

Proverbs in Wole Soyinka's Construction of Paradox in *The Lion and The Jewel* and *Death and The King's Horseman*

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Summary

Paradox, which is one means through which conflict is resolved in Soyinka's works, also accounts for the difficulty in interpreting his works. Proverbs play a significant role as a creative tool in the playwright's construction of paradox for the representation of the reality of his society and envisioning a better one. The article focuses on how proverbs have been strategically infused into the plays to lend a paradoxical edge to characterisation and the ironic resolution of conflict in the plays. A critical study of the proverbial idioms employed in the plays (these idioms are critically related to some salient Yoruba proverbs outside the texts) show that the charge of obscurity that is often levelled against Soyinka is attributable to his deployment of the tool of paradox to achieve aesthetic and philosophical significance. The study is informed by an agential approach to literary criticism which makes possible the establishment of connections between authorial intention and the agency of the text.

Opsomming

Paradoks, een wyse waarop konflik in Soyinka se werke opgelos word, verklaar ook waarom sy werke so moeilik is om te interpreteer. Spreekwoorde speel 'n belangrike rol as 'n kreatiewe werktuig in die toneelskrywer se konstruksie van paradoks vir die voorstelling van die realiteit van sy samelewing en om 'n beter samelewing te visualiseer. Die artikel fokus op hoe spreekwoorde strategies in toneelstukke geïntegreer is om 'n paradoksale kant aan karakterisering en die ironiese oplossing van konflik in die toneelstukke te gee. 'n Kritiese studie van die spreekwoordelike idiomme wat in die toneelstukke aangewend word (hierdie idiomme staan in 'n kritiese verwantskap met sommige treffende Joroeba-spreekwoorde buite die tekste) sal aantoon dat die obskuriteit waarvan Soyinka dikwels beskuldig word, toe te skryf is aan sy aanwending van die paradokswerktuig om estetiese en filosofiese betekenis te verwerf. In die studie word 'n agentgerigte benadering tot literêre kritiek gevolg, wat die bewerkstelling van aansluitings tussen die skrywer se bedoeling en die teks as agent moontlik maak.

Introduction

Many interpretations of Soyinka's works have revealed that the playwright is a gifted literary writer whose writings reveal his full consciousness of the significance of literary art as a means of interrogating and charting a course for the transformation of society. In spite of this, the tedious task of uncovering meanings embodied in his works has given rise to another critical consensus that the playwright is fond of indulging in obscurantism. By way of analogy, his much-criticised work, *A Dance of the Forests*, written in commemoration of Nigerian independence is appropriate to mediate the foregoing critical positions. *A Dance of the Forests*, like most of the playwright's works that cut across the three conventional genres of literature, might not adequately communicate the ideal of the pursuit of social well-being which is behind its composition from a non-culture-specific perspective. The idioms of the play which derive from the culture of the playwright undergo an intricate process of symbolic functionality as the idioms themselves transit from their original genre of orality to another within a new literary practice which the colonial epoch inaugurated in various African societies – written drama.

The anti-proverbial dimension to the use of language in the two texts as explicated in the present study may be seen as one way in which the playwright deliberately manipulates the African oral resource (Yoruba proverbs) to reflect his acceptance of modernity on the one hand and his rejection and contention of a "racialist understanding of culture and modernity upon which European imperialism rationalized its violence" (George 2003: 138) on the other hand. His works can, therefore, be best described as "symbolic artefacts" which, as Paisley Livingston argues, can be so identified for meaningful interpretation on the basis of "a number of important assumptions about the activity of sentient agents, beginning with the writers whose efforts are indispensable to the existence of literary works" (Livingston 1991: 10).

Obiajunwa Wali's comment on the play may be necessary in showing the significance of paradox and the role of proverbs in the paradoxical constructs which the selected plays represent:

Less than one percent of the Nigerian people have the ability to understand Wole Soyinka's *A Dance of the Forests*. Yet this was the play staged to celebrate their national independence, *tagged on to the idiom and traditions of a foreign culture*.

(Wali 1997: 332; my italics)

Implicit in this critical comment on the play is an assumption that only those who are formally trained in the art of the literary practice of the West can see through the play's mask of artistic engagement with a most pertinent issue of social reality – the corporate survival of Nigeria – at a defining

moment in the life of a newly independent African country. This is altogether unconvincing, for the play remains a reference point in the charge of literary obscurity against Soyinka amongst indigenous critics who are knowledgeable about the Eurocentric literary tradition in addition to their immersion in the indigenous African culture and traditions.

