

# The Existentiality of African Ritual Dramas and “The Myth of Essence” in a Contemporary Discourse

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## Abstract

African dramatists, after “slavish imitation of European models”, are said to begin to re-direct their interest and attention to using “indigenous performance traditions as sources and basis for their dramatic creation” (Okagbue, 2007: 11). But beyond a seeming rejection of Eurocentrism in Okagbue’s claim, there is a need to deconstruct and reconstruct the introduction of ritual performance into African literary drama. This need arises for certain reasons: the attempt to understand the extent to which ritual functions and represents the essence of life of a people as against being an existential reflection of fear and apprehension which may promote self-interest or personal agenda of survival; the need to understand the relationship between what Soyinka identifies as “the myth of essence” and “fictive myth” and to also appreciate their implications for contemporary consciousness; to analyse how ritual myths function as the bank of primordial (archetypal images) consciousness of fear we are confronted with in the dramas. Could it be that African dramatists believe in the primacy of such rituals and archetypal images or is it just to reject the so-called Eurocentric views of drama by creating an authentic African drama? Could it be that they are in search of an African identity, and what is the nature of such identity? In essence, what is the place of ritual drama or “the myth of essence” in a contemporary discourse? The issues above are discussed in this paper within the framework of the theories of existential consciousness and deconstruction.

## Introduction

... there is evidence in literary theatre that after the initial phase of a slavish imitation of European models, more and more African dramatists are beginning to mime their respective

indigenous performance traditions as sources and basis for their dramatic creation. The literary theatre is borrowing more and more from the oral tradition as is clear from many African plays (Okagbue, 2007: 11).

The quotation above underscores the fact that African dramatists, at a point in their creative enterprise, returned [and are still returning] to using traditional and cultural materials in their writings. Different reasons might have motivated this returning to “mime[ing] of their respective indigenous performance traditions as sources for their dramatic creation”. It may be as a result of the rejection of the Eurocentric view of no drama or elements of drama in Africa; it may also be as a result of the search for and the projection of the authentic African form of Dramatic aesthetics. In essence, it may be concerned with the totality of the debates underscored by the concerns of the evolutionist and the relativist schools of thought on what is African drama (see the list of those who belong to each school in Okagbue, 2007, pp. 4-5). There may be different intentionalities. However, in this paper, my interest is specifically to look at what I have termed the existentiality of African ritual dramas and the myth of essence. I want to see if the rituals are seen as mere dramatic motifs or as representing the pathway to the future; I want to understand the extent to which these rituals represent the essence of the African consciousness in a contemporary world and how they shape and help to negotiate not just academic discourses but even social discourses. Finally, I want to see if truly the rituals are a representation of collective African consciousness or a representation of the interests of the privileged individuals who have always subtly found a way of imposing their interests on others in the name of culture, tradition and religion.

### Rituals as an Existential Phenomenon

What is existentiality of African ritual drama? First, there is perhaps characteristically nothing peculiarly African in the return to and presenta-

tion of ritual elements in drama or performances – the attempt to retrace one’s steps back to seek meaning and purpose in one’s “root”. This attempt appears as a worldwide quest that has resurfaced in the study of the universal archetypal patterns – a phenomenon that propels man to the eternal search for the source of his being and essence. It seems that interest in rituals is one of such quests. For instance, the motivation for rituals is a universal interest that is essentially existential. According to Oscar (1995, p.4) “most rituals are related to one of three basic concerns of man; pleasure . . . power . . . or duty” and these are universal concerns. Rituals are said to have developed from man’s attempt to find solution to his challenges and problems and to control circumstances around the identified three basic concerns of his existence (Oscar, 1995, pp. 4-8).

Beliefs in and the celebration of rituals are linked to what Taylor identifies as animism, an essential primitive mode of apprehension ((Americana, 2003, p. 888; Awolalu et.al, 1979, p. 22). Taylor further claims that animism was the core of all religion and that, no primitive or crude society had not been found which did not exhibit such a belief in spirit (Americana, 2003: 888; Awolalu *et al*/1979: 22). It is clear that the celebrations of rituals are tied to religious beliefs and there is no society of the world where religion is not practised. A ready example of this is the origin of Western dramatic tradition that is linked directly to the Greeks’ Dionysian festival.

