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## Betwixt and Between Colonial Hegemony and Contemporaneity: Examining The Voyage of Transmutation in African Drama

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### Abstract

*Drama is a potent tool for purposeful communication, and African drama in particular is usually deployed to communicate preconceived messages to the people in terms of cultural reassertion, education, propagation and entertainment. Thus, dramatists deploy diverse elements such as dramatic action, dialogue, characters, conflict, movement, rituals, songs, chants, music and dance amongst others to represent human activities in their dramatic texts. These theatric-cultural elements are usually synthesised in dramatic texts with directing, acting, and design to find expression in performance as theatre. Dramatic texts in this light portray pertinent issues of the society, which are harnessed and dramatised for purposeful communication to the audience. In African drama for instance, salient issues, ranging from colonial to contemporary ones are always depicted in dramatic texts for communication and entertainment purposes. It is against this background that this paper examines the voyage of transmutation from colonial to contemporary pre-occupations in African drama. With the use of content analysis, the paper explicates the comparative thematic, stylistic and other intrinsic pre-occupations in three selected plays, depicting a broad base of African drama. This paper adopts Water Fisher's Narrative Paradigm Theory to underpin the analysis of the content in this paper. The theory shows how all forms of communication come by way of narrative, and stories people tell to communicate, are perceived in accordance with the audiences' personal values. The paper thereby finds that issues in the selected dramatic texts such as oppression, resistance, heroism, cultural reassertion on one hand, and leadership question, corruption, nepotism, women empowerment, and hybridisation of varying cultural tendencies on another hand project a notion of transformational voyage in the body of African dramatic texts. The paper then concludes by stating that this development consequently entrenched a new identity of African drama as hybridised dramatic texts that embody both African indigenous and European foreign elements of culture as a mixed grill.*

**Keywords:** Betwixt and Between, Colonial Hegemony, Contemporaneity, Voyage of transmutation and African Drama.

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### Introduction

The preoccupation of African drama has mutated significantly over time to reflect new trends; ideologies and idiosyncrasies that depict the African society. These new trends are characteristically indicative of African

drama transmuting from colonial tendencies to the ever evolving contemporary issues in the polity. Thus the subject matters, thematisations and general portrayal of societal issues in African drama as reflection of the society indicate a trajectory of



transmutation from colonial hegemony with its derivatives such as conquests, occupations, oppressions, and cultural alienations amongst others to the contemporary issues of maladministration, corruption, nepotism, exclusion of women, communal clashes amongst others which have been identified as the bane of meaningful development in Africa. In this regard, Owonibi describes African drama as “a body of works through which one can understand the twists and turns in African development” (98).

The trajectory of transformation in African drama is imperative given that dramatists who were hitherto preoccupied with projecting issues of imperialism, self-determination, nationalism and so on have dovetailed the issues in their dramatic texts with prevailing causes in Africa. Although drama in general and African drama in particular engages people to entertainment and excitement, African drama transcends this phenomenon, as it is usually deployed to serve purposeful communication to the people. Notably in this light, African drama emblematises African tradition and philosophy, which are predicated substantially upon orality and narrative impetus. The oral, storytelling tradition of the people depicts the ambience of the society and is potent as instrument of communicating to the people. This approximates to what Sekoni refers to as “the manipulation of narrative patterns for the purpose of communicating meaning and attaining aesthetic experience” (140). The attainment of aesthetic experience through purposeful communication in this regard propels salient characteristics of African drama. For

instance, the presence of oral narratives in the dramatic texts usually involving the narrator who conveys the story to the audience, the use of epics, myths, histories, legends and so on as subject matters of dramatic texts, the juxtaposition of English with indigenous languages of expression in the texts, through the use of code-mixing and the creation of allegorical characters who depict ideas, values or situations in the society all typify African drama. These invariably suggest that African drama has been *en route* to destination, and has been evolving from the oral trenches to the literary strengths and still waxing. In another development, the different expressive tendencies of African drama, such as African colonial drama, post-colonial drama, post-independence drama, protest drama, contemporary drama, civil war drama amongst others also connotes its voyage of transmutation. All these strands hinge on a common denominator of African drama, which in the words of Owonibi “is a potent means of recording African experiences in its numerous dimensions” (98).

The focus of this paper therefore is to examine the trajectory of transformation in African drama in terms of form and content, in order to ascertain the voyage of transmutation from colonial hegemony to contemporary issues. Through the method of content analysis, the paper analyses contents of three plays depicting a broad spectrum of African drama to accentuate the findings in this paper. The plays for examination in this regard are Ebrahim Hussein's *Kinjeketile* (1970), Ola Rotimi's *Ovonramwem Nogbaisi* (1974), and Femi Osofisan's *Morountodun* (1982). The selected plays, apart from



depicting a broad base of African drama, also reflect regional spread of West and East Africa where the portrayal of colonial hegemony and its attendant implications hold sway in dramatic texts.

