

Cultural Contradictions, Contestation and Challenges in the Dramatic Works of Wole Soyinka and Femi Osofisan

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Abstract:

Arguably, drama is an admirable metaphor for cultural logicity. Reinforcing this stance, some Nigerian dramatists adopt the position of keen observers of humanity while others like Wole Soyinka and Femi Osofisan take opposing sides in presenting metaphorical commentary on the socio-political situation in Nigeria and by extension Africa. The hunch of this study leans on how playwrights engage cultural dynamics through dramatic works; it sought to ascertain the extent to which these cultural denouements are patronised or eluded in relation to their bound responsibility towards traditional heritage. This is done in recognition of shifting values, quest for reinterpreting history and on the premise of identifying with the society. It can be argued within the framework of this paper that Soyinka's artistic rumination within the ambit of utopian literary genre successfully activates the African concept of animism while Osofisan marries Marxist ideology with poetic and mythic elements of African culture, rejecting the tragic vision that accompanies Soyinka's plays. Through contrastive analysis, this paper scrutinises the critical mooring of African tradition, myth and history in the dramatic works of Soyinka and Osofisan. It finds that elements of cultural contradictions and contestation are common denominators that run through the works of both playwrights. And submits that the plays of Soyinka are amply supplied with an interplay of gods, mortals and the dead, emphasizing godlike essence that detects material and emotional power while those of Osofisan are submerged in social change rhetoric and pedagogies of the oppressed.

Key Word: Contestation, Contradiction, Culture, Drama, Nigeria

Introduction:

Culture is a fundamental concept within the framework of historical discourse and value treatment. Broadly, it deals with all the learned and shared ideas and products of a society. By this, Scupin's (1995: 33) re-echoing of E. B. Taylor's definition of culture comes in quite relevant. He describes culture as "that complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, arts, morals, law, custom and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of the society." Going by the aforementioned and relating within the precincts of this study which seeks to relate the relevance drama poses in reading and re-reading culture; it could be argued that drama – as an art – is culture itself. Thus the message or picture it passes on could go a

long way in defining a pattern that will engender wholesome absorption or outright contestation. Leon Trotsky (1981: 32) supposedly implied this when he said “art is always a social servant and historically utilitarian. It finds the necessary rhythm of words for dark and vague moods, it brings thought and feeling closer or contrasts them with one another, it enriches the spiritual experience of the individual and of the community, it refines.” By this assertion, it is obvious that art is integral with the life of the society and plays diverse roles in the lives of generations.

Suffice it to say then, that drama is a vital and persistent aspect of human experience utilized as a powerful tool of cultural interaction and communication. The images evoked by drama whether in writing, production or performance, send powerful signals which ultimately influence people’s perception of the world. This is particularly so because drama, just like all art forms outlive the life of its originator. It inspires and transmits values, beliefs and norms from generation to generation. This ignites a further call for caution and deep thinking in the transmitting and transposing of certain cultural traits. Culture is not static, all cultures are inherently predisposed to change and, at the same time, to resist change; this is highly reflected in Nigerian drama. In view of this, writers like Soyinka approach the issue of cultural change from the angle of resistance to European imperialism while cementing existing African mores for continuous cultural consciousness. On the other hand, writers like Osofisan reside power in the people to opt for change, pushing an agenda of dynamic processes that encourage the acceptance of new ideas and things despite existing cultural mores.

Nigerian drama has done a lot in redefining the concept of cultural understanding. In assessing the works of some Nigerian Dramatists, a richer understanding of the concept of culture surfaces especially as it has been theorized by early playwrights like Wole Soyinka and James Ene Henshaw and later playwrights like Zulu Sofola, Femi Osofisan and Tess Onwueme amongst others. Not only do the mentioned dramatists show (through their work) the value of culture, they also demonstrate the function of cultural re-reading as a method of highlighting and critiquing power differentials based on societal stance and of course gender. Ultimately, while Soyinka’s works theorizes wholesome cultural transmission to comment upon local mores, Osofisan uses his presentation to reshape cultural discourses within dramatic studies; enriching the debates with knowledge of innovation and the complexity of straight jacketed approaches.