It is in the celebration of these rituals yearly that they become formalised into fixed ceremonies in forms of cultural and traditional ceremonies and myths or stories grow around them (Oscar, 1995: 2). Of course, these myths

eventually become the bedrocks of every religious belief and are pervasive in form of ideologies. We can attest to the fact that a lot of races are today bound to such myths that are presumed to represent their "peculiar" existential experience. This is what will now lead me to that which is presumed to represent the myth of essence according to Soyinka (1988: 22).

### **The Myth of the "Myth of Essence"**

First, we may again need to take a quick look at myths. Myths are defined as stories told as symbols of fundamental truths within societies having strong oral tradition and are usually concerned with extraordinary beings and events (*Americana*, 2003, p. 699). They are also seen as sacred narratives in the sense that they hold religious or spiritual significance for those who tell them, and contribute to and express systems of thought and values (Myth, 2008. Retrieved from <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Myth>). It is argued that myth "achieves comprehensiveness and ultimacy because it refers its society back to primordial reality, which is not merely prior in time but is a qualitatively different time, place and mode of being" (*Americana*, 2003, p. 699). The belief is that "the primordial time is the reservoir and repository of the models on which all the significant knowledge, expressions, and activities of the present society are based" (*Americana*, 2003, p. 699). For Evrubetine, agreeing with the thought expressed above, asserts that myth is actually the source of every retrievable human knowledge including the totality of western philosophy (2006: 2-3). If myth is truly the reservoir of all knowledge, then Soyinka's claim of the existence of the "myth of essence" may be valid. However, it

appears that Soyinka is reacting to Nietzsche's claim that myth developed in and on the principle of illusion (Nietzsche, 2000: 322; Soyinka, 1988: 22). For Soyinka, myth, particularly the tragic myth, is the soul essence of his people (1988: 22). He also claims that for the Yoruba, rituals and sacrifices did not develop around myth or as myth; they are the essence of his totality – his access to interact and bridge the gulf within him; of his understanding of time and space.

Of course, this view of myth negates Frye's view of myth in relation to ritual. Frye sees myth as "the deliberate expression of a will to synchronise the human and natural energies . . . into a form of . . . a temporal sequence of acts in which the conscious meaning or significance is latent . . ." (2000: 482). Myth, whether of essence or fictive, (Soyinka, 1988, p. 22) is therefore a narrative and so, a bricolage, and as a result the product of a myth maker or a storyteller. One can borrow one last view from Frye in relation to myth: "All literary genres are derived from . . . myth" (2000: 484). What is more to add to this is simply that since myth is literary, it encapsulates social conflicts and social conflicts could be seen as representing the consciousness of survival (Ojoniyi, 2012: 51).

Existentially, the consciousness of survival is primarily individual's. It only becomes collective when collectivism guarantees individual's interest. According to Wallace, the relationship between individual's will and the collective will is known as culture and tradition; the combination of which accounts for individual's personality (1970: 6). It is this radical understanding of culture that constitutes a great challenge one has with the validity of whatever is understood as the myth of essence, and this is what I will now proceed

to deal with in some selected ritual plays.

### Ritual Plays in the “Myth of Essence”

In *Dry Leaves on Ukan Trees*, Yerima takes us through the riddles of the superficial mode of apprehension of a people whose lives and essences are built around the excessive consciousness of rituals and the demands of the gods. In the play, the shrine of Olokun has been desecrated by a chief who cuts down Olokun’s Ukan trees with the royal cutlass. Olokun demands the death of the perpetrator and that of the King. However, there is one way to save the life of the King. His forebear, Ulolo must accept to die for him! Because Ulolo is his forebear, he is destined to die for him or with him. Since, Ulolo has internalised the narratives around his destiny, he agrees to fulfil his destiny! However, there is a last minute twist as Odion frees Ulolo and takes his place in the ritual death.

