when Aafaa, mimicking the Specialist, tortures Goyi the "underdog" with a needle in an attempt to extract some information from him:

AAFAA. Does it matter? (Voice change. He points a 'needle' held low, at GOYI.) Say anything, say anything that comes into your head but SPEAK, MAN! (Twisting the needle upwards.)

GOYI, hand over crotch, yells.

BLINDMAN (solemnly). Tem Acu Tetigisti.

AAFAA. Believe me, this hurts you more than it hurts me. Or—vice versa. Truth hurts. I am a lover of truth. Do you find you also love truth? Then let's have the truth. THE TRUTH:

(He gives another push. GOYI screams.)

CRIPPLE.

} Rem Acu Tetigisti.

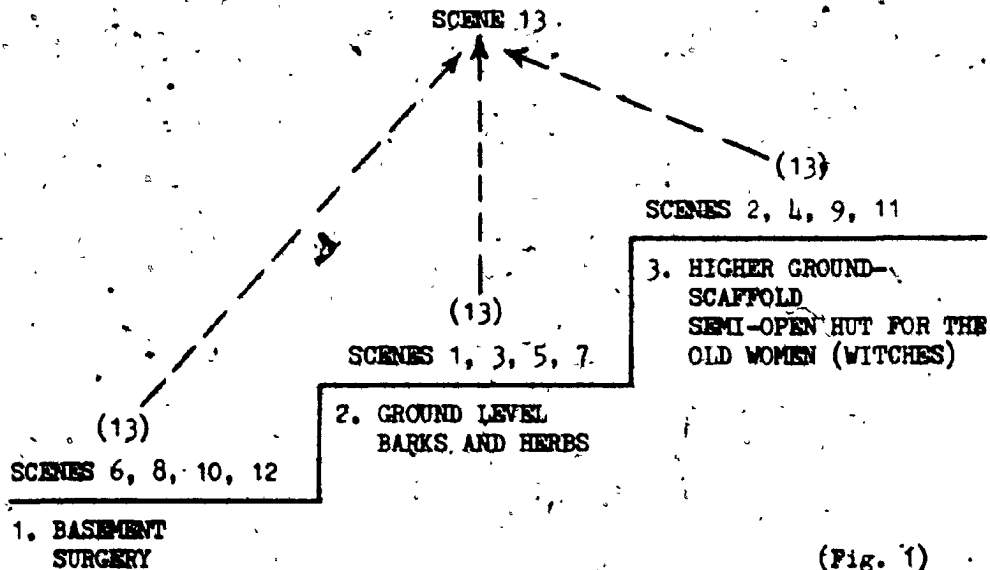
BLINDMAN.)

AAFAA. Think not that I hurt you but that Truth hurts. We are all seekers after truth. I am a Specialist in truth. Now shall we push it up all the way, all the way? Or shall we have all the truth all the truth? (Another push. GOYI screams, then his head slumps.) Hm, the poor man has fainted.

(p. 14)

⁷⁰ The Man Died, p. 22.

Soyinka's denouncement of tyranny in the play is articulated most incisively in the condemnation of Dr. Bero. For destroying humanity (symbolized by the Old Man), Bero deserves the worst form of retribution, and he gets it even before he commits the final crime in the play. This is where the artistic significance of Iya Agba and Iya Mate becomes noticeable. These two characters are not just Old Women; they are two weird sisters, whose superhuman nature is given an adequate theatrical representation in the location of their hut in relation to the other levels of action on the stage. Ogunba offers a diagrammatical representation of the three spatial levels as reproduced below from The Movement of Transition, p. 214:



This diagram illustrates the supremacy of the Old Women over the ordinary human beings operating in the basement and on the ground level. The Old Women's hut overlooks both levels. Even the basement which is "hidden" beneath level 2 is accessible to the weird sisters metaphysic-

ally since they control the herbarium that constitutes Bero's "laboratory." It is obvious from the play that Iya Agba and Iya Mate are not necessarily malevolent witches. They are functionally Earth Mothers who protect their children from harm. Like every loving mother who may reprimand an erring child, these Earth Mothers are capable of love and anger. To offend them in any way is to offend the earth on which one treads. Dr. Bero, by his numerous atrocities during the war, by his flagrant disrespect for and ingratitude to the Earth Mothers, and by his final crime of parricide, has pitched himself against the formidable Earth Mothers. Curiously enough, the penalty for his crimes is not death. Instead of killing Bero, Iya Agba passes a "life-in-death" sentence on him so casually that an undiscerning audience may miss it:

IYA MATE. Si Bero!

(SI BERO comes out a few moments later, obviously roused from sleep. She notices first the pot of coals, then makes out figures of the two women in the dark. She shrinks back.)

Don't be afraid, daughter. No harm will come to you.

IYA AGBA. We thought it was time for a visit. Bid us welcome so we can go about our business.

SI BERO. It's. . . it's an unusual time for earth-mothers to visit their daughters.

IYA AGBA. Not if they have debts to collect. Say how you want it done, woman.

SI BERO. Debts! No, not him. Don't touch him, my mothers.

IYA AGBA. I waste no strength on carrion. I leave him to earth's rejection. (p. 74)

Iya Agba's condemnation of Bero as dead putrefying flesh to be rejected by the earth is the worst abomination to which a human being can be subjected in Yorubaland.⁷¹

⁷¹ Cf. Achebe's explicit use of this concept as it applies to the Ibo in Things Fall Apart, pp. 16-17.

The sentence passed on Bero may very well be Soyinka's condemnation of the leaders of oppressive regimes anywhere, particularly in modern Africa. Madmen and Specialists may be considered, therefore, as a dramatization of Soyinka's grim vision of a soulless society crumbling under the weight of a "System" operated by rapacious "beasts." The ending of the play indicates the end of another era of oppression, but not necessarily the end of oppression. With the mendicants' chant "Bi o ti wa" (p. 77) fading into the darkness, there is the fear expressed that the System will rear its head again even if it means under a new leadership and in a different form: As was, As is, and ever shall be, world without end.

One may say with McCartney that the end of the play "does make sense, perhaps a larger sense than we want. We see a glimpse of the abyss, of the absolute and final meaninglessness of human activity,"⁷² especially in any society which resembles the world of Madmen and Specialists. The note of utter hopelessness on which the play ends has provoked the critical view that the play is pessimistic. According to Oyin Ogunba, Soyinka in response to charges of pessimism in the play "has hinted that the play is an exercise in exorcism, that by writing in this manner he experiences a release from the pent-up anger consequent on his detention and that it is a way of hitting back at those who punished him."⁷³ Ogunba adds a footnote piece which reveals that

⁷² B. C. McCartney, "Traditional Satire in Wole Soyinka's Madmen and Specialists," WLWE, 14, No. 2 (Nov. 1975), 511.

⁷³ O. Ogunba, The Movement of Transition, pp. 227-28.

Wole Soyinka made the point himself in a lecture delivered in Rutherford College, University of Kent, Canterbury, on 14 February 1973. Taken for what it is worth, this piece of information creates the impression that Madmen and Specialists is, in the first instance, the product of Soyinka's personal experience during the Nigerian civil war. But as a work of art, it is a pungent social satire that depends for its effect on verbal nuances, which enhance the achievement of authorial catharsis; and it is doubtful if Soyinka could have written the play without the experience he had during Gowon's military regime.

The discussion of Madmen and Specialists at this point in the history of Soyinka criticism inevitably saddles one with the task of defending the play against allegations of obscurity, non-intelligibility, "babbling monologues," and "a flair for high-falluting but meaningless words," among others which only betray either the critic's hasty reading, or insensitivity to Soyinka's mood and intentionally subtle use of words in the play. In a paper presented at the Symposium on Wole Soyinka at the University of Ibadan on 13 May 1973, Bernth Lindfors argues that Soyinka frequently fails as a seer to transfer his visions to others. According to him, Soyinka "too often offers nothing but scrambled messages, subtle verbal puzzles that scholars must labour to decode."⁷⁴ To back up his contention, Lindfors cites, among numerous others, three key passages from Madmen and Specialists, two of which will suffice for illustration in this study. The first, reproduced below, is dismissed as an example of Soyinka's "babbling monologues":

⁷⁴ B. Lindfors, "Obscurity in Soyinka's Dramatic Works," p. 4.

OLD MAN: Because. . . we are together in As. (He rises slowly.) As Is, and the System is its mainstay though it wear a hundred masks and a thousand outward forms. And because you are within the System, the cyst in the System that irritates, the foul gurgle of the cistern, the expiring function of a faulty cistern and are part of the material for re-formulating the mind of a man into the necessity of the moment's political As [an obvious pun], the moment's scientific As, metaphysic As, sociologic As, economic, recreative ethical As, you cannot-es-cape! (pp. 71-72)

A proper understanding of this passage is crucial to the overall perception of the meaning of the entire play. "As" is ostensibly an insignificant word by itself. Within the context of the play, however, there is more significance to the word than meets the eye. The relative adverb is taken from the prayer "Glory be to the Father," which ends with "As it was in the beginning, is now, and ever shall be, world without end. Amen." The supplicant's acceptance, in this prayer, of the eternity of God lies at the back of Soyinka's mind in choosing the name "As" for the "System" which prides itself upon all imaginable atrocities aimed at perpetuating itself in any given society where the atmosphere favours its propagation.

In the world of Madmen and Specialists, the power-that-is thrives on suspicion, arrogance, brutality, oppression and violence, in short, on inhumanity in all its ramifications. The Old Man who represents reason and humanity in the world of the play codifies the modus operandi of the flawed leadership in the society ruled by "As." This codified "System" embraces the political, economic, sociological, scientific, metaphysical, recreative, and ethical aspects of society. It is a System that was in the past; it is operating at present; it will

be in future. It may "wear a hundred masks and a thousand outward forms" (p. 71); the personnel operating it may change; but the System remains in force. This is what makes the individual nothing more significant than a "cyst" within the System—a mere biological cell that may be destroyed without doing any damage to the System, especially if such a "cyst" is found to be irritating, revolutionary, or "the foul gurgle of the cistern" (p. 71).

What it boils down to is that in the System of As, the individual is regarded as a "cyst" that cannot escape the watchful diabolic eye of state. This should aid us in recognizing the meaning in Aafaa's attempt to decode "As" as follows:

A. As is Acceptance, Adjustment of Ego to the
Acceptance of As. . . . (p. 41)

As a "cyst" rendered helpless within the System, the best one can do is to accept As and to adjust oneself to its doctrine.

B. Blindness. Blindness in As. I say this unto
you, As is all-seeing; All shall see in As who
render themselves blind to all else. (p. 41)

Parodied from the Bible, this explanation emphasizes the need to accept As blindly, and "see" only through the eyes of its leadership. This implies a rejection of one's own ideas and initiative in order to be a ready receptacle for the ideology of As.

Inspired by the Old Man's food, Aafaa decodes C as follows:

"C. Contentment. A full belly. . . . A full belly comes and goes; for half the people I know it never comes" (p. 52). This clearly means that there is no contentment in the As System. But more frightening than this is what "H" stands for:

E. Humanity! Humanity the Ultimate Sacrifice to
As, the eternal oblation on the altar of As. (p. 52)

This is central to the satire in the play which represents Soyinka's sad reflection on what Eldred Jones has identified as "the erosion of humanity in a well-organized, tightly controlled authoritarian society."⁷⁵ Closely connected with the sacrifice of humanity to the godhead "As" in such a society is the System's ironic existentialist philosophy implied in what letter "I" represents: "I am I, thus sayeth As" (p. 43). According to Aafaa, the only danger in decoding "I" in this manner is that "sooner or later someone is going to say it and leave out 'so sayeth As.' And that means trouble" (p. 43). The implication is that asserting oneself in any form is tantamount to equating oneself with the godhead As. Such an existentialist assertion would immediately reduce one to "the cyst in the System that irritates" (p. 71), and the grave consequences are anybody's guess.

The attempt by Aafaa to analyze the System of As from A to Z reveals some of the fundamental principles on which the System operates. Although he goes only as far as "I," there is enough to establish the dehumanizing qualities of the oppressive regime of As. To go through all the letters of the alphabet would not only be boring, but would also destroy the effect created by the partial exposure of the traits of a sickening regime. Besides, the nine traits exposed so far in the play constitute the core of the philosophy of the As System.

⁷⁵ E. D. Jones, The Writing of Wole Soyinka, p. 91.

The explanation given should make it sufficiently clear that Aafaa's speech cannot justifiably be described in terms of "empty words [which] refer to the mental make-up of Bero and his colleagues who consider themselves specialists in all phases of life only by showing some flair for high-falluting but meaningless words."⁷⁶ Rather, the speech contains the pith and marrow of Soyinka's bitter satire in the play. Unless one recognizes the quintessential quality of Aafaa's speech, as outlined above, one may miss the direct invective against the flawed leadership of the As regime which is a caricature of the war-time military regime in Nigeria, and of what Jones describes as "the rulers of our increasingly authoritarian societies in many parts of the world."⁷⁷

Before examining the second passage which Lindfors regards as "a parade of unparalleled paronomasia,"⁷⁸ it is essential to note in what terms Aafaa sees the inhumane leadership of the As System. He draws attention to the tyrant as he "sees" him in the Cripple:

Oh, look at him, Monsieur l'homme sapiens, look at the lone usurper of the ancient rights and privileges of the priesthood, (The CRIPPLE makes an obscene gesture: AAFAA registers shock.) look at the dog in dogma raising his hindquarters to cast the scent of his individuality on the lamp-post of Destiny!
(p. 73)

The latter part of Aafaa's speech is significant for its ambiguity. In

⁷⁶ T. Olafioye, "Cultural Conventions in Soyinka's Art," Ba Shiru, 7, No. 1 (1976), 69.

⁷⁷ E. D. Jones, The Writing of Wole Soyinka, p. 91.

⁷⁸ B. Lindfors, "Obscurity in Soyinka's Dramatic Works," p.

the first instance, it is directed at the Cripple who poses for a fart; but it also reminds one of an essential quality of the As System:

GOYI. As farts, damn you! (He turns his rear and gestures obscenely.)

AFAAA. I was going to suggest Fulfils. As fulfils.

GOYI. And I say Farts. (p. 42)

Like Goyi's obscene gesture, the Cripple's pose which interrupts Aafaa's speech quoted above is not merely meant to provoke laughter for its own sake. Rather, it creates an opportune moment for the expression of Aafaa's revulsion at the "stench" which the As System produces. This "stench" is, of course, more offensive to the Old Man than to Aafaa, most probably because of the Old Man's awareness of Bero's insignificance. The account of Bero's atrocities reaches a peak in the dialogue between the Old Man and Bero:

OLD MAN. Electrocutes. Electric chair. Electrodes on the nerve-centres—your favourite pastime, I believe? Tell me something new. What hasn't been abused [that is, in torturing or even eliminating victims]?

BERO. (has taken out his gun, weighs it significantly.)
And lightning strikes. What about it?

OLD MAN. The boy learns. The boy learns.

BERO. Don't you dare patronize me. Answer me, what about it?

OLD MAN. That lightning strikes? It could strike you, no?

BERO. Yes.

OLD MAN (quiet triumphant smile). Then you're not omnipotent. You can't do a flood and—(Pause.)—can't always dodge lightning. Why do you ape the non-existent one who can? Why do you ape nothing? (p. 66)

This is only a foretaste of the furious reductionist language in the Old Man's final invective denoting the insignificance of Bero who, all along, has thought himself unsurpassable. It is this final invective that Bernth Lindfors calls a parade of word-play. Like the meadicans

who are victims of As, Bero himself is no better than the "cyst" in the System; he is only aping the omnipotent, the eternal Godhead. But he, like the "underdogs," cannot escape:

. . .you cyst, you cyst, you splint in the arrow of ignorance, the dog in dogma, tick of a heretic, the tick in politics, the mock of democracy, the mar of marxism, a tic of the fanatic, the boo in buddhism, the ham in Mohammed, the dash in the criss-cross of Christ, a dot on the i of ego an ass in the mass, the ash in ashram, a boot in kibbutz, the pee of priesthood, the peepee of perfect priesthood, oh how dare you raise your hindquarters you dog of dogma and cast the scent of your existence on the lamp-post of Destiny you HOLE IN THE ZERO of NOTHING!
(p. 76)

Lindfors views this passage "with sober apprehension as representing a very dangerous tendency in Soyinka's art--a tendency toward meaningless frivolity which robs his work of any serious implication."⁷⁹ Carefully considered in the light of Soyinka's impression of the "throw-ups" who assumed power by default in Nigeria, this passage makes too much sense to be dismissed as "meaningless frivolity." Soyinka has recommended that "the first step towards the dethronement of terror is the deflation of its hypocritical self-righteousness."⁸⁰ This is precisely what the above passage does. He who regards himself as omnipotent is reduced in the passage to either insignificance or worse. Two examples will suffice to illustrate this point. The "tick in politics" immediately suggests that the "tic" at the end of the word is insignificant by itself. But the pun strongly suggests that the

⁷⁹ B. Lindfors, "Obscurity in Soyinka's Dramatic Works," p. 21.

⁸⁰ The Man Died, pp. 15-16.

target of the invective in the passage may also be viewed as a tick,⁸¹ a parasitic blood-sucking and disease-transmitting acarid, which poses a big threat to healthy politics in the society. Similarly, "the mock of democracy" is used to decry the gross mockery of democracy which is characteristic of the reign of terror under the hypocritical self-righteousness of a tyrant. The summation of all these images of insignificance and of blemish is effectively put in the "HOLE IN THE ZERO of NOTHING," implying that the flawed leadership of the As System, like its victims, is a hollow, a blemish, a mere cavity. Besides, Soyinka seems to hint at the way in which the regime of As reduces language to mere gibberish. The passage, therefore, not only deflates the hypocrisy of a tyrant, but also reduces him to nothingness. The language with which Soyinka achieves this reduction is infused with venom. This is why the passage cannot be rightfully tagged as "clowning for clowning's sake."⁸²

As if in a frenzy the Old Man, assuming the role of the tyrant, raves on the mendicants the way Bero would do when power drunk. Bero is, no doubt, lumped together with the mendicants in the Old Man's rain of abuse. But the Old Man himself is not exempt from being branded a "cyst," a mere irritating cell that can be destroyed at will by the System. In the scene that ends the play, the Old Man, still possessed in his assumed role of the Specialist, almost commits the inhuman crime of slaughtering the Cripple. But before he can thrust

⁸¹ Cf. the flea-eating scene earlier in the play (p. 39).

⁸² B. Lindfors, "Obacurity in Soyinka's Dramatic Works," p. 22.

the scalpel into the Cripple's chest for an incision, the System he mimics destroys him. Bero shoots his own father. By this act, he removes the only trace of humanity left in the world of Madmen and Specialists. The significance of the Old Man's death is that it comes at the moment when his humanity is about to be sacrificed, even if inadvertently, on the altar of As. His death is, therefore, a paradox rather than a true tragedy, a triumph over the System that has failed to dehumanize the Old Man in his life. ●

From the foregoing discussion of The Trials of Brother Jero, Jero's Metamorphosis, and Madmen and Specialists, it is clear that although the three plays are basically social satire, traces of political satire abound, especially in the last two. However, for plays by Soyinka which are thoroughly political, one must turn to A Dance of the Forests, The Bacchae of Euripides, and Kongi's Harvest.

(b) Political Satire:

Of Soyinka's twelve plays published to date, A Dance of the Forests⁸³ remains the most ambitious and the most complex; it poses the most challenging problem for critics. The pattern and extent of interaction of the living and the dead, as well as human and mythological characters attest to the complexity of the theme, structure, and language of the play. This complexity, however, does not necessarily becloud the meaning and satirical intent of the play, especially

⁸³ (London: O. U. P., 1963). All quotations and page references are taken from this edition.

if one is familiar with the Yoruba world view.

In his important essay "The Fourth Stage," Soyinka explains the Yoruba belief in the contemporaneous existence of the living, the dead and the gods. According to him, in the metaphysical world order of the Yoruba,

present life contains within it manifestations of the ancestral, the living and the unborn. All are vitally within the intimations and affectiveness of life, beyond mere abstract comprehension.

And yet the Yoruba does not, for that reason, fail to distinguish between himself and the deities, [between] himself and the ancestors, between the unborn and his reality, or discard his awareness of the immense gulf which lies between one area of existence and another. This gulf is what must be constantly diminished by the sacrifices, the rituals, the ceremonies of appeasement to the cosmic powers which lie guardian to this gulf.⁸⁴

In A Dance of the Forests the human community's request for illustrious ancestors is an attempt to bridge the "primeval severance" that separates the living from their ancestors and from the gods. But the rituals and ceremonies to which the ancestors are summoned have been sullied by man's sordid atrocities. The gods and their servants who are guardians of the gulf separating the living from their ancestors, have no alternative but to intervene and lay bare before the humans the monstrosity and putrid nature of the feast to which they have invited their ancestors. It is no accident, therefore, that Aroni, a servant of Forest Father, elects to send two of the restless dead to the feast of the gathering of the tribes. Aroni, as Ogunba states,

⁸⁴ Soyinka, "The Fourth Stage: Through the Mysteries of Ogun to the Origin of Yoruba Tragedy," in The Morality of Art, Ed., D. W. Jefferson (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1969), p. 122.

is a timeless spirit who knows the past with astonishing intimacy and can look far into the future. With such disturbing knowledge it is difficult for him genuinely to share in the false joy of the human community on this occasion or [to] collaborate with them to produce illustrious ancestors. He knows that the gods are not well-disposed to humanity and that in particular Ogun and Eshuoro will, as ever, dominate human thought, producing large-scale disaster and death.⁸⁵

This should explain the apparent malevolence of the roles played by the deities and their servants in the play. They generate in the humans a sense of blood-guilt, and lead them to self-condemnation. This is precisely Soyinka's satiric design, as will be made manifest in this study.

In his commendable effort to identify the sources of A Dance of the Forests, Gibbs comments:

One is initially suspicious of the principles on which Soyinka appears to have constructed A Dance of the Forests. He seems to have dismantled one play, A Dance of the African Forests; thrown in an old poem, 'Invocation Dance'; reconsidered a theme from an earlier work, the theme of blood-guilt from The House of Banigeji and, in the light of the failure of The Invention, concocted a radically new drama.⁸⁶

A Dance of the Forests, no doubt, is an assemblage of materials from the various sources identified by Gibbs, and possibly from D. O. Fagunwa's novel Ogbojù Ode Ninu Igbo Irunmole (Lagos: Nelson, 1950), which Soyinka later translated as The Forest of a Thousand Daemons (Nelson, 1968). What makes the eclectic work a full-bodied poetic drama is Soyinka's skillful integration not only of these materials, but also of

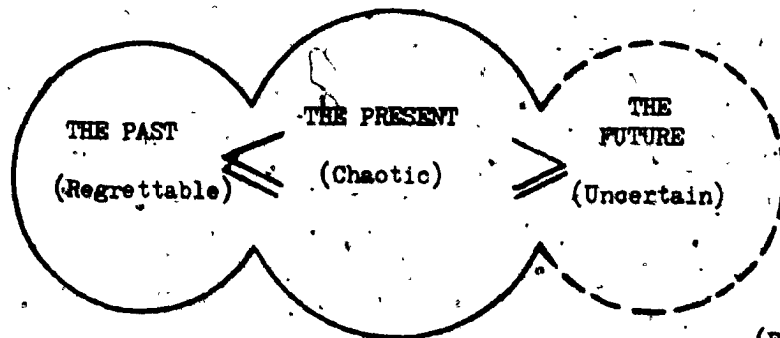
⁸⁵ O. Ogunba, "The Traditional Content of the Plays of Wole Soyinka" (Part II), African Literature Today, No. 5 (1971), 107.

