

Culture and the Contemporary Religious Dynamics in Nigeria: A Study of Soyinka's Drama

Megbowon Funmilola Kemi

PhD candidate and graduate Research Assistant
Department of English and Comparative Literature
University of Fort Hare, South Africa
kemimeg@gmail.com

Uwah Chijioke

University of Fort Hare, South Africa
cuwah@ufh.ac.za

ABSTRACT: The role of religion and culture in socio-economic development cannot be underestimated. Coupled with socio-economic advancement, the postcolonial and contemporary African society is characterised by unprecedented rise in the level of religious movements with diverse contradicting beliefs championed by so called spiritual and religious leaders. The overwhelming socio-economic downturn in the society has meant that people have turned to religion for solutions to their problem but the church has not really lived up to expectation which writer like Soyinka portrayed in his text. Considering the above mentioned, this study textually analysed Wole Soyinka's *The Trials of Brother Jero* from a postcolonial theoretical perspective with the aims of exploring religious dynamics vis-à-vis cultural /moral degradation as portrayed in the text. It further resonate the place of culture in the contemporary religious environment. Moral degradation is captured from the characters of brother Jero, the old prophet, Jeroboam and the drummer boy where lack of respect for elders, covetous exploitation by spiritual leaders, materialism, falsehood and deceit are exemplified in religious setting as depicted in the text. All these delinquencies are contrary to indigenous cultural and moral values of the

traditional Nigeria society. With the above highlighted current delinquency trend, the study concludes that the place of culture in the future of religion cannot be underplayed. This is so because indigenous cultural values place high emphasis on uprightness, truth, contentment, respect, which are needed in making contemporary religion worthy to practice, religious leaders more respected and peoples trust on their leaders justifiable.

KEY WORDS: Religion, Postcolonial, Materialism, Merchandise, Politics.

1. Introduction

Culture and religion are two main fibers sustaining the continued existence of a community. Religion and culture occupy a crucial position in Africa societies, these two are interwoven such that each does not really exist alone. Culture refers to the cumulative deposit of knowledge, experience, beliefs, values, attitudes, meanings, hierarchies, religion, notions of time, roles, spatial relations, concepts of the universe, and material objects and possessions acquired by a group of people in the course of generations through individual and group striving (Hofstede 1997). Biggs and Moore (1993) state that culture is the sum total of the ways of life of a people, which is transmitted from one generation to another” (Biggs and Moore 1993).

Religion, on the other hand, is an organized system of beliefs, ceremonies, practice and worship that centers on one supreme God or the value of the deity that provides groups of men with a solution to the question of ultimate meaning (Bhatt 2012). It is the strongest element in traditional African culture, which exerts great influence upon the conduct of the African people. Religion is closely bound up with the traditional way of African life, hence religion shapes the lives of Africans; at the same time, life shapes religion as well (Omobola, 2014). Visalo (2002) notes that religion indicates that spirituality is a part of human nature that needs to be fulfilled. It is, therefore, difficult to separate the word religion from culture since religion is defined as a collection of cultural systems.

The contemporary African society has found itself is an age of intense social, cultural and economic integration which has brought about great exposure leading to creativity, diversities and dynamics in social, cultural and religious lifestyles of African people. The challenges that came along with these integration cannot be under estimated and ignored. Some of these are conflict among religious faithful and bodies/organizations, religion influenced political agitations, terrorism, materialistic oriented lifestyles, and lack on contentment. Moreover, the economic difficulties and tyranny that also came along with African society’s integration has made the consultation of religious

leaders inevitable since religion and religious leaders are considered by Africans as a means reaching the creator of the world (God) who has solution to life challenges. Unfortunately, religious actors who are supposed to provide good offices and serve as mediators according to Appleby (2000), are instead merchandising religion.

As is the case with most other African countries, Nigeria places high premium on religion as solution to many of life's challenges. Nigeria has the largest population in African and is one of the most religious countries in the world (Lenshie and Abel, 2012). Religion in Nigeria is heterogeneous, however Christianity, Islam and African Traditional religion are dominantly practised ones and it is an important part of the socio-economic and political life of the country. The economic downturn of the late 80's exacerbated by the IMF conditionality created an economic meltdown, which drove millions of Nigerians to seek solace in religion. The mushrooming of churches created a gap for false prophets and charlatans to manifest.

Considering the aforementioned and the fact that literature mirrors the reality of a society, the present study examines culture and contemporary religious dynamics using Soyinka's *The Trials of Brother Jero*.