The theoretical framework that guides the analysis of texts in this paper is Water Fisher's *Narrative Paradigm Theory*. It shows how all forms of communication come by way of narrative, and stories people tell to communicate, are perceived in accordance with the audiences' personal values (Iorngurum 42). The basis of the theory is hinged on what Fisher describes as "Narrative Rationality" (Warnick 2), which is divided into narrative probability and fidelity. The former is concerned with the question of whether the story is free of contradictions or not, and the latter deals with the quality of the story aligning with the logic of good reason. The theory takes into account the formation of narratives to communicate ideals, and other perceptions to the target audience whose reception of the stories is based on value judgment. The narratives could be based on history, folklore or contemporary politics; however, the purpose is for the audience to interpret the narratives of the narrator, through the logic of good reason. "There is particularity and causality in the segments of history which the narrator has chosen to tell. Because this is so, history can never be free from interpretation" (Etherton 148). It is in this light that this theory is apt in the analysis of contents of the selected plays to ascertain the voyage of transmutation in African drama.

## Colonial Hegemony and African Drama

One area of human endeavour apart from politics, which colonial hegemony has deeply influenced in Africa is literature, including dramatic literature. Given the conquests and subsequent occupations of the African continent by the European colonialists, the people became acculturated and indoctrinated into accepting perhaps all aspects of the imperialists' culture as standard of livelihood and co-existence. The schools, churches and concert parties for instance were the beehives of moulding European culture and tradition. Thus the sustained dominance in political culture, economy and military prowess by Europeans, which entrenched regimes of oppression, speaks to the notion of colonial hegemony. It is this hegemonic tradition that provoked African literature, which African drama is an integral part of. Notably however, "African literature had, of course, been produced outside the institutions of colonialism: the existence of oral literature in all African languages and pre-colonial writings in Arabic, Amharic, Swahili, and other African languages is ample evidence of a thriving literary tradition in pre-colonial Africa" (Gikandi 54). Many of African literary writings during and after colonialists' invasion of Africa tend to respond to colonial hegemony, which is also usually conceptualised as colonial history, heritage or legacy. This perhaps propels Gikandi's submission thus:

African literature was produced in the crucible of colonialism. What this means, among other things, is that the men and women who founded



the tradition of what we now call modern African writings, both in European and indigenous languages, were, without exception, products of the institutions that colonialism had introduced and developed in the continent, especially in the period beginning with the Berlin Conference of 1884-5 and decolonisation in the late 1950s and early 1960s (54).

This presupposes that African literature, and drama in particular, has been on a transformational voyage of identity and relevance. Stemming from the pre-colonial oral heritages, through the fierce terrains of colonial hegemony to the point of convergence, which is the hybridised form of drama with European and African traditional elements. Against this backdrop, Aguoru identifies three stages of the transmutation of African drama; the first stage (traditional drama and theatre), the second stage (foreign features and influences), and the third stage (modern drama and theatre) (10-21). Aguoru's first trajectory involves traditional dramas that were performed through rituals, ceremonies and festivals across Africa. Ogunbiyi (quoted in Aguoru 10) describes this phenomenon as, "the evolution of traditional African drama as an expression of the relations or state of connectedness between man, society and nature". This perhaps explains why African drama is usually perceived as a "form of drama characterised by orality, largely because of the folkloric tradition it sprouted from; a tradition which portrays dominant features found in performances in pre-colonial Africa" (Aguoru 10). The second trajectory entails the incursion of

western drama and theatrical forms into the fabrics of African drama. This was done initially through the introduction of foreign literary texts (such as plays) and their performances in African schools and European concerts traditions in churches and other social groups. Thirdly, in this regard is the birth of a new theatrical tradition with emphasis on performing arts and the literary drama/theatre which focuses on writing (Aguoru 21).

This third stage arguably provoked the fourth strand in the growth of African drama. That is the contemporary typology where there is a hybridity of western and indigenous African forms. A typical African dramatic text in this regard connotes a potpourri of several elements that transcend indigenous to foreign ones. In the light of this notion, Olaniyan opines that:

Africa is home to several traditions of theatre, conceived as an ensemble to culturally marked and consciously staged practices in space and time and before an audience. Many of these traditions are of ancient origin, while others emerged with formal European colonisation of the continent in the nineteenth century, and the subsequent imposition of western education, religion, and culture. The older traditions are mostly non-scripted, improvisatory, and performed in indigenous African languages (354).

This speaks to the juxtaposition of oral tradition; the ritualistic and performative tendencies, which characterised the African people with



Western conventions of form, style and language medium. It is this symbiosis that finds expression in most African dramatic texts. The motivation for this juxtaposition is not far-fetched. Most African literary writers who emerged at the time were bred through the colonial systems of education and politics, and could thereby use the weaponry of the colonial language and literary styles quite effectively. This is coupled with the “increasing tendency on the part of modern African writers to identify with the literary traditions of their people in terms both of content and of technique” (Okpewho 83). In other words, African literary writers in general and dramatists in particular reacted against issues in their societies that they found alien and inimical to the well-being of their people and society.

### **The Nature of Colonial Drama in Africa**

Colonial drama is an integral part of the literary tradition that reacted against colonial hegemony in Africa. That is the period of European hegemony's occupation of the continent of Africa for socio-economic, political and cultural gains as well as attendant denigration of the continent and its people. Yerima describes the experience of colonialism in Nigeria, one of the continent's most adversely affected regions as:

the process of occupation, rule and dominance of the original Nigerian inhabitants by the British government. The colonial process is known not to have taken place in Nigeria alone, but the whole of Africa. This led to the partition of Africa after the act of 1885 and the Brussels act of 1892 (31).