⁸⁶ J. Gibbs, "The Origins of A Dance of the Forests," African Literature Today, No. 8 (1976), 68.

the three distinct yet interrelated worlds of the living, of the dead, and the unborn, and of the gods and spirits. Through this integration, the playwright creates a dramatic situation in which he projects his troubled vision of his society caught in the throes of growth. The play "presents a comprehensive view of man [and his world] over a massive span of history; it even—in the highly symbolic chorusing of the future—looks into the future."⁸⁷ The grim vision which the play presents is hinted at in the testimony of Aroni, the Lame One:

I know who the Dead Ones are. They are the guests of the Human Community who are neighbours to us of the Forest. It is their Feast, the Gathering of the Tribes. Their councillors met and said, Our forefathers must be present at the Feast. They asked us for ancestors, for illustrious ancestors, and I said to FOREST HEAD, let me answer their request. And I sent two spirits of the restless dead. (p: 1)

This expository testimony points in the direction of a cyclic pattern of evolutionary continuity discernible in the play; and it can be diagrammatically conceptualized as follows:



(Fig. 2)

The past is represented by the Dead Man and the Dead Woman; the present

⁸⁷ E. D. Jones, The Writing of Wole Soyinka, p. 32.

by the living; and the future is symbolized first by the chronic pregnancy of the Dead Woman, that is, by the unborn child, and later by the doomed Half-Child. The adoption of this temporal pattern of history in the play, as represented in Fig. 2 above, shows that the PRESENT is similar to, but "greater" (that is, more important and more relevant) than either the PAST or the FUTURE, though the temporal divisions of history are interrelated. The crucial point in history, therefore, is the "present," which in the play is the celebration of the "Gathering of the Tribes." But the occasion, meant to enhance the reunion of the dead and the living at a moment of joy, turns out to be an accountability session, a moment when the living, no less than the dead, are made to see themselves as they really are.

Soyinka's method of breaking down the time barrier in history in order to mirror the inner worth of the living is particularly intriguing for its irony. First, he introduces two spirits of the restless dead sent by Aroni contrary to the expectations of the Human Community. Aroni's role and character have been created as a means of bringing men to justice and self-recognition. His role, not unlike Soyinka's artistic intent, is succinctly expressed by Agboreko:

Aroni is Wisdom itself. When he means to expose
the weaknesses of human lives, there is nothing
can stop him. And he knows how to choose his time.
(pp. 34-35)

Like Aroni, Soyinka refuses to remain complacent when fundamental issues affecting the lives of the people are being toyed with by politicians. To remain silent is to condone inhumanity and injustice, and to make oneself an accomplice to crime and tyranny in society. As

Soyinka puts it in The Man Died: "The man dies in all who keep silent in the face of tyranny" (p. 13). Through A Dance of the Forests, Soyinka means to jolt Nigerians, particularly the pre-independence civilian government, into the shocking realization that Nigeria has no cause for rejoicing at the so-called attainment of independence. He could not have chosen a better time for articulating this shocking but realistic view than the celebration of Nigeria's independence in 1960.

Demoke's statement that he did not know the real significance of the totem for the feast of the Gathering of the Tribes may be taken as Soyinka's satirical rendering of the question: "What is Nigeria (1960) actually celebrating?" The sickening debauchery of the nation, symbolically similar to Murete's, calls for sober reflection; the day set aside for celebrations ought to be, in the words of Eshuoro, "a day of reprisals" (p. 45). This point is lucidly made in Part One of the play. The activities of the characters in this part strongly indicate that the festivities at the Gathering of the Tribes are already marred long before the appointed day. Suspicion, petty squabbles, the germ of disintegration and eventually of total collapse, have symptomatically reared their heads. From the initial interaction of the living, the dead and the spirits of the Forest, it is almost sure that a tragic dance of the forests is in the offing.

In choosing the crucial point in history (the present) for the dance, and including the pointed ironic invocation of the ancestors to witness the occasion, Soyinka succeeds in evoking history to indict man for his past failures and inadequacies, for his present atrocities,

and for the great threat which these pose for the future. A Dance of the Forests may therefore be viewed as a powerful statement by a visionary poet-playwright who is genuinely frightened by the monstrosity (the Half-Child) which the government and people of Nigeria mistake for a "cherub" whose birth is being celebrated with fanfare and carousing.

With artistic ingenuity, Soyinka invokes the ancestors to bear testimony to his indictment of the government and people of Nigeria. He even introduces deities, and the spirits of the forest to function in a way that reminds one of the Olympian gods. As Baré has noticed,

Soyinka's OBANEJI would feel that he is among friends on Mount Olympus, traditional home of interfering gods. Like ancient Greek deities, Forest Head cannot refrain from getting personally mixed up with the affairs of men. As they once did, he enjoys the company of mortals. . . . Not unlike Zeus he finds it a bit of a problem to keep peace among the lesser gods (OGUN and ESHUORO), who themselves bear some resemblance to Zeus' more delinquent offspring.⁸⁸

Soyinka's use of these mythological spirits of the forest is more than a mere echo of the classics. It enables the playwright to complete a cosmic assemblage of characters to further his "masquerade" idiom in indicting the human community.

In a most revealing flashback spectacle which Aroni conjures (pp. 54-65), Soyinka provides a historical perspective of the political situation which has engendered the monstrous present as the "accumulated heritage" from the days of Mata Kharibu. Adenebi, the Court Historian in Kharibu's regime, makes the point early in the play: "The

⁸⁸ Baré, "A Dance of the Forests, Wole Soyinka's latest play," African Horizon, January 1961, p. 9.

accumulated heritage—that is what we are celebrating. Mali. Chaka. Songhai. Glory. Empires" (p. 8). These names remind one of war heroes, terrorization and slavery for which the medieval Sudan authoritarian empires were noted. It is this picture of the past that the audience are shown in the re-enacted Court of Mata Kharibu. The brief session clipped out of Mata Kharibu's reign of terror exposes the atrocities committed by the regime. On his throne "Mata Kharibu is angry; his eyes roll terribly; the court cowers. His queen, on the hand, is very gay and cruel in her coquetry" (p. 51). It becomes known that soldiers die unmourned after being saddled with impossible tasks. Unjust wars are fought, and it is a crime for any of the warriors to think:

MATA KHARIBU: (advancing slowly on him.) It was you, slave! You it was who dared to think.

WARRIOR: I plead guilty to the possession of thought. I did not know that it was in me to exercise it, until your Majesty's inhuman commands. (Mata Kharibu slaps him across the face.)

MATA KHARIBU: You have not even begun to repent of your madness.

WARRIOR: Madness your Majesty?

MATA KHARIBU: Madness! Treachery! Frothing insanity traitor! Do you dare to question my word?

WARRIOR: No, terrible one. Only your commands. (p. 53)

Mata Kharibu would have wrathfully beheaded the Warrior had it not been for the timely intercession of the Physician. The Warrior, even in the face of an impending death sentence, refuses to yield to the Physician's persuasion to fight an unjust war. His protest is one of the key passages in the play:

It is an unjust war, I cannot lead my men into battle merely to recover the trousseau of any woman. (p. 54)

Unborn generations will be cannibals most worshipful

Physician. Unborn generations will, as we have done, eat up one another. Perhaps you can devise a cure, you who know how to cure so many ills. I took up soldiering to defend my country, but those to whom I gave the power to command my life abuse my trust in them. (pp. 55-56)

All this seems to anticipate the spirit of protest against war, genocide and "cannibalism" in Madmen and Specialists. The Slave-dealer, a good illustration of the corrupt war-profiteer, bribes the Court Historian to approve the ship in order to secure the contract to convey sixty alleged "traitors" to the slave market. The Physician fights in vain against the Slave-dealer's obvious inhumanity. And so, corruption triumphs; man's inhumanity to man wins the day. Despite the ominous and ironic warning of the Soothsayer—"It is in the nature of men to seek power over the lives of others, and there is always something lower than a servant" (p. 61)—Mata Kharibu stubbornly hangs on to authoritarian power over his subjects. Madam Tortoise, his queen, is as inhumane as her husband, but worse; she is sly. Conscious of the Warrior's firm stand against fighting an unjust war, she desperately tries to win him over by coquetry. The warrior turns her down:

Madame, I know what havoc you have wreaked among my men, and we now face the final destruction of a good band of loyal men. Somehow, I do not hate you. But I do know the power of blood on the brain. I beg you to keep beyond my hands. (p. 63)

Hurt by this rude rejection and by the arrival of the Warrior's wife (the pregnant Dead Woman in the play), Madam Tortoise becomes furious;

MADAME TORTOISE: (her face breaks into fiendishness.)
I knew it was incredible. It could not be. I, Madame Tortoise, spurned by a common soldier.
For that! Was it for that? (p. 65)

She consequently orders that the Captain be castrated, a sentence which

his pregnant wife finds too shocking to bear. She "clasps her womb, gasps and collapses" (p. 65).

This flashback scene has been dealt with so lengthily because it is crucial to a proper perception of the political satire in the play. According to the Dead Woman, "a hundred generations has made no difference" (p. 26). It was Mata Kharibu and his queen a hundred generations ago; today it is a reincarnation of these mean and inhumane authoritarians. History is merely repeating itself. This is the basis of Soyinka's political satire in A Dance of the Forests.

Corruption in official quarters is as widespread in independent Nigeria as it was in the court of Mata Kharibu. Social injustice is still noticeable. The relation between the government and the governed is hardly any different from what it used to be in Kharibu's court. If there is no glorious past to be proud of, there is hardly any cause for celebration on the attainment of political independence. This seems to be Soyinka's central message in the play. It may very well be Soyinka's voice that one hears behind the Obaneji "mask" when Obaneji (Forest Head in human disguise) tells Rola:

I know too much. . . about people... far too much.
When I saw them all, actually rejoicing—that much
is true at least—most of them did experience joy
. . . but you see. . . when they laughed, I was
looking down their throats. . . (p. 14)

Asked by Rola what he saw, Obaneji replied: "Only what I know already" (p. 14). What Obaneji saw down the throats of the revellers is sheer putrefaction reflecting the activities of the governing Council. The Council office responsible for the registration and licensing of motor

vehicles is singled out to illustrate official corruption. The "Chimney of Ereko," which parallels the Slave-dealer's ship, continues to be driven on the roads with a record of "eight serious crashes" and two or three dips in a pit before it is finally written off (p. 16). Another lorry, the "Incinerator," constitutes a greater hazard to the lives of the people. Obaneji reports:

When it was built, someone looked at it, and decided that it would only take forty men. But the owner took it to the council. . . now, my friend, this is something for you to investigate. One of your office workers took a bribe. A real substantial bribe. And he changed the capacity to seventy.

DEMOKE: Seventy!

OBANEJI: Yes. Seventy. From forty.

ROLA: That's nearly twice.

OBANEJI: You said it—nearly twice. Now what do you think would happen if such a trap suddenly caught fire?

DEMOKE: When?

ROLA: (shuts her eye tightly.) No, no, no. . .

OBANEJI: Yesterday. That is why they have called it the Incinerator since yesterday. Of the seventy people in it, five escaped. It overturned you see, and the body was built of wood. . . Dry and brittle in the Harmattan season too. They were all on their way here—to the gathering of the tribes. (pp. 16-17)

With sixty-five souls burnt to death in a single accident on the eve of the grand feast, bribery and corruption have already started to take their toll. This is one more reason for heart-searching reflection rather than the raucous celebrations at the gathering of the tribes.

Soyinka's political satire in the play is probably most pungent in the introduction of the totem motif. The Council has commissioned a totem to be carved and made the central figure at the great feast. This totem becomes the symbol of the clan at the gathering.

The significance of the totem lies in its satiric intent. Demoke, who "creates" the totem, reveals that he has created it in Rola's image:

DEMOKE: I carved something to you. Of course I didn't know you then, I mean, I had never met you. But from what I heard, you were so. . .

ADENEBI: Bestial. Yes, just the sort of thing you would carve, isn't it? Like your totem. Bestial it was. Utterly bestial.

DEMOKE: Actually, that is what I mean. Madame Tortoise is the totem--most of it anyway. In fact, you might almost say she dominated my thoughts--she, and something else. About equally. (p. 23)

Like most artists, Demoke creates out of the impression he gets from the world outside him. Rola (Madame Tortoise) is both his inspiration and model for the creation of the totem, and the ruggedness of her bestiality, reproduced in the totem, makes Demoke's creation a sad reflection of the monstrosity of authoritarian regimes.

If the totem symbolizes the nature and aspirations of the people, it becomes uncomfortably clear that the Gathering of the Tribes is nothing but a celebration of the people's own bestiality. The dance of the Half-Child then becomes the dance of the monstrosity of the new-born Nigerian society at the time of transition from colonialism to political freedom.

Soyinka's play may, by derived analogy, be regarded as the finished product, the "totem" he "carved," as commissioned for the 1960 independence celebrations in Nigeria. Like Demoke's totem, the play represents the monstrous meeting point of the not too glorious past, the cursed and chaotic present, and the frightening future of the Nigerian society. The climactic dance towards the end of the play and the chorused song of the future attest to the view that the future is

bleak. Representatives of the spirit world prophesy this bleakness:

SPIRIT OF THE PALM: White skeins wove me, I,
 Spirit of Palm
 Now course I red.
 I who suckle blackened hearts, know
 Heads will fall down,
 Crimson in their red. (p. 73)

The Half-Child, in a move that is fraught with meaning, "seems to appeal for help mutely from those around him, but they stand silent"

(p. 74). He joins the chorus:

I who yet await a mother
 Feel this dread,
 I who flee from womb
 To womb, cry it now
 I'll be born dead
 I'll be born dead. (p. 74)

The Spirit of Darkness has nothing but doom to foretell:

More have I seen, I Spirit of Dark,
 Naked they breathe within me, foretelling now
 How, by the dark of peat and forest
 They'll be misled
 And the shutters of the leaves
 Shall close down on the doomed
 And naked head. (p. 74)

Next is the Spirit of Precious Stones who sees the rush for material wealth as the undoing of many:

Still do I draw them, down
 Into the pit that glitters, I
 Spirit of gold and diamonds
 Mine is the vain light courting death. (p. 74)

The Spirit of the Rivers sounds even more frightening in its threat of drought:

From Limpopo to the Nile coils but one snake
 On mudbanks, and sandy bed
 I who mock the deserts, shed a tear
 Of pity to form palm-finged oases
 Stain my bowels red! (p. 75)

The Spirit of the Sun laments its inability to function effectively: "The Sun cries Noon / Whose hand is it that covers up his face!" (p. 76). This is a searching question which signifies that Nigeria's future and that of Africa, and of the world in general, is clouded rather than bright. Like the Spirit of the Sun, the Spirit of Volcanoes has been relatively dormant; but the potentials of a devastating eruption are a threat to the neighbourhood.

The emergence of ants from the grave prompts Forest Head to ask: "But, who are you?" The responses are quite revealing:

ANT LEADER: We take our colour from the fertile loam
Our numbers from the hair-roots of the earth
And terror blinds them. They know
We are the children of earth. They
Break our skin upon the ground, fearful
That we guard the wisdom of Earth,
Our Mother.

FOREST HEAD: Have you a grievance?
ANT LEADER: None Father, except great clouds of earth
Pressed on our feet. The world is old
But the rust of a million years
Has left the chains unloosened. (p. 77)

Then follows a series of serious allegations:

ANT: I thought staying this low,
They would ignore me. I am the one
That tried to be forgotten.
ANOTHER: I am the victim of the careless stride.
ANT LEADER: We are the ones remembered
When nations build. . .
ANOTHER: . . .with tombstones.
ANOTHER: We are the dried leaves, impaled
On one-eyed brooms,
ANOTHER: We are the headless bodies when
The spade of progress delves.

ANOTHER: Down the axis of the world, from
The whirlwind to the frozen drifts,
We are the ever legion of the world,
Smitten, for--'the good to come'. (p. 78)

The ants do function as an allegory of the common people who are victims

of oppression in an unjust society. Their accusations, uncontested by the humans, further condemn the Human Community.

The foregoing interpretation of A Dance of the Forests is an attempt to assert that Soyinka's satiric vision of Africa, particularly Nigeria on the "eve" of Independence, is gloomy. The visionary playwright shocks his audience, indeed the entire nation, into the stark truth that the occasion of Independence is a crucial moment in the nation's history, a moment when the monstrosity of the Kharibu-like past which has begotten the present ought to be reflected upon, and ways and means sought to prevent its spread into the future. The neglect of this all-important introspection in favour of vain-glorious festivities has only one dire consequence—a doomed future, symbolized by the birth of the Half-Child who fears that he will be born dead.

Dathorne holds a contrary view. "In the end," he claims, "hope is symbolized in the half-child of the dead woman."⁸⁹ Ogunba shares the view that the play "ends on a note of optimism,"⁹⁰ but later states that the "future is dark with foreboding and that it will be more violent and terrible than either the past or the present."⁹¹ Una Maclean makes an interesting point regarding the Half-Child:

In Demoke's final action [of protecting the Half-Child] can be seen Soyinka's conception of the role of the artist in the new society. The new child or nation is born of the warrior, who was the one man

⁸⁹ O. R. Dathorne, African Literature in the Twentieth Century (London: Heinemann, 1976), p. 321.

⁹⁰ O. Ogunba, The Movement of Transition, p. 95.

⁹¹ Ibid.

of integrity from the past. But without the protection of the artist the child remains in danger of destruction. Soyinka is suggesting that it is the artist, with his heightened perception of events and his sense of responsibility, who will not only interpret the past to the present but [also] will protect the potentialities of the future.⁹²

There is no doubt that the artist may be able to interpret the past and foretell the future. Whether he can "protect the potentials of the future" or not is a difficult assessment to make. In A Dance of the Forests, Soyinka succeeds in expressing his pessimistic but realistic vision of Nigeria, and on a wider scale, of Africa, where political leaders delude themselves about the brightness of the future in the face of problems which remain unattended to. As Adrian Roscoe has noted, events in Nigeria and in other African nations since independence

have proved with a vengeance the accuracy of at least that part of [Soyinka's] vision which dealt with the future. . . . Soyinka's satiric vision is a curious affair—partly Swift's savage indignation, partly the Conradian 'horror,' and partly the Wordsworthian lament over 'what man has made of man.'⁹³

Soyinka's "totem" and the various critical comments on his satiric vision in the play attest to the assertion that A Dance of the Forests, like many other pieces crackling with sardonic laughter, is a monument to the playwright's mordant vein.

The relationship between A Dance of the Forests and Soyinka's other political satires—The Bacchae of Euripides, an adaptation, and Kongi's Harvest—is not hard to show. Ogunba, in the concluding part

⁹² Una Maclean, "Soyinka's International Drama," Black Orpheus, No. 15 (Aug. 1964), 49.

⁹³ A. A. Roscoe, Mother is Gold (Cambridge: C. U. P., 1971), p. 227

of his study of A Dance of the Forests, makes the point that the play

is the watershed of Soyinka's dramatic writing.⁹⁴ It is in this play that he makes the first truly memorable intellectual effort to understand and present the dilemma and travail of a modern African state at the time of its attainment of nationhood. It looks as if the magnitude of the occasion and Soyinka's basic fears about the future of his country forced him to think hard and produce a work of such considerable substance which has since been highly esteemed, not least of all for its prophetic insight.⁹⁵

The same prophetic insight, demonstrated in A Dance of the Forests, and already vindicated by recent socio-political developments in Africa, particularly in Nigeria, may be found at work once more in both The Bacchae of Euripides and Kongi's Harvest.

In his introduction to The Bacchae of Euripides Soyinka describes Euripides' The Bacchae as "an aetiological drama within the social struggle."⁹⁶ This view of the tragedy of King Pentheus points out Soyinka's fascination with two prominent features of the classic tragedy. The first is the mythology of the Dionysian communal purification rites in Thebes; the second deals with the revolutionary ethos usually associated with the fall of a tyrant. Soyinka's adaptation blends these two features in such balanced proportions that the play

⁹⁴ One may even say the play is the watershed of Soyinka's career as an artist. Soyinka implicitly confirms this in Idanre and Other Poems (London: Eyre Methuen, 1967), p. 59, where he writes: "Idanre lost its mystification early enough. As events gathered pace and unreason around me I recognise it as part of a pattern of awareness which began when I wrote A Dance of the Forests."

⁹⁵ O. Ogunba, The Movement of Transition, p. 101.

⁹⁶ Soyinka, The Bacchae of Euripides (London: Eyre Methuen, 1973), p. ix. All references are to this edition.

transcends a mere imitation of "aetiological drama" which the playwright sees as "a prodigious, barbaric banquet, an insightful manifestation of the universal need of man to match himself against Nature."⁹⁷

The motif of the communal New Year purification rites is not alien to Nigerian drama. In fact Soyinka has used it in The Strong Breed in which revolutionary tension attends the ritual murder of Eman, the unwilling "carrier." A similar tension can be felt in The Bacchae of Euripides in which Tiresias offers to take the place of the Old Slave as "carrier" in order to prevent an uprising among the slaves. Tiresias explains: "The city must be cleansed. Filth, pollution, cruelties, secret abominations—a whole year's accumulation" (p. 10). Asked what pushed him into "this extreme sacrifice," Tiresias replies:

. . . I have longed to know what flesh is made of.
What suffering is. Feel the taste of blood instead
of merely foreseeing it. Taste the ecstasy of
rejuvenation after long organising its ritual.
When the slaves began to rumble I saw myself again
playing that futile role, pouring my warnings on
deaf ears. An uprising would come, bloodshed, and
I could watch untouched, merely vindicated as
before, as prophet. (p. 12)

This passage, an innovation in Soyinka's adaptation, sounds like what Soyinka himself would say as a visionary artist responding to the events in the Nigerian society of the early seventies. He has prophesied war before in The Trials of Brother Jero (1964). By the time he wrote The Bacchae of Euripides in 1973, a three-year war had already torn Nigeria apart. But the return of peace in January 1970 only marked the beginning of another cycle in the history of man's

⁹⁷ The Bacchae of Euripides, pp. xi-xii.

inhumanity to man associated with the reign of terror, no matter how disguised or subtle the terrorism may have been. Madmen and Specialists (1971) was consequently written to condemn, among other things, the genocidal war and its dehumanizing effects on the common man. In 1973, Jero's Metamorphosis appeared, satirizing the corruption and budding tyranny of the newly formed Salvation Army of the Lord. This budding tyranny flourishes in The Bacchae of Euripides.