The play’s dramatic conflict moves from one level of crisis of consciousness of the characters to another. It vividly exemplifies the reality of binary opposition, privileging, and the elimination of signs for signs to underscore the challenges of choice making in the face of existential options as confronted by the characters. Right from the beginning of the play, through the songs of the Chorus, it is established that the intention to ward-off evil and ill-luck is the motivation for the sacrifices to Olokun. Part of the song goes thus:

The gentle breezes,  
Bring forth their strength,  
And sweep these ill-luck and bad tides to the ocean.  
My guardian spirit guide me through,  
Don’t let me fall on the path of the bad tides.  
Leave me to witness the goodness of these

times...

Evil /ill-luck

pave way

so that those innocent

travellers can walk free

unhindered.

Ill-luck pave way for all of us (Yerima, 2001: 9-11).

The consciousness of fear and death has taken root in the mind of the people after successive deaths of their kings. This consciousness informs the idea of the presence of a “Strong one (the one with ill-luck)” in their midst as they invoke “the spirits of our father not to fail us” (Yerima, 2001: 11) in order to confront the existential crisis of life like the presence of a “Strong one”. It, therefore, appears that every apprehension leading to an existential action or inaction is a product of certain consciousness. For instance, the apprehension of duty which seemingly forces Ulolo to abandon his wife on the first night of their wedding to attend to his master, the King, is a consequence of his consciousness as the forebear of the King. To be a forebear of the King comes with the intention to die with or for the King as the need arises or as the occasion demands. Ulolo responds to Okeke who is trying to plant a new seeming revolutionary consciousness of self in him like this:

Okeke: Then control your heartbeat. The shoulder . . . friend, the shoulder . . . that is the best place to put another man’s load.

Ulolo: And my duty?

Okeke: What duty do you owe a master than to serve him with all your heart? That you do too well. And what about you? . . . I ask you, what about you?

Ulolo: Me? . . . I shall leave tomorrow, my Onogie needs me tonight. When you see

Idahaota my dainty wife, tell her to hold herself, the Onogie demands it of her.

Okeke: The Onogie demands too much, but, like you said, the Onogie is a god, not a man. He does not eat nor drink, he is second to Osanobua (Yerima, 2001: 14).

Of course, there is no doubt that the consciousness of Okeke detests the image of Onogie as a god. He appears to know better than Ulolo that, the Onogie eats and drinks and is therefore not a god. The image of the Onogie as a god in the consciousness of Ulolo is a product of privileging that is already internalised arbitrarily and historically. It is this consciousness of his duty and the deification of Onogie that ultimately leads him to accept to take the place of Onogie in death when Olokun demands a life to spare the life of Onogie. Though, he realises that Onogie has problems and crisis, Onogie is a god. Perhaps, Onogie is a troubled god who needs to be attended to by the mortal Ulolo. It then appears that Ulolo is a product of a systemic historical conditioning. He has been programmed to accept his destiny as the King's forebear.

After Ulolo has decided to die for Onogie, Okeke returns to probe his decision as a superficial action:

Okeke: If your thoughts were this deep, you would not have done what I heard. Why Ulolo?

Ulolo: It is my task.

Okeke: What task has a slave?

Ulolo: To serve his master...

Okeke: Show me where it is said, show where it is written, that you cannot have a life of your own. Show me (Yerima, 2001: 55).

But, Ulolo's action is no doubt reflective. It is a reflective action based on his apprehension of his purpose in life. His

apprehension of his purpose is culturally and historically conditioned. Like Soyinka's Emman in *The Strong Breed* and Olunde in *Death and the King's Horseman*, he has come to embrace his destiny as a necessity. He has been born, so he believes, to either die with the King or for the King. However, beneath this consciousness of duty to the King is the desire to be a free man and therefore live. He laments:

Ulolo: The tender mercies of my life grant me peace. The night heat melt my soul and fear grips me. Yet, in an ordained cursed trap walk I slowly to the edge of the protruding spear. To turn back I cannot. And to dodge it I cannot. To run will make me face the drums of shame. For I have put at peace my Onogie's heart. A debt once entwined, must now become mine alone . . . (Yerima, 2001: 58).

