

DEPLOYMENT OF RITUAL FOR SOCIAL REGENERATION IN CONTEMPORARY NIGERIAN DRAMA

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ABSTRACT: *The Nigerian society since independence has been disturbingly marked by inter-ethnic hostilities, religious intolerance, unemployment, poverty and intense corruption. The alternation of power between the military and the civilian elites has not yielded lasting solutions to these obstacles to national development. Dramatists like Wole Soyinka, Ola Rotimi, Femi Osofisan and a host of others, have engaged the Nigeria political imperative as they have used their arts to denounce the greed and ineptitude of politicians. They have shown interest in the project of national re-birth in a way that is different from the superfluous and grandiloquent spirit of the politicians. Sometimes these dramatists explore aspects of indigenous cultures to articulate their political and artistic concerns. One significant aspect of indigenous culture being explored in contemporary drama is the tradition of ritual cleansing. In a traditional society like Nigeria, myth, symbols and religious rituals nurture social interactions and regeneration. The practice of ritual cleansing is common to many communities as it is a significant aspect of the people's religion and civic culture; they dedicate certain occasions to spiritual renewal by individuals and the community as a whole. Thus, this work captures the analysis of Wole Soyinka's *The Strong Breed* and Femi Osofisan's *No More the Wasted Breed* as they explore ritual as a weapon for social construction and regeneration for community development. Ritual in this study thus becomes the dominant instrument through which the Nigerian society is reflectedly purified. However, the societies captured in the two texts used for this study show different need and importance attached to ritual performance. Thus, Soyinka's *The Strong Breed* examines ritual as a cultural ethnic cleansing annually embarked upon and making use of a carrier who takes the cleansing obligation upon himself while in Osofisan's *No More the Wasted Breed*, ritual is employed as a dominant instrument of liberation. It is employed as the only way through which the society can be transformed from its ill-state.*

KEYWORDS: ritual, social regeneration, Nigeria, drama rebirth.

INTRODUCTION

The existence of man on earth is one that is beyond his understanding. This mystery has brought him a kind of belief that there are some forces beyond his control and he needs to balance his day-to-day activities with these external forces. Horn (1981) in his essay, "Ritual and the Theatrical: The case of Bori Mediumship", explains:

The forces which govern man's world are beyond his control. They are sometimes palpable rain, earthquake, animals, disease – and sometimes impalpable-fate, luck and the apparent breakdowns and discontinuities of causality. To most men, both why and how these things happen are impenetrable mysteries and their world may be seen as menacing anachy. The desire to order this confusion, as a means of influencing, if not totally controlling the capricious forces, lies in the priorities of human communities second only to survival itself; to dominate nature and destiny, to be sovereign over their lives in their world. Man seeks a means to silence these capricious forces, if not totally controlling them, but to have a way of survival and dominating nature, and also destiny. Thus, ritual is borne out of an attempt of man to reckon with the unknown. This is the symbolic action by man in order to relate with these forces, also to generate a tight knit relationship between man and the divine. This is done to ensure the well being of an individual or a community. Man learns to make nature work according to his needs. He learns to court nature, to coax it and not to suppose for a moment that an arbitrary will can be imposed on it, to make it render its wealth.

Thus, ritual is a set of actions performed mainly for its symbolic values. This may be according to what the tradition of the community demands. It usually refers to actions which are chosen arbitrarily by the performers. Ogunba (1978) sees ritual as not just an act for nothing sake, but as a communication directed to a particular spirit, god or goddess. The crop materials; living and non-living things that are prescribed for ritual are called ritual materials. Ritual materials vary from one god to another or from ritual to ritual. Among these ritual materials are; kolanut, bitter kola, yam, plantain, sugar cane, cock, pigeon, ram, etc. However, ritual gets to its climax when ordinary ritual materials are not enough to divert the evil of a particular community and a human being is needed to address the situation, as a ritual sacrifice for the purgation of evil and cleansing. This person now serves as a 'scapegoat' who bears the burden of evil of others on himself.

Every ritual material has distinct properties that are beyond human comprehension. They are given up for unique communication in relaying people's messages to the supernatural forces. The benevolent ones are the good ones while the malevolent ones are the destructive and evil supernatural powers.

Ritual has been divided into Imitative, Positive and Negative ritual, Rite of passage and Sacrificial ritual respectively, based on resemblance in identity across cultures. Imitative rituals are those that originate and are copied from myth. Ogunba (1978) believes that some African ritual ceremonies reveal instances of imitation, either of an experience in life or of the behavior-patterns of some powers. Myth or an aspect of myth is repeated in this type of ritual, so, it is called imitative ritual. They are patterned after the myth of the ancestor involved. Positive and negative rituals are concerned with preservation of culture and orderliness in the community. They celebrate morality and values in the custom of a community. Positive ritual deals with renewal of individual while negative ritual spells avoidance of what is described as taboo and

things that are to be avoided. Africans see morality as the positive command of the gods and ancestors while taboo is a negative command which is prohibited. The rituals deal with discipline: morality is applauded while the breach of forbidden things attract a heavy penalty on the person who commits the offence and even largely on the whole community (Bell, 2007).