The much-debated issue of an appropriate African medium of literary expression in properly defining the literature of the continent is at the heart of the discourse which inspired Wali's critical comment. However, the very question of idiom raised in the comment lends it the attraction of criticism in view of the palpable African (Yoruba) traditional artistic idioms which inform the play's distinctive texture and structure as is the case with *Death and the King's Horseman* and *The Lion and the Jewel* (henceforth *Death* and *The Lion* respectively) which the present study focuses on and, perhaps, a good number of the literary works of the playwright. Wali's scepticism incidentally points in the direction of what he has come to assume to be a recurring feature of Soyinka's artistry. His (Soyinka's) encoding of his literary message in paradox seems to be playing out in the manner he is being portrayed by critics, which carries an obvious but erroneous implication that the playwright is, to borrow words from Iyasere, "inordinately experimental in the western instead of the African way, to the extent that a reader will find it difficult to tell whether or not" his work is "African in both texture and structure" (Iyasere 1975: 119).

A great challenge posed by Soyinka's obsession with paradox is faced by Nasidi who sees the playwright as being in an unfortunate circumstance of entrapment within Eurocentric literary predilection which, as he observes, culminates in Soyinka's scandalous exposure of African metaphysics to the undue incursion of Western epistemology (Nasidi 2002: viii). Although Nasidi need not be apologetic as a Marxist critic of Soyinka, in so far as his ideology of literary criticism toes the line of objectivity, it might, however, be more significant to note that so much is bound to be missed out in a moment of unbridled anxiety to take on the hard fact of African literary modernity which Soyinka's works embody. As Soyinka himself puts it, "the reality of Africans has to be acknowledged and the modernist impulse of Europe has to be part of the historical experience of colonization, which, for better or worse, has given rise to modern African states" (Ojaide 2009: 3).

What is being rigorously driven at is the point that Soyinka's works embody what in terms of European literary aesthetics would count as "curious features" (Iyasere 1975: 115) as R.P. Armstrong puts it; and that the curious features are the "significant traditional influences ... that we cannot ignore" (Armstrong in Iyasere 1975: 110). As Iyasere further observes, there is need for "a knowledge of oral influences, and an investigation of their place in the language and forms of contemporary fiction" (Iyasere 1975: 110). Granted that Iyasere's observation points in the right critical direction for the evaluation of African literature, proverbs would

readily count in the enumeration of the African oral traditional elements that go into Soyinka's articulation of the complex social reality of African modernity, to whose service Soyinka has consistently deployed the tool of paradox. Invariably, it cannot be out of the way to isolate proverbs that account for a significant proportion of African indigenous idioms which go into the composition of two of his works (*Death* and *The Lion*) and can attest to his ambidexterity in terms of creative writings of the tragic and comic classifications. It is no more impertinent to exclusively evaluate Soyinka's literary works and break the barrier of his paradoxical constructions on the basis of the proverbs which on their own terms attract critical attention to the works selected for the present study.

Besides, it is insightful to note that "the frequent use of proverbs by African writers, especially in fiction and drama, gives a unique flavor to African literature" (Ojaide 2009: 8). Nevertheless, the sociological significance of African literature underwrites the idea of flavour given through proverbial expressions in an African literary work not merely in the sense in which it suggests aestheticism but in the manner of the more profound engagement with African socio-political reality. As Ojaide further informs, "the proverb, a traditional speech trope, validates what the writer aims at conveying" (Ojaide 2009: 9). Hence, if *Death* dramatises "the African idea of law and order" (Ojaide 2009: 7), or that it, rather, depicts "a struggle between an alien class of oppressors and an indigenous feudal class" (Williams 1985: 114), or, perhaps, it, indeed, is the playwright's own dramatic way of showing his quarrel with his decadent culture (Ogundele 1994: 52), through the ritual of self-immolation, and that the folly of the aspiration of the emergent elite of post-independence Africa to see to the evolution of an ideal post-independence Africa is the satirical motif of the drama of *The Lion*, how does the proverbial idiom of the plays function in the paradoxical mode in which the plays are cast and validate any critical standpoint on them?