Ulolo is torn between two intentionalities; to die for the King based on the apprehension of the call of duty: or to live a free life with his wife. However, the demand of culture as a historical text in his consciousness has assumed a transcendental or prima status. The demand of the culture represents the good, the noble, the dignified and the responsible, while the desire to live a free life represents the bad, the ignoble, the shameful and the irresponsible. Of course, the representative sign of the ignoble action is simply eliminated in his consciousness by the representative sign of the noble which is to die for the King.

The issue arising from the realisation of the basis to die for the King is the existential claim of the freedom of choice in relation to each character. The question here is how free is Ulolo's choice of action to die for the King? His choice of action should be considered in the light of a "lifeworld", the interrelationship

between Sartre's being-for-itself, being-in-itself and being-for-others (McCulloch, 1994, p. 4). So, every human action is not isolated from the reality of his or her relationship with other "homecorades". No character's action is actually free. The issue of a character's freedom of action is relative. Every character's choice of action, as we have seen, is a crisis of sort in the mind of the character and it is conditioned. Ulolo laments at a point that:

. . . And all I am permitted to have is one son, who must join me in the dance of death. And even more sadly, I must go unfulfilled (Yerima, 2001: 68).

Although, he has this crisis in his consciousness, yet he has accepted his "destiny" and that of the only child he is permitted to have. So, the intentionality to die is a crisis in his consciousness. The crisis is resolved through binary opposition and elimination based on his interpretation of the texts and the appropriations of such interpretations. As we have noted, each interpretation and the appropriation of the interpretation in choosing, in the word of Martin Heidegger, "an authentic life" (action) (Unah, 1996, p. 7) or otherwise is a product of a character's level of reflection. The reflection may be superficial or deep. Here, Ulolo's intentionality is superficial and at the ethical level. He tries hard to hang his choice of action on what he sees as his responsibility or duty to the King. This is the reason, unlike Emman and Olunde, he does not embrace his choice of action with the spiritual hope and its attending eternal fulfilment.

He shelves this mode of apprehension, realising that there is actually a part of him that craves life. He takes to the advice of Odion who arranges his escape with his wife. Before he finally lives, Odion chastises him as carrying

his slavery in his heart:

Odion: Nothing! That was why we all laughed. Only you carried your slavery in your heart. So go and live, if you can. Go to where the sea breeze takes you. Go son. Go. Take my wrapper, tie it (Yerima, 2001: 70).

We can appreciate carrying slavery in one's mind, which can only manifest in the physical, as reflecting the state of the crisis of a conditioned character. The challenge is actually to transcend or break loose from the conditioned or the programmed mind-set. There is actually hardly any character that is not conditioned by one phenomenon or the other.

If we return to Onogie as a character, we can also appreciate the root of his problems as rooted in his consciousness. The Onogie's crisis, we realised, is caused by two primary reasons. The first is his inability to marry the lady after his heart as his mother and Iyase arranges a lady for him as his Queen:

Onogie: . . . the queen causes more harm to my thoughts than good. She is huge, she will suffocate me. To date I still wonder who I offend to deserve such an affliction as her presence. Oh they wound me Ulolo. The queen's voice rattles and deadens my bodily desires all over. Anyway, she was my mother's choice . . . My mother and Iyase quickly arranged Oliha's daughter for me just because they thought I needed a queen. Sadly, no one asked me, if I had a heart (Yerima, 2001: 17-18).

Onogie's inability to accept the queen as his wife leads to his inability to sleep. He is always having nightmares leading to his shouting in his sleep. He sees himself being pursued in his sleep. Of course, the image of a huge suffocating queen whose voice is

deadening as internalised by the King is capable of taking hold of his consciousness. As cited in his words above, if the queen causes more harm to his thought, then, he is definitely predisposed to hallucination, insomnia and crisis of consciousness.

Immediately a seeming solution is found to the problem above in the plan with Ulolo to get a second wife, a lady after the King's heart, the King sleeps without any problem or inhibition:

Onogie: . . . Haa Ulolo, I thank you . . . Come Ulolo I must sleep, now that I have a beautiful reason to wake up tomorrow. In fact the night takes too long (Yerima, 2001: 20).