This paper examines the cultural dialectic of dependence and variation, integration and alienation and the threshold between dramatists that are critical culture promoters and those that agitate for social change obtainable through cultural overturn. Quite importantly, drama, within the context of this paper is treated not as an artefact but as a process centred on the relations of cultural production and in the dynamic of human consciousness.

Overview of Nigerian Drama: The Praxis and Poesis

Drama is not only a medium for information dissemination, communication, education, conscientization and entertainment; it is also the rock which propels change in the society. This is made possible by the way and manner in which subject matters are treated. Drama, by its creation determines what it is and what should be, it is created in such a way that expresses

meaning, feeling, and spirit so that audience members have the opportunity to experience what the drama initiators want them to experience. Drama helps man to rediscover himself, form a world view, establish large scale assessment of events, get rational and reasonable orientation of the world. Aesthetically, drama expresses man's emotional-intellectual world in his relationship to the society. Societal or personal identity could be a direct result of the presence of elements from shared activities such as drama. In Nigeria, drama has played significant roles in re-writing history, forming and consolidating identities and self-rediscovery.

Nigerian dramas are richly rooted in cultural elements, just as Margaret Mead (1953) argues that the use of drama for cultural projection is very important because "the functioning of every human body is not only moulded by the culture within which the individual has been reared but also by the way he was born into society with a definite culture he has been fed and disciplined, fondled and put to sleep, punished and rewarded" [p. 368]. This goes to explain why culture plays a vital role in the physical and mental development of an individual in any society. It further explains why Nigerian playwrights project different cultural elements in their works. Particularly interesting is where the same culture meets different interpretation and treatment initiated by different dramatists.

The history of serious literary theatre in Nigeria began with James Ene Henshaw who was the first recognized dramatist in Nigeria. The emergence of Henshaw's *This is our Chance* which was performed in 1947 and published ten years later (in 1957) clearly puts into perspective the 1956 date given by Adelugba, Obafemi and Adeyemi (2004) "as the year of the birth of Nigerian drama in English" (p. 151). In 1952, "Henshaw won the first prize at All Nigerian Festival of the Arts with his one-act-play *Jewel of the Shrine*" (Adedeji 1986: 718). His works were "mainly interested in social foibles and domestic conflict, often presenting dramatic encounters between generations separated by opposed traditions, beliefs, and mores." (Simon Gikandi, 2003, p. 308). Adelugba et al. (2004) explain that Henshaw's plays are populist and filled a lacuna, a paucity of drama texts in Nigerian schools, "before the arrival of more profound and serious dramatic texts of Wole Soyinka, JP Clark, Ola Rotimi and Zulu Sofola, playwrights who properly typify the first-generation Nigerian playwrights and dramatists of the English literary tradition" (p. 151).

First Generation of Nigerian Literary Dramatists

According to Yemi Ogunbiyi (1981: 30), "between 1958 and 1965, a robust ferment of intellectual activities developed at the university and in the city of Ibadan, especially at the Mbari Centre, where the first serious and significant generation of literary dramatists, including Wole Soyinka and J. P. Clark, emerged." Adelugba et al. (2004: 153) add that "other dramatists who also began writing around this time include Wale Ogunyemi, Sonny Oti, Zulu Sofola and Samson Amali." Adding to these, Julius-Adeoye (2013: 53) notes that "Ola Rotimi is also part of this generation, though he was studying at Yale University in the US at the point when this movement began." Expatriating further, Adelugba et al. (2004: 153) relate that, Wole Soyinka, who was based in England, arrived in Ibadan and formed the 1960 Masks, drawing members from the Player of the Dawn." The Mask theatre served as a facility for promoting Soyinka's research in African theatre forms and for the performance of his works and the works by other African writers. According to Jeyifo (2001: 174), "Soyinka's work has already accumulated a vast and comprehensive list of critical studies with innumerable diverse approaches to which

it would be hard to add something without a risk of tedious repetition.” Being in tandem with Jeyifo, it is important to add that Soyinka has traversed the Nigerian, indeed the world, dramatic landscape for over half a century and, along the way, winning different laurel associated with literature; this is inclusive of the prestigious Nobel Prize for Literature which he won in 1986.