2. Synopsis of Soyinka's *The Trials of Brother Jero*

The play begins with the eponymous character, Brother Jero himself giving us some background information on how he came into priesthood by taking advantage of his appearance- thick long hair and beard. He reveals how he became fond of the trade. He further makes known how the trade has become fashionable and how professionals in the trade try to outsmart one another in acquiring lands on the beach and attracting ignorant and gullible members. He goes on to expose the scheme he employs to acquire land by the beachfront for his master, the old prophet, who ignorantly thinks Jeroboam schemes all other competitors out solely for him- not knowing that Brother Jero helps no one but himself. For this singular reason, his master places a curse on him that daughters of Discord will be his ruin and downfall. Therefore, the play is based on the near-fulfilment of the curse placed on Brother Jero by his master.

The play thus goes on to reveal a couple named Chume and Amope. Amope, a petty trader, sells a velvet cape to Brother Jero who promises to pay three months earlier but defaults. Her husband, Chume, a Chief Messenger at the Local Government office, serves as Brother Jero's apprentice on the beach in his church. Jero is able to explore and exploit the ignorance, stupidity and materialistic tendencies of his followers as he deceives them with visions of better life and promotion in their various quests.

Due to the nagging nature of his wife, Chume has long wanted to beat her, Amope, so that she can desist from her annoying behaviour. However, Brother Jero prevents him from beating her; not for Chume's benefit but for himself to keep Chume in perpetual enslavement.

Interestingly, the cat is let out of the bag when Chume realizes that Brother Jero has been fooling him all the while having invalidated all Jero's claims that keep him in bondage after it dawns on him that Brother Jero finally allows him to beat his wife, Amope, in order to rid himself (Jero) of his creditor (Amope). Being a comical and satirical play, as Chume's sense of reasonableness later dawns and seeks revenge from Brother Jero, Soyinka introduces the of unreasonableness and ignorance prepared by no other person but Brother Jero himself.

Contemporary religious dynamics as portrayed in the texts are highlighted and discussed below: This dynamics are viewed from the perspectives of religious practises.

2.1 Misrepresentation of alien Religion

The coming of the White to African brought many things that are alien and strange to the African people. The White, as Ngugi wa Thiong (2012) noted, came with the Bible on his left hand and gun on his right hand. The White, not only introduces his culture and tongue but also his religion to the African people who succumb to him and all he stands. African being religious, they sheepishly fall for the Whiteman and his religion which they, Africans, hardly understand fully like his tongue. This, hence, makes misconceptions, misrepresentations and misinterpretations abound in practicing the alien religion. Soyinka portrays this misrepresentation of alien religion and it adherents through the character of Brother Jero with his followers and other prophets, though unheard, in the play. Brother Jero's introduction is revealing and it will be illuminated the more as the same is being seen in the contemporary Nigerian society below:

JERO: I am a prophet. A prophet by birth and by inclination... I was born a prophet. I think my parents found that I was born with rather thick and long hair. It was said to come right down to my eyes and down to my neck. For them, this was a certain sign that I was born a natural prophet. (Soyinka 1998)

Furthermore, from the excerpt above, misinterpretation and misrepresentation is vivid. Jero's parents ignorantly assume that since their son is born with thick and long hair that automatically qualifies and validates him to be a prophet. It can be said that

this is an ignoramus allusion to Samson whom the Bible records to be a Nazarite to God in Judges 13: 4. Samson was born with long and thick hair which the angel forewarned his mother and father never to let any razor touch. This religious trait is thus transferred to Jero because of his long and thick hair. The contemporary Nigerian society is full of many false prophets who assume outlandish religious connotations for the purpose of deceiving gullible followers.

2.2 Religion and Merchandise

According to Appleby (2000), religious leaders are to provide good offices and serve as mediators. Instead they merchandise religion. Due to biting and debilitating economic realities, many Nigerians have taken to surviving through religion. Religion sells like premium motor spirit (PMS) in Nigeria. Because of unemployment, some men/women in the society have turned themselves into men/women of God overnight. This has therefore turned religion, especially Christianity into a trade. As Jero puts it:

And I grew to love the trade (prophet profession). It used to be a very respectable one in those days and competition was dignified, but in the last few years, the beach has become fashionable, and the struggle for land has turned the profession into a thing of ridicule (Soyinka, 1998).