Onogie can sleep now that the sign of evil, the huge suffocating queen, has been eliminated through binary opposition and privileging by the sign of good, an "elegant, full of life-Her nipples, long, black and ready" young lady (Yerima, 2001: 18). The crisis is resolved temporarily with the intention to marry a new wife. This intention clearly presents Onogie as an egoistic character, a mere reveller operating at the lower level of superficial apprehension.

The second crisis is also traceable to the fear of the presence of the one with ill-luck who is believed to be responsible for the untimely successive death of former Onogies. The internalisation of this fear and its attendant dread also produces hallucination and nightmares. The intention arising from this is the decision to consult his trusted chiefs, Iyase and Esongban (Yerima, 2001: 20). However, as things turn out, one of his trusted chiefs, Esongban, is revealed as the source of his problem who wants him dead untimely. Esongban has cut the Ukan trees at the shrine of Olokun with the royal cutlass with the mind

to cause the death of Onogie (Yerima, 2001: 42-5). His reasons are that his friend, the former Onogie, impregnated his wife and that the son of his sister Idehen is not allowed to become the king.

Esongban: . . . when the present Onogie's father our last king was a prince and was asked to live with me, he loved my wife Izaka. The present Onogie was a product of that unlawful alliance . . . So I did it. I could not swallow Izaka's hold on my life and that of my family. I knew that if I cut the Ukan trees, and defiled the Onogie's personal shrine, his life would be cut short. I also knew that since he had no child, my sister's son Idehen would be made king . . .

Ogie-obo: I was surprised when the gods revealed it to me. The Onogie calls you father. He has moved your seat up the rank of chiefs. You are his trusted adviser . . . (Yerima, 2001: 43-4).

The actual issue here is that the action of the former king and Izaka on which the plan to kill Onogie is established has definitely been nurtured over twenty years. Esongban has been a chief through the reign of the former king and he has definitely been nursing the idea to revenge the "unlawful" act of the former king. The desire for this revenge has gone through different levels of crisis of consciousness in binary opposition, difference, marking and privileging, before the intentionality to eliminate Onogie is finally reached. Of course, as it is, Onogie, his mother Izaka, and the former king constitute the signs of evil to be eliminated so that Idehen, the son of Omoze, Esongban's sister, the signs of good, can be allowed to reign in peace. Esongban, as a character, operates at the superficial level of apprehension as a mere egoistic character. His embrace of death is not by choice. He pleads

with Ogie-obo when he realises the demand of Olokun for what he has done:

Esongban:...But tell me father, can something be done? Can you change the deadly shroud for the sweet linen of silk? Can my sponge of death change to the soft cotton wool of life?

Ogie-obo: No . . . No. If I do, your death will be on my head . . . (Yerima, 2001: 44-5).

One of the challenges of consciousness here is that the characters are not always ready to accept the consequences of their actions and inactions. It appears the crisis in taking an action or in not taking one is actually in the possible outcome or result of such action or inaction. It is the reflective consciousness of the possible outcome of an action or inaction that constitutes what Kierkegaard (*Encyclopedia Americana*, 1979: 762) has earlier identified as “the dizziness of choice making”. But since the characters are under obligation to make choices, none of them is, therefore, immune to this crisis of choice making which is also the crisis of consciousness.

Now, if we again return to Onogie as a reveller, an egoistic character, we can see a character who readily accepts to sacrifice another man, a man who has just gotten married, so that he might live. The life of the other man is not important to him. Death is evil, particularly Onogie’s death. But, death is also good if it is to make him live. Here, death has a dual essence and purpose; death is both evil and good. When the demand is for Onogie’s life, he mourns, when Ulolo offers to die as a required substitute for his death, he rejoices. We can then compare Onogie with Odion who eventually decides to take the place of Ulolo. The action of Odion is unlike the decision of Ulolo which is hinged on a seeming ethical

demand of duty. Odion’s action is based on the mind-set of self-sacrifice. We must understand the difference between a need for ritual sacrifice in the name of a god and self-sacrificial action by an individual or a character.