The ritual of rite of passage is also called the passage of life. It is based on separation - one leaves a kind of life for another as development takes place. In Yoruba land of the South-Western part of Nigeria, the rite of passage starts from birth through puberty to marriage, to death, then to life-after-death. It is a passage from one stage of life to another. The separation that features in the transition process is characterized by liminality. Liminality is derived from the Latin word 'Limen' which means 'a threshold'. This is at the middle stage of ritual when participants no longer hold their pre-ritual status but have not yet begun the transition to the status which will be held of transition, the rite of separation comes first as the child separates himself and leaves childhood. The second phase is 'Initiand' between childhood and adulthood. The child is assessed to prove that he is capable of the next stage. The third stage in Liminality is called 'Incorporation'. The child is now celebrated and welcomed to the new world-new birth in the new society. This rite of passage accords the initiand or participant a new social role as a new being.

In sacrificial ritual, there is a victim that is sacrificed. This victim could be animate in form of human or animal or inanimate in form of objects such as colanut, bittercola, coconut, sugarcane, etc. The sacrificial materials are taken to the place designed for the ritual so as to effect the purpose. The victim carries the sins and evils of the person or community. The victim may also want to serve the purpose of an ambassador carrying a message from the world of the living to the spirit world. In the olden days human beings were used in sacrificial ritual, but today, such has been replaced with animals or other objects. The victims may be adorned and celebrated for the duty as in the case of Elesin in Wole Soyinka's *Death and the Kings's Horseman*, while in some areas, the victim is treated with no mercy as in the case of Eman in *The Strong Bread*. Ritual suicide is classified under sacrificial ritual, the act or voluntarily and decisively committing death.

AN OVERVIEW OF THE TWO PLAYS

The Strong Bread is one of the best known plays of Wole Soyinka. It is a tragedy that ends with an individual sacrifice for the sake of communal benefit. The play is centered on the tradition of Egungun, a Yoruba festival tradition in which a scapegoat of the village carries the evil of the community and is exiled from civilization. When the play opens, an annual end-of-year rejuvenation ritual is about to begin. We see Sunma intensively and desperately pleading with Eman to leave the community, but he seems tied, unable to escape the fate that is to come. Eman's response to Sunman's statement that she had renounced her father, seems casual and normal. The carrier as practiced in the community is usually chosen from among strangers who

will be tortured, humiliated and hanged on the eve of the new year. His function is to carry to the river before midnight all the sins and filth of the community during the past year. There are only two strangers in the community; Ifada, who seems the community's choice and Eman.

Eman, the play's protagonist takes the role of the carrier, knowing it will result in his beating and exile. He does this to spare Ifada, a young simpleton the same fate. The ritual takes an unexpected turn as Eman flees; his pursuers set a trap for him which eventually results in his death. This is a highly symbolic play as it seems to suggest that death is a crucial marker in the struggle between individual's will and the community's wholeness. The crisis brings back memories while checking the pedigree of Eman's family. His father was also a carrier and sacrificed his life. So Eman has to flee from the family's tradition of symbolic sacrifice. It is the idiot boy, Ifada who seems to protest against Eman's role as a sacrificial victim for the community in a symbolic way by stripping the effigy of her clothing. In other words, Ifada is stripping the effigy of its acquired personality as Eman.

Eman accepts his past and discovers;

Eman:

I am very much my father's son, one of the 'strong breed' who must take this responsibility upon themselves (pg. 81).

At the end of the play, he's caught in a trap set by his pursuers at the sacred trees and killed.

In *No More the Wasted Breed* (1981), the myth of gods in relation to man's providence is overriding; the legendary syndrome of the carrier, the chosen one to expiate for the sinful misdemeanors of others is also used by Osofisan to launch a new cultural ideology that seeks to break away from a questionable past. In doing this, the apotheosis of the gods and goddesses is humanized so that Olokun and Elusu (both godheads of the river) are brought to the suffering land of the living to hear the people's testimony. Elusu had vented her spleen against human disrespect thus:

Elusu:

So what has happened to the age long injunction that they must honour my beauty and not fresh in me? (p.89).

And against her vow of destruction, Olokun, her moralistic husband, warns Elusu.