From this, the contemporary Nigerian society is laden with many social maladies and religion has not been able to proffer solutions to the problems. As evident in a capitalist market, competition amongst religious leaders in some churches have become the order of the day with morality finding itself at the lowest ebb of the society and cultural values being lost on daily basis. These religious professionals, in getting *customers* (p.20), take to various means and schemes in outsmarting one another. With fake, rehearsed, prepared and choreographed miracles, they now easily hoodwink ignorant and miracle-seeking members of the public irrespective of their social standing and class.

Soyinka uses Brother Jero in pushing this contemporary nature of the religious professionals forward. First, he employs *six dancing girls from the French territory, all dressed as Jehovah's Witnesses* (p.10). Secondly, he affirms *I am glad I got here before any customers – I mean worshippers – well, customers if you like. I always get that feeling every morning that I am a shop-keeper waiting for customers* (Soyinka 1998).

2.3. Religion Falsehood and Materialism

The contemporary Nigerian society is a society that is being run on deception, falsehood and hypocrisy from the religious leaders to the followers. Honesty, faithfulness and truth have become and are becoming increasingly scarce day by day. Everybody is now involved in the game of deception, falsehood and hypocrisy – from the family being a microcosm of the society to the religious space and political arena – deception is enthroned. The hunger for wealth and material things by religious leaders now cannot be compared in its magnitude to what the traditional society stood for where there was constant checks and corrections and where relative desert one whose hands are known to be unclean. The society has been said by social commentators and analysts to be on the brink of failure. As it stands in Nigeria, kidnapping is the now the other of the day. Although kidnapping has always been in the traditional Nigerian society most especially when *Oro*, Yoruba cult, festival is being held and its victims are always consequently killed in appeasing the gods of the land. But the present-days kidnappings are mainly for money and acquisition of material things. Bribery and corruption have become clogs in the wheel of progress in the land. In the play, virtually all the characters are materialistic and in their quest to satisfy their material lust, they get deceived, schemed and exploited. Jero reveals this:

JERO: *My Master, the same one who brought me up in prophetic ways staked his claim and won a grant of land... I helped him, with a campaign led by six dancing girls from the French territory, all dressed as Jehovah's Witnesses. What my old Master did not realise was that I was really helping myself* (Soyinka 1998).

Also, in Brother Jero and Amope's encounter in Scene Two of the play, Jero is revealed not only as a debtor but also a liar cum deceiver.

JERO: *Yes, thanks be to God. I-er-I hope you have not come to stand in the way of Christ and his work.*

AMOPE: *If Christ doesn't stand in the way of me and my work.*

JERO: *Beware of pride, sister. That was a sinful way to talk.*

AMOPE: *Listen, you bearded debtor. You owe me one pound, eight and nine. You promised you would pay me three months ago but of course you have been too busy doing the work of God. Well, let me tell you that you are not going anywhere until you do a bit of my own work.*

JERO: *But the money is not in the house. I must get it from the post office before I can pay you* (Soyinka 1998).

In order to forever keep his followers within his imposed-confinement and to make them constantly dependent on him, he boldly declares “*Strange, dissatisfied people. I know they are dissatisfied because I keep them dissatisfied. Once they are full, they won’t come again*” (Soyinka 1998). Chume, Jero’s prophetic apprentice is not left out of his schemes and manipulations as Brother Jero continuously restrains him from beating his wife, Amope, because beating her will make him to be contented and will therefore not need Jero again. This has become the way of religious professionals and politicians in the land who keep promising better life and standard of living to their followers but their promises have never come to reality. Jero explores greatly the materialistic nature of humanity to bring them into his prepared slavery. Also, Amope is seen as a nagging wife who verbally abuses her husband frequently and is always pushing him to do more for her. Although she claims that it is for her husband’s good, her intent, however, is revealed as her latter words betray her former claim. She said:

He doesn’t realize it is all for his own good. He’s no worse than other men, but he won’t make the effort to become something in life. A Chief Messenger. Am I to go to my grave as the wife of a Chief Messenger? (Soyinka 1998).