We know that Emman in Wole Soyinka’s *The Strong Breed* eventually submits himself as a carrier not entirely because he wants to be a carrier to save the community, but ultimately to save Ifada who is unwilling to act as the carrier. His reflective action is mainly a sacrificial action to liberate Ifada. Odion has not come to die so that Onogie may live in peace to enjoy his reign; he has come to take the place of a man who still craves life and has just been married to a lady who happens to be Odion’s grand-daughter. His action is a self-sacrificial action for the joy of his innocent grand-daughter and the vow he made long ago (Yerima, 2001, pp. 59-70). Odion operates at the spiritual level of self-apprehension. He lives a selfless life as a true spiritual character like Olunde and Emman in *Death and the King’s Horseman* and *The Strong Breed* respectively. However, this does not negate the fact that they are existentially conditioned beings who could not rise above the roles created for them by the myth of essence.

However, in *The Strong Breed*, a human life is wasted because the ritual eventually failed. At the height of the ritual when all the villagers are expected to place their burdens and curses on Emman the sacrifice, they, could not. This is evident in the conversation between Jaguna and Oroge:

Jaguna: . . . it is a sorry world to live in. We did it for them. It was all for their own common good. What did it benefit me whether the man live or died. But did you see them? One and all they looked up at

the man and words died in their throats.  
Oroge: It was no common sight.  
Jaguna: Women could not have behaved so shamefully. One by one, they crept off like sick dogs. No one could raise a curse.  
Oroge: It was not only him they fled. Do you see how unattended we are? (Soyinka, 1969: 119).

Any ritual from where the people fled, the priest has definitely failed. The issue of Emman's destiny as a carrier is an historical error that has been created by the myth makers to shift the burden of their fears. We must retrieve ourselves from these forms of ordinary narratives and cosmic phenomena. Self-retrieval can only be possible when we are able to break ourselves loose from myths – an ordinary attempt by man to externalise and communicate his inner intuition (Soyinka, 1976: 107).

This argument can also be extended to *Death and the King's Horseman* by Soyinka. It is evident that if Elesin has the opportunity to create or narrate his own purpose, he would not have accepted the myth that he must die to continue to serve the King in the underworld. However, when Elesin appears as a purely existential character who is ready, like Camus's Sisyphus, to exert his will against the communal will (as the communal will seems antithetical to his "personality") his son, Olunde, seems to have succumbed to the pervasive indoctrinating power of the text of myth, culture and tradition surrounding his destiny. But, on a critical note, the ritual suicide of Olunde is actually meaningless, except he has gone through the necessary or required rites of becoming a substantive Elesin Oba.

In essence, if the tradition is to be observed to the letters and the norm is strictly absolute,

then the death of Olunde who has never been installed as the reigning Elesin Oba is a failure. And, on a serious note, if Elesin dies before the dead king, the king is not required to die with him – for Elesin Oba is a commoner whose death like Ulolo's is insignificant as it amounts to a mere common death. I perceive that the myth of Elesin Oba is part of the capitalist myth of oppression of the masses, the poor of the society, who keep waiting on the so called royalty, praising them and agreeing to serve them in this world, and in the world to come.

Often, tragedy occurs when man attaches *prima status* to *trado-socio-cultural* values and begins to interpret them not as products of social constructs anymore, but as absolute intransitive values that cannot be altered or challenged. These types of actions, in particular, on the one hand, and the actions of the "radical elements", on the other hand, inspire the tragedy in Zulu Sofola's *Wedlock of the Gods*. The tragic events in the play are built on the quests of individual absolute interpreter of socio-cultural and or traditional values. The *prima status* attached to culture and tradition by those who say "this is our world, this is how we met it, and it is how we live in it and will leave it for the generations to come" cannot be ignored.