Julius-Adeoye (2013: 54) describes Soyinka as “the first Nigerian and African multifaceted literary figure that distinguished himself in all the genres of literature.” Suffice to mention here that Soyinka is a poet, novelist, critic, essayist, autobiographer, playwright and director. He is both a cultural and political activist. In reeling out Soyinka’s achievement, Lindfors (1982: 19) has this to say:

From his earliest plays (“The Invention” (1957), unpublished), *The Swamp Dwellers* (first staged in 1958; published 1963), “The Root” (1959, unpublished) performed during the British Drama League in London, *The Trials of Brother Jero* (performed in 1960; published 1963), *The Lion and the Jewel* (performed in 1959 at the Royal Court Theatre; published 1963) to the present, he has established himself as Africa’s finest and most discussed playwright.

Julius-Adeoye (2013) lists Soyinka’s works to include *Jero's Metamorphosis* (performed 1974, publ. 1973), *A Dance of the Forests* (performed 1960, publ.1963), “The Republican and the New Republican” (performed 1963), *Kongi's Harvest* (performed 1965, publ. 1967), “Rites of the Harmattan Solstice” (performed 1966) and *Madmen and Specialists* (performed 1970, publ. 1971). He also wrote *The Strong Breed* (1963, publ. 1964), *Before the Blackout* (performed 1965, publ. 1971), *The Road* (1965) and *Death and the King's Horseman* (1975). In *The Bacchae of Euripides* (1973), he has rewritten the *Bacchae* for the African stage and, in *Opera Wonyosi* (performed 1977, publ. 1981), bases himself on John Gay's *Beggar's Opera* and Brecht's *The Threepenny Opera*. “Others are “The Golden Accord” (performed 1979-80), “Priority Projects” (performed 1982), *A Play of Giants* (1984), *Requiem for a Futurologist* (performed 1983, publ. 1985), *Childe Internationale* (performed in 1964, publ. 1987), *From Zia with Love* (1992), *A Scourge of Hyacinths* (performed on BBC radio 1991, publ. 1992), *The Beatification of Area Boy* (performed 1995, publ. 1995), and *King Baabu* (2002).

Other playwrights of this generation include: John Pepper Clark who also distinguished himself in the field of drama as well as in other genres of literature as a whole; Ola Rotimi - often examined Nigeria’s history and ethnic traditions in his works; Zulu Sofola - the first female dramatist in Nigeria and Wale Ogunyemi – regarded as the most indigenous of all the Nigerian literary dramatists writing in English. He was a member of the Wole Soyinka’s theatre companies and an ardent believer in the Yoruba religion and cultural worldview.

Second Generation of Nigerian Literary Dramatists

The period after 1970, considered the post-civil war phase in Nigeria, witnessed the emergence of a different crop of playwrights, regularly referred to as second generation dramatists. According to Julius-Adeoye (2013: 61), “the best in this group of playwrights were set apart from their predecessor not necessarily by any age difference, *per se*, but rather by

what Ogunbiyi considers to be temperament and vision, hardened, as it were, by the trauma of the 1967-1970 Nigerian civil war.” Ogunbiyi (1981: 36) lists these writers to be “Wale Ogunyemi, Fela Davies, Comish Ekiye, Soji Simpson, Kole Omotosho, Bode Sowande, Meki Nzewi, Laolu Ogunniyi, Bode Osanyin, Esiaba Irobi, Tunde Fatunde, Ahmed Yerima, Akinwumi Isola, and Femi Osofisan.” However, Julius-Adeoye (2013) rates Wale Ogunyemi as gliding between both the first and second generations as a founding member of the old Orisun theatre, the travelling theatre and part of early television in Nigeria. He adds Akanji Nasiru to the list while stating that there are others who share the radical ideology of this generation but may not be as prolific in their dramatic releases as those already captured. Such writers include: Kole Omotosho, Tunde Fatunde, Rasheed Gbadamosi; Olu Obafemi. And there are also other who choose to write in Nigerian languages, such include: Akinwunmi Isola, Faleti and Samson Amali.