The body of dramatic texts produced during this period is tagged colonial drama. Notably, the perception of colonial drama in this regard tilts more significantly to the thematic and other intrinsic elements in the dramatic texts than the periods of their production. Most literary dramatic texts during this period try to assess the effects of European culture and politics on the African people. Some African dramatists of the time attempted to explicate African efforts and aspirations for freedom from the overbearing imperialists' tradition.

Notably, the crux of African drama is purposeful communication through reassertion of cultural and traditional values which embodies a mixed grill of education, propagation, protest and entertainment. A fundamental phenomenon that stems from this fact is the continuation of a protest against the doctrinal literary heritage that was introduced by the colonialists after the abolition of the slave trade, and the climax of it being the enactment of the Slave Trade Act of 1807. According to Gbilekea, “Colonialism and colonial literature thus completed the alienation that was started during the slave trade. Literature was particularly important to the colonialists because they viewed it as a necessary process of civilising and humanising Africans” (50). This presupposes that through the processes and tendencies of colonisation, Africans were exposed to European literature in schools, theatres or concerts parties. This accounts for why the first generation of playwrights in Africa such as Ene Henshaw, Wole Soyinka, Ola Rotimi, J.P. Clark, Joe De Craft, Efua Sutherland, Tawfiq al-Hakim, Ngugi wa Thiong'o, amongst others wrote with the



mindset of protest through the same means (colonial language and stylistic approaches), but the issues in their writings are targeted at conscientising Africans. Ker concludes in the light of this assertion that "African writing first asserted itself as protest literature" (20). This form of protest is the protest of identity; to reawaken the consciousness of the African people regarding their cultural heritages and traditions.

It was this wave of protest that found expression in the works of African literary writers during the emergence of the literary movement tagged *Negritude* in the 1930s, with great impact mostly in francophone West Africa. *Negritude* movement was a literary and ideological movement led by the francophone black intellectuals, writers and politicians. The movement reacted particularly to the French policy of assimilation which characterised among other things the European devaluation of African culture and tradition. The movement was founded by Aimes Césaire and championed in Africa by Leopold Senghor and David Diop, amongst others. It should be noted that the ideals of *negritude* movement found expression mostly in poetry, and was not popular in Anglophone West Africa. Soyinka, for example, dismissed the movement for been too simplistic. He believed that its practitioners deliberately and outspokenly took undue pride in their colour, because "A tiger does not proclaim its tigritude" (Kelani 293). However, the ideas of *Negritude* fall within the general purview of what characterised African literature in general and its thematic focus in the colonial period; that is, the need to return to the "Africanness" that has been disrupted by colonisation,

and assessment of nationalist struggles for independence or freedom. Notable playwrights whose works reflect these pertinent issues of reassertion and cultural propagation include Wole Soyinka (with *The Lion and the Jewel* {1966} and *A Dance of the Forest* {1963}), Tawfiq al-Hakim (with *Fate of a Cockroach* {1966}), Ngugi wa Thiong'o (with *The Black Hermit* {1968}), Ola Rotimi (with *Ovonramwen Nogbaisi* {1974} and *Our Husband has Gone mad Again* {1977}), Ebrahim Hussein (with *Kinjeketile* {1970}), Athol Fugard (with *Sizwe Bansi is Dead* {1972}), Ngugi wa Thiong'o and Meco Mugo (with *The Trials of Dadan Kimathi* {1976}) amongst many others.

### **The Nature of Contemporary African Drama**

Many scholars interchange the terms contemporary African drama and modern African drama when referring to the emergence and functionality of literary drama in Africa. The reason for this perhaps stems from the emergence of literary tradition that could be regarded as a typology of African drama. As Nwabueze states:

Written drama did not appear in the continent until 1944. A careful examination of the genesis of modern African drama will reveal that its evolution bear the same mode of birth with Adam, a being that had already attained adulthood at the time of his creation (22).

The major point of note from the submission above is that African drama had long existed in the realms of performative renditions and oral narratives that were deeply rooted in the milieu of the African society. The



literary typology of African drama therefore leveraged on the already established oral tradition to find expression as plays. It carries the requisite attributes of maturation at inception because of the roots from which it stemmed. This also suggests that the term modern African drama though indicates other connotations; it is widely used to designate the birth of literary drama in Africa by the African dramatists, distinct from pre-colonial oral and performative drama traditions. It is the post-independence or post-colonial literary tradition, and drama in particular that held sway after the departure of the white colonialists. Okunoye is emphatic about the focus of post-colonial drama. According to him, dramatic works that could be regarded as post-colonial are those that “dramatise the corrupting influence of the colonial engagement on the African; works that project a conscious resistance to the colonial presence by subverting imperialist distortions in the perception of Africa” (77). This submission equally projects post-colonial drama as works that are aimed at reasserting African values and jettisoning the colonialists’ cultural and political imprints.