In essence, the clash in the play is propelled by individuals' fears: the fears behind the socio-cultural traditional absolutists' losing their values, and that of the radical elements' (the challengers of the status quo) not being able to entrench theirs. This clash is the raw material for tragedy in the play. Ibekwe's fears force him to drag her daughter, Ogwoma, just like a goat or a mere commodity, to the house of Adigwu in a forceful marriage against her wish and desire. Ogwoma laments; "I was tied and

whipped along the road to Adigwu. Now that God has freed me they still say I am his brother's wife" "(Sofola, 1972, p. 21). It is, probably, simply superficial to see and interpret the tragedy in the play on the actions and inactions of Ogwoma and Uloko. If they have not acted, Ogwoma and Uloko have no chance against the absolute culture and, now that they have acted, they also do not have a case against the absolute interpreters of the culture. The foundation for the crisis in the play is laid in the fears and the intentionality of Ibekwe and the absolute demands of his world-view and that of other absolute interpreters of culture and traditions.

These fears and intentionality only find justification in the fact that female children are culturally viewed or seen as "a man's . . . source of wealth . . ." (Sofola, 1972: 9). Ibekwe, however, expresses the frustration and fears which make him to privilege the culture that sees and accepts daughters as mere commodities and sources of wealth thus:

It was nobody's blame that I was left fatherless when I was only a child. My mother suffered alone to rear me and my brother, Ike. When we became men we saw that certain members of the Onowu family had wiped out our father's compound . . . In silence Ike and I managed to build another house . . . we asked for help of Onowu family but those members who wish us disgrace and shame worked against us (Sofola, 1972: 29).

The fear of another "disgrace", the fear of the death of his son, the fear of his inability to raise money for the initiation rite and the sacrifice demanded by Ikenga, the family god, makes him to give his daughter in marriage, against his "wish" and the daughter's wish, to the money bag from whom he can raise "cheap"

money.

Ibekwe: So I gave my daughter away against my wish and hers to the man from whom I could get enough money to add to what I had to save my son's life . . . (Sofola, 1972: 30).

Ibekwe confesses that he fights a war of consciousness; a war of fear. We see his choice of action after he interprets his circumstances, interest and value. The question, however, is: at what point is a character permitted to privilege the tenet and the demand of a culture above his conscience and moral? Is this kind of privileging permitted at the point of a character's desperation for survival? Can one justify people who kill for money and rituals in order to gain power and authority as is seen in the revelations of ritual oaths of allegiance taken nakedly by some political office holders (*The Punch*, 2009, 14 July "Editorial")?

Characters' recourse to culture, privileging its tenets and demands above the demands of what may be seen as the demands of a good conscience, is in a kind of constant binary opposition in the consciousness of the characters. This action is always a prelude to crisis and tragedy. No doubt, the observation of Nietzsche that, it is our needs and our fears that interpret the world appears to be true (Nietzsche cited Schacht 1983: 8, 125).

On their part too, the radical elements in the play, Ogwoma and Uloko, the challenger of the status quo, go through this same existential war. They fight the battle of binary opposition, privileging the demand of their love above every other demand and the implication of violating the taboo associated with the violation of the demand of the culture of mourning by a woman who has just lost her husband. Uloko tells Ogwoma to "forget the

world" yet Ogwoma in replying says, "I cannot forget the world" (Sofola, 1972, p. 13). They know the "world". The world has its demands and expectations that are often antithetical to the general good will and the wellbeing of the characters. They are against the "world" and they know that the "world" is, no doubt, against them. They are willing to escape the "world"; they are willing to confront the "world". Unfortunately, the status of the "world" appears transcendental. The "world" is a phenomenon that is pervasive, yet they are ready to exert themselves against the "world". The battle line is drawn between the characters; their values, their interests, their fears, their intentionality on the one hand and the "world's" on the other. Indeed, they exert themselves against the "world" (Sofola, 1972: 55). They, however, pay the ultimate price, and theirs, as Uloko claims, "is the wedlock of the gods".

Nevertheless, the "world", in her pervasiveness too, bleeds. In this situation, in the words of J.P. Clerk in one of his poems, *The Casualties*, the casualties are actually the living that bear the burden of the dead on their conscience. The living dead, who can sacrifice their consciences on the altar of materialism, are the actual casualties; the living dead are those who have lost their voices against cultural, religious and political hegemony.