Although no mention is made of Nigeria or any other African nation, the emphasis which Soyinka places on the fall of the tyrannical King Pentheus strongly suggests that Soyinka had at the back of his mind the oppressive dictatorship in Nigeria (under Gowon) and in Uganda (under Idi Amin) in introducing slavery and revolt into his adaptation of Euripides' play. The Bacchae may be seen therefore as providing Soyinka with the essential material for the continued articulation of his revolt against oppression and authoritarianism—a mission to which he dedicated himself as early as 1960 when he wrote A Dance of the Forests to mark Nigeria's Independence.

The relevance to Africa, especially Nigeria, of the tyranny of Pentheus in Thebes is not far-fetched once the universality of the theme of oppression as treated in many of Soyinka's plays is accepted. Superimposed upon Nigeria's political situation, The Bacchae of Euripides is as much a Nigerian political satire as it is a Greek mythologized political comment on the struggle for liberty from the authoritarianism of a tyrannical King. Though the play is essentially a tragedy, Soyinka's satiric voice can hardly be missed in the irony and often direct invective, with which he condemns tyranny as exemplified

by Pentheus's reign. It is in the light of this "masked" political satire that The Bacchae of Euripides will be discussed.

The symbolic setting of the "crucifixion slope" as the play opens immediately draws the audience's attention to a socio-political condition where persecution of the common people, vicious executions, and tyranny have brought about "charred ruins," though not without some glimmer of hope, symbolized by the "green vines." There is in the setting at the beginning of the play an ingenious and economical representation of the cycle of life, through persecution, death, decay, and regeneration. The threshing floor and the slaves at work suggest a society that stinks with oppression and the enslavement of the working class.

In Madmen and Specialists, the Blindman says with a shrug: "When things go wrong it's the lowest who get it first" (p. 13). The Ants in A Dance of the Forests express a similar view. In The Bacchae of Euripides the slaves who supply the scapegoat for the annual New Year purification ritual revolt openly against the system;

SLAVE LEADER. Wait (Takes hold of him.) Suppose the old man dies?

HERDSMAN. We all have to die sometime.

SLAVE LEADER. Flogged to death? In the name of some unspeakable rites?

HERDSMAN. Some must cleanse the new year of the rot of the old or the world will die. Have you ever known famine? Real famine?

SLAVE LEADER. Why us? Why always us?

HERDSMAN. Why not?

SLAVE LEADER. Because the rites bring us nothing! Let those to whom the profits go bear the burden of the old year dying.

HERDSMAN. Careful. (He points to the row of crosses.) The palace does not need the yearly Feast of Eleusis to deal with rebellious slaves. (p. 4)

This is an early indication of the growing spirit of revolt among the down-trodden slaves. What they revolt against is embodied in Soyinka's characterization of King Pentheus, who is engaged in a tragic conflict with Dionysos. Soyinka keeps in constant focus the oppressor (Pentheus), the oppressed (slaves and other subjects), and the saviour (Dionysos). The interaction of these characters reveals the playwright's concentration on establishing the guilt of Pentheus in order to justify the tragic end to which he deservedly comes.

To his blasphemy that Dionysos is a bastard (p. 28); King Pentheus adds the crime of persistently opposing and preventing the worship of what he derogatively calls

a rat who got roasted
Right in his mother's womb, blasted by the bolts
Of Zeus. (p. 29)

Pentheus considers the new Dionysian craze as "cunning subversion" which he vows to bring to an end (p. 28). In demonstration of his resolve to stop the "lecherous gospel" that spreads like a blazing fire, Pentheus declares a state of emergency, and orders one of his officers:

Go to the gates of Electra, order out
All the heavy-armoured infantry.
Call out the fastest troops of the cavalry
The mobile squadrons and the archers.
Issue a general call-up—all able-bodied men
Who can hold shield and spear. Set in motion
The standard drill for a state of emergency—
I have reasons for that—these restive dogs
Might see their chance to stage a slave uprising,
I have seen signs, so see to it!
I want the troops massed here directly.
We attack the Bacchae at once. (p. 62)

Pentheus may have been motivated by a noble sense of "duty to preserve / The territorial integrity of Thebes" (p. 63), but his action

amounts to a haughty defiance of the god, Dionysos. Despite all the warnings and good advice given by both Tiresias and Kadmos, Pentheus foolhardily scoffs at the will of heaven and trifles with divinity. With all the manifestations of the identity, presence and influence of Dionysos who has assumed a human form, Pentheus orders the imprisonment of the god, an act that reminds one of the imprisonment of Obatala:

Oh take him away. Get him out of my sight.
 He talks and talks. Lock him up somewhere near—
 In the stables—yes, leave him in the stables
 Let him thrash in the hay and light up his darkness
 With the flame of Dionysos. Dance in there.
 And the creatures you brought with you, your
 Accomplices in subversion, I shall have them
 Sold to slavery. They'll work in mines or carry
 Water for the troops, day and night—that
 Will silence their drums. (p. 46)

The motif of silencing the revellers' drums recalls the silencing of the royal drums in Kongi's Harvest. Elements of Kongism appear in the peremptory manner in which Pentheus orders the imprisonment of Dionysos. This action brings Pentheus' blind despotism to its peak. Anything he does after putting the god in chains only hastens his downfall.

Pentheus' major tragic flaw may be identified as his pride, which prompts him to put so much premium on arms against Dionysos and his worshippers, and to spurn the warnings of Tiresias and Kadmos:

TIRESIAS. Come, we have done our duty.

I pity Pentheus

His terrible madness. There is no cure,
 No relief from potions. Nor from preaching.

KADMOS. Wait. His mind is surely distracted,
 His thoughts sheer delirium—Son, remember
 That dreadful death your cousin Acteon died
 When those man-eating hounds reared
 By his own hands savaged him, tore him
 Limb from limb for boasting that his prowess

In the hunt surpassed the skill of Artemis,
Do not let his fate be yours.

PENTHEUS (grimly.)

It won't. But I thank you for suggesting a most
Befitting fate for that sorcerer when we find him.

(p. 34)

Pentheus finds it difficult to trust anyone around him, including the renowned prophet Tiresias. This feeling of insecurity continues to haunt him, and his strategy is to eliminate all his opponents. He orders the destruction of Tiresias' property, and issues a warrant for the arrest of

This thing of doubtful gender who infects
Our marriage beds. Find him. Glap him in chains,
Drag him here. He'll suffer stoning to death
The nearest fate I can devise to Acteon's
Piecemeal death at the jaws of his hunting hounds.
He'll find Thebes a harder bed than he had
Bargained for his Bacchic jigs. (p. 35)

So power-drunk is Pentheus that he fails to see any significance in Tiresias' words that "in Greek the name Pentheus signifies / Sorrow" (p. 36). What marks the beginning of this "sorrow" is the unusual hesitation of the attendants to carry out his orders. As usual, Pentheus fails to see what this really means. When the Old Slave dares to question the wisdom of his command to destroy the hut of the holy man, Pentheus knocks him flat with a slap.⁹⁸ In the reaction of the slaves to this action lies another sign of fall to which Pentheus pays little or no attention:

SLAVE LEADER. Back! Keep back!

VARIOUS.

- Keep away!
- This is filth, stain

⁹⁸ Cf. The Warrior's fate in A Dance of the Forests (p. 53) when he dares to question Mata Kharibu's command.

-- Smear, decay
 -- Abomination

SLAVE LEADER.

Back! Leave him there
 Let him die there and accuse him!

PENTHEUS (his hand on his sword).
 Do you slaves defy me?

VARIOUS.

We are strangers but we know the meaning
 of madness

-- To hit an old servant
 With frost on his head
 Such a one as has stood
 At the gateway of Mysteries.

SLAVE LEADER.

You know it. This
 Was the body of the Old Year Dying.
 The choice of the priests of Eleusis
 Till good Tiresias stepped in his place.

VARIOUS.

On the scorn on his lips. Such
 Inhuman indifference. Corrosive
 As his hate for Dionysos.
 Age is holy
 To hit an old man
 Or demolish the roof of a sage?
 Yet we are the barbarians
 And Greece the boast of civilization
 We are slaves and have no souls.

SLAVE LEADER.

No one will touch him where he lies
 The world must see it.
 Dionysos shall avenge this profanity
 I live to witness
 The feast of the vengeance of joy. . . . (pp. 36-38)

This effrontery, which marks the beginning of the end of Pentheus, recalls to mind a Yoruba proverb: "Bí erú bá gbó Oba lónhún, ó ti so adé rẹ̀ di àbòro." (When slaves raise their plaintive voice against a king, his crown shrinks into a mere cap without as much as a tassel to grace it.) This proverb with its metonymic referents describes the king's loss of his viceregal dignity and authority once a slave is bold enough to bandy words with him. Pentheus gets the message. As the stage

direction indicates, his "face registers horror and disbelief as he recognises the implications of this" (p. 38). But rather than relent, he hardens and overreaches himself by imprisoning Dionysos.

When the Bacchantes severally invoke the wrath of Dionysos on Pentheus, the "shrieking intensity of sound protesting the sacrilege" (p. 47) brings their plaintive voice to a climax:

CHORUS.

Now. Now is the time. Bromius
Be manifest! Come, the new order!

BACCHANTE.

Shatter the floor of the world!

SLAVE LEADER.

It's happening. The palace of Pentheus
Totters, bulges, quivers. Rot gapes
In the angry light of lightning. Roots
Long trapped in evil crevices have burgeoned.
Their strength empowers me, the strength
Of a Master. . . Join him! Power his will!

CHORUS.

Come BROMIUS!

(p. 51)

This choral invocation of Bromius' name is a clear manifestation of the shift of loyalty of the subjects from Pentheus to Dionysos. With no loyal subjects left to honour and respect the king, Pentheus' future as Theban king is doomed. Nothing sums up Pentheus' character and doom better than the words of Dionysos, who sees no future for the tyrant:

You Pentheus, because you are a man of chains.
You love chains. Have you uttered one phrase
today that was not hyphenated by chains? You
breath[es] chains, talk chains, eat chains, dream
chains, think chains. Your world is bound in
manacles. Even in repose you are a cow chewing the
cud, but for you it is molten iron issuing from the
furnace of your so-called kingly will. It has
replaced your umbilical cord and issues from this
point. . . (He touches him on the navel, commences
to turn PENTHEUS round and round, gently. In spite
of himself PENTHEUS is quite submissive.) . . . and
winds about you all the way back into the throat

where it issues forth again in one unending cycle.
 (He holds out his hand before PENTHEUS' eyes, like
 a mirror.) Do you recognise it? Have you ever
 seen the like? In all your wanderings have your
 eyes even been affronted by a creature so gross,
 so unnatural, so obscene? (pp. 65-66)

Pentheus is made to appear like a monster, frightening as well as repulsive. In portraying him in this light, Soyinka succeeds in presenting the monstrous picture of a tyrant, be it in Thebes, in Nigeria, in Uganda, or in any nation where authoritarianism reigns supreme.

In order to portray Pentheus as a tyrant effectively, Soyinka pitches him against the common will and aspirations of his subjects as championed by Dionysos. In the play, therefore, Dionysos is more than a god whose wrath is let loose in revenge on the haughty king. He is an embodiment of the commonweal of Thebes. In him are met both fierceness and benevolence. As the Slave Leader comments:

His hands trap wildness, and breed it gentle
 He infuses tameness with savagery.
 I have seen him on the mountains, in vibrant fawn-skin
 I have seen his smile in the red flash of blood
 I have seen the raw heart of a mountain-lion
 Still pulsing in his throat

 I know he is awaited, the covenant, promise,
 Restorer of fullness to Nature's lean hours.
 As milk he flows in the earth, as wine
 In the hills: He runs in the nectar of bees and,
 In the duct of their sting lurks--Bromius. (pp. 19-20)

In plains and valleys
 Nest his joyful Bacchae, his mesh of elements
 Reconciles a warring universe. (p. 21)

Despite the fierceness which indicates the power of Dionysos over ordinary human beings, there are in him elements of life, growth, nourishment and pleasure, all of which are held in commendable balance.

This explains why Tiresias calls upon the defiant king to accept Dionysos with open arms and enlist in the burgeoning Dionysian cult:

Shall I tell you what to look for in this being?
 Think of two principles, two supreme
 Principles of life. First, the principle
 Of earth, Demeter, goddess of soil or what you will.
 This nourishes man, yields him grain. Bread. Womb-like
 It earths him as it were, anchors his feet.
 Second, the opposite, and complementary principle--
 Ether, locked in the grape until released by man.
 For after Demeter came the son of Semele
 And matched her present with the juice of grapes. (p. 30)

To deny the Bacchantes the opportunity to worship this benevolent, though fierce, deity is to cut them off from the source of nourishment (milk) and pleasure (wine). And if Dionysos is a universal peacemaker, if "his mesh of elements / Reconciles a warring universe" (p. 21), to prevent his worship is to throw the universe into chaos. Pentheus' tyranny, therefore, makes him an incorrigible enemy of the peace, happiness, wishes, and aspirations of his people. This is the light in which Soyinka wants the audience to see not only Pentheus, but all tyrants.

Watching The Bacchae of Euripides in the theatre, or reading the text in the privacy of one's home, one can hardly fail to associate the action and utterances of Pentheus with those of certain political or military rulers in Africa and elsewhere. This is why Pentheus' height of folly becomes very significant when he requests:

'Stranger. . . from here I can see
 Little of these counterfeiting worshippers.
 What if I climbed that towering fir that overhangs
 The banks, do you think I might see the better at
 Their shameless orgies?' (p. 84)

At this stage in the decline of Pentheus, once his request (reported by an Officer) is acceded to, the inevitable catastrophe sets in. Seated

on the highest tip of the towering fir tree, Pentheus literally trades his throne in the palace for a "naked nest" which constitutes "his new throne among the leaves" (p. 84). Pentheus' request represents his and all tyrants' pride, vaulting ambition, and unbridled desires, all of which bring only self-destruction. The fall of Pentheus from his tree-top "throne" then symbolizes the catastrophic end which all tyrants deservedly come to.

The death of Pentheus, preceded by a perversion of a communal purification ritual and the inhumane sacrifice of slaves as unwilling scapegoats, is essentially a purification ritual. At once, it marks the end of the tyrant and ushers in, hopefully, an era of peace and all that Dionysos means to the common man. Pentheus then becomes the "carrier" in the New Year purification ritual, done to death by his own mother and relatives. As the crucial moment of the discovery of the horrid deed dawns upon Agave, the rhythm of tragic action reaches a final crescendo that soon subsides into a muted celebration of the epiphany, the dawn of the new order. This is symbolically stated in the ritualistic transformation of the spurts of blood from Pentheus' head into wine,⁹⁹ which everybody, including Agave and Kadmos, partakes of.

A discussion of The Bacchae of Euripides as a political satire cannot be complete without some mention of Soyinka's analysis of Dionysianism:

⁹⁹ Cf. the second illusory wedding feast shown to Pentheus (pp. 68-69) with an allusion to the miracle at the wedding at Cana (John, 2: 1-10).

The definitive attachment to a suitable deity—in this case Dionysos—was nothing more than the natural, historical process by which populist movements (religious or political) identify themselves with mythical heroes at critical moments of social upheaval. Myth is part-wish-fulfilment through hero projections. This means, naturally, that it is an outline for action, especially for groups within society who have experienced loss and deprivation. The cleverer tyrants such as Periandros and Kleisthenes recognised this potential and, for their own hardly altruistic motives, actively encouraged the spread of Dionysiac 'rage.'

Dionysos' history was extravagantly rich in all the ingredients of a ravaged social psyche: displacement, suppression of identity, dissociation, dispossession, trials and the goal of restoration: . . . In challenging the state Mysteries he became champion of the masses against monopolistic repressions of the 'Olympian' priesthood, mercantile princes and other nobility.¹⁰⁰

This analysis confirms the legitimacy of placing The Bacchae of Euripides among Soyinka's political satires even though the play is fundamentally tragic. McGee remarks that the play "is Soyinka's first major work set outside of his native Africa—but the Greek tragedy presents him with little difficulty."¹⁰¹ This may be explained by the fact that Soyinka regards the Greek tragedy as a fitting statement on the prevalent despotic form of government in Africa in the late sixties and early seventies. Soyinka's adaptation accordingly transforms the mirth-making Greek deity into an elixir for the suffering of the Theban people.¹⁰² Pentheus' hard and compact torso may be an embodiment of order, rationality and puritanism, as McGee asserts, but Soyinka chooses

¹⁰⁰ Soyinka, The Bacchae of Euripides, pp. vii-viii.

¹⁰¹ H. McGee, "Soyinka Goes Greek," Newsweek, 13 Aug. 1973, p. 49.

¹⁰² Ibid.

to emphasize the king's pride, and utter disregard for the collective will of his subjects as his tragic flaw. The adaptation consequently breathes with fresh vigour; and Soyinka's skillful handling of the "masked" political satire brings the play, in spirit, close to the political satire in Kongi's Harvest.

Like The Bacchae of Euripides, Kongi's Harvest,¹⁰³ Soyinka's most caustic political satire to date, is built around a ritualistic festival set at the beginning of the harvest season: the New Yam Festival. In both plays are featured tyrants whose actions constitute a desecration of the communal rites of the people. Since its first production at the Federal Palace Hotel in Lagos in 1965, Kongi's Harvest has often been seen as articulating a dialectical confrontation between the traditionalism of Oba Danlola and the modern dictatorship of Kongi, and between the forces of life and those of death. It appears, however, that, with the exception of one critic or two, none of the critics reacting to either the performance or the text of the play has dealt with its political satire in depth. The present study is designed, therefore, to fill the gap created in the criticism of Soyinka's much talked-about political drama.

In a paper, "Modern Negro-African Theatre," presented at the Colloquium during the Festival of Negro Arts in Dakar in April 1966, Soyinka outlines the trend of modern African theatre, and asserts that

Speculation on what direction original plays by the intellectual playwrights would have taken is actually

¹⁰³ (London: O. U. P., 1967). All references are to this edition.

easy. Open to the general pattern of historical conflict between authority and individual, it would hardly be anything but pessimistic, though not necessarily resigned. . . . Now that there appears to be the beginning of a reversal of that myth of African absolutism, however, or, at least, a crack in the oppression of monolithic perpetuity, modern theatre may turn, instinctively, to its celebrative functions,¹⁰⁴

The "myth of African absolutism" and the "oppression of monolithic perpetuity" referred to in the above passage conspicuously feature in Kongi's Harvest, the end of which signals the reversal of the myth, or, at least, a movement in the direction of its inevitable collapse.

Kongi's Harvest is generally accepted as a comment on contemporary political scene in Africa. Gerald Moore's view that the play "is probably flawed as a permanent contribution to the African repertory by its fairly elaborate topicality"¹⁰⁵ does not, however, recognize the universality of the theme of despotism in the play. The critic argues: "Some of the lines will draw less of a laugh even now [ca. 1970] than in 1965, for certain phrases and attitudes of fashionable dictatorship are already less familiar than they were a few years ago."¹⁰⁶ This view is probably less true today than it was in 1970.

It is some relief, however, that the critic concedes that the "basic follies and greeds exposed by the satire are. . . always with us, and a production of the play ten years hence would have little difficulty in

¹⁰⁴ Cited in Dapo Adelugba, "Citadel of Power in Kongi's Harvest: An Approach to the Soyinkaresque World View." A paper presented at the Symposium on Wole Soyinka, Univ. of Ibadan, 13 May 1973, pp. 2-3.

¹⁰⁵ Gerald Moore, Wole Soyinka, p. 71.

¹⁰⁶ Ibid.

finding the right lines and gestures to strike a contemporary chord."¹⁰⁷

The focus of the satire in Kongi's Harvest is the tyranny of Kongi, which is modelled on known figures in African politics of the fifties and the sixties. Graham-White suggests that the play may have been influenced by John Arden's Serjeant Musgrave's Dance, a play which "was presented at the Royal Court Theatre in London while Soyinka was working there."¹⁰⁸ Another critic finds a close resemblance between the satire in Kongi's Harvest and that in Brecht's The Resistible Rise of Arturo Ui, and cites Brecht's own comment on his play which is said to be a satire on Hitler and Hitlerism:

The great political criminals. . . must be exposed, and particularly, exposed to laughter. For they are by no means great political criminals, but the perpetrators of great political crimes, which is something altogether different.¹⁰⁹

This description of the dictator should help a reader of Kongi's Harvest in appreciating why Kongi is portrayed not as a hero, but as a political anti-hero. The discoveries cited above, no doubt, provide for a comparative study of Brecht, Arden, and Soyinka. However, such an exercise, as impressive and illuminating as it may be, is outside the scope of the present consideration of Kongi's Harvest as a political

¹⁰⁷ Gerald Moore, Wole Soyinka, p. 68.

¹⁰⁸ A. Graham-White, "West African Drama: Folk, Popular, and Literary," Ph. D. Thesis, Stanford University, 1969, pp. 215-16; also see pp. 216-17.

¹⁰⁹ Cited in S. E. Ogunde, "Aspects of the Political and Social Satire in the Plays of Wole Soyinka," A paper presented at the First Ibadan Annual African Literature Conference, University of Ibadan, 6-10 July 1976, pp. 19-20. Earlier cited in Frederic Ewen, Bertolt Brecht, His Life, His Art and His Times (London, 1967), p. 375.

satire which unquestionably grows out of real political situations in Africa. The similarities between the modus operandi of Kongi and that of Serjeant Musgrave or Arturo Ui only attest to the universality of authoritarianism.

The tyrant Kongi, with all the image-casting paraphernalia of modern times and surrounded by indoctrinated tin god worshippers, finds adequate models in independent African nations. One of these models is the late Dr. Kwame Nkrumah, one-time President of Ghana, whose image as Osagyefo ("Redeemer") is recalled by Kongi's apotheosis. It should be stressed, however, that by the time Soyinka wrote Kongi's Harvest, other African politicians such as Dr. (Hastings) Kamuzu Banda of Malawi and Dr. Milton Obote of Uganda were beginning to emerge as variations of Kongi in their countries. Obvious references to these political leaders in the play will show that Kongi's Harvest is not a pointed reference to Dr. Kwame Nkrumah or to Ghana only.