Olokun:

...we cannot be worshiped by corpses. If I don't intervene, you'll wipe out the entire race (p.91) Biokun and Saluga (both fishermen), represent the duality and ambivalence of contemporary human society towards such godheads. The oppositional attitudes of reverence and irreverence, piety and blasphemy are in play here, for Biokun is ready to sacrifice, fervent for a lease of life for his son through the goddess. He surges at the thought of his son's incurable disease. 'I just want him to live that's all. I want him (96). This is the only son he bares after waiting for 'ten seasons', now being made as one of the victims of Elusu's vengeance. Thus, Biokun has to put

aside his radicalism and succumb to offering a sacrifice to the goddess as demanded by the priest but unknown to him he is the needed sacrifice because he is from the line of carriers; he bears the mark of the foredoomed.

Saluga on the other hand, abhors the retrieval and continuation of old sacrifices which have yielded nothing but sickness, famine and overflow swamp of crops.

Saluga;

The town has done nothing but make sacrifices to Olokun in the past few weeks... they've given him so much that our stores are empty and we face the threat of starvation (p.103).

Vehemently opposed to the carrier myth, Saluga believes that the concensual recognition of chest moles as the sign of the chosen ones in the likes of Osoosi, Biokun and the infant Erindo is illogical and more of a ploy to put a particular section of humanity to extinction.

Saluga:

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...(pg.105).

Saluga speaks on behalf of Biokun that the mission of the carrier is impossible, adding that the only thing the gods know how to do is to collect from humans, use them as sacrifices and give them nothing but woes in return. He tells Biokun not to carry anything, that he would only be used as a sacrificial lamb like his father, who was used as a carrier and never returned. Even in his hour of heroic confrontation with and domination by goddess Elusu, Saluga denounces "gods who feed on their worshippers". The point of recognition for obsequious Biokun comes when Saluga is put to a momentary death. His eyes are now opened to the reality of what is really happening. He says that what his friend has said is true, that the gods are only concerned with their bellies and not about the way humans live and fare. He does declines to be a carrier, even at the expense of his son's life. He further pronounces an ideological judgement on the godheads in precise terms.

Biokun:

The people... abandoned your court because you failed us. Because you take and take and give nothing back, except betrayal.... A great betrayal!

They did not kill you, you killed yourself (pg.108).

When Olokun sees all that has happen, he decides to do justice because he realizes that it is Elusu who is at fault; because the people have been in the dark for a long time and have not been catered for. So, he resurrects Saluga and Elusi dies. Even though Olokun, with his moralizing attitude, corroborates this new change, by saying "...time is no longer on our side" it is still tragic enough to see the human waste and sloths that the godheads fashioned out of their priest, Togun who laments: "I've learnt no trade but this!\ I've no other skill but purchasing"(pg.110)

RITUAL AS A TOOL FOR SOCIAL REGENERATION IN THE SELECTED PLAYS.

No society can remain static forever. Critics have stressed on moral issues of *The Strong Breed*. Eldred Jones as cited by Egharevba (2007:26) observes that in the play, Soyinka uses “a fairly common scapegoat ritual as a vehicle for a tremendous moral statement which transcends setting”. This moral statement is realized through the suffering and death of Eman and the reaction of people towards what befalls him. Almost at once, the villagers begin to return, subdued and guilty, the chief of the purification rite and the most committed, observes:

Then it is a sorry world to live in... It was all for their own common good. What did it benefit on 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 throat (p.42).

Regrets become the lots of the villagers, which would be used as a yardstick for change. Every discussion between Oroge and Jaguna shows the solemnization and regret of the people for their action. Oroge utters “it was no common sight”. It took a strange form and thus change, transformations and reform, because of the needless sacrifice of Eman pricks the conscience of the community in the question of where lies the justifications in human sacrifice.

The play ends with an optimistic note or transition\regeneration. It seems as if the mind or the occurrence ministered into the hardened people to reality and consciousness. The ritual in the play brings into clarity the sacrificial acts that change the mind. Ritual is transformational and it engineers change and reform. This is why Egharevba (2007:2a) sees the ritual play as “ a sacrificial act that would interrupt the cycle of unending history and bring to an end an inherent and tragic history”.

Wole Soyinka presents *The Strong Breed* with Marxist perception which dominates Osofisan’s *No More the Wasted Breed*. Apparently, the strong belief of Soyinka in the inviolability of the gods and in the irrevocability of destiny is unarguably well delineated, which Osofisan finds unpleasant and unacceptable. This is because to Osofisan, the carrier motif as portrayed by Soyinka is retrogressive and oppressive, where a man should be allowed to hold his destiny in his hands. The play finally captures Osofisan’s belief that the development and the cleansing of the society should be seen as a collective responsibility of everybody and not the oppressive task of a few breeds that have been destined for destruction by the gods

A more complex kind of attitude to ritual is to be observed in *The Story Breed* where Soyinka is dealing with the theme of social regeneration. The attitude is complex because it seems Soyinka does not completely disbelieve the notion of regeneration through ritual cleansing. Eman, the hero runs away from his community to avoid his duty of a carrier of the people’s sins, only to be compelled by force within him to fulfil the same obligation, in another community.