More so, it is clear that the prayer of the contemporary religious leaders is always directed towards materialistic cravings and better life. Nobody seems to care about moral uprightness and righteousness but material-led prayers in reducing the insatiable wants of humans. This is portrayed in Chume’s prayer. He prays:

...Tell our wives not to give us trouble. And give us money to have a happy home. Give us money to satisfy our daily necessities. Make you no forget those of us who dey struggle daily. Those who be clerk today, make them Chief Clerk tomorrow. Those who are Messenger today, make them Senior Service tomorrow. Yes Father, those who are Messenger today, make them Senior Service tomorrow. Those who are petty trader today, make them big contractor tomorrow. Those who dey sweep street today, give them their own big office tomorrow. I say those who dey walka today, give them their own bicycle tomorrow. Those who have bicycle today, they will ride their own car tomorrow. I say those who dey push bicycle, give them big car tomorrow. Give them big car tomorrow. Give them big car tomorrow, give them big car tomorrow (Soyinka 1998).

For repeating “*those who are Messenger today, make them Senior Service tomorrow*” twice and “*those who have bicycle today..., give them big car tomorrow*” five times shows that though at the surface level, Chume is seriously praying for the congregation, but the repetition of those lines of prayer reveals, at a deeper level, where he belongs and in essence he is only praying for himself.

In addition, Brother Jero is able to deceive the Member of the Parliament even though he occupies an exalted and privileged position in the society because he fuels and befriends his (Member) materialistic and positional quest. Member falls so cheap to Jero's schemes and antics. As the play ends, he ignorantly declares his allegiance to Brother Jero calling his *Master* (p. 44). All these are consequently pointing to the contemporary Nigerian society as materialistic, deceptive and selfish.

2.4. Religion and Curse

As the traditional Nigerian society greatly believed in the destructive power of curse, the contemporary Nigerian religious leaders also shares the same beliefs even though with modern touches and modifications. It has been established that the Yoruba people and by extension other Nigerian tribes not to place a curse(s) on someone without the person doing anything worth being cursed. Curse is mostly employed when the victim cannot directly fight his/her oppressor or victimiser/cheater. Thus, curse is critically linked with superstition. One of the Yoruba proverbs is *eni da eeru ni eeru nto* (meaning: whosoever pours ashes away will the ashes follow). It is generally believed among Yoruba people that when someone offends genuinely and the person is cursed, the curse placed on the offender will definitely come to fulfilment.

The play, as implicit in the summary, is based on the near-fulfilment of the curse placed on Brother Jeroboam for hoodwinking his master, the Old Prophet, to believe that the piece of land got from the Town council through six disguised ladies from the French territory as Jehovah's Witnesses:

OLD PROPHET: *Ungrateful wretch! Is this how you repay the long years of training I have given you? To drive me, your old Tutor, off my piece of land...telling me I have lived beyond my time. Ha! May you be rewarded in the same manner. May the wheel come right round and find you just as helpless as you make me now...* (Soyinka 1998).

OLD PROPHET: *Ingrate! Monster! I curse you with the curse of Daughters of Discord. May they be your downfall. May the Daughters of Eve bring ruin down on your head!* (Soyinka 1998).

2.5. Religion and Rituals

Ritual killing is also observed to be carried out in today's religious society in Nigeria. It is known that majority of those who claim to be pastors, prophets, evangelists, etc. in the contemporary Nigerian society are opposite of what they profess to be as the

case of Brother Jero in the play. Many of these self-acclaimed men/women of God have been caught with human parts in their vehicles, churches, and homes; amongst other incriminating allegations and criminalities (PM News, 2017; DailyPost, 2017). There was a case of a so-called man of God in Nigeria who was stopped by the policemen at a checkpoint for checking. Like Jero, he declared, "I am a pastor" but when he was searched, human parts were found in his car. He was subsequently whisked away by the police. This is the situation of the contemporary Nigerian society. These self-professed men/women of God are only men/women of their bellies:

I am a prophet. A prophet by birth and by inclination... I was born a prophet. I think my parents found that I was born with rather thick and long hair. It was said to come right down to my eyes and down to my neck. For them, this was a certain sign that I was born a natural prophet (Soyinka 1998).