These second generation writers led by Femi Osofisan, out of an ideological commitment, were initially shunned or, at best, were indifferent to Western acclaim by refusing to publish with foreign firms. They firmly believed that the production of literature cannot be divorced from its content and overall objective in a neo-colonialist economy. Unlike their older predecessors Soyinka, Clark, Rotimi and Sofola, these playwrights are unequivocal in their sympathies with the working masses, and “even when they use myth as their backdrop for dramatic action, it is manipulated in such a way that the message comes out clearly in favour of radical change” (Oyekan 1997: 162). They appropriated Marxist exegesis in their creation of drama and in the analysis of existing literature.

Femi Osofisan, considered as the most vocal literarily of this generation of radical dramatists, is appropriated to have written ideologically situated plays to reflect the struggle of the neglected masses of the Nigerian population. Osofisan ventured into all of the genres of literature and excelled in all. Julius-Adeoye reveals that Osofisan “writes poetry under the pseudonym Okinba Launko. His *Kolera Kolej* was published as prose before being adapted for the stage under the same title.” In plays such as *The Chattering and the Song* (1977), *Morountodun* (1982), *Once Upon Four Robbers* (1980: 62), including his early social farce, *Who’s Afraid of Solarin* (1978), he demonstrates a commitment to social justice and political change. Reiterating Sola Adeyemi, Julius-Adeoye (2013) professes that “Osofisan continues to create a radical shift in the psyche of our nation, Nigeria, his drama staunches our open wounds and his songs rouse us from our lethargy and set us ablaze.”

Apart from being credited for creating the Kakaun Sela Theatre Kompany – a semi-professional troupe, Osofisan instituted a form of theatre style in which he adopted Bertolt Brecht’s alienation technique, changing of costumes, sets and recasting actors in the middle of a performance. Julius-Adeoye (2013) goes ahead to comment that:

Osofisan’s fecundity on stage is without unequaled among Nigerian dramatists. He wrote upward of more than three dozen plays which include, Behind the Ballot Box (1967), Oduduwa Don't Go! (1968), A Restless Run of Locusts (1975), Who’s Afraid of Solarin (1978), Morountodun and Other Plays [with Morountodun, Red is the Freedom Road and No More the Wasted Breed] (1983), Once Upon Other Robbers (1984), Farewell To A Cannibal Rage, and Midnight Hotel (1986), Two Short plays [containing Altine's Wrath and The

Oriki of A Grasshopper] (1987), *Another Raft* (1989). From the 1990's he published *Birthdays Are Not For Dying and Other Plays* [containing *Birthdays Are Not For Dying*, *Fires Burn and Die Hard* and *The Inspector and the Hero*] (1990), *Esu and the Vagabond Minstrels* (1991), *Aringindin and the Nightwatchmen* (1992), *Yungba Yungba and the Dance Contest* (1993), *The Album of the Midnight Blackout*, and *Ire Ni!, Nkrumah-Ni!...Africa-Ni!, and Tegonni, An African Antigone* (1994). He also published *The Oriki of A Grasshopper and Other Plays*, *Twingle-Twangle*, *A Twynning Tayle*, and *The Engagement* (1995). Others include *One Legend, Many Seasons* (1996), *Fiddlers on a Midnight Lark* (1996), *Making Children is Fun* (1996), *Reel Rwanda!* (1996), *Many Colors Make the Thunder-King* (1997), *Ajayi Crowther*, *The Play of Kolera Kolej*, and *Women of Owu* all in 2006. (p. 63)

In asserting Osofisan's relentless fecundity in the Nigerian dramatic sphere, Tejumola Olaniyan (1999: 78) acknowledges that Osofisan's works are "skilful appropriation and re-interpretation of indigenous performance form, a fine-tuned materialist revision of history, and a consummate dramaturgic sophistication." Ogunbiyi (1981: 36-37) adds to this as he maintains that:

Eclectic as he is original, Osofisan has sought to reshape traditional Yoruba mythology and ritual in the light of the contemporary realities, to squeeze out of old myths fresher meanings, in the belief that Man, in the last analysis, makes his own myth. Not content to merely expose the ills of the society, he has dared to provide us with glimpses of his vision of a new society. It is interesting to note that Osofisan's plays are popular fares at institutions across the country.

Subsequently, it could be said that Osofisan represents a significant number of his generation of Nigerian writers who concede to neither Eurocentric "conceptions of an ideal African past nor naive enthusiasm about Western influence, a generation that has seen both colonialism and postcolonialism and has few illusions about either." (Savory 1998: 376).