It could be observed from the above arguments that there is a very thin line demarcating the terms; Modern African drama, post-colonial drama and Contemporary African drama, because each of the terms connotes post-independence drama that draws materials substantially from African oral traditions and colonial history to project emergent issues in Africa. In other words, the terms also emphasise thematic shift from colonial occupation, oppression, and struggle for freedom to the neo-colonial issues of leadership and its

attendant derivatives in post-independence Africa. This is perhaps why Coker emphasised that, “the post-colonial African condition can indeed be expanded beyond the colonial bracket. This opening-up will thus account for Africa’s neo-colonial experiences in both military and colonial garbs” (158). This presupposes that the body of literary drama could be tagged Modern African drama, or Post-colonial drama which focuses significantly on contemporary issues in the African polity, hence the reason for the interchange of the terms.

Notably, in terms of periodisation, the drama that is christened Post-colonial drama flourished during the post-political independent experience in most countries of Africa. It was the period whereby the responsibilities of political leadership shifted from white imperialists to Africans themselves. Kelani describes it as “the stage when literary artists engaged in socio-political criticism, which had invariably been answered with all forms of repression—banning, arrests and imprisonments of writers” (293). Many writers who began the art of writing during the colonial period grew more prolific. The literary works they produced which reflected the neo-colonial tendencies perpetrated by the emergent political leaders of that time put them in the eye of the storm with their fellow Africans who were saddled with the responsibilities of political leadership. Post-colonial drama therefore evinces the salient (notably contemporary) issues reflecting the plight of Africans in the aftermath of colonial rule, and the consequential “modus operandi” of the fellow African political leaders. In the light of this development, both the period of post-



colonial drama and its thematic preoccupations are in fusible tandem as exemplified in the body of dramatic texts produced.

The flurry of African drama in terms of play productions opened new vistas widely in the post-colonial literary period, where most prolific playwrights who emerged through the colonial process mastered their creative prowess during this period in the portrayal of neo-colonial fallouts such as dictatorship, corruption, nepotism and allied issues in the polity. Many of these plays reflect a trajectory of transmutation from colonial to post-colonial or contemporary issues, which represents a voyage of discovery. Many prolific playwrights in Africa exemplified this trajectory in their plays. For example Wole Soyinka's *The Lion and the Jewel* (1963), *A Dance of the Forest* (1963), *The Strong Breed* (1964), *Kongi's Harvest* (1967), amongst others reflect this tendency. J.P. Clark-Bekederemo's *The Masquerade* (1964), *Ozidi* (1966), *Song of a Goat* (1971) amongst others equally projects this notion. Ola Rotimi on his part wrote in the similar vein in *Kurunmi* (1971), *The Gods are not to Blame* (1971), *Ovonramwen Nogbaisi* (1974), and *Hopes of the Living Dead* (1980). Wale Ogunyemi too wrote in this light with *Ijaiye War* (1970), *Eshu Elegbara* (1972), *Kiriji* (1976), *The Divorce* (1977), *Queen Amina of Zazzau* (1999), amongst others. Femi Osofisan who represents the second generation of playwrights prolifically wrote in this realm in *Restless Run of Locusts* (1975), *The Chattering and the Song* (1976), *Once Upon Four Robbers* (1980), *Morountodun* (1982), amongst many others.

In other parts of Africa, we have Efua Sutherland with *Foriwa*

(1962), *Edufa* (1967), *The Marriage of Anansewa* (1975), *Voice in the Forest* (1983), amongst others. Joe de Graft with *Through a Film Darkly*, (1970), *Muntu* (1977) and *Sons and Daughters* (1979). Ama Ata Aidoo with *The Dilemma of a Ghost* (1964), *Anowa* (1970), *Our Sister Killjoy* (1977), and *Changes* (1991). Ngugi wa Thiong'o also wrote in this regard *The Black Hermit* (1967), *This Time Tomorrow* (1970), and co-authored *The Trial of Dedan Kimathi* (1976) and *I Will Marry when I Want* (1982), with Micere Mugo and Ngugi wa Miri, respectively. These plays, coupled with many from other regions of Africa form the body of drama that reflects the voyage of transmutation from colonial to contemporary issues. Our concern in this paper therefore is to examine the salient issues in African drama that reflect transformational voyage in search of identity and relevance. The scope here is limited to the analysis of drama texts from West and East Africa (Nigeria, Kenya and Tanzania) for the purposes of representation and clarity.

Contemporary African drama in the context of this paper refers to the literary drama written in the English language by African playwrights, whose issues are about the African society and its people. It is usually understood by one of its cardinal characteristics as a hybridised drama with both Western and African indigenous elements. Western elements speak to the language medium (which is substantially English), structural nuances of acts and scenes as well as proscenium-like staging conventions. African indigenous elements, on the other hand, refer to the ensemble structure of storytelling amidst songs, music, dance, chants, mime, and tenable



diction (usually code-mixing) of expression as well as performers-audience affinity propels by the staging conventions. Nwabueze aptly describes the nature of contemporary African drama with its attendant characteristics when he submits that:

When contemporary African drama was born, it came with all the paraphernalia of growth, all the major qualities of traditional drama-rituals, songs, dance, and other aspects of traditional life and living. It made use of oral narratives, took themes from African traditional life to create plays that are modern in form, content and technique. It made use of traditional material to explore the realities of the time (22).