From the very fact of the message of the African modernity which Soyinka wraps up in a complex web of paradox, communication carries the high risk of being lost easily. This fact is accentuated by Segun Adekoya's insightful description of paradox:

On the surface and seemingly transparent level, it appears to be contradictory, confusing and untrue, while on a higher philosophical and translucent level, it resolves itself, eliminates confusion and is comprehensible.

(Adekoya 2008: 3)

The foregoing quotation is a fragment of Adekoya's inaugural lecture which extensively elucidates the concept of paradox while it explicates its importance as a reflector of life in its complex manifestations.

The inaugural lecture orientates in the direction of a deep search for the meaning of paradox in its diverse manifestations in life. Life which is what literature engages across ages is, according to the lecture, infinitely constituted of pairs of opposites. It is within the context of apprehension of life as paradoxical constructions that Soyinka's works which might be considered difficult must be interpreted for they operate essentially on the translucent edge of paradox.

Within the framework of the paradoxical construct which *Death* and *The Lion* are to be understood are proverbs which must be sought for a comprehensive rendition of the plays' postcolonial messages. To deal with the two plays as literary works which are framed with proverbs on the solid foundation of paradoxical composition is to first have a proper conception of the playwright as an *àgídìgbò*¹ drummer, "an expert wrangler with words" who is a product of an African society (Yoruba) which commands "a whole stable of horses [proverbs] and groom them to serve a variety of rhetorical purposes" (Lindfors 2002: 105). The metaphor, *Àgídìgbò*, constitutes the focal point of the instructional essence of the Yoruba proverb: *Bí òwè bí òwè ní à lù ilù Àgídìgbò. Ológbón ní í jò. Òmòràn ní í mòn-ón* [The *Àgídìgbò* drum communicates proverbially. The message is decoded by the wise and the knowledgeable]. The African literary critical circle provides a right forum for the wise and the knowledgeable who may be said to have varying levels of capability to decode the proverbial messages of the *Àgídìgbò* drummer, Soyinka.

Expectedly, many a wise and knowledgeable individual (literary critic) has interpreted Soyinka's *Death* and *The Lion*. Since these works of Soyinka address African modernity like most, if not all, of his works, their continued interpretation is a pertinent assignment to African literature. Soyinka's use of proverb in the two representative works might be taken as the very knot that binds the riddles which the plays approximate through the stress of aestheticism to the crucial point of sociological essence which is the hallmark of the very model of writing – African literature – that gives them class and form.

Proverb and Paradoxical Construct: The Comic Case

A Yoruba proverb seems to have generated the creative impetus of *The Lion* and it goes to sum up the paradoxical import of the play and offers a pivotal statement of analysis of characterisation in the play: *Èmón² tí ó gbón fẹ́fẹ́*

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1. *Àgídìgbò* drum is a type of drum that the Yoruba use in communicating proverbially
 2. *Èmón* is referred to as *praomys minor* in zoological terms

*èbìtì*³ *paá bèlèntàsé Olóṣè abara giò giò* [The rabbit with all its smartness ended up being a captive of *èbìtì*, how much less a sluggish one like *Olóṣè*⁴]. Applying the proverb for a broad classificatory analysis of the central characters of the play, Lakunle, Sidi and Sadiku belong to a class of vulnerable prey whose wit is inadequate to counter the scheming of the oratorical “Lion of Ilujinle”, Baroka. The sense in which the proverbial *èbìtì* entraps its prey is deployed in the characterisation of Baroka as relatively calm but crafty. Sidi, Lakunle and Sadiku traverse the limited space of the drama but end up being entrapped by Baroka who pursues with a near mathematical doggedness.

Soyinka works through the “voluble” character, Lakunle, in *The Lion*, whose “histrionic side” the playwright explores with characteristic humour (Ogunba 1974: 34), to give a synopsis of the play in form of a proverb. The Eurocentric romantic character, Lakunle, in his usual ludicrous posture continues with his plans to win Sidi’s heart. Lakunle voices his determination proverbially after getting drenched with water while trying to show his love by offering to assist Sidi with her pail filled with water. Sidi is delighted that Lakunle gets drenched with water for his stupid insistence and lashes out at him:

Sidi: There, wet for your pains.
 Have you no shame.

Lakunle: *That is what the stewpot said to the fire*
 Have you no shame – at your age
 Licking my bottom? But she was tickled
 just the same.