Third Generation of Nigerian Literary Dramatists

Julius-Adeoye (2013) distinguish the third generation of Nigerian literary dramatists as being defined not by nationalism or mythopoetic ethos as they are not noted for any definitive interest in revolutionary aesthetic or Marxist cantos but in individual survival strategies. He however noted that the plays so categorised in this generation all seems to align with what Ameh Akoh (2009: 264) refers to as "the burning issues confronting postcolonial transitory state of Africa or Nigeria." Julius-Adeoye (2013: 66, 68) goes ahead to list writers of this generation to include: "Tess Onwueme, Julius Okon and Stella Oyedepo, Irene Salami-Agunloye, Foluke Ogunleye, Tracie Utoh-Ezeajugh and Bunmi O." Aside the above listed female writers he extends the list to include: "Ahmed Yerima, Ben Tomolaju, Sam Ukala, Chukwuma Okoye and Emeka Nwabueze." He notes that apart from the aforementioned who have distinguished themselves within this generation, there are others who are waiting to break

into the mainstream of playwriting. He lists such to include: “Bakare Ojo-Razaki, Biyi Bandele-Thomas, Lekan Balogun, Debo Sotuminu, Segun Ashade, Alex Asigbo, Solomon Igunare, Greg Mbajiorgu, Makinde Adeniran, Akpos Adesi, Benedict Binebai, Chris Egharevba, John Iwuh, Victor Dugga and others who are quickly making their impact felt on the Nigerian dramatic firmament.”

Julius-Adeoye (2013) also classifies Nigerian literary artists into the ‘First Decade of the Twenty-First Century’ group of writers. He defines their work based on alignment with issues of nationalism, treating contemporary societal and gender related problems.

Concurring Versus Conflictual Cultural Pedagogies in the Works of Soyinka and Osofisan

Literature, generally is a reflection of human society; thus every literary work of art prides itself with ingredients of socio-cultural realities. Drama, as a genre of literature projects itself as an outward exhibition of these socio-cultural realities and man’s engagement/disengagement with them. As it is the hunch of this paper, Osofisan is analytically discussed in relation to Soyinka in their treatment of these realities and the emerging discourses/theories.

Culture is unique and debatable, interestingly so because it is subject to change and at the same time resistant to change. Culture has a long and controversial classic history in interpretation and implementation. This is evident in the varied forms and frames of the dramatic works of Soyinka and Osofisan. A reading of Soyinka’s *The Strong Breed*, *Death and the King’s Horseman* and *the Lion and the Jewel* reveals a strong pull at tradition. In the mentioned texts, Soyinka presents stories in which tradition and cultural practices assume ‘rightful’ places in human lives and belief system of the indigenous people. This is notwithstanding whatever foreign learning and influence that have crept in.

In *the Lion and the Jewel*, Soyinka has Lakunle not only disgraced by traditional values but the Bale (being the very epitome of an exploitative tradition) is placed to out manoeuvres the naively romantic Lakunle and the simple-minded Sidi only to enrich his harem. In *Death and the King’s Horseman*, Simon Pilkings is subdued by tradition and his hope for the civilising mission is somewhat quashed as Olunde turns round to embrace the cruel demands of tradition and dies for it. Sadly, Soyinka reinforces that when external forces try to disrupt traditional gory demands, the result is two persons dying instead of one. Elesin having gone through a ceremony meant to help the dead king travel peacefully to the world of the dead is expected to commit suicide as the final phase of the ceremony. Regardless of having other reasons to live on, he is prompted by honour and obligation to cultural practices to pursue his death ceremony. When the critical rite is interrupted by the British colonial forces and his suicide is prevented, Elesin is disgraced and humiliated. His son, whom he had previously disowned for abandoning the tribe to attend school in Europe, now disowns him. Elesin is repudiated by friends and tribesmen and is held in prison by the British as a means of protecting his life. After witnessing his son’s suicide to right his wrong, he strangles himself with his own shackles. This further proves Olunde’s sacrifice as vain. To this Ikenna, Kalu & Ogwumike (2017: 22) comment that Soyinka’s credence thrusts on “the activities of mortals being modulated from behind by gods and such gods influence them for good or bad.”