This description underscores the notion of hybridity of western and indigenous African elements in typical African drama texts. The texts in this regard, having followed a trajectory of transformation from European structures of play-text to new styles and techniques of staging that tilt significantly to African traditional life. Afakponana and Binebai paint a pertinent picture of a typical play-text by describing dramatic texts as:

master symbols which narrate a sequence of events or incidents that are either read or performed. When read they are taken as literature but when performed they become theatre. But in the performance of dramatic texts, many arts of the theatre are synthesised. These arts may be dance, music, song,

incantations, costume, scenery, lighting, and properties (96).

It is imperative in the discourse of contemporary African drama to lend credence to the indigenous traditional oral performances like folktales, festivals, rituals, amongst others that have been much identical to the African people. These pre-colonial oral traditions have therefore found expression in modern African literary drama. In this light modern African drama is usually perceived as a juxtaposition of indigenous and European traditions which showcases unique blends. However, the dominant trends in African drama consist of colonial and post-colonial periods with their varying derivatives.

### **The Voyage of Transmutation in African Drama**

The tendency of drama projecting to posterity the salient issues in the society that produced it is an age long practice. The classical age of Sophocles, Aeschylus, Euripides and Aristophanes was defined by the nature of the dramas they wrote. Thus the ancient Greek tragedy and comedy typified the Greek society and its values. In contemporary African drama, colonial themes, stylistic elements and other intrinsic factors have gradually dovetailed with contemporary issues of the polity in Africa. This is reflective in the body of works that will be examined in this paper.

Plays in the category of colonial drama emphasise the colonial hegemony; menace of conquests, subjugation and subsequent struggle for freedom. Colonisation itself as a process was shrouded in history characterised by wars, conquests and occupations. In Africa, the historical



events involving the white colonialists find expression in African drama. As Etherton submits:

For the dramatist history not only provides stories; it also provides themes which are specific to the dramatist's world view such as the struggle for independence. History also provides a specific content; in terms of playwright's own society, which embodies those broad themes (149).

A number of events in Africa colonial history find expression in dramatic texts. Obvious examples include, "Ijaiye War" which Rotimi (in *Kurunmi*) and Ogunyemi (in *The Ijaiye War*) harnessed. "The Mau Mau War/uprising" that the Kenyans Ngugi and Mugo (in *The Trial of Dedan Kimathi*) explored and the "Maji Maji Uprising" in Tanganyika, which Tanzanian Hussein (in *Kinjeketile*) dramatised amongst several other examples. These examples from West (Nigeria) and East (Kenya and Tanzania) Africa focus on heroism of the leaders of the time who possessed brave dispositions. The reason for building dramatic stories on the exploits or conquests of kings-warriors is basically to achieve the reassertion of confidence in the past and embody a need to re-establish the historical validity of it (Etherton 148). When the colonialists came, in the words of Etherton they "first confirmed the greatness of the indigenous kingdoms, and then obscured them by conquering and denigrating their heroes, rejecting their values and belittling their institutions" (149).

Colonial history in this regard is portrayed in Ebrahim Hussein's

*Kinjeketile*, which is a play based on the Maji Maji Uprising in Tanganyika, the present day Tanzania. The action of the play progresses through a series of short scenes with narration and a final series of battles that are partially narrated and they came to a climax with the shooting of guns, including the sophisticated German guns to stage a blackout. The drama text is mainly concerned with the notion of reason and national liberation, and what the two things mean to the Tanzanian people. The playwright sees the way in which the two concepts can be factored into the Maji Maji Uprising, which the Tanzanian people are familiar with.

The significant aspect of the story is the dramatisation through history of the failure of rebellion against the colonial oppressors. The very thing that unites the Tanganyikan tribes and gave them effrontery to attack the German colonialists also causes their defeat and eventual deaths in large numbers. That is the "magic water" given to them by their god, Hugo to protect them against the German colonialist's bullets. Kinjeketile, the leader of the people is accorded the status of seer and prophet and has given his people faith in themselves by anointing them with "maji", the magic water. The new found confidence in "maji", the magic water now unites the people, and they no longer fight amongst themselves. Once the needed unity is achieved through the magic water, they could not be stopped from attacking the Germans. But the people's over reliance on the magic water failed to protect them against the German bullets. The play at first establishes the state of disunity, especially amongst the tribes and despair in the face of the German oppressors before the discovery of the



magic water. Kitunda, who is appointed by Kinjeketile to lead the army against the German colonialists, believes in rational approaches to the war but many citizens can hardly wait as evident in Mkichi's voice of frustration:

Mkichi: But it is better to die than live like this. We are made to work like beasts in the cotton plantation. We are forced to pay tax. We die of hunger because we cannot work on the shambas. I say death is better this life

Kitunda: It's better to live like this than to go to war and lose thousands of our men. And the few who will survive will get the same treatment, or worse, as before (Hussein 18).