In a Programme Note to the production of the play at the Arts Theatre, University of Ibadan in November 1969, Soyinka assures the audience that the play

is not about Kongi but about Kongism. Therefore, while it has been suggested with some justification that there are some resemblances between the character of Kongi and that of ex-President Nkrumah—the play was first presented in 1965 while Nkrumah was still in power—it must be emphasized that Kongism has never been dethroned in Black Africa.

There are a thousand and more forms of Kongism—from the crude and blasphemous to the subtle and sanctimonious. A current variety may be described as the cult of plaster cast sanctity. All roads lead in the same direction, and down this hill, striking sparks from careless skull, Kongi Rides Again!

Kongism may be defined, therefore, as any form of despotic rule which employs some or all of the tactics and machinery of Kongi in Kongi's Harvest, with an objective similar to Kongi's. Given this definition, it becomes easy to identify the political satire in the central conflict in the play. This conflict, between Oba Danlola and Kongi, is reminiscent of the constitutional conflict between Dr. Milton Obote, former President of Uganda, and King (Alfred) Kabaka Mutesa II of Buganda. Like Oba Danlola, the Kabaka finally succumbed to the unbending will of Dr. Obote. The Obote-Mutesa II confrontation, however, only serves as a take-off point for Soyinka's biting satire on despotic rule.

As the play opens, Oba Danlola is seen in detention in Kongi's concentration camp, which brings back memories of the Nazi concentration camp of the World War years in Germany. With Danlola are his favourite wife, his Ogho Aweri, Bende his page, and his retinue of drummers and buglers, all of whom are mere vestigial manifestations of the King's former royalty. Danlola's appearance at curtain-rise, therefore, is as ironic as it is revealing.

The opening section entitled "Hemlock" starts off with the consciously desecrated parody of the national anthem of Ismaland (the land of "isms"). The second stanza of the anthem clearly sounds the note of disapproval of Kongi's "absolute-ism":

To demonstrate the tree of life
 Is sprung from broken peat.
 And we the rotted bark, spurned
 When the tree swells its pot
 The mucus that is snorted out
 When Kongi's new race blows
 And more, oh there's a harvest of words
 In a penny newspaper. (p. 1)

The last two lines are a modified translation of the Yoruba saying: "Oro pò ninu lwe kòbò." The implication of this saying is that Danlola, like other victims of Kongi's tyranny, can hardly exhaust his tale of woe. It is noteworthy that the passage quoted above bears some similarity to the complaints of the Ants in A Dance of the Forests, to the protest of the slaves in The Bacchae of Euripides, and to the plaintive voice of the mendicants in Madmen and Specialists. So, from the outset, the playwright skillfully hints at a socio-political situation in which the common people and even royal personages are treated like "cysts" in the "System."

The filth imagery—"muchs that is snorted out"—incisively portrays the level to which Kongi's form of dictatorship has reduced those who constitute the resistance group in Isma. In detention, however, Oba Danlola still maintains his royalty as much as possible. As the Drummer puts it, "Ogun is still a god / Even without his navel" (p. 9). This explains why the Superintendent is terrified when Danlola threatens to prostrate before him in response to the Superintendent's charge that the Oba is not even grateful for the concessions granted him. In Yorubaland, when an Oba is to be enthroned, he first of all prostrates before the entire community three times as his last act of respect for his subjects. Once crowned, the Oba prostrates only to an Oba of a higher rank, but never again to any of his subjects. If he does, the person to whom he prostrates earns for himself or herself an irrevocable curse. Hence the Superintendent's plea:

I did not make any impious demand of you. All I asked was for more respect to constituted authority.

I didn't ask for a curse on my head.

Only a foolish child lets a father prostrate to him.
I don't ask to become a leper or a lunatic. I have
no wish to live on sour berries. (p. 6)

Despite the Superintendent's recognition of Oba Danlola's royalty; he has stopped the royal drums. Danlola's reaction to this affront is worth quoting for its significance:

DANLOLA: Good friend, you merely stopped
My drums. But they were silenced
On the day when Kongi cast aside
My props of wisdom, the day he
Drove the old Aweri from their seats.
What is a king without a clan
Of Elders? What will Kongi be without.
Sarumi, what name was it again?

SARUMI: The Reformed Aweri Fraternity.

DANLOLA: A big name for little heads.
And now, he wants to eat
The first of the New Yam. (pp. 3-4)

This passage reveals rather succinctly the crucial points of difference between the two authorities in conflict. Danlola's "props of wisdom" which Kongi has cast aside are the Old Aweri. To deny him the services and companionship of these elders is to desecrate the traditional institution which thrives on dialogue and the spirit of comradeship for the peace and progress of the society. Without his Old Aweri, Oba Danlola is no true king. By dispersing the Old Aweri, therefore, Kongi has taken a bold step towards phasing out traditional rule in Isma.

Kongi's unyielding demand for Danlola's "total, absolute submission—in full view of the people" (p. 39) proves that it is not really the new yam he wants at the festival; his real desire is a public demonstration of the ascent of Kongi to ultimate power, an act which will render Danlola redundant in the scheme of things. According to

the Fourth Aweri, who regards Danlola as a "retrogressive autocrat," once the Oba symbolically acknowledges the supremacy of the State, "the State will adopt towards him and to all similar institutions the policy of glamoured fossilism" (p. 24). Of course, Danlola's vision of being stripped of his viceroyalty has been expressed with deep concern in "Hemlock." However, he is not the type to be humiliated so easily; and the ensuing power struggle between him (traditional monarchy) and Kongi (despotism) fosters the political satire which unfolds itself in the rest of the play.

Oba Danlola sees through the emptiness, or, at least, the shallowness of the philosophy upon which Kongi's political tactics thrive. He regards the Reformed Aweri Fraternity,¹¹⁰ a caricatured parallel of the Ogbu Aweri, as a big name for little heads (p. 4). There is abundant evidence early in the First Part of the play to justify Danlola's remarks. The Reformed Aweri Fraternity are in session at Kongi's retreat, saddled with the task of planning for and beyond the upcoming New Yam Festival. However, theirs is an exercise in futility. Their disputation only exposes their ineffectiveness, disrepute, and redundancy.

More pertinent than this exposure, however, is the disparaging portrayal of Kongi that emerges from the disputation of the Reformed Aweri. It is revealed through the Fraternity in the first,

¹¹⁰ The name most probably derives from The Reformed Ogboni Fraternity, a secret cult which, along with a few others, was recently declared as an undesirable "secret society" by the Nigerian Military Government. It is now illegal for public servants to be members of such secret cults in Nigeria.

third, and fifth scenes of the First Part that Kongi will not only appropriate Danlola's vicerojal powers to himself, but also will become a god himself. As Kongi's "disciples," the Reformed Aweri search for an image that befits their status. The suggestion by the Fourth Aweri that the term "Magi" be adopted (p. 11) should be regarded as the playwright's design to satirize power-drunk Kongis, particularly in Africa. As the Fourth Aweri rationalizes: "From the recognition of us as the Magi, it is one step to his inevitable apotheosis" (p. 11). The pungency of the satire in this statement lies in its irony. One can see through the thin veneer that masks the satire which becomes more transparent when the Third Aweri shouts down the Fifth who keeps asking why they need an image: "Will you for Kongi's sake stop asking that question?" (p. 12). Instead of saying "for God's sake," the Third Aweri makes a god of Kongi, half in derision and half in anger.

The Fourth Aweri, in an attempt to redeem his rambling colleagues, comes up with a suggestion which turns out to be an obvious jibe at Dr. Nkrumah, the acclaimed leader of the African revolution:

FOURTH: We might consider a scientific image.

This would be a positive stamp and one very much in tune with our contemporary situation. Our pronouncements should be dominated by a positive scientificism.

THIRD: A brilliant conception. I move we adopt it at once.

SIXTH: What image exactly is positive scientificism?

THIRD: Whatever it is, it is not long-winded proverbs and senile pronouncements. In fact we could say a step has already been taken in that direction. If you've read our Leader's last publication. . . .

FIFTH: Ah yes. Nor proverbs nor verse, only ideograms in algebraic quantum. If the square of $XQY \cdot (2bc)$ equals QA into the square root of X ,

then the progressive forces must prevail over the
 reactionary in the span of .32 of a single
 generation.¹¹¹ (p. 13)

This passage brings into sharp relief the immediate target of Soyinka's satire. It reveals an ideal despot's out-of-this-world approach to political issues. Whatever the "algebraic quantum" may mean, it all boils down to Kongi's use of arms to eliminate his opponents: "then the progressive forces must prevail over the reactionary in the span of .32 of a single generation." According to the Fifth Aweri, Kongi's last publication, written for him by one of his Reformed Aweri,¹¹² contains neither proverbs nor verse. In other words, in the dictator's conception of political ideas, there is no room for traditionally accepted words of wisdom, or for the art of poetry with which traditional rulers like Danlola normally approach socio-political problems. Kongi, it is implied, is so impatient, and so puffed up with power, that all his faith is in the trigger of a .32 calibre rifle, or in any other method which is in accord with what the Fourth Aweri sums up as "an exercise in scientific exorcism" (p. 20).

Kongi's methods of eliminating political opponents are not necessarily peculiar to Nkrumah of Ghana. There are too many Kongis in

¹¹¹ Parodied from Kwame Nkrumah's Consciencism (London: Panaf Books, 1964). Chapter 5, "Set Theoretical Terms" is an extraordinary reduction of political thoughts to curious mathematical theorems and equations.

¹¹² The question of Nkrumah's authorship of the fourteen books ascribed to him, and published by Panaf Books, rears its head in Kongi's Harvest, p. 35. Rumour has it that Professor William Abraham and other scholars of Nkrumah's Flagstaff house establishment actually wrote some of the President's books. The Fifth Aweri may, therefore, be a dramatic recreation of Professor Abraham for satiric purposes.

Africa to reduce Soyinka's satire to sheer topicality. Answering a question on the Nigerian government's acceptance of his theatrical work, Soyinka states that the government has never accepted him, but

it hasn't got much choice. It was during the hot political arena in 1963, 1964, and 1965, the civilian period where elections were being rigged, and people were disappearing, and all opponents of the government could be taxed out of existence, their cocoa farms just taken away like that, when armies of thugs literally reigned as roving pirates. . . .

Recently [Nov. 1969] when I directed again Kongi's Harvest with the University Theatre Company—and this is ironic because I directed it at the request of the University [of Ibadan], for the University's twenty-first birthday ceremonies, to which everybody came. . . it was one of these almost semi-state occasions—I had interpreted Kongi's Harvest with a military image on top at a very direct reference point.¹¹³

It may be inferred from the above passage that all the social and political ills, including the victimisation of opponents and the rigging of elections in Nigeria, were ready materials for Soyinka's satire. For instance, during the unpopular regime of Chief S. L. Akintola in the former Western Region, elections were brazenly rigged to favour the N. N. D. P. Certain Obas had their annual salaries reduced to one penny, an act calculated to humiliate those who refused to support the government's unorthodox and unethical mode of operation. This political situation in Yorubaland of the sixties may have prompted the incorporation of the song "E ma gun'yan Oba kere o." that is, "Don't pound the king's yam / In a small mortar" (pp. 2 and 57). Danlola's reaction to the song when sung by Sarumi (p. 57) is worth noting:

¹¹³ Soyinka, "Penthouse Theatre," in In Person, pp. 105-106.

Go and tell that to the Leader's men
 Their yam is pounded, not with the pestle
 But with stamp and a pad of violet ink
 And their arms make omelet of
 Stubborn heads, via police truncheons. (p. 57)

This critical comment forcefully sums up Kongi's terrorism which recalls the unprecedented despotism of the Akintola regime of the sixties. The government's abuse of the radio and the press to misinform and to confuse the public only hardened the hearts of the masses against the maniacal leadership of the government. Soyinka ingeniously recreates some aspects of the political life of the era in Kongi's Harvest. In the anthem in "Hemlock," there are echoes of the reaction of numerous subscribers to government rediffusion sets in Western Nigeria who had to return their sets because they found the government propaganda distasteful:

Who but a lunatic
 Will bandy words with boxes
 With government rediffusion sets
 Which talk and talk and never
 Take a lone word in reply[?]

 No I do not bandy words
 With a government loudspeaker. (p. 2)

The rediffusion set motif is further exploited when one of Kongi's orders is relayed over the rediffusion boxes. The order comes soon after Kongi learns that one of the five men condemned to death has escaped from detention:

KONGI: I want him back, I want him back you hear?

 I want him back--alive if possible. If not,
 ANY OTHER WAY! But I want him back! (p. 47)

To this order, Oba Danlola reacts with a mixture of dejection and fury:

And the radio has put a price
 Upon his head: A life pension
 For his body, dead or alive, . . .

.
 In my primitive youth, that would be called
 A plain incitement to murder. (pp. 62-63)

Kongi's man-hunt order is believed to have been derived from a statement credited to Dr. Banda, President of Malawi.¹¹⁴ Soyinka incorporates Banda's order into his play to universalize through Kongi the ruthless determination of the Malawian President to eliminate his political opponents by any means.

Earlier in the play, Kongi has consented to grant reprieve to the five condemned men at the request of the Secretary, who keeps mediating between the forces of life (represented by Oba Danlola, Segi and Daodu) and the forces of death (Kongi and his officials). The Secretary has had to pander to Kongi's sense of pride to secure the reprieve:

It's all part of one and same harmonious idea my
 Leader. A Leader's Temptation. . . . Agony on the
 Mountains. . . . The Loneliness of the Pure. . . .
 The Uneasy Head. . . . A Saint at Twilight. . . . The
 Spirit of the Harvest. . . . The Face of Benevolence
 The Giver of Life. . . . who knows how many other
 titles will accompany such pictures round the world.
 And then my Leader, this the Year of Kongi's Harvest!
 The Presiding Spirit as a life-giving spirit—we
 would project that image into every heart and head,
 no matter how stubborn. (p. 39)

The Secretary's flattery, and Kongi's reaction to it and to the flashes from the camera as he poses for snapshots, betray the tyrant's megalomaniacal

¹¹⁴ O. Ogunba, The Movement of Transition, p. 191. In a footnote on the same page, he adds: "In 1964 Mr. [Henry] Chipembere, former Minister of Education in Malawi, escaped from detention. It was reported that Dr. Banda. . . . put a price on his head and caused the same to be announced on Malawi Radio. The statement was widely condemned throughout the world."

mania. The Reformed Aweri Fraternity recognize this flaw in their leader, and, particularly the Fifth Aweri, who has suggested the idea of the reprieve to the Secretary, fully understands Kongi to be too bloodthirsty to subscribe whole-heartedly to the idea:

SECRETARY: You don't know how he hates those men. He wants them dead—you've no idea how desperately.

FIFTH: I do. But tell him he can kill them later in detention. Have them shot trying to escape or something. But first, demonstrate his power over life and death by granting them a last-minute reprieve.

(p. 30)

This murderous suggestion is in part reminiscent of the political situation in the Congo (now Zaire) in February 1961. Shortly after the independence of that country, its first Prime Minister, Patrice Lumumba, was ousted from power and killed in prison. It was later announced that he was accidentally shot when attempting to escape from detention; but the circumstances of his death made the official bulletin rather incredible.

Soyinka continues to draw from contemporary events in independent Africa to expose and to condemn Kongism in all its forms. One nauseating aspect of Kongism which he satirizes is that it encourages among officials the intimidation of the common people, who are no safer from Kongi's bloodthirstiness than the officials themselves are. To avoid being intimidated, and to enjoy certain privileges even in detention, these officials are often bribed. Consequently, bribery and corruption become by-products of Kongi's authoritarianism:

FIFTH: Don't act innocent with me. If a detainee pays your price you'll see to his comforts. I bet our royal prisoner has put on weight since he came under your charge.

SECRETARY: This is slander.

FIFTH: Sue me.

SECRETARY: I refuse to listen to any more of this.

FIFTH: And a full sex-life too I bet. Are you going to tell me you don't issue week-end permits to his wives?

SECRETARY: You are taking advantage of your privileged position.

FIFTH: I waive it you shameless bribe-collector.

Say whatever is on your mind, or take me to court. I waive my philosophic immunity.

SECRETARY: All right. So I take bribes. It only puts me on the same level with you. (pp. 25-26)

The corruption of the Aweri, according to the Secretary, thrives on their "power of being so close to power. . . . Of course you've been bought. Bribed with the bribe of an all-powerful signature across a timeless detention order" (pp. 26-27). Through this dialogue and the subsequent demand of bribe from the Secretary by the Fifth Aweri, Soyinka depicts one of the most irrepressible evils in the society.

The First Part of Kongi's Harvest incisively portrays Kongi's steep and treacherous ascent to power. The President of Isma that emerges is an embodiment of a superhuman anti-hero who looks forward to a harvest that will mark the beginning of a new calendar. As the Secretary puts it, the year "shall be known as the year of Kongi's Harvest. Everything shall date from it" (p. 37). Kongi's ambition transcends the dictatorial leadership of Isma. He foresees himself as a god whose epiphany on Harvest day will change the pattern of dating from 200 B. C. to 200 B. K. H. He argues that "K. H. is less ambiguous" than "B. H." which the Secretary suggests. "The year of Kongi's Harvest. Then for the purpose of back-dating, B. K. H. Before Kongi's Harvest" (p. 37). Soyinka would describe this as an example of blasphemous Kongism because of the obvious iconoclasm in Kongi's plans to

set aside the orthodox system of dating, thereby attributing to himself the honour done Christ.

Pitched up on the pinnacle of power, the apotheosized despot can only go in one direction--downwards. The height of his power is such that his fall is bound to be precipitous. Most of the Second Part of the play concentrates on the nose-dive decline of Kongi's dictatorship. To effect this fall, Segi and Daodu have formed a resistance group to counter what the Fourth Aweri would call "power reversionism" (p. 20). Oba Danlola has to settle for cooperating with the group. Soyinka explains why Daodu has to lead the opposition to Kongi's despotic government. Answering an interviewer's question, he states that

the Obas were not equipped to fight this new kind of dictatorship and one by one the traditional institutions fell before the onslaught of these new power-rapacious national leaders. You will find that where there has been any constructive and realistic resistance it has had to come from the younger generation.¹¹⁵

It should be noted, however, that Daodu is not merely representing the ambitious younger generation who, according to Soyinka, would rather share in political power than take the risks involved in opposition. As Sarumi's son and heir to the throne of Danlola, Daodu sees in Kongi's "power reversionism" a big threat to his chances of ascent to the throne. His future, like that of the institution of traditional rule, hangs on the outcome of the conflict between Kongi and Danlola. It is understandable that he is determined to risk his life to fight Kongi and Kongism in Isma.

¹¹⁵ An interview with Dennis Duerden, in African Writers Talking, Eds., D. Duerden and C. Pieterse (London: Heinemann, 1972), p. 179.

Daodu finds a willing ally in an equally aggrieved Segi, another of Soyinka's extraordinary women. Rola (Madame Tortoise) in A Dance of the Forests, and Simi and Dehinwa in The Interpreters are of the same type. Ogunba likens Segi to "some of the famous Yoruba or Fini women of antiquity--Moremi, Emotan, Sungbo—who perform great [feats] under tragic pressure."¹¹⁶ It should be stressed, however, that Segi lacks their heroic stature, though her part in the anti-Kongi movement is extraordinary. Her Club serves as a convenient venue for the planning sessions. Unlike Kongi's retreat, characterized by fear, suspicion, starvation, ineffective disputation, and threats of death, her Club is full of life--music, dancing, singing, laughter and drinking. Beneath all these, however, lurks that tension created by the awareness that five detainees, including Segi's father, are soon forfeit their lives to Kongi's tyranny unless speedy action is taken to turn the table against the dictator.

Daodu's ambition and fighting spirit, fortified by Segi's bitterness against Kongi, transform him into something of a wild cat ready to pounce on its prey. Draped by Segi in the symbolic "Spirit of Harvest" robe, he feels within him a surge of "power" with which he pours out imprecations on Kongi and his types all over the world. The dialogue that follows typifies Soyinka's invective on perpetrators of despotism in all its forms:

DAODU: Let me preach hatred Segi. If I preached
hatred I could match his [Kongi's] barren
marathon, hour for hour, torrent for torrent.

¹¹⁶ O. Ogunba, The Movement of Transition, p. 197.

SEGI: Preach life Daodu, only life. . . .

DAODU: Imprecations then, curses on all inventors of agonies, on all Messiahs of pain and false burdens. . . .

SEGI: Only life is worth preaching by prince.

DAODU: (with mounting passion): On all who fashion chains; on farmers of terror, on builders of walls, on all who guard against the night but breed darkness by day, on all whose feet are heavy and yet stand upon the world. . . .

SEGI: Life. . . life. . . .

DAODU: On all who see, not with the eyes of the dead, but with eyes of Death. . . . (p. 45)

Segi only pretends to check Daodu's growing passion. Deep inside her she fully welcomes Daodu's imprecations on her father's enemy. Once the "Spirit of Harvest" robe is taken off Daodu, his wrath and curses on the Messiah of pain subside. Enough has been said, however, to convince the audience that the moment is ripe for the precipitous fall of Kongi, for the Harvest of Death.

Danlola has resorted to unkingly antics, which he calls "play-acting" (p. 56), to fool Kongi into believing that he will be at the Harvest to present the new yam as an act of public submission. Disgusted with the pointless frolicking of Sarumi and Danlola, Daodu bursts the royal drums with the heavy handle of the ceremonial whisk of Danlola. This action almost earns Daodu the king's irrevocable curse, because his good intentions have been misconstrued by Danlola who is under great pressure to go to the Festival. Daodu assures him, however: "Nothing can alter what today will bring. And your compliance is a vital part of it" (p. 63). Once Danlola gets the hint of the anti-Kongi plans, he capitulates.

Sarumi

It seems our son will make us mere

Spectators at our own feast. But
 Who are we to complain? Dada knows
 He cannot wrestle, will he then preach restraint
 To his eager brother?

Well, I will not bear the offering
 Past the entrance to the mosque
 Only a phony drapes himself in deeper indigo
 Than the son of the deceased. (p. 64)

Oba Danlola is the "Dada" who cannot fight; and Daodu is his "eager brother" who volunteers to use his superior muscularity in defence of his weaker "brother." It would be sheer folly for "Dada" to spurn the offer of assistance when threatened by a bully. Soyinka's use of this Yoruba proverb appropriately describes the helplessness of Danlola at this stage of the power-struggle.