Yet another sacrificial instance is played in *The Strong Breed* where Soyinka (just as in *Death and the King's Horseman*) sacrifices his character to traditional demand of life taking. Eman's blood trails him to fulfil his supposed traditional role to the people. *The Strong Breed* tells the story of a young man, Eman, who is traditionally saddled with the ancestral and messianic responsibility of being a carrier; cleansing the community of all distresses and evil particularly on the eve of a new year. As a carrier, he is tasked to willingly or forcefully submit himself to a macabre of ritual sacrifices, he is positioned as the receptacle of all the community's ills. Though Emman tries to avert the responsibility he is eventually plunged in the cultural expectation. Osofisan evaluates the ethical ratios and motivation informing the dialectics of leadership and the negation of responsibilities in the anonymous traditional African community mirrored in Soyinka's *The Strong Breed*. He examines the human tragedies that occur as a result of abuse of institutional powers by the holders of such power and questions their motives in his adaptation of the said play – *No More the Wasted Breed*. Through his works, Osofisan adjudges drama as the most prominent preoccupation of society considering its function as a tool for social change. He seems to be pushed by Terry Eagleton's (1976) assertion (which hinges on the Marxist ideology of literature) that if drama cannot be designed for the good of society, it means then that it is a wasted enterprise.

Outstandingly, Osofisan consistently explore African tradition and cultural matrices to make artistic statements and as argued by Akinyemi & Falola (2009: 11), "with Osofisan's dramaturgy, myth is demystified; history is de-historicized and re-contextualized." This assertion could be established in Osofisan's *Another Raft* (a response to J. P. Clark's *The Raft*). In *Another Raft*, Osofisan demystifies the gods and the world of the supernatural. He demonstrates the irrelevance of ritual sacrifices and the inefficacy of the scapegoat syndrome. He further drives home the inaptness of relying on supernatural forces for survival – he reduced to naught the functionality of the Yemosa in *Another Raft* with a strong message that our survival lies in our hands, our decisions and our preferred action. Osofisan takes up the hematic concern in *Another Raft* in response to *The Raft* where J. P. Clark adopts the framework of ritual and myth to place the fate of man in some supernatural forces. Osofisan rather offers in *Another Raft*, a platform for radical consciousness notwithstanding the existence or non-existence of supernatural forces. Justifying this very outstanding standpoint of his, Osofisan (2001: 92) in one of his essays - "Ritual and the Revolutionary Ethos" declares:

And it is not only that the machinery provided by the old society for dealing with chaos has lost its capacity for total effect, it is also that the very metaphysical raison d'être of that machinery has been eroded with the advent of a new socio-political philosophy...the flux of social transformation stands unrelieved in the crisis of ritual.

Driving this point further, he had the character Togun (Priest to Olokun), in *No More the Wasted Breed* say "Most of the things which mattered at the time of my father have ceased to count. The laws of our youth have turned overnight into the relics of history. The times changed, and so did our people...the old customs have crumbled, the old gods fled into retreat" (Osofisan 1982: 99).

While it may be ascertained that the cultural setting of most works of Osofisan hardly extend beyond the social, political and economic life of the Yoruba people, it could be argued that Osofisan's dramatic oeuvres provide an ambit for making applicable comments on the Nigerian (and by extension Africa) Society though with the Yoruba worldview and cultural milieu as a springboard. Osofisan prides himself in telling stories of injustice, the disposed, the minorities whose voices are alienated; he tries to re-establish hope for the common man by questioning the rationale behind existing oppressive structure. Such are his treatment in plays like *No More the Wasted Breed*, *Morountodun*, *Another Raft* and *Red is the Freedom Road*. With plays like *Farewell to a Cannibal Rage*, *Midnight Hotel*, *The Inspector and the Hero*, *Altine Wrath* and *Who's Afraid of Solarin* he treats the menace of corruption in the society. In *Aringindi and the Nightwatchmen* as well as in *Yungba Yungba and the Dance Contest* he treats the subjects of power and politics.

