



A Discourse on Tragedy in Traditional Yoruba Drama as Exemplified by Wole Soyinka

Agibe, Christopher Ngoro and Apejoye, Esther Frank

Department of Theatre and Media Arts, University of Calabar, Nigeria

Email: chris.agibe@yahoo.com; esther.apejoye@yahoo.com

ABSTRACT

Many theatre scholars have come to accept the norm that only the Western form of tragedy as exemplified by Aristotle as the only tragedy but this has proven to be wrong owing to the fact that Arthur Miller theorized the tragedy of the common man. However, Soyinka the first African to theorize on tragedy has provided us with the tragic form of drama in the Yoruba ritual theatre. Therefore, this work seeks to critically discuss the tragedy in Yoruba traditional drama as exemplified by Soyinka, bringing to a conclusion that the African tragedy is more in-depth than that of the Western because the tragic hero does not just remain in the physical realm but transcends to the cosmic where he relates with the gods (who are the main actors in the Yoruba ritual drama) while the Western form of tragedy only relies on the ephemeral stage. The comparative and critical method is employed here. At the end of this work it is believed that many theatre scholars will come to embrace the theory of tragedy as exemplified by Soyinka.

INTRODUCTION

Tragedy is a word that has come to be loosely associated with any disaster or misfortune. But in a more précised term, it can however be considered as a work of art that probes with high seriousness questions concerning the role of man in the universe which he exists. In dramatic circles, especially in occidental dramatic works, tragedy as a dramatic form is considered the oldest dramatic manifestation. According to Oscar Brockett, it presents “ a genuinely serious action and a serious tone throughout.” (Brockett O. 2004,p.49). it raises significant issues about the nature of human existence, morality or human relationships. In classical drama, it is a play in which the protagonist, usually a man of importance and outstanding personal qualities,

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falls to disaster through the combination of a personal failing and circumstances with which he cannot deal. It is defined by Encyclopedia Britannica as:

“A dramatic composition, often in verse, dealing with a serious or somber theme, typically that of a great person destined through a flaw of character or conflict with an overpowering force, as fate or society, to downfall or destruction.”

Emeka Nwabueze traces the origin of occidental tragedy (the oldest recorded tragedy) to the theatre and drama in Greece (Nwabueze E, 2011, p.11). he asserts that tragedy originated from the communal celebration, a choric dance in the rituals to the Greek god Dionysus. Four Dionysia, or Bacchanalia, feasts of the Greek god Dionysus (Bacchus), were held annually in Athens. Since Dionysus once held place as the god of vegetation and the vine, and the goat was believed sacred to him, it has been conjectured that tragedy originated in fertility feast in order to commemorate the harvest and the vintage and the associated idea of the death and the renewal of life. The purpose of such rituals is to exercise some influence over these vital forces. Whatever the original connections of tragedy may have been, two elements have never entirely been lost: (i) its high seriousness befitting matters in which survival is an issue and (ii) its involvement of the entire community in matters of ultimate and common concern. Herein lies the central focus of tragedy.

Since the classical Greek period, four epochs of tragic drama are identifiable: these include the classical, the Elizabethan/Jacobean, the Neoclassical era, and the modern tragedies. In the Classical era, drama drew its subject matter from legend, myth and remote history. The action in which play was involved in always has magnitude. The plays were mostly written in verse and choral songs mark off the scenes. The ending of the plays always involves a reversal of fortune from good to bad. It was designed to purge the souls through the emotions of pity and fear. Key playwrights include Aeschylus, Sophocles and Euripides. The Elizabethan/ Jacobean era spans the period of 1558 to 1603. It marked the beginning of innovative English plays. A major characteristic of this dispensation was the serious interface of fate and freedom as exemplified by Marlowe's *Doctor Faustus*. Shakespeare follows the path of Marlowe in the pursuit of fate and freedom of tools of tragic drama. His heroes are the vehicles of psychological, societal and cosmic forces that tend to ennoble and glorify humanity or infect and destroy it. The logic of tragedy that possessed him demanded an insistence upon the latter. Initially, his heroes make free choices and are free time after time to turn back, but they move toward their doom as relentless as did Oedipus. The total tragic statement however, is not limited to the fate of the hero. He is but the centre of an action that takes place in a context involving many other characters, each contributing a point of view, a set of values or anti values to