In scene ii of the Second Part, the stage is set for the great New Yam Festival. The harvest scene itself sufficiently projects Kongi's despotism. All the pictures on the huge cyclorama are conspicuously titled "Kongi Terminus, Kongi University, Kongi Dam, Kongi Refineries, Kongi Airport, etc. Finally, of course, a monster photo of the great man himself" (p. 64). In Nigeria, streets, institutions and other important places are often named after politicians who thus attempt to have their names immortalized, no matter how undeserving they may be. A good example is the Ahmadu Bello University, Zaria, named after the former premier of Northern Nigeria who was killed in the coup of January 1966. But the pictures and inscriptions on the cyclorama are more than a satiric reference to the politicians' claim for the immortalization of their names. They project in visual terms the fact that Kongi is Isma and Isma is Kongi. The last stanza

of the anthem of the Carpenters' Brigade¹¹⁷ confirms that in Ismaland
Kongi is everything:

For Kongi is our father
And Kongi is our man
Kongi is our mother
Kongi is our man
And Kongi is our Saviour
Redeemer, prince of power
For Isma and for Kongi
We're proud to live or die! (p. 65)

With all the "mallet-wielding arms pistoning up in the Nazi salute" (p. 66), these carpenters sing only from their throats, not from their hearts. Their Captain reveals that he "was busy reviving what remained / Of the carpenters" (p. 71). This indicates a split in the solidarity of the Brigade: the rehabilitated Women's Corps has broken away to ally with Daodu's Farm Settlement (p. 75). Kongi's world seems to be falling apart and the whole atmosphere at the Square is tense. The Secretary has to step up security measures to avert possible treasonable sabotage. Even Segi's confidence seems to be shaken momentarily as she nervously tells Daodu: "It seems suddenly futile, putting one's head into the lion's jaws" (p. 77). The outcome of the open confrontation hangs in the balance. This, then, is the most suspenseful point in the play as it approaches the crucial catastrophic end. Danlola has foretold this inevitable disaster in "Hemlock":

This is the last
Our feet shall touch together
We thought the tune

¹¹⁷ Probably a parody of the Workers' Brigade Dance Band of Ghana. Practically all the popular highlife bands in Ghana composed and played songs in praise of Dr. Kwame Nkrumah when he was President of the Republic.

Obeyed us to the sbul
 But the drums are newly shaped
 And stiff arms strain
 On stubborn crooks, so
 Delve with the left foot
 For ill-luck; with the left
 Again for ill-luck; once more
 With the left alone, for disaster
 Is the only certainty we know. (p. 10)

As the New Yam Festival progresses, not as the Secretary has planned it, but according to Daodu's and Segi's strategy, the Secretary notices with fright the approach of tragedy. The original plan, kept top secret all along, is to organize a coup d'état in which Kongi is to be assassinated. This master-plan includes a mini-ceremony in which Daodu will make a speech before handing over the yam to Danlola for the symbolic presentation. The speech which is as ironic as it is insinuating deserves to be quoted extensively:

An impotent man will swear he feels the pangs of labour; when the maniac finally looks over the wall, he finds that there, agony is the raw commodity which he has spent lives to invent. . . .

I have elected to sample the joys of life, not its sorrows, to feast on the pounded yam, not on the rind of yam, to drink the wine myself, not leave it to my ministers for frugal sacraments, to love the women, not merely wash their feet at the well. In pursuit of which, let this yam . . . be taken out, peeled, cooked, and pounded, let bitter-leaf soup simmer in the women's pots and smoked fish release the goodness of the seas; that the Reformed Aweri Fraternity may belch soundly instead of merely salivating, that we may hereby repudiate all Prophets of Agony, unless it be recognized that pain may be endured only in the pursuit of ending pain and fighting terror.

It is at this point that Daodu hands over the prize yam to Oba Danlola before he continues his speech:

So let him, the Jesus of Isma, let him, who has assumed the mantle of Messiah, accept from my farming settlement this gift of soil and remember that a human life once buried cannot, like this yam, sprout anew. Let him take from the palm only its wine and not crucify lives upon it. (pp. 78-79)

This lengthy speech, meant to eventually replace that of Kongi, may be interpreted as a curse attached to the New Yam to be tasted by the "Jesus of Isma." The yam, with the curse on it, is therefore not an ordinary yam any longer; it is now poison. It prefigures the human head to be presented by Segi to Kongi instead of the pounded yam.

Everything works out as planned until the unscheduled return of Segi's father who has earlier escaped from prison ruins it all. The burst of gun-shot with which Kongi's security man kills Segi's father is heard in the middle of Kongi's blessing of the New Yam which is still held out in Danlola's hands.¹¹⁸ On learning about her father's assassination, Segi leaves the Square, with the promise to "return soon with a season's gift for the Leader" (p. 81). This "gift" turns out to be the head of her father, served in a copper salver. According to the final stage direction,

Segi throws open the lid.
In it, the head of an old man.
In the ensuing scramble, no one is left but Kongi and
the head, Kongi's mouth wide open in speechless terror.
A sudden blackout on both. (p. 84)

An ending like this provides a greater theatricality than the assassin-

¹¹⁸ In the film version of the play, Kongi is shot in the middle of his scheduled oratory, bringing him and his authoritarianism to an end. Kongi's Harvest, a screen-play for Calpenny Films, is directed by Ossie Davis. According to James Gibbs in Wole Soyinka: A Select Bibliography in Progress (1976), "Soyinka disassociated himself from the released film version" (p. 4), which differs substantially from the text of the play. But Soyinka plays Kongi in the film.

ation of Kongi would have achieved. In Yorubaland the act of presenting anybody with a human head, moulded, carved, or real, is a frightfully symbolic way of asking the recipient to prepare to die. By presenting her father's head to Kongi, Segi has spelled the doom of the tyrant. The terror on Kongi's face shows that he understands; he realizes that he is condemned by both the living and the dead. The significance of Segi's terrifying action is manifested by the total desertion of the Square, leaving Kongi and his symbolic "gift" of the season. Kongi's is a harvest of death, not of life, because he has always seen the world around him not with the eyes of the dead but the eyes of Death. This means that he has not viewed the society he rules with the "eyes" of the ancestors. Instead, he is bent on destroying everything that belongs to his ancestral past.

If the play had ended with the symbolic condemnation of the tyrant, it would have been a complete play in its own right. However, Soyinka elects to add the "Hangover," in which the audience get one last glimpse of Danlola, Dende and the Secretary. Their flight and their discussion point to the fact that the "python" (Kongi) has only been assailed scathingly; he is not dead yet. And like a wounded lion, he is bound to be more dangerous than before. This "Hangover" ending keeps the entire action in tune with the message in the play. Despotic rule, like the "As System" of Madmen and Specialist, was in the beginning, is now, and ever shall be. Soyinka's words become relevant once more: "All roads lead in the same direction, and down this hill, striking sparks from careless skulls, Kongi Rides Again!" As long as Kongi

ride in Africa and elsewhere, the struggle against Kongism is bound to continue. In the words of Eldred Jones, "it is this continuity, however feeble, which holds out any hope for particular situations and societies, and, eventually for mankind."¹¹⁹

One may say in conclusion that Soyinka succeeds in assembling the social and political predicament of Africa in general, Nigeria in particular, and in distilling its agonies and harsh realities, its hopes and frustration, into pungent satirical drama. His major preoccupation in his satirical plays has always been with man's struggle for freedom from oppression. Even in a play like Camwood on the Leaves, which is anything but satirical, the theme of liberation struggle underlies the central conflict.

Like Kwei Armah in The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born, Wole Soyinka views the world around him and is disgusted with what he sees. The revolutionary expression of this disgust elicits in his audience a similar disgust towards the social and political ills which he exposes to ridicule in his satirical drama. Of course, one may not always share his pessimistic vision of modern African societies, but one cannot deny the realistic nature of his vision. Recent social and political experiences in Africa show that Soyinka's vision deserves some recognition, especially when it forms part of a tragic vision of society.

(iv) Metaphysical Excursion:

One final and very important aspect of Soyinka's dramatic

¹¹⁹ E. D. Jones, The Writing of Wole Soyinka, p. 89.

work is his metaphysical excursion into the meaning of life. This excursion is undertaken in both The Road and Death and the King's Horseman, where the playwright makes an extensive use of the death motif. Death, particularly on the road, is a recurrent motif in Wole Soyinka's writing. In "Death in the Dawn" for instance, Soyinka implies that a mother's ardent prayer:

Child
 May you never walk
 When the road waits, famished¹²⁰

cannot placate Esu (god of the crossroads) when he thirsts for human blood. This bloodthirstiness can be averted, however, with appropriate placatory sacrifices. There is the belief among the Yoruba people that road accidents are sacrifices forcibly taken by Esu when he is hungry. To avoid an unprecedented loss of life, the traveller must therefore offer adequate sacrifice (dog meat, palm oil, and palm wine) to Ogun the god of seven paths who, through his agent (Esu who oversees the road), strikes a mortal blow on any defiant traveller. Such a traveller becomes a bloody meal to satisfy the "blind hunger in the road's hidden belly."¹²¹ In another poem, "In Memory of Segun Awolowo,"

Soyinka comments:

Death the scrap-iron dealer
 Breeds a glut on trade. The fault
 Is His of seven paths whose whim
 Gave Death his agency.

(Idanre and Other Poems, p. 14)

This personification of Death presupposes Esu at his treacherous "game"

¹²⁰ Soyinka, Idanre and Other Poems, p. 11.

¹²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 69.

on the road.

In The Interpreters Soyinka's use of the motif of death on the road is probably best exemplified in the description of the death of Sekoni:

The Dome cracked above Sekoni's short-sighted head one messy night. Too late he saw the insanity of a lorry parked right in his path, a swerve turned into a skid and cruel arabesques of tyres! A futile heap of metal, and Sekoni's body lay surprised across the open door, showers of laminated glass around him, his beard one fastness of blood and wet earth. (p. 155)

The sight of the victim of a ghastly road accident like this, "Silenced in the startled hug of / Your invention" (Idanre, p. 11) is chilling. Obaneji recalls in A Dance of the Forests how the road claimed sixty-five lives in a passenger lorry nicknamed the "Incinerator" (p. 17). Another wreck, the "Chimney of Ereko," according to Obaneji, "has survived eight crashes, apart from falling in a pit two or three times" (p. 16). These road accidents which are not exaggerations of real experiences on Nigerian roads pose the crucial question: what could be responsible for the frequent deaths on the roads? Firstly, the roads, with treacherously narrow bridges and pot holes, are death-traps. Secondly, where the roads are wide and bitumen-surfaced—a rarity in Nigeria when Soyinka wrote The Road—drivers who lack the proper education for safe driving constitute a menace. Thirdly, so corrupt are some officials of the Motor Licencing Offices, and the police, that many unroadworthy vehicles are allowed on the already hazardous roads; and many of the drivers literally buy their licences. A combination of these factors promotes the high rate of deaths on Nigerian roads.

This then is the background against which one has to approach The Road¹²² in which Soyinka draws upon his wealth of unpleasant memories of fatal road accidents in Nigeria to aid him in his metaphysical excursion into the chthonic realm of existence, using the egungun mask-idiom as a vehicle for the movement of transition.

Concluding a brief study of The Road, Amankulor states:

The judges who awarded a first prize to this play at the Commonwealth Festival of the Arts in 1965, without doubt, must have been impressed by its bold and effective dramatic technique without boasting of any proper understanding of its ritual form which remains as puzzling and [as] powerful as the sacred python, "the coiled snake of Mysteries," whose beauty is admired but whose mysterious existence is inscrutable.¹²³

In considering the complex symbolic structure of the play, one needs to share Professor Iyengar's views that a "play like The Road built in different layers of reality and varied forms of human discourse may be capable of more than one interpretation. The 'road' is doubtless both a physical reality and a patent symbol with its own subsidiary symbols."¹²⁴ Bernice Duncan suggests that "the road... is the road all men travel that ends as the play ends for the Professor, in our deaths."¹²⁵ Whatever the variety of interpretations to which The Road opens itself, it is doubtful if the play can be justifiably called a "rich and beautiful tragedy," as an anonymous reviewer puts it in The

¹²² The Road (London: O. U. P., 1965).

¹²³ N. N. Amankulor, "Dramatic Technique and Meaning in The Road," Ba Shiru, 7, No. 1 (1976), 58.

¹²⁴ K. R. S. Iyengar, Two Cheers for the Commonwealth (New York: Asia Publ. House, 1970), p. 161.

¹²⁵ A review of The Road in Books Abroad, 40, No. 3 (1966), 361.

Literary Supplement, 10 June 1965, p. 476. Also, contrary to the contentions of certain critics, The Road has no plot, at least, in the sense in which a correspondent applies the term when he asserts in error: "In so far as there is a plot it concerns a driver Kotonu, who knocked down a possessed reveller at the Festival of Drivers, whose body mysteriously disappeared, leaving only the Ogun mask which he keeps as a 'humble quota to the harvest of the road.'"¹²⁶ This misconception is as misleading as that of Gerald Moore who states that

Murano has been killed just before the play opens, knocked down by the lorry-driver Kotonu just at the moment when he is masquerading as the god Ogun at the annual 'Drivers' Festival. As the play teaches us, Kotonu and his 'mate' Samson have hidden the body in the back of their lorry to deceive the angry worshippers and have brought it back to town.¹²⁷

Cosmo Pieterse is guilty of the same misinterpretation in his reference to Murano as one "who had been dead."¹²⁸ Fernth Lindfors also asserts that the Professor

has as his personal servant a mute young spirit named Murano who has been run over and killed by a lorry not long before the play opens. It turns out that two of the layabouts in the motor park are responsible for Murano's death. On this frail but original festive line Soyinka hangs his drama, letting it balloon and flutter in a gale of gusty words.¹²⁹

¹²⁶ West Africa, 18 Sept. 1965, p. 1061. For similar views, see Michael Billington, "First Night," Plays and Players, 13, No. 12 (Nov. 1965), 34; and Cosmo Pieterse, "Dramatic Riches," Journal of Commonwealth Literature, No. 2 (1966), 169.

¹²⁷ Wole Soyinka (London: Evans, 1971), p. 58.

¹²⁸ "Humour, Melodrama, Drama, Wit. . .," Cultural Events in Africa, No. 10 (Sept. 1965), 4.

¹²⁹ "Obscurity in Soyinka's Dramatic Works," pp. 11-12.

These misconceptions and misinterpretations have been cited not to demean the intellectual stature of the critics, but to illustrate how easy it is to set out on the wrong foot on The Road of Soyinka. Those who talk curiously of "a plot" in, or "the plot" of, The Road will no doubt discover, if they try, that any attempt to identify a conventional beginning-middle-end pattern of action in the play is futile.

The structural pattern of the play is one of shifting impressions. The action is rather static, with no linear story to dramatize. The characters do not develop because the primary concern in the play is not with characters but with the persistent search for the essence of death in order to grasp fully the meaning of life. When the characters speak, their dialogue, rather than leading to a logical conclusion, tends to be as incoherent as can be from scene to scene. Instead of revealing a sequential series of events with a cathartic effect in the end, The Road only presents loosely connected episodic situations, including flashbacks that tend to be obtrusive. The cumulative effect is that the audience are confronted with the insanity of the world of the characters, with all its grimness, its bewildering fragmentations, often humorous, often ridiculous, and mainly absurd.

Although The Road does not legitimately belong to the Theatre of the Absurd, it certainly possesses some of the peculiarities of action and language of known Absurd drama. One may, with some justification, assert that, like the Theatre of the Absurd, The Road represents the satirical, parodistic aspects of life. But behind this facade of satirical exposure of the absurdity of the human condition in The

Road lies a deeper level of the playwright's vision of a world in which the only certainty in man's life is death. This vision, and the entire meaning of the play, may be lost on the audience, unless the essence and the significance of the ostensibly insignificant character Murano the mute is grasped fully. With him in proper perspective, it is possible to piece together into a meaningful pattern those disjointed clues with which Soyinka communicates with his audience.

In order to appreciate fully the mysterious nature of Murano, one needs to be familiar with Soyinka's essay, "The Fourth Stage," and with axépo cultism¹³⁰ evoked in the prefatory poem "Alagemo" in The Road. Equally indispensable to a proper unscrambling of the mask-idiom in the play is the class discussion recorded at the University of Washington on 20 April 1973. Answering a participant's question on the function of the albino in his work, Soyinka referred to The Road and stated:

In The Road a certain essence of human consciousness—in Yoruba metaphysics I define it as the area of transition—happens to be something which preoccupied me. Yoruba metaphysics holds the view of there being three major areas of existence. . . .It's the world of the unborn, the world of the dead, and the world of the living. There is a mutual correspondence between these three areas. But I believe there is also a fourth which is not often articulated but which I recognize as implicit. . . .It is the chthonic realm, the area of the really dark forces, the really dark spirits, and it also is the area of stress of human will. So many physical symbols keep cropping up as an expression of this area of transition. Now one of them for me is the albino. He is a kind of twilight creature. . . .There's this feeling of them not being

¹³⁰ For a detailed treatment of this subject, see O. Ogunba, "The Axépo Cult in Ijebuland," Nigeria Magazine, No. 86 (1965), 176-86.

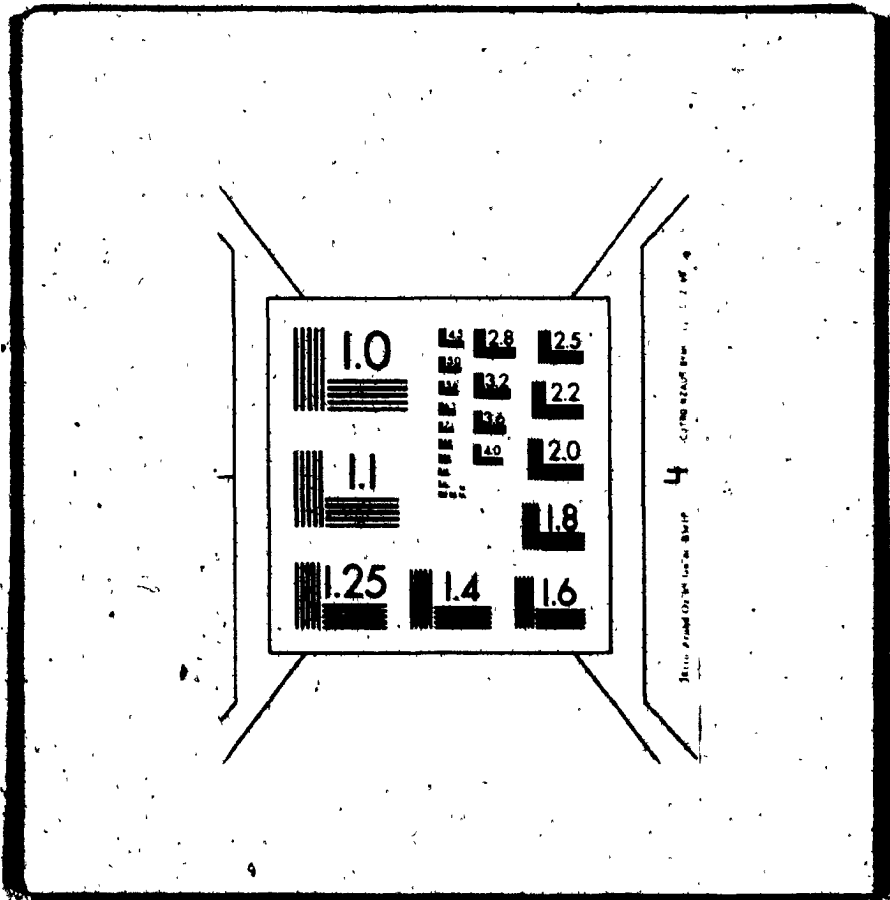
quite of this world; they can't see very much in daylight, they see better in the darkness; they're very fragile; you feel that if you hold them they'll dissolve in your hands. And I think it is this which creeps into The Interpreters. . . . It's a kind of spillover of this feeling for the numinous area of transition.¹³¹

Soyinka's private myth of the chthonic realm of existence, which is an outgrowth of Yoruba metaphysics, unravels the mystery of the identity and the role of Murano in The Road. Like the albino, Murano is a twilight creature, a symbolic expression of the chthonic realm. All the victims of the various fatal road accidents described in the play belong in the world of the dead. Professor and all the other characters, except Murano, are inhabitants of the world of the living. But, whatever their aspirations, frustrating experiences and sense of achievement, they are all aware of the inevitability of death as man's life's final experience. Death, therefore, lies in wait for every human being at the point of transition between the world of the living and that of the dead. It is this mysterious borderline which constitutes the impenetrable barrier to Professor's quest. According to Wole Soyinka, this mysterious borderline is the "void of transition"; and in The Road Murano is the only character alive who has come nearest to this enigmatic chthonic realm of existence.

Asked by Kotomu where he found Murano, Professor replies: "Neglected in the back of a hearse. And dying. Moaned like a dog whose legs have been broken by a motor car. I took him—somewhere—looked

¹³¹ Wole Soyinka, "Class Discussion, in In Person, Ed., K. L. Marshall, pp. 117-18.

5



after him till he was well again" (p. 44).¹³² He goes on to describe Murano as "the one person in this world in whom the Word reposes."

SAMSON: Much use that is to him. He cannot use his tongue.

PROF.: Deep. Silent but deep. Oh my friend, beware the pity of those that have no tongue for they have been proclaimed sole guardians of the Word. They have slept beyond the portals of secrets. They have pierced the guard of eternity and unearthed the Word, a golden nugget on the tongue. And so their tongue hangs heavy and they are forever silenced. Do you mean you do not see that Murano has one leg longer than the other?

.....
When a man has one leg in each world, his legs are never the same. The big toe of Murano's foot--the left one of course--rests on the slumbering chrysalis of the Word. When that crust cracks my friend--you and I, that is the moment we await. . . . (pp. 44-45)

This passage complements Soyinka's private myth and makes the meaning of Professor's "Word" clearer. Among the Yorubas, a critically ill person, an accident victim on the danger list in the hospital, and an extremely old person are all described as being on the threshold of the world beyond, knocking on heaven's gate. To vivify this metaphysical concept, the grave has come to be regarded as the symbol of the void of transition. A man with only one foot in the grave (a dying man) is neither fully of the world of the living nor has he crossed over to the world beyond.

Murano is such a character who has only straddled over the chthonic "void" when he is picked up unconscious by Professor from the

¹³² This reply sufficiently disproves the claim by some critics that Murano was "dead" or "killed" after he was knocked down by Kotonu's lorry as cited earlier.

scene of a ghastly road accident. Professor's (or, is it Soyinka's?) powerful associational sensibility is demonstrated in the use of the "hearse" metaphor to describe the lorry in which Murano is found. The word aptly describes the deplorable coffin-like passengers' cabin insecurely built on the chassis. Besides, the lorry so constructed is usually "over-loaded." When such lorries speed down treacherous roads, they are literally "coffins" on wheels, "pregnant with stillborns" (p. 56). A character like Murano who has survived the crash of a "hearse" is endowed with the secret of the "Word." It will never be known whether he has been a mute from birth, or has become one as a result of the shock from the accident. He is not deaf, however, as some critics believe.¹³³ The problem is that he cannot communicate the secret of the "Word" to the living, probably because it is a knowledge that can be acquired only through a personal experience. It is for this "knowledge" that Professor searches with monomaniac obsession. This is the mysterious "Word" that he knows can be found only "where ascent is broken and a winged secret plummets back to earth" (p. 45)..