Examining the play, one sees different cultures and subcultures at play. There is the culture that believes no death is natural; somebody, a human agent, must be responsible for a death and as far as Odibei is concerned "Adigwu died of a swollen stomach. A man who dies like a pregnant woman did not die a natural death. Somebody killed him." (Sofola, 1972: 6). There is the ritual of inheriting a woman whose husband has died just as mere

properties would be inherited or passed over to other family members. Closely linked to this ritual is the culture that sees daughters as mere sources of wealth to their parents. Also, there is a culture that forbids woman to be self-willed. There is a culture of duty, for instance, "the duty of mourning a dead husband for three months". There are taboos that must not be violated, and related to this, is the culture of retribution. There is a culture of authority and privilege that cannot be challenged or questioned. These cultures represent apprehensions and predispose to certain intentionalities.

### Conclusion

In applying the concept of deep structure and Levi-Strauss' concepts of bricolage and bricoleur (1962: 17, 274), as also expounded by Derrida (1978 reprinted in Lodge, 1988: 114-5), one can easily see rituals, cultures and subcultures as products of the fears and the intentionalities of the bricoleurs, "the savage minds", "the intellectual myth makers" and their attempt to create their "world" through myth, culture and religion. One cannot but agree with Nietzsche (cited in Schacht, 1983: 8, 125 and 131) and Soyinka (1976: ix, 11) that myth, culture and religion often explain our fears, intentionalities and the attempt to externalise our inner intuition as we strive to maintain our balance against cosmic phenomena.

This understanding is crucial to maintaining peace, order and justice in every socio-cultural, political and economic interaction of the characters. It is also important to respecting others' right even when a character feels wronged by the actions of such characters. A character cannot just act based on his or her perceived right like Odibei, Ogwoma, Uloko,

and Ibekwe without consideration for the rights of others – for it is said that “rights are expressed within the limits of the law”. . . as Tugbokorowei and Ifeanyi (2010: 117) put it, “. . . your right to swing your arms ends where the other man’s right to defend his nose begins.” When one’s right is expressed without such consideration, there is bound to be a counter action or reaction leading to what could be seen as a state of anarchy or arbitrariness. For instance, since it is believed that anyone who does what Ogwoma is alleged to have done has committed an act of death, violated the worse taboo in the land and so will die of a swollen body with water leaking from everywhere (Sofola, 1972: 19-23), Odibei and other absolute interpreters of culture should have allowed the gods to fight for themselves. This is one of the main problems we have with religious fundamentalists till today. They are always killing fellow humans on behalf of the gods. In fact, Adeoye (2009, pp. 11-12) vividly describes religious fundamentalists when he says “they are killing to sell God”. This experience is prevalent in Northern Nigeria where Muslims continue to kill the so-called infidels in the pretence of a religious demand.

Killing men for the gods is a form of absolutism that makes characters that stand to benefit from the status quo to privilege the demand of some ritual, cultural or traditional value above humanity in the name of myth of essence. Such myth is a product of fear and the attempt to keep humanity in perpetual bondage, not even to cosmic phenomena, but to the privileged few who have narrated themselves to a position of power and authority through bricolage – the myth of royalty and nobility. And this is the ever constant tragedy of our race and the ever

constant dramatic crisis and conflict. It is a dialectical battle of the texts in the consciousness of the characters.

There is actually no myth of essence outside the existential apprehension that perfects the historical conditioning of the minds to see, narrate and interpret the world for self-preservation. Returning to exhume ritual materials for contemporary discourse can only be seen as an essential existential search for meaning through the totality of the shared historical human experiences. The challenge lies in our ability to understand with Levi-Strauss, Frye and others, the symbolic meaning of myths, cultures and traditions as codes and signs with different significations and that we cannot impose our absolute on others. The fact of the matter seems to be that the sign for our collective identity is subsumed in the sign of the identity of the individual. Returning to mythic and ritual materials is a universal mode of consciousness that is not peculiarly African. One can safely presume that the use of rituals, mythic and cultural materials in contemporary African writings are symbolic and spontaneous. The writers are existentially predisposed to drawing from the universal fount of consciousness, not necessarily because they seek to reject or abandon Eurocentricism – for Eurocentricism is now part of our postcolonial literary discourse and legacy.

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