3. Discussion

Considering the dimension of dynamics of contemporary religious environment in Nigeria as discussed above it can be relatively inferred that contemporary religion, religious leaders and religious practices lack the moral aptitude to change the other aspect of the society because religion in its entirety that is considered to be sacred has been greatly corrupted. Hence, without doubt, the place of traditional Nigerian cultural values cannot be overemphasized. Traditional Nigerian culture like that of other African countries is embedded in strong moral considerations. It has a system of various beliefs and customs which every individual ought to keep in order to live long and to avoid bringing curses on them and others. In traditional Africa, a shared morality used to be the cement of society. These shared traditional, cultural and social values and morals as mentioned by literature include; Charity, honesty, truthfulness, and respect for and fear of supernatural realities (Kinoti 1992). Motlhabi (1986) also draw attention to the fact that equivalents of the Ten Commandments in the Holy book (Bible), like prohibitions to steal, murder, commit adultery, telling lies or deceit, are encountered in the traditional concept of a virtuous life. Furthermore, Nigerian traditional values has a moral code that forbids doing harm to a relative, a kinsman, an in-law, a foreigner and a stranger, except when such a person is involved in an immoral act Adultery, stealing and other forms of immoral behaviour are strongly discouraged and whenever a suspected offender denies a charge brought against him, he would be taken to a soothsayer or made to take an oath for proof of innocence. Moreover, the traditional African ethics can be described in terms of; communalism (i.e. means that an individual's image will depend rather crucially upon the extent to which his/

her actions benefit others rather than him/herself, not by coincidence but by design); humanistic or anthropocentric (i.e. traditional cultural morality virtue is not about obeying the will of a god or pleasing him, but about obeying the will of the community and seeking the well-being of human beings), pragmatistic and utilitarian, tribalistic, and shame-oriented. It is important to note that these values are inextricably bound together and are to be comprehended in their totality as African cultural values.

4. Conclusions

Religion in Contemporary Nigeria society was introduced by westernization with all its attendant temptation. For this reason it is open to abuse because many of the practitioners have taken advantage of the poor economic situation to deceive people and rob them of their belongings as exemplified in the play *Understudy*. Soyinka had always advocated for a return to African traditional values and he creates character that serve as caricature to buttress his point. In *the Lion and the Jewel* Soyinka creates the character of Lakunle who is confused and shuffles between his culture and westernization which he hardly understands to make the point to Africans of the importance to remaining steadfast in their culture. In *the Trials of Brother Jero*, Soyinka used the same artistic device in advocating for a return to traditional values in our quest for societal regeneration. Cultural values are fundamental in all human societies which should be displayed in all human actions and activities. It is very important for these values to flow into religion and imbibe by the religious leaders. With the above highlighted current delinquency trend, the study concludes that the place of culture in the future of religion cannot be underplayed. This is so because indigenous cultural values place much emphasis on uprightness, truthfulness, contentment which are needed in making contemporary religion worthy to practice, religious leaders more respected and peoples trust on their leaders justifiable.

References

- Akinwumi, Akinbola. 2005. *(Un) Making place, displacing community: the 'transformation' of identity in a Russia–Poland borderland*. 2005: 951-956.
- Appleby, Scott. 2000. *The ambivalence of the Sacred: Religion, Violence, and Reconciliation*. New York: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers.
- Biggs, John and Moore, Patience. 1993. *The process of learning* 3rd. ed. Australia: Prentice Hall.

- Bhatt, Chetan. 2012. "Secularism and conflicts about rights." In *Secularism, Racism and the Politics of Belonging*, 6-9. London: Runnymede.
- Hofstede, Geert. 2004. "Personality and culture revisited: Linking traits and dimensions of culture." *Cross-cultural research* 38, no. 1: 52-88.
- Kinoti, Henry. 1992. "African morality: past and present." In Mugambi, J.N.K. & Nasimiyu-Wasike, A., eds. *Moral and ethical issues in African Christianity*. Nairobi: Initiatives.
- Lenshie, Edward and Abel, Johnson. 2012. "Religious Fundamentalism and Problem of Normlessness: Issues in Value System in Nigeria." *Global Journal of Human-Social Science Research* 12, no. 9-C.
- Motlhabi, M. 1986. "The concept of morality in African tradition." In Tlhagale, B. & Mosala, I., eds. *Hammering swords into ploughshares; essays in honour of archbishop M.D. Tutu*. Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans.
- Ngugi Wa Thiong'o. 2012. *Weep not, child*. NY: Penguin.
- Omobola, Ojo. 2014. "Influence of Yoruba culture in Christian religious worship." *International Journal of Social Science and Education* 4: 584-595.
- Soyinka, Wole. 1998. *Plays: The Trials of Brother Jero, Jero's Metamorphosis, Camwood on the Leaves, Death and the King's Horseman, Madmen and Specialists, Opera Wonyosi*. Vol 1. London: Methuen Drama.
- Visalo, Phra. "The Dynamics of Religion in the Age of Globalization: Lessons from Indonesia, Philippines, and Japan." *The Asian Face of Globalisation: Reconstructing Identities, Institutions, and Resources* 2003: 25.