Soyinka can be said to be questioning the process of ritual cleansing in *The Story Breed*, but not questioning the fundamental philosophy behind it which is regeneration. What he questions is forcing of that role on an unwilling victim, Ifada, the village idiot whom the people believe has been set aside by the gods for that social role. For Soyinka, the society should have waited for a willing victim, something that has never happened in that community. Eventually, Eman prevents the use of Ifada only to take the role himself and dies for the community.

The impact of that self-sacrifice on the society is remarkable. It starts a process of self-questioning and prick of conscience which alone can lead to genuine social regeneration. To teach this lessons, Soyinka has to tamper with the ritual process by introducing a foreigner, Eman, with a different understanding of social regeneration. Soyinka introduces an element of abomination or taboo into the ritual process by making Eman to hide the chosen carrier, Ifada, who has been prepared by the gods in his house. It is by disturbing the usual ritual process that Soyinka is able to discuss the need for a new direction of the process.

In *No More the Wasted Breed*, Osofisan identifies with the poor and the oppressed in the society and wonders why they are usually called upon to sacrifice their lives at the expense of the rich. Saluga confronts the gods and accuses them of wickedness. He wonders why they are always on the side of the oppressors. Saluga insults Elusu by calling her “that old hag”. Elusu is thus provoked and therefore attacks Saluga during which he later dies. In this play, the ritual serves as a tool for social regeneration, for the gods are completely overcome with shame. They therefore decide to withdraw and allow the people to have their freedom. As Elusu sings, Saluga is revived. Life is now restored. No more floods and the children no longer die. This is what Saluga described “as a new world! Men shall be free” (p.100). The gods finally withdraw to the waves since men have become the masters of their own fate.

Osofisan’s play emphasizes the gradual realization of that radical spirit, that confrontational power, a volcanic strength or self-assertion within the protagonist as a necessary instrument for man to free himself and the masses from an unjust social order. Thus, self-assertion and confrontation become the pragmatic instrument for societal regeneration. The dramatist’s resourceful diction in the play reflects a society beleaguered by forces of decadence and death. Evidently, the social reference is the chaotic and diseased contemporary Nigeria brought about by the activities of neo-colonialism. The situation as Saluga constantly articulates calls for revolutionary action if the society is to rid itself of spiritual vacuity as well as economic morass as well as political aridity that retard its growth.

CONCLUSION

The two plays selected for this study, present the preeminence of ritual and its effects on the community and individual as the balance of life to promote and actualize some social functions.

Ritual is reflected in this study as symbolic and not just an act performed for ceremonial purpose, it is attributed with the role of keeping the society purified.

Wole Soyinka in *The Strong Breed* and in several of his plays has portrayed the need for the society to be regenerated and that rebirth and regeneration can only be achieved through the offering of a carrier. This is why his carrier motif or the theme of the scapegoat runs through a number of his plays such as *The Bacchae*, where Pantheus is torn into pieces by Maenads on Mountain Kithairon “as an embodiment of Dionysus who was torn to pieces by the titans and by his death, purges the guilt of Thebes for its failure to recognize the new god, Dionysus (Okpewho, 2000). Soyinka as a literary giant uses his drama to depict that rite, ceremonials and rituals are indispensable and inevitable metaphor for the drama of life.

Both Wole Soyinka and Femi Osofisan believe in a better society, though they differ in their approach to the solution. To have a better society, according to Soyinka, there are a set of people who are destined to suffer for the wrong doing of others. These people, referred to as the masses or the oppressed, cannot decide for themselves the fate that befalls them. While Osofisan believes that these people referred to as masses, should possess the ability to stand up for their rights. He believes that their boldness to say no to injustice and oppression is the only way to a better society and governance. Through Saluga, Osofisan is making the point that no society needs a Messiah. What is needed is self-assertiveness and radical confrontational stance of Saluga and Biokun against the gods of the land who relish in their affluence and thereby cause starvation and death to the common men.

Osofisan also departs from Soyinka in the use of carrier by disinvesting him with the enormous task of carrying alone the societal sins. Heroism in Osofisan’s play *No More the Wasted Breed*, is therefore collective and not individualistic as in the case with Soyinka’s *The Strong Breed*

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