the complex dialectic of the play. The neoclassical era was heralded by the discovery of classical poetry. Tenets of classical Greece were re-established. The unities of place, time and action were strictly observed. The conflict between passion and reason became uppermost in the minds of dramatic poets and they gave vents to this theme in a new version of tragedy called Heroic plays. According to Thomas Hobbes, "*the work of an heroic poem is to raise admiration, principally for three virtues, valour beauty and love.*" Moral concern, beginning with Aeschylus, has always been central to tragedy, but in the works of the neoclassical tragedians this concern was explorative and inductive. The moral concern of the heroic play is the reverse. It is deductive and dogmatic. In the modern tragedies, these plays show how the subject of tragedy become the interest in the lives of the common man and domestic situations. The language of drama changes from poetic language of verse to everyday language of prose. The protagonist is overcome by a combination of social and psychological circumstances, which are offshoots of Darwinian and Freudian theories. Major playwrights of this period include Henry Ibsen, August Strindberg and Arthur Miller. A coherent and affirmative view of the individual, society, and the cosmos is vital to tragedy-however tentative the affirmation may be. Unresolved question remained at the end of every tragedy. There is always an irrational factor, disturbing, foreboding, not to be resolved by the sometimes consolations of philosophy and religion or by any science of the mind or body; there is irretrievable loss, sadly though not necessarily symbolized by the death of the hero. In the course of the action, however, in the development of the character, theme, and situation and in the conceptual suggestiveness of language, tragedy presents the positive terms in which these questions might be answered. The human qualities are manifest, however, limited; human freedom is real, however marginal. The forces that oppress the individual maybe mysterious but actual- fate, the gods, chance, the character of one's own or humanity's past working through the soul. Though never mastered they can be contended with, defied and at least in spirit, transcended. The process is cognitive; one can learn.

Drama is not however restricted to Europe or European-like drama. There exist other dramatic forms in Asia, Australia and Africa. The Encyclopedia Britannica holds that Asian drama in spite of its uniqueness has no room for tragic plays. It writes

"While the cultures of India, China and Japan have produced significant and highly artistic drama, there is little here to compare to its magnitude, intensity and freedom of form to the tragedies of the West."

It holds that, in Buddhist teaching, the aim of the individual is to suppress and regulate all those questioning, recalcitrant, rebellious impulses (hamartia) that first impels the Western hero toward his tragic course. The goal of

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nirvana is the extinction of those impulses, the quieting of the passions, a kind of quiet in which worldly existence ceases. This implies that Buddhism inhibits the character traits responsible for tragic flaws. Western tragedy celebrates life and the love for life. He is totally unwilling to give up that life. In Asian drama, there is no such intense focus on the individual. For instance, this can be seen in the Japanese Noh plays.

“the hero may be seen in moments of weariness and despair, of anger or confusion, but the mood is lyric, and the structure of the plays is ritualistic, with a great deal of choral intoning, dancing, and stylized action. Noh plays in the view of western dramatist, merely affirm orthodoxy, rather than probing and questioning it, as Western tragedies do.”

This assertion implies that tragedy is a western construct. This may not be completely true as there are certain Noh plays that are completely tragic in their complete nature. In general terms, Noh plays emphasize the sorrowful aspects of life. They dramatize laments of lovers for dead love, of families for lost homes, of warriors for defeated causes. The nature and pattern of presentation may not meet the Aristotelian expectation of the West, but they certainly do evoke pity and fear in these plays, brief as they may be, they are able to dramatize powerful feelings of thwarted hopes and claustrophobic memory of trauma. This in every way is in itself tragic.