It is this state of despair amongst the people meted by the German colonialists in Tanzania that Hussein dramatises in this play. The frustration and the hopeless disposition left the people begging for solutions and attacking one another. Kinjeketile, one of the tribesmen, decided to withdraw to himself and becomes deeply involved in prayers and rituals in his hut. He falls in a trance, apparently possessed by some forces that drag him to the river where he later emerges with a water pot containing the "maji" or magic water to the amazement of the waiting villagers. In a state of trance, Kinjeketile utters incantations to reveal the efficacy of the new found magic water thus:

Kinjeketile: He who partake of this water no harm will

befall him. No bullet will penetrate his body. These are the gifts given us by our ancestors and our spirits (Hussein 20).

This is the incidence that marks the turn of events in the play, and invariably defines the people's resolve to defend their land and liberate themselves from the shackles of colonial occupiers. The slogan for the war is established in the light of the new found magic water. "Maji! Maji!" which translates as "water" now in this context has come to mean "freedom". The development of the dramatic story shows Kitunda, the rational war lord now very eager to "pull the trigger", and Kinjeketile is reluctant to give the orders for the start of the war. The seeming reverse in their decisions is evident in Kitunda confronting Kinjeketile thus:

Kitunda: We have the water now, and we have the people, and what's more, we are united.

Kinjeketile: No, you are not ready to fight! What you mean is, you are confirmed in the belief that the water and the spirits will fight the war for you. Remove the water, and you will have a war-amongst yourselves, tribes against tribe (Hussein 21).

Historicity is used in this instance by the playwright to advance the themes of conquest, oppression, liberation and disunity. The German colonialists in this case made use of the porous nature of the Tanzanian society at the



time to conquer and rule them. The division amongst the various tribes was a major undoing of the people. Kinjeketile took advantage of that wanton disunity to create a seemingly new found unifier, the “maji” water. But it turned out that he himself doubted the whole idea and admitted that he spoke under the influence of the spirits while in a trance:

Kinjeketile: I’ve been cheated! They have killed me-no, I have killed myself! It was a dream, yes, I was dreaming! (Hussein 22)

This is coming from a realisation that the people absolutely believed in what he said and about the “maji” water providing safety for them and are not ready to back off from it. The unity of the people as a result of the magic water grew more than expected, and the people cannot accept anything else than the outright war to liberate the Tanzanian territory from the German colonialists. The people that hitherto only groaned under the oppression and fight themselves in frustration are now pressed for time to attack the Germans. Kinjeketile’s point is that he wanted the people to use war strategies and not rely on the powers of the magic water in fighting the Germans, which he expresses:

Kinjeketile: There is a war ahead of us and, by god, I don’t want people to die because of some silly beliefs and superstitions (Hussein 29).

But none of the war strategies earmarked to be used in attacking the Germans’ fort (camp) from four

strategic locations to overwhelm them was followed. The people wholly relied on the efficacy of the “maji” water as the magic wand that will eliminate the oppressors for them. Kitunda, the leader of the war generals only count loses:

Kitunda: We lost more than 1200 men from the second company. Those of us who survived stumbled about like raving lunatics, some screaming, Kinjeketile has betrayed us all! Others were struck into a stupor, and did nothing. Most of us felt it was no use fighting any more. We fell into a hopeless despair (Hussein 30).

In the end, Kinjeketile is arrested and is being tortured into a colonial German prison in the fort to confess that the magic water he gave to the people was a lie. He refused to admit that it was a lie because first of all the colonialists will tell their children that to fight for one’s country is wrong. Secondly, Kinjeketile belied that the proclamation of the magic water has facilitated the needed unity amongst the people, which is the vital ingredient for liberation. Therefore, the use of colonial history in *Kinjeketile* (1970) is a statement of the state of affairs in African drama, which is on a voyage of shift to other emerging issues in the polity.

In Rotimi’s *Ovonramwen Nogbaisi*, colonial history is equally dramatised as a reflection of the hegemonic influence by the white imperialists. The background to the



play indicates that the play is set in 19<sup>th</sup> century Benin, the present day Edo State of Nigeria. The period the British colonialists were consolidating their hold on their protectorates south of the River Niger, and treaties were signed to foster legitimate trade with the indigenes of these areas. The play dramatises the tale of king Ovonramwem who on ascending the throne of Benin avenges the death of one of his loyalists. The play spotlights the happenings that resulted in the 1897 massacre which led to the killing of some British colonialists, as a result of their insistence to visit Benin during the Ague Festival even though strangers were forbidden to see the Oba and the abrogation of Benin middlemen from enjoying their direct access to the inland trade. In the end, both Oba Ovonramwem and the Benin kingdom fall to the superior powers of the white colonialists.

Colonial history is indicative here through the depiction of Oba Ovonramwen's braveness to defend the Benin kingdom and the people. As Etherton remarks, "Rotimi sets out to challenge the colonial biases of history" (171). Colonial legacy in this regard embodies the themes and allied motifs of oppression, struggle, pride, power, authority and betrayal amongst others. Oba Ovonramwem now fears for his kingdom and the people as the loss of their kingdom to the white colonialists is inevitable. He calls for caution even as he is poised to defend their land thus:

Oba Ovonramwem: Caution is our word, my people. Let the Whiteman rudely prod us

further, in spite of caution, then he will know that the way a cat walks is

not the way it catches the rat (Rotimi 5).