One may conclude from the foregoing analysis that Soyinka's preoccupation in The Road is with the quest for the essence of death in order to grasp the meaning of life. This explains why the Word, which Professor has devoted his entire life to discover, is to "be found companion not to life, but Death" (p. 11).

The exploration into the mystery of death in the play takes

¹³³ For evidence that Murano is not deaf, see pp. 52-53 of the text, where Professor addresses him, and he obeys his verbal order to hide when Salubi appears on the scene.

Professor along the metaphysical road until, limited by his human nature, he realizes that he cannot go beyond the transitional "zone" that demarcates the world of the living from that of the dead. It should be obvious, therefore, that The Road, regardless of its setting, is not about the "road" as the title may suggest. It is not even about death on the old treacherous Nigerian roads. Every action, reported, re-enacted, or presented on stage, is made functional to Professor's (and no doubt, the playwright's) exploration of "the fourth stage" in order to get at the essence of death. The metaphysical road down which this exploration is conducted is, of course, concretely symbolized by Nigerian roads, with their insatiable claim on travellers' lives.

Given this interpretation, Professor becomes an externalization of Soyinka's exploratory mind, or, at least, an aspect of it. Two areas of experience in Soyinka's life are juxtaposed in the play: the road and the Church. In an interview conducted by Olu Akaraogun, Soyinka explains that

The Road is based on what I might call a personal intimacy which I have developed with a certain aspect of a very strange personal experience which developed out of my travels on the road. It was almost a kind of exorcism writing that play. . . . The Professor was making a search into the essence of death.

Regarding his attitude to religion, Soyinka continues:

I am no longer a Christian. I rejected Christianity a long time ago. It just did not correspond to my attitude to life. . . . I have taken some interest in traditional religion, just as I have taken in Christianity. I am curious about traditional Nigerian religions with the same element of curiosity. No doubt some aspects of indigenous

religions have influenced my work.¹³⁴

This interview clearly shows the affinity between Soyinka and Professor in The Road, but Professor is not necessarily Soyinka.

In the incantatory poem "Alagemo" Soyinka incisively outlines the mystery in which the Agemo cult is shrouded, a mystery that is similar to that which surrounds the meaning of Professor's "Word." Ogunba is the first to recognize in The Road, particularly in "Alagemo" Soyinka's identification of agemo as orò.¹³⁵ However, this implicit identification cannot be stretched to lead to the assertion that "Professor's present conviction is that the meaning of human existence is to be found in man's daily encounter with orò, the dark, inexorable spirit of the road, the spirit of sudden death."¹³⁶ Man can encounter orò only once after which he crosses the chthonic realm of existence or becomes dead alive.

The strength and beauty of The Road reside in the playwright's ingenious assemblage of discreditable characters who collectively and severally contribute to the death of innocent passengers and other road

¹³⁴ In Spear Magazine (Nigeria), May 1966, pp. 18-19.

¹³⁵ O. Ogunba, The Movement of Transition, pp. 131-32. I do not, however, share Ogunba's view that orò, "a dark, mysterious, incomprehensible spirit of death," literally means the word. There seems to be a confusion of vocabulary here. Though physically and phonetically similar, orò—the evil spirit of night and sudden death, and orò—word, or talk, are two entirely different words, and no ambiguity is intended in the association of agemo with orò in the prefatory poem "Alagemo." Orò in Yoruba myth is an evil spirit that walks the night, capable of altering its height and therefore its reach when it finds a victim to strike. Once it hits, the victim either goes home to die after a sudden high fever, or he becomes crippled, deaf and dumb for life.

¹³⁶ Ibid., p. 132.

users. The scene of the interaction of these characters, appropriately enough, is a roadside shack, a drivers' haven pitched next to the Church with its graveyard. It represents that part of the world of the living which is closest to the world of the dead, which makes the shack an appropriate "laboratory" for Professor's quest.

The multi-functional shack serves as an "AKSIDENT STORE" for the sale of motor spare parts and passengers' personal effects looted from the scenes of accidents. In the evenings, the shack is turned into a drinking bar when Professor and his "disciples" converge for a "communion." Smelling with Murano's wine, and clouded with the smoke from hemp provided by thug-recruiting politician Chief-in-town, the entire shack sets its bacchanalian "laughter against the very throat of the organ pipes" (p. 68) in the adjacent Church. This setting is tremendously symbolic.

Professor's quest for the "Word" originally started in the Church where, as lay reader, he was exposed to the "Word" in the Bible. At that stage in his search, the "Word" meant nothing more than what the gospel according to St. John reveals:

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God; all things were made through him, and without him was not anything made that was made. In him was life, and the life was the light of men. (Joh. I: 1-4)

The "Word" in this context is Christ the Redeemer whose sacrificial death has restored everlasting life to mankind, and whose resurrection is a symbolic victory over death. This is the living "Word" left resting on the lectern when Professor was excommunicated for embezzling the Church funds.

Cast from grace, the nearest Professor can get to the "Word" is to set up a post where, from time to time, he can get a glimpse of the lectern that bears the mysterious "Word." In his continued search outside the Church, Professor seems to have added a new dimension to the life-giving "Word" made flesh. The paradox of Christ's death as man's source of rebirth seems to lurk behind Professor's hopes of getting at the root of the meaning of life through an appreciation of the essence of death.

Since the play is set in Nigeria where more lives are lost on the roads than in any other way, it is most appropriate that Professor should be aided in his search, even if, inadvertently, by characters who are associated with the "road," and who, through their negligent driving, have sent many a human being to their death. The "road" is given the attribute of an immobile but a menacing agent of death. Professor puts it succinctly: "The rock is a woman you understand, so is the road. They know how to lie and wait" (p. 58) for their victims. But worse than the treacherous roads are the members of the drivers' haven. Professor, who criminally removes road signs meant to forewarn drivers of dangerous spots on the road and who forges drivers' licenses for characters who are not qualified to drive a vehicle, is an active promoter of fatal accidents on the road. Kotonu, the most reasonable of the lay-abouts, is too careful a driver for his own good and for the good of road users, as Samson's opinion of him reveals:

He's never acted like a normal person. When other drivers go out of the way to kill a dog, Kotonu nearly somersaults the lorry trying to avoid a flea-racked mongrel. Why, I ask him, why? Don't you

SAMSON: Overshot the pontoon, went down with the lorry.

KOTONU: And Saidu-Say? Indian Charlie who taught us driving? . . . Where is Humphery Bogart? Cimarron Kid? Have you known any other driver take an oil-tanker from Port Harcourt to Kaduna non-stop since Muftau died? Where is Sergeant Burma who treated his tanker like a child's toy?

SAMSON: Just the same. . . .

KOTONU: Sergeant Burma was never moved by these accidents. He told me himself how once he was stripping down a crash and found that the driver was an old comrade from the front. He took him to the mortuary but he stopped to remove all the tyres. . . .

You know, Professor is a bit like Sergeant Burma. He was moving round those corpses as if they didn't exist. All he cared about was replanting the sign-post. To see him you would think he was Adam replanting the Tree of Life. (p. 21)

Kotonu's recount of the fate of his late fellow drivers and of the numerous "travellers whom you never really see until their faces are wiped clean by silence" (p. 21) shows that The Road, despite its intermittent wry humour and festival spirit, is a serious play.

Graham-White in his conclusion to the study of the play submits:

Although the drumming, dance, and song might give the play a unity not apparent on the page, the overall effect of the play upon me is as though Ibsen had tried to write Brand using characters drawn from Jonson's Alchemist; fascinating, but not completely successful.¹³⁸

It is doubtful if the play's stature suffers as a result of Soyinka's blending of the serious and the comic, or the significant and the trivial. When Soyinka goes out of his way to pass satirical comments on the evils in the society he ensures that his satire is relevant to the main pre-

¹³⁸ A. Graham-White, West African Drama, p. 215.

occupation in the play. For example, the serious national problem of unemployment, which breeds lay-abouts and criminals, especially among young school leavers, is cleverly hidden beneath the laughter-provoking exchanges between Salubi and Samson, two ideal vocational idlers who demonstrate the frustration of the job seeker:

SALUBI: All I need now is a licence [sic]. It is only a matter of getting Professor to forge one for me.

SAMSON: Ask him.

SALUBI: I have asked him a hundred times, but he always says.

SAMSON (mimicking): Go away. Come back when you have a job.

SALUBI: You see. And a man can't get a job without a licence [sic].

SAMSON: And you can't get a licence [sic] without a job. So why don't you just go and hang yourself? (p. 4)

The dialogue ends in the suggestion of suicide (it could very well be murder) as the solution to Salubi's problem. Everything done or said in the play invariably ends up on a note of death. Viewed in this light, Soyinka's social satire in The Road is not as obtrusive as some critics would like their readers to believe. Constantly in focus is Professor's quest for death throughout the play.

In the end Professor comes face to face with death. He has earlier implicitly professed that the mastery of the fear of death is an essential step towards the discovery of the fullness of life: "One must cheat fear, by fore-knowledge" (p. 94). This statement is significant, coming shortly before Say Tokyo Kid stabs him on the back for the sacrilege of letting Murano assume the agemo mask since such an act is bound to provoke the spirit to uncontrollable anger: "I reckon this

has gone too far. I ain't scared like these people so I'm telling you, you're fooling around where you ain't got no business" (p. 93). In a determined attempt to stop Murano (now performing the egungun dance) from further desecrating the egungun cult, Say Tokyo Kid confronts the possessed egungun.

As the stage direction shows, both Say Tokyo and the figure "stand motionless, facing each other. Suddenly they lock, With no sound but hissed breaths they heave and gripe at each other in a tense elastic control" (p. 95). Salubi hands Say Tokyo a knife, and almost immediately, Professor reaches for his stick to disarm Say Tokyo but it is too late. Say Tokyo drives the knife into Professor's back. In a swift movement, Murano lifts Say Tokyo high up in the air, and smashes him savagely on the bench. The masquerade himself undergoes a symbolic process of "dissolution": "Slowly the mask spins, spins, sinking lower as the Professor staggers to his table" (p. 96). With Professor and Say Tokyo dead, and with Murano (the masquerade) attaining the agomo stage of "flesh dissolution," the quest in the play comes to an end.

Professor's dying speech reveals his sad realization that his compulsive quest for the fullness of life through a search for the essence of death has been a futile endeavour. Confronted by the final gate to the "Word," Professor utters what remain the most baffling words in the play:

Be even like the road itself. Flatten your bellies
with the hunger of an unpropitious day, power your
hands with the knowledge of death. In the heat of
the afternoon when the sheen raises false forests and
a watered haven, let the event first unravel before
your eyes. Or in the dust when ghost lorries pass you

by and your shouts your tears fall on deaf panels and the dust swallows them. Dip in the same basin as the man that makes his last journey and stir with one finger, wobbling reflections of two hands, two hands, but one face only. Breathe like the road. Be the road. Coil yourself in dreams, lay flat in treachery and deceit and at the moment of a trusting step, rear your head and strike the traveller in his confidence, swallow him whole or break him on the earth. Spread a broad sheet for death with the length and the time of the sun between you until the one face multiplies and the one shadow is cast by all the doomed. Breathe like the road, be even like the road itself. . . . (p. 96)

Not specifically addressed to any one, the long speech sounds on the one hand like imprecations, like the "veiled shaft" released from "the bowstring of the Word" (p. 93), and on the other, like an injunction to his survivors in the shack to continue their "trade" in death, to "power your hands with the knowledge of death." The latter sounds more probable in that Professor has finally found the "Word," though from the hand of the least informed about its essence; it is up to the surviving touts to quest for the essence of death for themselves. The metaphor in Professor's dying command "Be the road" relates his speech to the title of the play and also to the Christian Word—"I am the Way"—which is turned upside down in The Road. Professor's dying speech portrays an unfulfilled man who dies without actually understanding what he has found. Hence the enigmatic dying speech.

In the death of Professor, the role of Ogun as the "godfather of all souls who by the road / Made the voyage home"¹³⁹ ironically becomes manifest once more in that Professor is killed with a knife forged in Ogun's "workshop." The "road" in the play, therefore, assumes

¹³⁹ Idanré and Other Poems, p. 65.

the additional dimension of a fated road of life and death which Professor has "travelled" in his metaphysical excursion. Although Professor is not everyman, the fated "road" along which he travels also lies in wait in varying forms for every "traveller."

The fascination of The Road arises, among other things, from its vigorous naturalistic dialogue which relies for its effect on a deliberate amalgam of standard English, Yoruba, pidgin, and parodied Western American ghetto "dialect." This amalgam allows for the variety of character, voice, and mood in the play. Adrian Roscoe refers to the language in The Road as "a carefully cooked pot pourri," and as a "linguistic confusion [which] thus reflects the wider cultural confusion that Soyinka is portraying."¹⁴⁰ One may frown on the use of "linguistic confusion" in describing the language in The Road, but Roscoe succeeds in tailoring his argument towards the conclusion that

The Road is Soyinka's writing on the nation's wall. He draws a society that is on the road to death and dissolution, a society for which there seems no hope. Perhaps, like Professor, who speaks of death as 'the moment of our rehabilitation,' this society will have to die before it learns the truth. Rebirth is only possible after the descent from life is complete. This movement itself is foreshadowed by the mask at the end of the play which sinks slowly until 'it appears to be nothing beyond a heap of cloth and raffia.'¹⁴¹

This conclusion is one more proof that the dynamics of The Road lies in its complexity which allows for more interpretations than one. However, for any interpretation of the play to be tenable, it has to recognize

¹⁴⁰ A. Roscoe, Mother Is Gold, p. 231.

¹⁴¹ Ibid., p. 232.

the significant imagery of agemo on which is based the symbolic "dissolution" which every human being has to undergo in order to be reborn, or to complete the full ritual cycle of life.

One important aspect of Yoruba metaphysics which does not quite surface in The Road is the concept of life after death, that is, after the "dissolution" stage. The Yorubas believe that after death, human beings "go home" to live in a spirit world (heaven). This is what distinguishes the concept of death as dramatized in Professor's quest in The Road from the motif of death as explored in Death and the King's Horseman.¹⁴²

Although the two plays are eleven years apart, they share a spirited quest for the essence of death. In Death and the King's Horseman, however, the quest is stripped of all ambiguities, and the "road" down which the "voyager" travels is neither treacherous nor elusive. Of course, unlike The Road which is through and through a product of Wole Soyinka's creative imagination, Death and the King's Horseman derives directly from history, and this is responsible in part for the more definite pattern of action in the play. According to Soyinka, the "play is based on events which took place in Oyo, ancient Yoruba city of Nigeria in 1946. That year, the lives of Elesin (Olori Elesin), his son, and the Colonial District Officer intertwined with the disastrous results set out in the play" (p. 6). It is interesting to note that another Nigerian playwright Duro Ladipo has written a play

¹⁴² Soyinka, Death and the King's Horseman (London: Eyre Methuen, 1975). All references are to this edition.

"Oba Waja" (The King is Dead"),¹⁴³ also based on the same historical incident in Oyo. In a postscript, Ulli Beier, who terms his English version of the play as an adaptation, claims that

"Oba Waja" is a true event that happened in the recent past. We learnt the story from Mr. Pierre Verger, who was in fact able to verify it through correspondence with the District Officer in question. Ladipo has kept fairly close to the facts, except that he makes the Olori Elesin kill himself in the end, whereas he stayed alive in real life.¹⁴⁴

Although Soyinka affirms that the factual account of this historical event has been preserved in the archives of the British Colonial Administration, his dramatic interpretation of the event may very well have been inspired by Duro Ladipo's play with which, no doubt, he is familiar. One may even hazard the guess that Soyinka, having read "Oba Waja" and watched it on the stage, found that its dramatic potentials have not been fully exploited, and therefore decided to write a full-length dramatic interpretation of the historical event.

What elevates the play above the ordinary plane of historical drama is Soyinka's metaphysical search for the meaning of tragedy, of death, and, therefore, of life, something that has been his preoccupation for a long time. This is noticeable in the sacrificial death of Eman in The Strong Breed, in Professor's quest for the "Word" in The Road, in A Dance of the Forests, and in much of Soyinka's poetry. What these works have in common with Death and the King's Horseman is what

¹⁴³ In Duro Ladipo, Three Yoruba Plays, English adaptation by Ulli Beier. (Ibadan: Mbari, 1964), pp. 54-72.

¹⁴⁴ Ibid., p. 74.

Soyinka describes as "the universe of the Yoruba mind--the world of the living, the dead and the unborn, and the numinous passage which links all: transition."¹⁴⁵

In the play *Elesin* is the image of transition whose traditional role as the King's horseman recalls to mind Henshaw's Companion For A Chief, in which a similar role is vindictively imposed upon Adeigra by the fetish priest of Boka village, but craftily averted. Unlike Adeigra, *Elesin*, by virtue of his office, knows all along that he is the chosen companion for the King. The play opens on the day when *Elesin* is to perform his honorable duty as the King's horseman. Act I focuses on *Elesin*'s final moments on earth, when his "tryst" with death is about to be kept. He has one leg in this world, and the other in the world of the dead. The approach of the critical moment of transition starts him thinking like a philosopher; and his disquisition on death assumes a mythical pattern:

Death came calling.
 Who does not know his rasp of reeds?
 A twilight whisper in the leaves before
 The great araba falls? Did you hear it?
 Not I! swears the farmer. He snaps
 His fingers round his head, abandons
 A hard-worn harvest and begins
 A rapid dialogue with his legs. (pp. 11-12)

The myth of the "Not-I bird" illustrates how man, prompted by the instinct of self-preservation, fears death and anything that promotes it. The "Not-I bird" is Death's courier, summoning the individual to cross the void of transition into the world of the dead. When the

¹⁴⁵ Death and the King's Horseman, p. 7.

"bird" arrives to perform its duty, very few people are equipped with the fortitude required to face the critical moment with equanimity. This explains why the farmer takes to his heels and abandons his harvest on hearing of the approach of the "Not-I bird."

The fear of death also grips the hunter who decides to call off his hunt. The same fear forces the courtesan to break her date with the Chief Tax Officer. Even the Mallam "shuts down school before its time / Runs home and rings himself with amulets" (p. 12). Elesin's myth of the "Not-I bird" is an ironic foreshadowing of his own act of flinching. At this point in the play, however, Elesin, ostensibly, is the only one who is not scared by the approach of the "Not-I bird":

Ah, companions of this living world
 What a thing this is, that even those
 We call immortal
 Should fear to die.

.....
 I, when that Not-I bird perched
 Upon my roof, bade him seek his nest again,
 Safe, without care or fear. I unrolled
 My welcome mat for him to see. Not-I
 Flew happily away, you'll hear his voice
 No more in this lifetime--You all know
 What I am. (pp. 13-14)

The philosophy that underlies Elesin's attitude towards death in this passage is not unlike Bacon's. In his essay "Of Death," Bacon asserts that "Groans and convulsions and a discoloured face, and friends weeping, and blacks and obsequies and the like, show death terrible."¹⁴⁶

Elesin does not appear to be frightened by his approaching death, but his utterances in Act I betray something of the stoic in him. Bacon

¹⁴⁶ The Essays, or Counsels, Civil and Moral of Francis Bacon (London: The Chesterfield Society, [1883?]), p. 41.

points out that "the Stoics bestowed too much cost upon death, and by their great preparations made it appear more fearful."¹⁴⁷ This is very true of Elesin because his behaviour later in the play shows him as unwilling to die, though not necessarily frightened by death. At first he seems anxious to die:

PRAISE-SINGER: Elesin o! . . . What tryst is this
the cockerel goes to keep with such haste
that he must leave his tail behind?

ELESIN (slows down a bit, laughing): A tryst where
the cockerel needs no adornment, . . . When
the horse sniffs the stable does he not strain
at the bridle? (p. 9)

This ought to make excellent theatre. The praise-singing and dancing of the opening ceremony in the market have a symbolic significance to the action in the play. It should be noted that Elesin Oba shows up at the market square towards the close of the market. According to the Yorubas, "ayé l'ojá, òrun n'ilé"; that is, the world of the living is only a market place; man's real home is in heaven. Elesin's arrival at the market square towards the close of the market, (presumably, shortly before sunset) aptly symbolizes his "evening of life" when he has to prepare to go home, urged by the death of Alafin of Oyo. As the law and custom of the land stipulate, the late King has to be accompanied, among other things, by his favourite horse, and his horseman. As an inducement to accompany the King on his way to the world beyond, the horseman, during his life, has the unrivalled privilege of getting whatever he desires. Elesin himself acknowledges the comforts of life he has enjoyed:

¹⁴⁷ The Essays, or Counsels. . . of Francis Bacon, pp. 42-43.

Where I found little I made do with little.
 Where there was plenty I gorged myself.
 My master's hands and mine have always
 Dipped together and, home or sacred feast,
 The bowl was beaten bronze, the meats
 So succulent our teeth accused us of neglect.
 We share the choicest of the season's
 Harvest of yams. How my friend would read
 Desire in my eyes before I knew the cause—
 However rare, however precious, it was mine. (p. 14)

His testimony leaves no doubt that the world has been his as the King's
 horseman:

In all my life
 As Horseman of the King, the juiciest
 Fruit on every tree was mine. I saw,
 I touched, I wooed, rarely was the answer No.
 The honour of my place, the veneration I
 Received in the eye of man or woman
 Prospered my suit and
 Played havoc with my sleeping hours.
 And they tell me my eyes were a hawk
 In perpetual hunger. Split an iroko tree
 In two, hide a woman's beauty in its heartwood
 And seal it up again--Elesin, journeying by,
 Would make his camp beside that tree
 Of all the shades in the forest. (pp. 18-19)

But, as Elesin himself admits, "Life has an end" (p. 15). He who has
 been an "earth-bound" man of the flesh will go to keep his friend and
 master company, and act as the people's "intercessor to the other
 world" (p. 21). Before then, however, he seeks one more bride--a
 virgin. On seeing a beautiful young girl, whom he describes in hyper-
 bolic terms as "that goddess through whose lips / I saw the ivory
 pebbles of Oya's river-bed" (p. 19), Elesin's one last desire is to make
 her his bride:

The sap of the plantain never dries.
 You have seen the young shoot swelling
 Even as the parent stalk begins to wither.
 Women, let my going be likened to
 The twilight hour of the plantain. (p. 20)

This request, once granted, turns out to be the undoing of Elesin whose honour aspires towards death, and whose death would have opened the gate to good fame and extinguished envy, as Bacon would put it. Iyaloja senses the reluctance of Elesin in his final request for a new bride. In the discharge of her duty as "mother of multitudes in the teeming market of the world" (p. 22), she warns Elesin not to do anything to tarnish his honour and dignity. He should therefore be like the ants and the swallow:

No one knows when the ants desert their home; they leave the mound intact. The swallow is never seen to peck holes in its nest when it is time to move with the season. . . .