We may choose to take as an example the play MOTOMEZUKA (by who?.....), it opens with a priest (Waki) arriving at the village of Ikta and enquiring about a woman's grave, which has become a source of legend. The woman who shows him the grave turns out to be the ghost of Unai (Shite) buried in the grave. Two suitors courted Unai, but unable to decide between them, she drowns herself and the suitors kill each other. Now she continues to be tormented by guilt.

“If you abandon this evil obsession of yours, you can escape eternal punishment”.

The priest tells her. She is however imprisoned in an everlasting hell of self-imposed recrimination. She is in the “burning house” of her tomb. She vanishes still screaming in her torment. This is a nuanced psychological character in the order of August Strindberg. This is a tragic character not in Aristotelian terms but tragic all the same. This is a Noh play. It is in a similar vein that Ketu Katrak opines that,

“There is no African tradition of tragedy”.

He makes reference to the book *The Drama of Africa* by Anthony Graham, where Graham holds that

“There appear to be an ancient and anti-tragic superstition that to express sorrow was “somehow” to invite it”.

It is to such western believes about African drama and not only African but also Asian drama that Wole Soyinka addresses his thoughts on African drama as exemplified in Yoruba ritual drama.

Yoruba and Yoruba world view

The **Yoruba** tribe is one of the largest ethno-linguistic groups in sub-Saharan Africa. Yoruba constitute about 21 percent of the population of modern day Nigeria, and they are commonly the majority population in their communities. Many of the Yoruba in West Africa live in the states of Ekiti, Lagos, Ogun, Ondo, Osun and Oyo, making these political areas decidedly in the control of the numerically superior Yoruba.

While Yoruba can be found throughout the entirety of West Africa, even reaching into Benin, Ghana, and Togo, the greatest concentration of Yoruba is found in Yoruba land, an area in Western Nigeria. The Borgu in the northwest, the Nupe and Epira in the North, the Esan and Edo to the Southeast, borders Yoruba land and the Igala and other related groups to the northeast are considered the nexus of the Yoruba cultural identity.

The Yoruba are known for their excellent craftsmanship, considered to be the most skilled and productive in all of Africa. Traditionally, they worked at such trades as blacksmithing, leatherworking, weaving, glassmaking and ivory and woodcarving. The many densely populated urban areas of Yoruba land allow for a centralization of wealth and the development of a complex market economy, which encourages extensive patronage of the arts. Many people of African descent in the Americas claim a degree of Yoruba ancestry, due to the slave trade of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.

According to Soyinka’s interpretation, Yoruba culture separates the cosmos into the human world and the world of the deities. At the same time, the human world itself contains manifestations of the ancestors, the living and the unborn. Soyinka believes this experience different significantly from western idea that individuals orient themselves in their world through a sense of time as past, present and future. In the Yoruba world, it is not the individual’s sense of time that counts, but rather a community’s collective sense that it has complex ties to the ancestral community and to the unborn community.

The different communities of ancestors, living, and unborn are also, however, separated from one another, and these human worlds as a whole are separated from the realm of the gods. The gulf between areas of existence Soyinka calls transition or the transitional ether. Since, according to tradition, the gods were once completely and unhappily separated from human beings, many Yoruba myths are stories about the efforts made to cross these gulfs. Ogun, the god of iron and of metallurgic lore and artistry, was the first to succeed in conquering the transition. He crossed the gulf to the human world

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by extracting iron from the earth and thus providing the human world with the source of its weapons and its tools. Ogun is also, Soyinka explains, “the god of creativity, guardian of the road... explorer, hunter, god of war, custodian of the sacred oath”.