This word of caution does not go down well with Ologbosere, a senior war lord because he is boiling with burning desires to fight and defend their land against the white imperialists. He expresses his true desires during the meeting after the Oba addresses them in council thus:

Ologbosere:

Now a foreign enemy threatens the whole empire, and the Oba says to us

Defenders of the land: 'caution'! You think he truly expects obedience?

(Rotimi 6)

But the fear Oba Ovonramwem expresses is becoming obvious and widespread. He could not hide the magnitude of threats posed by the white imperialists. Oba again sounds a note of warning and anxiety thus:

Oba Ovonramwem: Children of our fathers, Benin I fear, has this day swallowed a long

pestle; now we shall have to sleep standing upright (Rotimi 7).

The fear Oba expresses is re-echoed by some of his foot soldiers, especially Iyase, who doubles as the Commander-in-Chief of the armed forces and Prime Minister of the Benin kingdom. He



obeys Oba's commands, but also expresses his dilemma during the council's meeting thus:

Iyase: Your Majesty, our teeth have touched a bone. Which end must we crack? To break custom and anger the gods of our fathers, or to break the Whiteman's pride with resistance to his coming, and thereby rouse his wrath? Your Majesty, our teeth have touched a bone (Rotimi 10).

In the end, the imperialists succeed by conquering Benin kingdom and its people. Oba Ovonramwem is betrayed by Chief Ezomo and Iyase, the two most senior war lords who reveal the Oba's whereabouts when acting as mediators between the colonialists and Oba Ovonramwem:

Chief Ezomo: (*Urgently kneels before Ovonramwem*) Pray, my lord, do nothing to provoke him again!

Iyase: Forget self! Forget status! Let power die so that Benin may live! Do as he commands...for Benin... for Benin...( Rotimi 13).

The play therefore, projects colonial hegemony and consequently communicates themes of conquest, struggle, resistance, power and authority. The forces of imperialism have succeeded in breaking the authority of the traditional institutions and rendered them subservient to the European ways of life. This is a glaring instance of the dramatisation of colonial hegemony to communicate attendant issues in the African polity.

## Folkloric Ethos and Contemporary African Drama

One of the fundamental developments that represent a transformational voyage from colonial to contemporary issues in African drama is the use of folkloric ethos, such the people's myths, legends, superstitions, and festivals amongst others to concretise dramatic stories. African playwrights, propelled by their research endeavours in this regard find it expedient to project their society's folkloric tendencies in play-texts as stylistic techniques of communicating contemporary themes. There are worthy examples of this phenomenon, especially in the works of the successive generations of playwrights in Africa. Examples such as the "Ozidi Saga" in Clark's *Ozidi* (1966), "Insects myth" in Al-Hakim's *Fate of a Cockroach* (1966), "Anansesem Folktale" in Sutherland's *The Marriage of Anansewa* (1975), "Swem myth" in Hagher's *Swem Karagbe* (1979), and the "Moremi myth" in Osofisan's *Morountodun* (1982) are easily reminiscent. These folkloric ethos are usually dramatised in these plays as subject matters, and crystallised for narrativity with the use of the narrator who typifies African storytelling idioms in a quest to communicate contemporary themes to the people.

In Osofisan's *Morountodun* for example, the peasants' revolt, known historically as the Agbekoya Uprising and the Moremi Myth are coalesced as subject matter in the play. The playwright deploys flashbacks to juxtapose recent history with ancient historical myth to form the dramatic story. The "play within a play" dramatic principle makes it expedient for Titubi and her group to disrupt the theatre performance meant to show the audience the imperatives of the



events associated with the uprising as it is being dramatised. Titubi and her people represent the rich who are unwilling to allow the people get orientated about their plight, hence the reason to disrupt the performance before the people become informed by it.

The Director, who is the narrator of the story, finds it difficult to persuade the Deputy Superintendent that he is the one that earlier called for his intervention. After much argument between Titubi and the Deputy Superintendent, and upon discovery that it is actually Titubi who comes to arrogantly disrupt the performance, the Deputy Superintendent offers to arrest her for breach of public peace. This leads to Titubi having to reach a compromise with the Deputy Superintendent on the alternative way of stopping the peasants' revolt. She volunteers to serve as police informant in order to defeat the peasants and protect her class. She is now required to disguise as a prisoner so that when the peasants, led by Marshal, invade the prison house she will be rescued as one of the prisoners, and eventually find her way to the camp of the peasant's militants and infiltrate them in order to defeat them. But at the turn of events, she undergoes radical transformation and is able to discover that the prisoners are fighting a just cause against the government and the elite, of whom she is an integral part.

The play invokes this myth to bear on the historical event of post-independence Nigeria. The Moremi myth, being a folkloric tradition, is deeply rooted in Yoruba folklore and history, from which a lot of inspirations are drawn; the playwright weaved it neatly into the plot of the play with a stylistic disposition. Titubi, the

protagonist in the story emblematises Moremi in order to play her crucial role of a catalyst in the farmers-government impasse as revealed in this dialogue between Titubi and Alhaja Kabirat, her mother:

Alhaja: And you think you can do it, Titu?