You wish to travel light. Well, the earth is yours. But be sure the seed you leave in it attracts no curse. (p. 23)

This warning note at the end of Act I, which presages Elesin's flinching, grows out of Iyaloja's fears that Elesin's insatiable carnal desire may hold him a "prisoner" too securely in this world to allow him to perform his traditional duty as the King's horseman.

As the play moves into Act II the machinery that will aid Elesin in deciding to remain on this side of the chthonic void is set in motion. Sergeant Amusa rushes in to inform the District Officer of Elesin's intent to commit ritual suicide. Scared and shocked by Pilkings' desecration of the egungun cult by wearing the sacred mask, Amusa refuses to "talk against death to person in uniform of death" (p. 25). So, he scribbles down his report:

I have to report that it come to my information that one prominent chief, namely, the Elesin Oba, is to commit death tonight as a result of native

custom. Because this is criminal offence I await further instruction at charge office. Sergeant Amusa. (p. 26)

As soon as this report is confirmed by Joseph (p. 28), the District Officer, urged by his wife, swiftly orders the arrest of Elesin. The arrest is stiffly resisted by the women and young girls who guard the entrance to the converted market stall where Elesin is consummating his latest wedding. Sergeant Amusa and his two constables are taunted by the market women and young girls in an unsavoury language full of phallic reference. Two examples will suffice to illustrate this:

AMUSA: I am tell you women for last time to comot my road. I am here on official business.

WOMAN: Official business you white man's eupuch? Official business is taking place where you want to go and it's a business you wouldn't understand.

WOMAN: (makes a quick tug at the constable's baton): That doesn't fool anyone you know. It's the one you carry under your government knickers that counts. (She bends low as if to peep under the baggy shorts. The embarrassed constable quickly puts his knees together. The women roar.)

WOMAN: You mean there is nothing there at all? (p. 34)

Bent on preventing Amusa's entry into the guarded stall, one of the women tells the Sergeant to go back and tell the white man who sent him to come himself. Amusa responds with a threat:

AMUSA: If I go I will come back with reinforcement. And we will all return carrying weapons.

WOMAN: Oh, now I understand. Before they can put on those knickers the white man first cuts off their weapons. (p. 35)

This teasing scene provides a comic relief in a predominantly serious play. Comic though the scene is, it represents the tragic conflict between colonial authority and die-hard native customs. The tragedy of the conflict is deepened by the fact that the policemen sent to

arrest Elesin are natives who fully realize the significance of the ritual ceremony to the people of Oyo. The role of the policemen in this play reminds one of the part played by the "Native" policemen in Ezentá Eze's The Cassava Ghost. The divide-and-rule tactic of colonial authority does not, however, have a chance of thriving in Death and the King's Horseman as it does in Eze's play. Yet, Pilkings successfully arrests Elesin and stops his ritual suicide planned for midnight.

Prior to this crisis point, however, is an important scene at the end of Act III. As soon as Elesin emerges from the market stall with the white velvet cloth in his hand as evidence of the consummation of his wedding, he addresses the crowd:

Oh you mothers of beautiful brides! (The dancing stops. They turn and see him, and the object in his hands. IYALOJA approaches and gently takes the cloth from him.) Take it. It is no mere virgin stain, but the union of life and the seeds of passage. My vital flow, the last from this flesh is intermingled with the promise of future life. All is prepared. Listen! (A steady drum-beat from the distance.) Yes, it is nearly time. The King's dog has been killed. The King's favourite horse is about to follow his master. My brother chiefs know their task and perform it well. (He listens again.)

(The BRIDE emerges, stands shyly by the door. He turns to her.)

Our marriage is not yet wholly fulfilled. When earth and passage wed, the consummation is complete only when there are grains of earth on the eyelids of passage. Stay by me till then. (p. 40)

This speech, quoted only in part, demonstrates that though Elesin is delivering his valedictory, he is remotely casting a hind glance at a world he is unwilling to leave behind. To aid him in committing the ritual suicide, therefore, both his Praise-Singer and Iyaloja join

forces to utter incantatory pronouncements:

PRAISE-SINGER: The river is never too high that
the eyes
Of a fish are covered. The night is not so dark
That the albino fails to find his way. A Child
Returning homewards craves no leading by the hand.
Gracefully does the mask regain his grove at the
end of day. . . .
Gracefully. Gracefully does the mask dance
Homeward at the end of day, gracefully. . . .
(ELESIN'S trance appears to be deepening, his steps
heavier.)

IYALOJA: It is the death of war that kills the valiant,
Death of water is how the swimmer goes
It is the death of markets that kills the trader
And death of indecision takes the idle away.
The trade of the cutlass blunts its edge
And the beautiful die the death of beauty.
Only Elesin. . . dies the unknown death of death. . . .
Gracefully, gracefully does the horseman regain
The stables at the end of day, gracefully. (p. 43)

The dirge which follows these incantations anticipates the death of
Elesin which is now taken for granted as irreversible at this stage.
As the Praise-Singer says amidst the doleful dirge, he would have
called Elesin back,

but when the elephant heads for the jungle, the tail
is too small a handhold for the hunter that would pull
him back. The sun that heads for the sea no longer
heeds the prayers of the farmer. When the river begins
to taste the salt of the ocean, we no longer know what
deity to call on, the river-god or Olokun. No arrow
flies back to the string, the child does not return
through the same passage that gave it birth. Elesin
Oba, can you hear me at all? (p. 44)

The impression created at the end of this Act is that Elesin is already
on the "road" to the world beyond. However, as the action and dialogue
in Act IV reveal, Elesin is still alive after the midnight hour. Olunde
who has arrived from Britain to bury his father is shocked to hear the

voice of his father (p. 60) who, he thought, had committed suicide when the rhythm of the distant drums rose to a crescendo and then stopped suddenly, only to be followed by a slow and resonant beat (p. 55).

The day is ruined. Olunde is not supposed to see his father alive after the death of the King. As he explains to Mrs. Pilkings, "it's forbidden for me, his heir and successor to set eyes on him from the moment of the king's death" (p. 56). A taboo is broken; and the desecration of the entire ritual ceremony, added to the desecration of the egungun cult by the Pilkingses, is an omen of disaster for the Elesin family and for the entire Oyo community.

The failure of Elesin to fulfill himself and become the "enviable" companion of the deceased King seems to be blamed on the unruly interference of the District Officer, Simon Pilkings. Elesin commits suicide by strangulation only after hearing, to his utter shame, that his son Olunde has had a head start on him in order to accompany the dead King. Iyaloja comments:

. . . He is gone at last into the passage but oh, how late it all is. His son will feast on the meat and throw him bones. The passage is clogged with droppings from the King's stallion; he will arrive all stained in dung.

PIKINGS (in a tired voice): Was this what you wanted?

IYALOJA: No child, it is what you brought to be, you who play with strangers' lives, who even usurp the vestments of our dead, yet believe that the stain of death will not cling to you. The gods demand only the old expired plantain but you cut down the sap-laden shoot to feed your pride. (p. 76)

Also in the Praise-Singer's earlier chastisement of Elesin—"You sat with folded arms while evil strangers tilted the world from its course

and crashed it beyond the edge of emptiness" (p. 75)--the impression is created that Simon Pilkings is responsible for Elesin's failure to die honorably. It can be contended, however, that the part played by Pilkings in the failure of Elesin to accompany the King as his horseman is minimal; it does not justify the blame he receives from both the Praise-Singer and Iyaloja.

As early as Act III, the yearning of Elesin for the great passage has begun to grow less enthusiastic: "The moon has fed, a glow from its full stomach fills the sky and air," he admits, "but I cannot tell where is that gateway through which I must pass" (p. 41). There is obviously some mysterious agent blurring Elesin's view of the gateway of transition. What this is remains unknown until Elesin appears again in the fifth part of the play. His explanation may at first elicit the audience's sympathy when he addresses Pilkings:

. . . The moon was my messenger and guide. When it reached a certain gateway in the sky, it touched that moment for which my whole life has been spent in blessings. Even I do not know the gateway. I have stood here and scanned the sky for a glimpse of the door but, I cannot see it. Human eyes are useless for a search of this nature. But in the house of osugbo, those who keep watch through the spirit recognised the moment, they sent word to me through the voice of our sacred drums to prepare myself. I heard them and I shed all thoughts of earth. I began to follow the moon to the abode of the gods. . . servant of the white king, that was when you entered my chosen place of departure on feet of desecration. (p. 62).

Elesin's rhetoric may initially succeed in prompting the audience to give vent to their indignation and condemn Pilkings for preventing the performance of a sacred duty. However, there are obvious contradictions between the above speech and Elesin's confessional statements addressed,

first to his new bride, and then to Iyaloja. What prompts the first confessional statement is Pilkings' citation of a Yoruba proverb which says: "the elder grimly approaches heaven and you ask him to bear your greetings yonder; do you really think he makes the journey willingly?"

(p. 64). The validity of Pilkings' assessment of the situation becomes obvious in Elesin's reaction:

My young bride, did you hear the ghostly one? You sit and sob in your silent heart but say nothing to all this. First I blamed the white man, then I blamed my gods for deserting me. Now I feel I want to blame you for the mystery of the sapping of my will. But blame is a strange peace offering for a man to bring a world he has deeply wronged, and to its innocent dwellers. Oh little mother, I have taken countless women in my life but you were more than a desire of flesh. I needed you as the abyss across which my body must be drawn, I filled it with earth and dropped my seed in it at the moment of preparedness for my crossing. You were the final gift of the living to their emissary to the land of the ancestors, and perhaps your warmth and youth brought new insights of this world to me and turned my feet leaden on this side of the abyss. For I confess to you, daughter, my weakness came not merely from the abomination of the white man who came violently into my fading presence, there was also a weight of longing on my earth-held limbs. I would have shaken it off, already my foot had begun to lift, but then, the white ghost entered and all was defiled. (p. 65)

It is obvious that Elesin has never feared to die; but the attractions of the world of the living, the numerous privileges he has enjoyed by virtue of his office, and the final "renewal of famished embers lodged eternally in the heart of man" (p. 69), are like heavy chains restraining him from crossing the abyss of transition. These metaphorical chains are aptly symbolized by the handcuffs clamped on Elesin after his arrest.

In the second confessional statement, addressed to Iyaloja, Elesin admits that he has been overwhelmed with a thousand temptations to linger a little while, but claims, rather unconvincingly, that he would have overcome them had it not been for the interference of Simon Pilkings. Even in his claim, one gets the impression that he is using the interference by Pilkings only as a face-saving defence:

It is when the alien hand pollutes the source of will, when a stranger force of violence shatters the mind's calm resolution, this is when a man is made to commit the awful treachery of relief, commit in his thought the unspeakable blasphemy of seeing the hand of the gods in this alien rupture of this world. . . . I made to utter my spells anew but my tongue merely rattled in my mouth. I fingered hidden charms and the contact was damp; there was no spark left to sever the life-strings that should stretch from every finger-tip. My will was squelched in the spittle of an alien race, all because I had committed this blasphemy of thought—that there might be the hand of the gods in a stranger's intervention. (p. 69)¹⁴⁸

When carefully considered, Elesin's confessional statements betray him as a hedonist who loves life too much to want to part with it. His failure to die through the help of spells and charms should be seen as the consequence of his looking back on a luxurious life he hates to leave behind. He is like a horse that sniffs the stable but does not

¹⁴⁸ Soyinka's version of Elesin's lament is a great improvement upon that of Elesin in Duro Ladipo's "Oba Waja," p. 63:

The white man rendered my charms impotent,
He drained the power of my medicine.
He has deprived me of a glorious death.
Now I can die of the machet
like a cow slaughtered in the market
I can bleed to death.
Now I can burn myself alive
smouldering away like a rubbish dump;
But the glorious road to heaven is closed.

strain at the bridle.¹⁴⁹ However, unable to bear his shame any longer, Elesin strangles himself, ironically, with the chains which, according to him, have earlier made him lose his will to die. But his is a belated action. As the Praise-Singer remarks, "If you [Elesin] had raised your will to cut the thread of life at the summons of the drums, we would not say your mere shadow fell across the gateway and took its owner's place at the banquet" (p. 75). Nevertheless, Elesin's suicide assumes tragic proportions. Elesin does not only confront his own death on the appointed day; he has been living with death in his mind for as long as he has held the office of the King's horseman. The death of the King sharpens the thought of death in him to the point of neurosis which he manages to conceal beneath the mask of the virtuoso in the art of dying.

Like the Oriental mystics, Elesin fully realizes that life "is just a bridge to eternity, death the gateway at the other side of the bridge."¹⁵⁰ But unlike the mystics, Elesin makes so much of life that he loathes to tread the bridge down the gateway to eternity. He himself pleads guilty to wavering between hedonistic life and honorable death. When he finally resolves to die, his death becomes pointless in terms of its ritual significance. Outdone by his son Olunde, Elesin does not become the King's horseman, nor does he retain the right of succession to the office of the King's Horseman in his family. Since

¹⁴⁹ Cf. Elesin's words: "When the horse sniffs the stable does he not strain at the bridle?" (p. 9).

¹⁵⁰ Eric Bentley, The Life of Drama (London: Methuen & Co. Ltd., 1965), p. 275.

only the first son can succeed his father as the King's horseman, the suicide of Olunde has put an end to the line of succession. Consequently, Elesin ends up as a two-way loser.

Even his intercourse with his new bride loses its significance. He once proudly displays the "souvenir" of his first union with his latest wife, saying: "It is no mere virgin stain, but the union of life and the seed of passage. My vital flow, the last from this flesh is intermingled with the promise of future life" (p. 40). Later he turns to his bride and remarks: "Our marriage is not yet wholly fulfilled. When earth and passage wed, the consummation is complete only when there are grains of earth on the eyelids of passage". (p. 40). These grains of earth are, unfortunately, bound to pollute rather than adorn "the eyelids of passage" because Elesin has been stained in life and in death. The final ritual of pouring some earth over Elesin's eyelids is immediately followed by Iyaloja's significant statement: "Now forget the dead, forget even the living. Turn your mind only to the unborn" (p. 76).

Elesin's death, whatever its level of tragedy, transcends a mere loss of life. It is a prelude to rebirth through his new bride, and, therefore, ironically life-affirming. Elesin himself has put it succinctly:

We cannot see
The still great womb of the world—
No man beholds his mother's womb—
Yet who denies it's there? Coiled
To the navel of the world is that
Endless cord that links us all
To the great origin. (p. 18)

The womb is the world of the unborn child; the umbilical cord is the child's life-line, linking its world with that of the living. By inference, therefore, the unborn symbolizes the future. It is the evolutionary relationship between the future, the present, and the ancestral past that aids man in recognizing his "great origin." The void that must be crossed and recrossed in moving from one stage to another is "the immeasurable gulf of transition," or "the numinous area of transition," or "the vortex of archetypes and home of the tragic conflict."¹⁵¹

Man's suffering of the agonies and uncertainties involved in the perilous plunge into this fourth area of experience is what triggers the tragic terror in him at the critical moment of transition. As Soyinka explains, the stage of transition

is however the metaphysical abyss both of god and man, if we agree that. . . music is the 'direct copy of the direct expression of the will,' it is only because nothing rescues man (ancestral, living, unborn) from loss of self within this abyss but a titanic resolution of the will whose summons, response and involuntary expression is the strange alien sound to which we give the name of music. . . . On the arena of the living when man is stripped of excrescences, when disasters and conflicts (the material of drama) have crushed and rubbed him of self-consciousness and pretensions, he stands in this gulf. . . it is at such moments that transitional memory takes over and intimations rack him of that intense parallel of the dissolution of his self and his struggle and triumph over subsumation through the agency of will. It is this experience that the modern tragic dramatist recreates through the medium of physical contemporary action, reflecting emotions of the first active battle of the will through the abyss of dissolution.¹⁵²

¹⁵¹ Soyinka, "The Fourth Stage," loc. cit., p. 125.

¹⁵² Ibid., pp. 125-26.

It has been necessary to quote Soyinka so extensively because the above passage is of tremendous help in appreciating the task which he has set for himself in his search for the meaning of tragedy in Death and the King's Horseman. The philosophy guiding the theme, action and language of the play can be deduced from "The Fourth Stage" from which the above excerpt has been taken.

A careful analysis of Death and the King's Horseman in the light of Soyinka's illuminating essay reveals that though the play is based on an actual historical event in Nigeria in 1946, the story of Elesin Oba transcends a mere re-enactment of history. Through this historical tragedy Soyinka continues his persistent search for the meaning of tragedy,

for a redefinition in terms of cultural or private experience [which he regards as] a recognition by man of certain areas of depth experience which are not satisfactorily explained by general aesthetic theories; and of all the subjective unease that is aroused by man's creative insights, that wrench within the human psyche which we vaguely define as tragedy is the most insistent voice that bids us return to our own sources.¹⁵³

The search in Death and the King's Horseman is articulated through the threnodic music of the drums and of the Praise-Singer, through the philosophically rich proverbial language of the major characters, and through the symbolic jarring of the music at the "Masque" and the trance-inducing rhythm of the native drums, all of which combine to give prominence to the threnodic essence of the tragic conflict in the play.

¹⁵³ Soyinka, "The Fourth Stage," p. 119.

The time and space I have devoted to the treatment of Wole Soyinka's plays are a result of my claim that Soyinka is Nigeria's (indeed, Africa's) leading playwright. His twelve plays so far published demonstrate the variety and dynamism of his themes and dramatic techniques. More extensively than any other Nigerian playwright, he dips into the culture, mythology, and traditional social milieu of the Yoruba people to forge a unique theatre that is as provocative as it is challenging. Since Yoruba traditional resources are a sine qua non in Soyinka's dramaturgy, both directing and acting will have to be geared towards a full utilization of these resources in order to achieve the "total theatre" of Soyinka's plays. This explains why it will take more than a cursory reading of Soyinka's plays to appreciate fully their stage productions. Many of the plays, like The Strong Breed, A Dance of the Forests, The Road, and Death and the King's Horseman presuppose the audience's familiarity with the myths, legends, and culture of the Yoruba people, which may be acquired either through reading or by interaction with the people.

Plays like The Lion and the Jewel and The Trials of Brother Jero may have simple stories to dramatize, but they require a highly resourceful producer to be staged effectively and successfully. More complex plays like Madmen and Specialists and A Dance of the Forests pose a much greater challenge to the creative imagination of the would-be producer. The cinematic technique of plays like The Lion and the Jewel, The Strong Breed, Camwood on the Leaves, and Kongi's Harvest may be the death of their stage productions if handled by inexperienced

producers. Any production of any of Soyinka's plays will depend for its success on the resourcefulness, skill and experience not only of the producer, but also of the set designer, lightning technician, and other stage hands, as well as of the actors.

The problems which Soyinka's plays pose for the producer and the audience are, of necessity, those which critics have to grapple with. Examples of critical opinions have been cited earlier in this study to illustrate the need for caution in appraising Soyinka's plays. Soyinka himself finds it necessary to warn critics and producers against misleading interpretations of his plays. In the "Author's Note" to Death and the King's Horseman, for instance, he states:

The bane of themes of this genre is that they are no sooner employed creatively than they acquire the facile tag of 'clash of cultures,' a prejudicial label which, quite apart from its frequent misapplication, presupposes a potential quality in every given situation of the alien culture and the indigenous, on the actual soil of the latter. . . . I find it necessary to caution the would-be producer of this play against a sadly familiar reductionist tendency, and to direct his vision instead to the far more difficult and risky task of eliciting the play's threnodic essence: (p. 6)

This warning note may be applied to some of Soyinka's slighter earlier plays. Even where this warning is heeded by critics, one finds that a critical opinion that was valid about a decade ago may not retain its validity any longer today. For instance, Martin Tucker wrote in 1966:

Soyinka is one of the few contemporary Africans writing in English who use no white man for their cast of characters (with the exception of his recent novel). This feature, for it is a positive characteristic, reveals again Soyinka's interest in the symbolic and human rather than the historic aspects of his dramatic material. . . . His lack of white characters can be

explained by his lack of interest in a contemporary historical situation; the white man and his sojourn in Africa. Soyinka is simply not interested in historical situations--his interest lies in the primary emotions of hope, defeat and struggle.¹⁵⁴

Death and the King's Horseman sufficiently disproves Tucker's assertion that Soyinka is not interested in contemporary historical situations and that he does not use white men in his cast of characters. Critics may learn from what has turned out to be Tucker's premature generalisation that Soyinka at 43 is far from being a spent force, and that it may be too early even in 1978 to assess Soyinka's artistic creative energy in unqualified terms.

Soyinka's latest work to date, Operation Wonyosi,¹⁵⁵ a vicious ridicule of Nigerians' misplaced values, re-affirms the claim that Wole Soyinka is a talented satirist who "approaches his literary creations with sincerity and has an implicit faith in a new and more rational order. . . [but] his satire is often a mere cloak for his more profound apprehension of his universe."¹⁵⁶ The profundity of his vision of modern society has often been misinterpreted as sheer pessimism; but as a humanist at heart, Soyinka can hardly resist the urge to portray realistically in his work the bizzare human conditions that unjust authority has imposed on the people of Nigeria and of any other nation where similar conditions exist. Soyinka may not make any concrete

¹⁵⁴ M. Tucker, "West African Literature: The Second Decade," Africa Today, 13, No. 5 (May 1966), 8.

¹⁵⁵ This play was not yet published by the time this study was completed.

¹⁵⁶ O. Ogunba, The Movement of Transition, p. 231.

proposals in his plays to solve the problems of the common man. As an artist, he does not owe this obligation to his audience. It is gratifying enough that his plays demonstrate a Promethean yearning for the betterment of mankind.

CONCLUSION

An attempt has been made in this study to trace the origins of modern Nigerian drama in English to the rich indigenous traditions of ritual dance-drama and masquerade that characterize occasional or seasonal religious and formal festivals in Nigeria. It has also been established that there exists an affinity between the contemporary theatre and the traditional theatre in Nigeria, though the frontier between the two remains difficult to define.

From the selected plays discussed in this study, it may be concluded that the development of modern Nigerian drama in English has gone through a peculiar process, and that its history does not follow a definable literary movement, such as realism, or naturalism. However, like its European counterpart, modern drama in Nigeria is a convenient blend of the popular and the literary dramatic traditions. Mahood points out the "growing awareness among African playwrights. . . to achieve some. . . synthesis of the old and the new, [of] the indigenous and the foreign, if they are ever to produce a distinctively African drama for the modern theatrical world."¹ Such a synthesis is more than a mere mixture, as Mahood observes; but in Nigeria, the playwrights, whatever their individual levels of achievement, have at their disposal an inexhaustible repository of myths, legends, and pre-drama rituals and festivals, all of which readily blend with, and enrich, modern theatrical modes and techniques. It should be noted

¹ M. M. Mahood, "Drama in New-Born States," Présence Africaine, 32 (1966), 27.

that the music, dancing and singing that feature prominently in stylized drama in Nigeria today are all a carry-over from the religious and festival drama of the preliterate Nigerian society.