Yoruba traditional drama

Origin

In discussing original of Yoruba traditional drama, it is renitent to draw attention to the fact that two streams of drama exist in Yoruba land. They are ritual (or traditional Yoruba) drama and Yoruba drama of accidental decent. The later is exemplified by plays like Ola Rotimi’s *The gods are not to blame*, *Kuromi*, Femi Osofisan’s *Morountordun*, *No more the Wasted Breed*, Zulu Sofola’s *King Emene*, Wole Soyinka’s *Kongi Harvest* etc. These may take the form and nature of occidental plays with their roots in western styles and concepts of play writing and play production. Though the stories may be of African setting, they are clearly influenced by European thoughts. There are by-products of European colonization of Africa. The former that is African ritual theatre is exemplified by Wole Soyinka’s *Death and the King’s Horse man*.

What sets these two kinds of plays apart is the concept of drama as appreciated by the Westerner and as it is experienced by the African. According to Wole Soyinka, drama in the west originated from the rituals of Dionysus. However, drama emerged from rituals without the associated mysteries of the rituals. Western drama is therefore rituals without its mysteries. While African drama is a product of ritual and it is inclusive of all the elements of rituals especially the mysteries of rituals (Soyinka 1978, p/2).

Our concern is clearly with the drama associated with African ritual drama, we will show no interest in western influenced drama, except when we need to contrast this with African ritual drama.

The origin of the Yoruba ritual drama lies in the myth and legends of Ogun. Maduakor O. notes that, Soyinka is fascinated with myth as a phenomenon with unlimited appeal for the imagination, manifesting himself in the literature, culture, folklore and the worldview of the people (Madakor O. 1986, p.285). Soyinka in his *Fourth Stage* compares the Greek god of drama Dionysus to Ogun the Yoruba god of creativity. Like Dionysus, Ogun is worshipped by sacrificing animals and drinking wine. His worship entails a lot of revelry. Ogun like Dionysus is also believed to be very fearsome and terrible in his revenge. As the god of iron, Ogun combines creativity and destruction. According to Soyinka, Yoruba believe that once upon a time, the gods Ogun, Obatala and Sango withdrew from the earth to the upper region of ether. This created estrangements from man which is symbolized in metaphysical terms as a thick under growth of matter and no matter which Soyinka calls the chthonic realm (Chris Agibe).

Troubled by their lack of completeness occasioned by this separation, the gods sought to be reunited with man. Ogun took it upon himself to bridge the gulf between the gods and man. He charted his course through primordial chaos across the barrier of mortality and death, to the world of the living. Ogun himself experienced disintegration and death previously in order to re-emerge whole, thus renewing the connection between man and the gods.

Ogun the tragic hero

Wole Soyinka makes us believe that according to Yoruba religion, the world is basically tragic in the sense that it under goes a continual circle of destruction and renewal. This is what he calls “the great continual cosmic struggle”. Herein lays the bedrock of tragedy in the Yoruba worlds. Ogun, god of iron, lover of mankind is therefore considered the first tragic hero. He was the first to cross the abyss of transition, undergo fragmentation and destruction only to attain renewal in the world of the living.

The Yoruba ritual drama is the drama of the gods – Ogun, Obatala and Sango, with minor cast featuring Olodumare and Esu. According to Jenifer Wallace, Yoruba tragedy is the re-enactment of Ogun’s sacrifice (*title, yr.pg*). The protagonist on stage adds further elements of tragedy as he imitated the actions of Ogun, by plunging himself into the abyss, thus making a ‘transition’ between the living and the dead. Ogun is the embodiment of tragedy, Soyinka draws from the works of Fredrick Nietzsche who defines tragedy as a combination of the Apollonian and the Dionysian personality traits. Soyinka in defining the Yoruba tragedy, views it from a tripartite relationship instead of Nietzsche’s bipod. To Soyinka, Ogun is the embodiment of the apollonian, the dionysian and the promethean spirit.

The apollonian is made manifest in creativity, his commitment to chart a course, the purposefulness with which the cause is achieved and his gift of art to man. The Dionysian component is reflected in his revelry. Palm wine an alcoholic intoxicant is freely taken during his worship. The promethean component of Ogun can be seen in his self-sacrifice. By plunging himself into the abyss of transition, he underwent destruction through self-sacrifice a true promethean spirit. In this analysis, Soyinka will have us see the Yoruba tragedy as a combination of these three forces of nature. Thus, defining a kind of tragedy different from the Western tragic notion.