Titubi: I will do it, mama. One woman did it before.

Alhaja: A woman?

Titubi: Moremi. Have you forgotten? (Osofisan 25).

Titubi's leadership role in this instance though is born out of selfishness to defend her class and its affluence; she has to take inspirations and courage from Moremi, the ancient legend of Ile-Ife. This further defines her disposition as a woman and the need to take action in the face of crisis, which is a pertinent leadership quality. It is also imperative to state that 'Moremi' is both a myth and legend that propels inspirations for exploits, especially in Yoruba traditional society. The playwright invokes this myth in the dramatic story to recall the legendary status of Moremi and also draw some parallels between her and Titubi, the protagonist in the story.

*(The scene is several decades ago, nearer the dawn of the Yoruba civilisation at Ile-Ife. The Manner of dressing and make-up suggests this historical context. A voice calls from off-stage)*

Voice: Moremi! Moremi! Are you not afraid?

Moremi: Niniola!

Niniola: I asked, are you not afraid?

Moremi: Well...up till this moment, I never thought of it. Fear



was...a faraway land  
(Osofisan 31).

This dialogue reveals how the playwright deploys the Moremi myth to bear on the dramatic story by making the protagonist take the character of Moremi to replicate her heroism. This invariably projects not just leadership where braveness and capability to take on a course for preconceived intents, but also gender imperatives and transformation as ingredients of societal development. The director, who is the narrator in the play, captures the notion of the woman's braveness in the midst of crisis thus:

Director: There she goes then, my friends, bravely walking into danger. Stepping carelessly into the unknown. Ah, women! My friends, the world is strange and women reign over it. Let us salute their courage (Osofisan 40).

Titubi as a woman is brave enough to lead a revolution that eventually turned out to broker peace between the peasants and the government of the day. She took inspiration and courage from the exploits of Moremi, the historical legend as indicated in the dramatic story.

Side by side with this inspiration is the notion of transformation exhibited by Titubi. Having volunteered to go on the espionage mission to the peasants' camp in an attempt to defend her class in order to make a bold step about her leadership qualities, she eventually discovers that the peasants' revolt against government and the elite has a just cause. This informs her attitudinal change in this regard. Titubi's transformation from an arrogant breed

of the upper class to a sympathizer of the poor peasants depicts a paradigm shift of the oppressors joining the camp of the oppressed. It also represents the breaking of gender barriers in matters of leadership and decision making in the society. Titubi now disassociates herself from the ruling class she initially sets out to defend and uphold. She declares in this light that:

Titubi: I am not Moremi! Moremi served the State, was the State, was the spirit of the ruling class. But it is not true that the State is always right...(Osofisan 70).

This confession stems from the transformation Titubi underwent in the peasants' camp. And it draws a parallel between Moremi of Ile-Ife and Titubi, the modern Moremi. She now identifies with the plight of the ordinary people against her elitist background. The theme of purposeful leadership in this instance is a reflection of the Nigerian polity, where government policies meted by the ruling elite against the masses are severely agonising but regrettably, they cannot empathise because of the huge gulf of affluence demarcating them from the rest of the masses. It takes an individual or a set of individuals who are brave and perhaps patriotic to stoop low to the penury level of the rest of the masses to understand their plight. This is needed direly in Nigeria now more than ever before.

This speaks to the pedagogic nature of African drama usually deployed as instrument of social orientation and education. The narrator at the end of the story



accentuates that, "In the end, peace came, but from the negotiating table, after each side had burned itself out. The *real* struggle, the real truth, is out there, among you, on the street, in your homes; in your daily living and dying..." (Osofisan 79). The use of historical myth of Moremi, which is integral to the people's culture and tradition, propels the communication of the themes of leadership and selfless sacrifice. It also concretises the notion of African drama transmuting from colonial hegemony to contemporary paradigms, such as the leadership question, place of women in governance, meaningful dialogue and attitudinal change as yardstick for peace and tranquility in the society. Moreover, the audience should serve as judges, who must not empathise but critically evaluate folkloric tradition as dramatised to deduce truth and meaning in them.

### Conclusion

African drama has transmuted over time to take new paradigms aimed at purposeful communication to the people. The nature of drama presupposes that it is dynamic in reflecting the issues inherent in the society. In this light, African drama in its uniqueness is perceived as the didactic commentary of the African society and its people. This underscores the trajectory of transmutation, regarding especially issues of colonial hegemony that have perverted many other societies in the past, to new dynamics of harnessing indigenous folkloric ethos to address contemporary issues of the polity. It is reflective in the analysis of the selected plays that, colonial hegemony left indelible prints on the African people,

thereby propelling playwrights to explore issues arising from those hegemonic tendencies as themes and stylistic approaches. Subsequently, the need for contemporaneity ranging from clamour for good governance to gender responsibilities have since taken precedence over colonial issues, which is a fact about African drama being on a voyage of transmutation. Notably, the contents of the body of numerous African plays studied, particularly the three plays evince these tendencies of transmutation, not only in the attendant contemporary themes, but also in stylistic nuances in the plays, which reflect a paradigm shift in this regard.

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