No More the Wasted Breed is Osofisan's response to Wole Soyinka's *The Strong Breed* where Eman sacrifices his life for the community, albeit in a roundabout manner. In retorting, Osofisan questions tradition and drives home the point that the past can only be considered relevant if it is appropriated in tune with contemporary and empirical reasoning. Thus subservient to the dictates of ancestral cultural practice without thorough interrogation is tantamount to retrogression. He insists that change, which is not a singular duty of any individual but rather the effort of collective must be made to strive, he however recognises that this much needed change can be initiated by one person and where such an individual fail in his courageous acts, the struggle continues. Hope Eghagha (2009: 69) justifies this as "the lesson in Marshall's death in *Morountodun*." In *Morountodun*, a culturally incline play, Osofisan presents the legendary Moremi as a galvanizing force that defies the gods, the king, and her personal safety to save her people. An action which at first was seen as contesting against culturally acceptable practice especially as the priest was given into making unending sacrifices. This suppose 'against' act of Moremi turned her to a legend.

In *No More the Wasted Breed*, Osofisan questions fixative old ways and celebrates the culture of questioning traditional values especially those that seems to be status defined. He had his character (Saluga) question the priest of Olokun (god of the ocean) thus:

Tell me, why is it always us who give our lives? Why is it always the poor who are called to sacrifice? Why is it always the wretched, never a wealthy man, never the son of a king, who is suddenly discovered to bear the mark of destiny at difficult moments, and pushed on to fulfil himself in suicidal tasks? Why?
(Osofisan 1982)

The Role of the gods: Differing Stances of Soyinka and Osofisan

In *A Dance of the Forest*, Soyinka presents a complex interplay between the dead, mortals and the gods. The plays spell of self-discovery within the context of African spiritualism. In the play, Soyinka portrays as characters, three deities worshipped for special powers: *Ogun*, Forest Head (*Obatala*) and *Eshu* (*Eshuoru*). The treatment addresses conflict of interest between the gods and how such affects the lives and destinies of human beings. In addition to the deities, Soyinka also engages spirits that 'control' the universe; this, probably because, according to African concept of animism "souls reside in objects and natural

phenomena such as trees, hills, streams, oceans, and rocks.” (Mastud, 2017: 230). Mastud (2017: 230) argues that “the inclusion of spirits by Soyinka is to project an integral cultural order in which all aspects of the universe correspond to a harmonious unity under the power of the supreme deity. The human characters also belong to different realms of existence: the living, the dead and the unborn.”

Another interesting twist is Soyinka’s inclusion of ancestors that have been rejuvenated through ritual practice. These different forces come together, staging a battle to possess the unborn child of the dead woman. Thus the play projects the interplay of forces from different realms of existence and nature. Soyinka uses gods and supernatural forces to shape human thought and action, this is done in such a way that humans have little or no control over their actions as they always have to give in to what the gods want or deem appropriate. In *A Dance of the Forest*, the gods appear to be into every aspect of human relationship and life. These gods mingle and interfere in the action of the human characters. This could be exemplified where Aroni (a god) relates that Demoke (a carver) has been accused of killing his apprentice Oremole. Also, Obaneji (a town dweller and a god) makes his character undergo a process of self-recovery. He leads Rola, Adenebi and Demoke deeper into the forest, bringing them to the judgement of self-recovery. Through this act of his, the scandalous love life of Rola, the corrupt practice of Adenebi and crimes of Demoke are brought to bare. It is further in recognition of the role of gods to bring man to judgement that Agboreko says: “No doubt it is another cunning thought of Aroni. To let the living condemn themselves” (Soyinka 1963: 37). Implicitly, the gods control human actions and do with them as pleased but yet they push the condemnation to humans when such surfaces. Since they are projected to interfere with human actions, why then can they not be apportioned the blame that comes from human actions? *Ogun* and *Eshuoro* are presented as gods with human-like conduct; the action of Demoke in killing his apprentice is carried out with the aid of *Ogun* – a god, meant to protect! Where then lies the justification in submitting completely to these gods? These are questions Osofisan seeks answers to through his dramatic works. He charges his audience to take central stage in their life affair and seek realistic resolutions to life challenges instead on relying on the gods.