As Adedeji has pointed out, notwithstanding the "differing history of origin and orientation [of the 'folk' and the 'formal' or 'intellectual' theatre], the two types of theatrical movements have emerged with a great deal of innovation. The fusion of the traditional with modern techniques and the utilization of Western concepts of stagecraft and presentation have become their distinguishing feature."² This explains why the folk operas of Ogunde, Ogunmola and Ladipo have so much in common with the "intellectual" theatre in contemporary Nigeria.

Like the folk opera which uses Yoruba or any other indigenous language as its medium of presentation, modern Nigerian drama in English employs local settings and themes, though some of these themes have universal significance. A good number of Nigerian plays in English draw extensively on local legends and myths to dramatize contemporary social, political and economic milieus. In some plays, the playwright's didactic intent manifests itself as we find in Ola Rotimi's The Gods Are Not To Blame, and in Obotunde Ijimere's Woyengi and The Imprisonment of Obatala. In others, such as Clark's Ozidi and Soyinka's A Dance of the Forests, there surfaces the author's intent to comment critically on events in the society. The frequency with which myths and legends occur in Nigerian drama strongly suggests that part of this

² J. A. Adedeji, "Oral Tradition and Contemporary Theatre in Nigeria," Research in African Literature, 2, No. 2 (1971), 135.

drama in English is still tied to the past by an umbilical cord that defies severance despite the steady progress of the new "intellectual" theatre with all the influences of classical and western dramatic conventions.

The new theatre keeps growing not only in terms of the number of playwrights, and of plays being written, but also in terms of the artistry that goes into the writing of new plays. Some playwrights like Henshaw and Clark may have burnt out their creative energy,³ but versatile and outstanding playwrights like Olá Rotimi and Wole Soyinka continue to write. A "younger" generation of playwrights has also emerged, among them, Zulu Sofola, Wale Ogunyemi, Femi Osofisan, Sony Oti, and many others with some promise. The dramatic conceptions of recent plays reveal signs of the growing maturity of the new Nigerian theatre: the playwrights are always doing something new, for which no set criteria of judgment exist. This experimental nature of the new plays reflects the bubbling creative energy with which dramatic literature is being produced at a rate that frustrates any effort to compile an exhaustive bibliography of primary materials in modern Nigerian drama in English.

It is not my intention to create the impression that all has been smooth-sailing for the playwrights, or for the growth of the Nigerian theatre. Theatre groups have been formed and many have had

³ J. E. Henshaw's last play, Dinner For Promotion, was published in 1967. J. P. Clark's latest play, Ozidi, was published in 1966. Since these playwrights are still alive, it may be premature to see their writing career already at an end; but the indications are getting stronger as the years go by.

to Yold because of administrative and financial problems. Besides, the small number of theatre houses in the country has been a crucial factor in the rate of the growth of the theatre. Up till 1967 there was only one modern theatre in the country—the 304-seat Arts Theatre of the University of Ibadan. The Jos Theatre in Jos, and the Shell-BP Theatre in Port Harcourt were too elitist and too far removed from the crop of budding playwrights to make any effective contribution to the growth of the Nigerian theatre. However, the situation has improved tremendously over the years. More theatre houses are being built by educational institutions and by a number of organizations. Nigeria is now proud of an ultra-modern National Theatre building in Lagos, though the cost of using it is too prohibitive to encourage young playwrights to stake their reputation, fortune and future by staging their plays in the Theatre. It will take established playwrights, and plays that have repeatedly attracted large audiences in smaller theatres, to attract a sufficiently large audience to offset the staggering cost of producing any play at the National Theatre. There is one consolation though: more and more plays continue to be produced with encouraging frequency in the smaller and less elitist theatres in other parts of the country.

The Nigerian theatre has come a long way from the days when the traditional theatre first moved from the ritual groves to the village square. At that time, the African theatre had no special building. Entertainments in traditional communities were held in the village square and the spectators who were participants in what may be termed as "total theatre" did not have to pay any entrance fees. The principal actors, that is, the priest and the ritualists, were not paid either.

The village square, apart from being the most convenient "theatre" for traditional rituals and festivals, symbolized and, to some extent, still does symbolize the entire village, its solidarity and its collective consciousness. The convenience and the symbolic significance of the village square should explain why Africans had no pressing need for the erection of buildings for the performance of ritual and festival dramas. Despite the steady growth of modern theatre houses, with their sophisticated proscenium stages, the village-square "theatre" continues to be used for rituals and festivals which constitute traditional drama.

The point has been made that drama in modern Nigeria grew out of indigenous traditional drama. This should explain why both forms of drama have certain functions in common. Like traditional drama, modern Nigerian drama endeavours to translate the totality of the human experience, and to recreate existing myths as a means of giving glimpses of the historical, religious, social and political life of Nigerian society. Therefore, the affinity between such a drama and the society in which it is set cannot be overstressed. This affinity is not restricted to that function of the theatre, which is, to quote Hamlet, "to hold mirror up to nature." The integration of mythology and history into Nigerian drama enables the playwright to awaken the consciousness of the audience to the past in order to appreciate fully contemporary situations. Very often, such an integration helps to explain, to develop and to enrich the African personality; but in some cases, the use of the past through myth and history fosters the exposition and condemnation of some undesirable and outmoded aspects of Nigerian cultural

life which are impediments to peace and progress. In short, myth and history provide materials for plays which, for all their apparent topicality, give artistic expression to man's continuing struggle for a proper understanding of himself and of the mode of life he lives in a contemporary society.

The transitional period between the dim past and the contemporary society has also provided ready materials for Nigerian playwrights. Plays set in this period normally concentrate on the various conflict motifs, including those between tradition and modernism, between the parent and the marriageable child, and between village life and the glamour of city life. Although these conflicts are common in the works of most Nigerian playwrights, each writer approaches the theme differently and with varying didactic purposes.

Now that an increasing number of African creative writers are emerging as the eye and conscience of their societies, Nigerian playwrights seem to have practically abandoned the overworked conflict motif in favour of themes of enduring and universal qualities. They reveal the socio-political phenomena current in Nigeria, but in integrating these phenomena into their plays, they succeed in making the social and political ills an example of the universal experience of man. The cannibalism of Dr. Bero in Soyinka's Madmen and Specialists, the tyranny of Kongi in Kongi's Harvest, and the conspiratorial murder of Ozidi in Clark's Ozidi, are all localized illustrations of man's inhumanity to man, of man's insatiable lust for power. No matter how localized the actions in plays like Clark's The Raft and Song of a Goat,

or Osofisan's A Restless Run of Locusts, or Soyinka's The Strong Breed and Madmen and Specialists may be, they assume universal heights once it is realized that the tragic conflicts and human experiences in them are not peculiar to Nigeria, or to Africa. Whether these plays are comic, tragic, or satirical, the vision of man and of his world which they reveal transcends the vision of a particular people in a particular locality.

Among the playwrights whose works have been examined in this study, Wole Soyinka emerges as a towering figure. His professed complete immersion in the African traditional world view and values of social cohesion is much in evidence in A Dance of the Forests, The Road, The Strong Breed, The Swamp Dwellers and Death and the King's Horseman, to mention only the prominent ones. More than any other Nigerian playwright, Soyinka exhibits in his dramatic works a restless spirit struggling to perceive the collective consciousness of contemporary society. The depth of his perception is confirmed by the significant integration of myth and ritual into many of his plays. Even in those plays where no myth or ritual exists, Soyinka's sensibility to his immediate social and political environment, particularly to the Yoruba contemporary social psyche, surpasses that of any of his contemporaries. So dynamic is his creative energy that, judged by both the volume and the quality of his plays published to date, Soyinka will remain for a long time to come Nigeria's leading playwright.

Soyinka is also in the fore-front in the playwrights' search for a new "African" theatre, a theatre created out of the African

society which fits and serves the aspirations of the emerging contemporary society. Such a "theatre" is bound to be plagued with numerous problems if it is to retain and to project an African identity. Fortunately, the Nigerian theatre, an integral part of African theatre, does not have the kind of problems experienced by the Brazilian Negro Experimental Theatre (NET). The NET was established as an attempt to wage a war against colour prejudice, and to create a Negro aesthetic aimed at attaining for the Blacks a worthy and respectable status.⁴ This négritudinal role of NET in Brazil, which is similar to that in Francophone African literature, has no place in the Nigerian theatre, though its basic functions remain mainly social, cultural, and political. Very much at a stage of maturity at the moment, the theatre and drama in Nigeria have come a long way from merely explaining Africa to Africans and to the world. In short, the sociology of the theatre in Nigeria has been systematically fused with the psychology of the theatre, with the result that what is available in Nigeria today is mainly psycho-socio-drama. This is not to say that the modern theatre in Nigeria is being used purely therapeutically, because its essential function of teaching and entertaining remain much in evidence.

The question is: what audience does the Nigerian theatre teach and delight? Ola Rotimi was once asked what audience he was writing for, and he replied: "English, as you know, is the official medium of communication in Nigeria. Inevitably, I write for audiences

⁴ Bakary Traoré, The Black African Theatre and Its Social Functions, Trans. Dapo Adélugba (Ibadan: I. U. P., 1972), p. 98.

who are knowledgeable in this language. However, in handling the English language in my plays, I strive to temper its phraseology to the ear of both the dominant semiliterate as well as the literate classes, ensuring that my dialogue reaches out to both groups with ease in assimilation and clarity in identification."⁵ One may say the same thing for most Nigerian plays written in English. The few exceptions are Soyinka's more difficult plays like A Dance of the Forests and Madmen and Specialists, which require more than the semiliterate's working knowledge of the English language to achieve what Rotimi describes as "ease in assimilation and clarity in identification."

In its infancy, Nigerian theatre was basically employed as a technique in sociological investigation and exposition. Now that the theatre has virtually come of age, it is beginning to be used for experimental purposes, though not by any means divorced from the problems of contemporary society. The import of all this is that Nigerian drama of the late fifties and early sixties would appeal to any audience in the world as a sociological exposition of the Nigerian society on stage. Today, the same audience would leave the theatre, not merely having satisfied their curiosity about Nigerian ways of life, but with a critical appreciation of the artistic techniques and the aesthetic values of dramatic presentations of those ways of life. This does not necessarily presuppose that modern Nigerian drama in its near-mature stage panders to the taste of the proponents of art for art's sake.

⁵ Ola Rotimi, interviewed by B. Lindfors, Dem-Say: Interviews with Eight Nigerian Writers, Occasional Publ., No. 9 (1974), p. 60.

The beauty and vigour of modern Nigerian drama in English reside in its almost effortless retention of its social significance while it continues to marry traditional dramatic elements with foreign (Western) dramatic techniques. The result is a drama which, despite its assimilation of "foreign" influences, seeks its own artistic creation through the development and enrichment of the Nigerian (and eventually African) identity. It is with such an identity that the Nigerian theatre can make bold to address itself to a particular audience, and by and large to realize its full potential.

Whatever the level of realization of this potential, the audience outside the African society will continue for some time to encounter one difficulty with Nigerian plays. The increasing broad-mindedness and curiosity of non-Africans have virtually broken down the barrier formerly constituted by the cultural background of most African literary works. However, the language barrier has not completely disappeared even though modern Nigerian drama is written in English. When a Nigerian play is written in standard English, with metaphors and idioms that reflect the English sensibility (as is the case, for instance, in Kole Omotoso's The Curse⁶), some vital values are lost. The language may be easily intelligible to non-African but English-speaking audiences, but one has the awful feeling that, brilliant as such a play may be, it cannot claim to express African ideas and thoughts.

⁶ (Ibadan: New Horn Press, 1976). First produced in May 1975 at the University of Ibadan Arts Theatre as The Golden Curse, the play is notable for its motif of mistaken identity, which echoes Shakespeare's Comedy of Errors.

Achebe has argued that the "African writer should aim to use English in a way that brings out his message best without altering the language to the extent that its value as a medium of international exchange will be lost. He should aim at fashioning out an English which is at once universal and able to carry his peculiar experience."⁷ A good number of Nigerian playwrights have successfully fashioned out such a brand of English. Clark, for instance, makes Zifa say in frustration:

A guest after being fed looks up
At the sun. But these many years I have been host
To a guest that will not return.

(Song of a Goat, p. 31)

Zifa's "guest" is his misfortune of being impotent. The return of this guest would mean the restoration of Zifa's sexual powers. The speech may be understood by an audience outside Nigeria, but the language derives its aesthetic value from Clark's African sensibility. Also, Ola Rotimi makes Odewale praise Baba Fakunle (the "Tiresias" of The Gods Are Not To Blame) as "oldest and most honoured / of all Seers" (p. 25), adding:

Baba Fakunle,
even without eyes
you are all-seeing--
a partridge: you see with the face
you see with the whole body. (p. 26)

The last two lines are a modified transliteration of the Yoruba saying: "T'ojú t'iyé ni aparò fi ñrírán." (The partridge sees with its eyes and with its feathers.) Although this is an inadequate description of the prophetic powers of a blind diviner, the point nevertheless manages to

⁷ C. Achebe, "The African Writer and the English Language," Morning Yet on Creation Day: Essays (London: Heinemann, 1975), p. 61.

emerge. The full implication of Odewale's speech elsewhere may not be grasped by a non-African audience when the hero prays: "When the evil-plotter beats his drum for the downfall of the innocent, the gods will not let that drum sound!" (p. 30). Passages like this, which are transliterations of indigenous tongues, are common in Nigerian dramatic works and may pose some difficulty for an audience not used to this pattern of transformed English. The problem is greater in Soyinka's plays than in those of any other Nigerian dramatist. "A non-African audience may find it a bit difficult to appreciate fully the African consciousness in the following passage taken from Kongi's Harvest:

SARUMI: We lift the King's Umbrella
 Higher than men
 But it never pushes
 The sun in the face.
 DRUMMER: I saw a strange sight
 In the market this day
 The sun was high
 But I saw no shade
 From the King's umbrella. (p. 8)

Put differently, this means that the grandeur, pomp and pageantry enjoyed by Oba Danlola do not constitute any threat to the security and freedom of the individual in the society. Yet, the King has been divested (by Kongi) of all he once enjoyed. His umbrella, symbol of protection over his subjects, does not cast any shadow any longer. This is a powerful way of expressing the far-reaching effects on the King and his subjects of the tyranny of Kongi. One may compare this passage with another deceptively simple passage from the same play. In "Hangover" Danlola in an ironic tone answers the Secretary that all went well,

As I ran well
 When I took a final look at Kongi
 And began a rapid dialogue with my legs. (p. 88)

The last line is a translation of the Yoruba expression, "Mo bá esè mi soro." Instead of using the standard English equivalent, "I took to my heels," Soyinka prefers the more forceful Yoruba expression which implies that Danlola urged his legs to carry him as fast as possible. No Nigerian audience would think twice before grasping the full implications and effect of Danlola's description of his flight after the partial success of the coup planned against Kongi.

Probably, the language problems posed to non-African audiences by passages like those cited above are not, after all, insurmountable. Such audiences, however, may miss the comedy entirely in a speech like the one by Chume in The Trials of Brother Jero:

O God a no' get eyes for my head. Na lie. Na big lie. Na pretence we de pretend that wicked woman! She no' go collect nutin! She no' mean to sleep for outside house. The Prophet na 'in lover. As soon as 'e dark, she go in go meet 'in man. O God, wetin a do for you wey you go spoil my life so? Wetin make you vex for me so? (p. 75)

There is no substitute for this passage. To render it in standard English is to ruin the comic effect of the pidgin English used.

Let me sum up the foregoing discussion by saying that of all the problems facing a non-African audience watching Nigerian drama in English, the language problem remains the least easy to overcome. The knowledge of the socio-cultural background to a play may be acquired through reading and research, but the ear of the audience will have to be conditioned to the rhythmic patterns of the transformed English language and to the complexities of pidgin English in order to grasp fully the subtleties of meaning in modern Nigerian drama in English.

The problem of language is common to African literature, no doubt. What makes it pronounced in dramatic literature is that while poetry and the novel may be read, with some close attention paid to the printed word, a play produced in the theatre leaves little room for the audience to stop and to analyze a passage without losing track of the development of the action and dialogue. In short, the spoken word is "in flight," and it takes a well-trained ear to grasp its meaning effortlessly. This problem is more knotty especially where the mode of thought, figures of speech, similes, proverbs and verbal nuances are lifted from the native language of the playwright. In spite of all these, the playwright can still effectively communicate with his audience if the actors succeed in translating into communicable action those words or phrases the full meaning of which may elude the audience in the theatre, be it in Nigeria, or outside the African continent.

Apart from the problem of communicating with his audience through the medium of his plays, the playwright faces a greater difficulty especially when his play is an incisively critical comment on certain events in his society. Apparently speaking from personal experience, Soyinka once declared: "In new societies which begin the seductive experiment in authoritarianism, it has become a familiar experience to watch society crush the writer under a load of guilt for his dare in expressing a sensibility and an outlook apart from, and independent of, the mass direction."⁸ The commitment of Soyinka to the

⁸ Soyinka, "The Writer in an African State," Transition, 6, No. 31 (June / July 1967), 11.

liberation of the individual from all forms of oppression and tyranny manifests itself in many of his plays. And his prison experience is not unlike what his African colleagues, such as Ayi Kwei Armah and Ngugi Wa Thiong'o, have suffered because of their writing.

Of course, Soyinka is not the only Nigerian to suffer for his commitment as a writer. Hubert Ogunde's Strike and Hunger (1946), based on the strike of the Enugu coal-mining workers who were fired upon by the police, was banned by the colonial government and Ogunde himself was harrassed for some time. His Yoruba Ronu (1964), a biting political satire, was also banned by the scandal-ridden government of the then Western Region. In addition, his Folk Opera Troupe was forbidden to play anywhere in the Region. The same play has recently been banned from performing at the National Theatre in Lagos, though no reason was given for the action of the Federal Ministry of Information (National Theatre Management Division).⁹ The experiences of Ogunde, those of Soyinka, and recently that of Ngugi Wa Thiong'o, will show beyond doubt that the African writer who poses as the eye, ear, and conscience of his society is most likely to ram his head against the walls of oppression of the powers-that-are.

With all the practical problems facing the theatre and drama, and dramatists in Nigeria, the question may be asked: what future has the theatre and drama in Nigeria? This is not an easy question to answer because of the many factors that may determine that future.

⁹ See "Yoruba Ronu Banned Again," Daily Times (Nigeria), 26 May 1978, p. 1.

Except for Soyinka's isolated case of temporary "exile"¹⁰ no Nigerian dramatist has had to flee from home as a result of the unfavourable reaction of the government to his plays, though the harassment of writers of plays which are unduly critical of the government cannot be ruled out. But the situation has not yet arisen that will put an end to the writing or production of plays, no matter how revelatory or critical of social and political ills of the society they may be.

With more theatre houses being erected in Nigeria, and with a growing recognition of the talent of actors and of the entertaining and didactic functions of drama, it is most unlikely that drama on stage will ever be replaced by the movies, with all their thrill and sophistication. This optimistic vision of the future of the theatre and drama in Nigeria grows out of the present upsurge in dramatic activity in the country. Even Soyinka, who once thought he might turn his back on the stage if he had the opportunity to make his first film,¹¹ is still very much involved in dramatic activities. Modern Nigerian drama in English has established itself firmly with the plays of Clark, Rotimi and Wole Soyinka. Upcoming playwrights like 'Laolu Ogunniyi, Wale Ogunyemi, 'Zulu Sofola and Femi Osofisan, among others, may not yet match the grandeur and the excellence of the plays of these established playwrights, but their works promise a bright future for drama in Nigeria.

¹⁰ Wole Soyinka would probably frown upon this word being used to describe his sojourn in England and Ghana during the turbulent years in Nigeria.

¹¹ "Wole Soyinka," A Spear interview by Olu Akaraogun, Spear Magazine, May 1966, p. 17.

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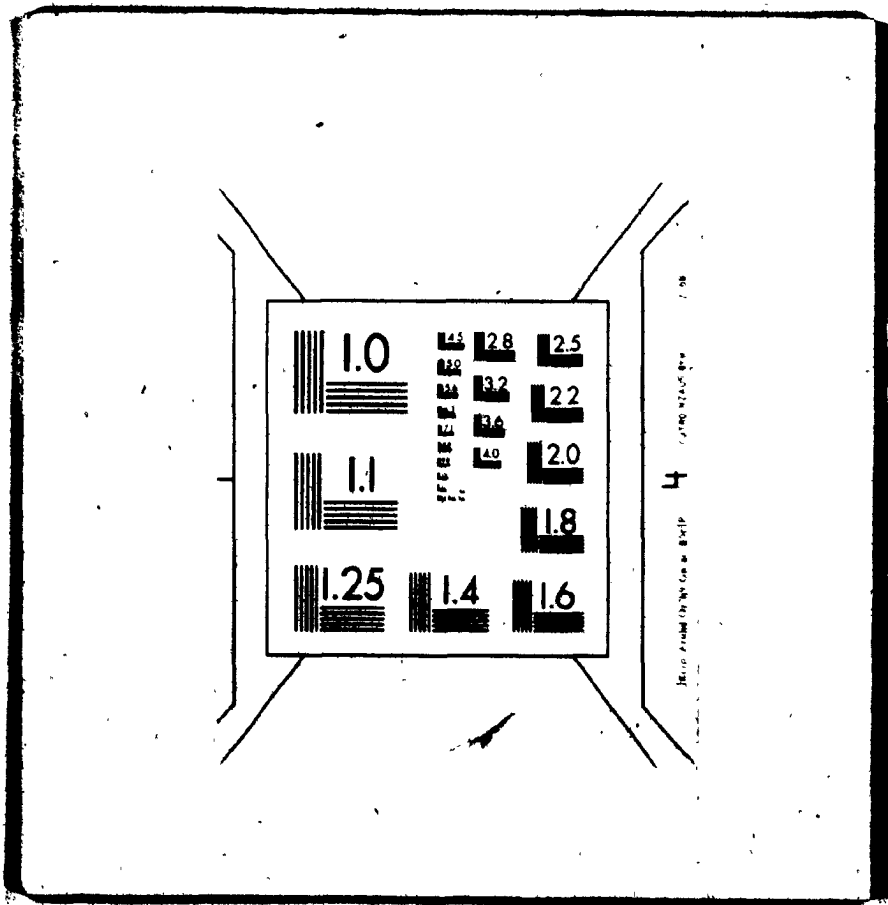
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