Yoruba is therefore embodied in man’s attempt to comfort the cyclical and endless process of destruction and renewal through self-sacrifice in the abyss transition for the common good of his community. If tragedy in accordance with the ancient Greek norms is questioning and probing with the cosmos, in search of answers to the great question of life, then the Yoruba view of the tragedy of Ogun certainly digs deep, even deeper into the essence to the cosmos than the theatre of Dionysus. This Yoruba theatre developed without the influence of accidental contact is indeed a manifestation of tragic

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thought it is truly an authentic African concept of tragedy. The tragedy of Ogun is an African tragedy.

Elements of Yoruba ritual tragedy

Source

The source of the Yoruba ritual drama is drawn from myths and legends. In the African world, myths are true. The drama of the gods has the principal characters (the gods) who walk the surface of the earth in close interaction with man both in the physical and the spiritual. The myths of the Yoruba are therefore not myths in the concept of the Western world but they are histories into themselves.

The stage

In Western concept, the stage is a specific physical location where a dramatic action takes place before an audience. The stage of the Yoruba tragic drama is both physical and cosmic. Soyinka calls it “a symbolic arena for metaphysical context”. In other words, the characters may be in human form (physically) but transcends to the other realm metaphysically. It is always a beautiful experience for the actors as they exist in body but in two places at the same time. Events occurring on stage are not merely an imitation of the myths of Ogun and the other gods. There is actually a reenactment of the same processes in the metaphysical world. The stage is therefore transformed into a shrine in the theatre of the gods. This is reminiscent of the ancient Greek stage with their choral strophes and the anti-strophes around the altar of Dionysus.

The actor

The actor(s) in the ritual drama of Yoruba is an imitation of Ogun and all the other gods. The protagonist is therefore reliving the bridging of the passage way to the gods according to Soyinka he is involved in a “powerful ritual cosmic influences that are internalized in him... and this implosive factor creates the titanic scale of their passion...”

The actors in Yoruba ritual drama is therefore not only involved in some physical action, he undergoes an intense spiritual experience as well.

Audience

The audience in Western drama is a fee paying group who are in the auditorium viewing a performance on stage. They are separated from the stage by an invisible fourth wall. Most times they are alienated from the happenings on stage, with no permission to make comments or contribute to the acts but the audience in Yoruba ritual theatre is integral to the actions on stage. They do not only participate in choral action at appropriate times, but they supply the energy to surmount the initial resistance to place him into the abyss of transition. Inspired by the audience and the music of transition, he is

seized by the primordial machete- waving courage of Ogun and he finally plays himself into the abyss of transition to undergo the “transitional rites of passage”.

Music

Music is said to be the food for the soul, therefore, music in the Yoruba tragedy like the audience provides the energy that facilitates the protagonist journey into the abyss of transition. According to Jenifer Wallace, the anguish of the protagonist at the point of his complete annihilation is channeled into a form of music which she termed the music of transition. Music therefore performs a very important ritual role. It is also choric in nature just as it was with the ancient Greeks in their dithyrambic processions in strophes and anti-strophes.

CONCLUSION

African literature cannot be regarded as infant anymore. Many scholars have written extensively on it. Soyinka is the first to bring African literature and theatre to limelight as he won the Noble Laureate. Till date he remains the only one who has founded a theory on African tragedy through his Yoruba ritual tragedy. Moreover, the Yoruba ritual drama attempts to access explore and question its universe in a holistic fashion. It takes a physical view of the world and crashes it against the cosmic realization of their world view. The resultant product is a tragedy of their gods. Soyinka in his treatise on Yoruba tragic drama adds another dimension to tragedy. He also cast in store the concept of an African tragic drama thus liberating Africa and the world at large, from the apron-strings of Western Cosmology. A new reception of tragedy is thus created.

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