In some of the plays of Osofisan, such as *No More the Wasted Breed*, he sees the gods as non-superhuman, as the people see them to be when they cheat and oppress humanity. The status of the gods is given to them by man and they can be disrobed by man. The gods can also fall or make mistakes like men; they are not perfect. In *Another Raft*, the gods do not exist but the muscles and the forces of man gave way for man to survive his predicaments. In *Esu and the Vagabond Minstrels*, Osofisan demystifies the age-old perception of modern man’s attitudes towards the issues of Esu. James Tsaior (2009: 56) contends that “most Christians in Africa believe strongly that *Esu* is the same person referred to in the Bible as the Devil or Satan, whereas the appropriate parallel or the equivalent of the Christian’s Devil does not exist in the Yoruba pantheon.” He adds *Esu* is one of the deities in the Yoruba pantheon known as the ‘errand boy’ of Orunmila. He is a “trickster god of revolt and unpredictable forces,” an embodiment of “the principle of justice whose operation often eludes man’s predictive abilities” (Muyiwa Awodiya, 1995, p. 73). To any ordinary human being, *Esu* is synonymous to all forms of negative thought and deed of human beings. The tragic end of man and the eventual death, collapse, or total extinction of a society is regarded as the manifestation of the

handiwork of *Esu* as replicated in the study of traditional African philosophy and religion using Western paradigms by Western trained scholars.

Osofisan coherently features through drama, the consistent exploration of African tradition and cultural matrices to make artistic statements. This he does without giving in to gory traditional demands but empowers his characters to seek justification for every cultural demand. Most often, he employs social change matrix to drive home his points. On the other hand, Soyinka's treatment of the gods in his works are quite religiously remarkable. The gods are portrayed as being in constant communication with man and they not only control human beings but also interfere in their affairs. Ikenna et al. (2017: 20) assert that this act is indispensable for the realization of what Soyinka describes as "Cosmic Totality." They add that "only Wole Soyinka has perhaps depicted the Yoruba gods with any degree of seriousness and relevance."

Osofisan employs his dramatic tools as social and ideological weapons as he demonstrates and calls for societal restructuring and re-channeling of belief systems especially those that benefit the 'gods' and the ruling class. This justifies Saluga question to Togun thus: "And who decided that chest moles are the mark of identity for carriers? Why not-fat cheeks like yours for instance? or a rotund overblown belly? I would have thought that a more juicy meal for your cannibal gods. (Osofisan 1982: 105)

Deductively, above longish illustrations of man's effort in taking charge of his affairs cannot be found in Soyinka's works, because Soyinka always ensures cultural traits and conditions travails no matter the losses. And such instances have made critics like Chinweizu, Onwuchekwa and Ihechukwu (1982: 249) to accuse Soyinka of "cultural servitude." His adherence to cultural supremacy is a trait religiously adopted by Zulu Sofola, who upon coming into the playwriting scene (as the first female dramatist in Nigeria) had raised hope that she will do away with dogmatic closure on gender identity and difference but she rather pitched a context where tradition is not to be jettisoned and expect everyone (particularly females) to find their own world within that very frame of tradition. This prompts Julius-Adeoye (2013: 234) to quote Ahmed Yerima as saying that "Zulu Sofola traps her characters within the cocoon of tradition." Such is one out of the many fallouts of employing drama as a tool of cultural servitude.

Conclusion

With thematic cultural representations that are dominantly coloured with a mixture of internal and external cultural values, which at some point generate cultural complications and even contradictions, the Nigerian drama industry has overly dealt with and is still dealing with culturally inclined messages initiated through dramatic works.

As can already be deciphered, Soyinka has critical mooring in African tradition, myth and history, he seems to dictate strict reverence to cultural milieu. He steeps deep into and draws the material and emotional power of his characters mostly from ancestral and supernatural forces whereas Osofisan critiques the past and rejects the tragic vision that accompanies Soyinka's plays while proposing an alternative to questionable cultural rites. He opts for a new social order based on the dictate of man's action and inaction. Soyinka activates the African concept of animism, while Osofisan marries Marxist ideology with poetic and mythic elements that supports man's conscious effort at self-elevation; he takes a stance of not

making his works static mirror of society but rather creates them as instrument that provokes the audience to action.

Nevertheless, a critical reading of both dramatists reveal that the contradiction between the demands of drama and the demands of history, and between cultural institutions and changing social reality are admirably explained, along with the means by which these contradictions can be ascertained.

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