(*The Lion*, p. 3; my italics)

Appearing right at the beginning of the play, the proverb voiced by Lakunle gives an immediate impression that Lakunle is completely determined to win Sidi’s heart. Through the proverb also, there is an immediate impression that he might be knowledgeable about the ways of the traditional Yoruba community within which he supposedly functions as a moulder of minds and maker of future leaders, and from where he seeks a future better half. On the contrary, in the unfolding events, Lakunle’s ludicrous handling of the plan to see Sidi become his wife comes as a disappointment. The audience is treated to a session of humour through Lakunle’s obsessive romantic fascination with Sidi that leads to an abrupt termination of the arithmetic class he has been taking and the subsequent holding of the

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3. *Èbìtì* is a local trap for catching wild animals in traditional Yoruba society. It is usually hidden to prevent targeted materials from being easily alerted
 4. *Olóṣè*, otherwise known as *avicanthis* sp, is a species of rat that is very sluggish and careless in nature

teacher in derision by the distracted pupils. Upon reflection on the proverb he has earlier voiced to assure Sidi of his determination to marry her and his subsequent shattering defeat, he appears a loud-mouthed clown who deploys proverbs in conversation without taking a lesson from their philosophical import.

Though voiced by Lakunle, the proverb is Baroka's abiding principle which ensures his victory in the contest for Sidi. Baroka cuts an image of a more careful schemer than Lakunle. Each nurses a dream of winning Sidi to his side. It is in Baroka that the playwright works out the usefulness of the proverb as a guiding regulation for the ideal African social crusader. The background to the ironic turn of events that sees Lakunle's loss of Sidi to Baroka is already contained in Lakunle's proverb. Since the reader already has a glimpse of the rustic life of the community from which Lakunle seeks a future partner through the stage direction, the proverb serves to lead in the direction of an understanding of Lakunle as a suitor who possesses the sensibility of the local inhabitants. However, the turn of events which reduces Lakunle to a pitiable piece after Baroka's triumph over Sidi and by implication, Lakunle, calls into question his personality vis-à-vis the community in which he is resident on the one hand, and the proverb's significance in the overall design of the play on the other.

First, at the proverb's (Lakunle's proverb at the start of the play) level of philosophical elucidation, the proverbial fire is supposed to be older than the tickled stewpot. It could be said that Lakunle, the user of the proverb, does not fit the equivalent image of the proverbial fire in respect of age as a criterion. Baroka, being the older contender in the contest for Sidi, fits the metaphorical description more. In a society where age counts as a measure of experience and wisdom, the proverb is not deployed by the appropriate personality, particularly when the proverb is weighted against the varying comportment of the two contenders (Lakunle and Baroka) with respect to the pursuit of the jewel, Sidi. Insight from the playwright's ideology of social criticism mediates the textual agency to facilitate a view of Lakunle as merely a medium of advocacy of his arch-enemy's philosophy of action. Since the play operates within the comic genre, the incongruity of the proverb vis-à-vis the user (Lakunle) purely serves the purpose of laughable amusement upon total reflection on the outcome of the play.

The fire-tickling-the-pot proverb by Lakunle is one that teaches tenacity, action, courage and, above all, unfailing doggedness; it is only a matter of meaningfully loaded irony that the proverb is confidently voiced by a weakling who misses the essence of it. In the context of the social concern of the play, therefore, the proverb is tantamount to a revolutionary philosophy for the would-be ideal social reformer.

More than any of the characters in the play, Sidi's picture comes out more clearly under the X-ray of the paradoxical implication of Lakunle's proverb. The pride of a beautiful damsel, who has become a cynosure of all eyes in

Ilujinle together with that of a cosmopolitan individual, possesses Sidi as she confidently displays actions and flaunts her beauty in the sleepy community of Ilujinle. All soulful entreaties and feeble attempts at seduction by Lakunle are inadequate to dissuade Sidi from the singular honourable path to marriage – bride price – known to her and her community. Nevertheless, even with the bride price, Baroka is not in the least a suitor for consideration. The full measure of Sidi's consciousness of her worth as a seductively beautiful damsel and contempt for the Lion of Ilujinle is revealed in her refusal to honour Baroka's invitation which she expresses explicitly in the belief that it will get across to Baroka through Sadiku:

Sidi: ...
 Tell your lord that I can read his mind,
 That I will none of him.
 Look – judge for yourself.
 He's old. I never knew till now, He was that old ...
 To think I took
 No notice of my velvet skin.
 How smooth it is!
 And no man ever thought
 To praise the fullness of my breast...
 See I hold them to the warm caress
 Of a desire-filled sun.
 There's a deceitful message in my eyes
Beckoning insatiate men to certain doom,
 And teeth that flash the sign of happiness,
 Strong and evenly, beaming full of life.
 Be just, Sadiku,
 Compare my image and your lord's –
 An age of difference!
 See how the water glistens on my face
 Like the dew-moistened leaves on a Harmattan morning
 But he – his face is like a leather piece
 Torn rudely from the saddle of his horse,
 Sprinkled with the musty ashes
 From a pipe that is long over-smoked.
 And this goat-like tuft
 Which I once thought was manly;
 It is like scattered twists of grass –
 Not even green –
 But charred and lifeless, as after a forest fire!
 Sadiku, I am young and brimming; he is spent.
I am the twinkle of a jewel
But he is the hind-quarter of a lion!

(*The Lion*, pp. 22-23; my italics)

Sidi voices her total disapproval of Baroka in a manner that reveals her biting indignation. This is a climactic point of ironic twist to the unfolding

drama. Sidi's naivety is totally concealed through her being depicted as totally hateful of Baroka's offer of affection. The initial bait through which Sadiku is revealed as Baroka's emissary of seduction is vehemently rejected by Sidi. However, when it is deceitfully packaged, both the go-between and the priced goal become totally dispossessed of the slightest inkling of the changed direction of Baroka's game plan. Sidi goes the whole hog, out of sheer inquisitiveness and a love of taunting, into the den of the lion whose praise-name – *a k'omọ láì lábẹ* [the master dissector who needs no blade] – attests to his masterful hunting skill.

The emptiness of Sidi's boastful rejection of Baroka, revealed in the final outcome of the play, is as pitiable as Lakunle. Though Soyinka draws his characters through metaphor (a linguistic resource which Sidi perfectly deploys during her conversation with Baroka), it is against Baroka's prowess in proverbial talk that the reader is able to evaluate Sidi's wit and conclude that she does not precisely belong to the same proverbial class as Baroka. Ogunba correctly classifies her with Baroka since both can "communicate in terms of a common culture and shared idioms" (Ogunba 1975: 51). The classification, however, does not invalidate the fact that Sidi does not manifest the understanding of proverbs as an embodiment of philosophy of caution against danger for the wise. There are sufficient proverbs which Sidi ought to have seized upon for a decision in the direction of safety, particularly during her encounter with Baroka preceding her final moment of downfall.

Suppose Lakunle's warning against going to Baroka lacks force of conviction by Sidi's assessment, there are sufficient indications of her imminent inglorious loss of pride as Baroka reels out proverbs at the climactic stage of her seduction. One such proverb that carries the grave warning appears twisted but still sufficient for the wary: "When the child is full of riddles, the mother has one waterpot the less". A Yoruba proverb that appears to be the one twisted by Baroka goes thus: *Bí ọmọdẹ bá gbón gbón kíkú, iyá ẹ a gbón ọgbón sínsin* [When a child is full of riddles, the mother learns the way to unravelling them]. Rather than heed the warning implicit in the proverb, Sidi goes on to taunt Baroka, oblivious of her presence within the "Lion's den". All along in the encounter between Sidi and Baroka, Sidi is seen scratching her nose with a snake's head as the Yoruba would say. As the conversation progresses, Sidi is revealed as fully aware of Baroka's slippery, hedonistic and insatiable nature. In spite of her knowing that Baroka is a fox who "stalks and dines on new-hatched chickens" (*The Lion*, p. 46), Sidi chooses to be less cautious. Her taunting of Baroka only goes to ascend a peak where she becomes less conscious, paving the way for Baroka's victory over her.

Baroka's victory is recorded on account of his mastery of language. Even when it may be argued that the recourse to the impotency trick eventually does the wonder of luring Sidi, it is Baroka's superb command of proverbial

language that actually transfixes Sidi and spells her doom. She is the proverbial dog that got missing for not heeding the hunter's beacon (*Ajá tíí yóò sọ̀nù kì í gbó fèrè ọ̀dẹ̀*). The *Àgídìgbò* drum is beaten through and through but Sidi fails to decode its message. What Baroka's warning proverbs then approximate in proverbial terms is a statement of characterisation of Baroka as a skilful wrestler who forewarns before cutting his challenger to size – *A wí fún ní kó tó dání àgbà ijàkadì*.

Within the ironic turn of events, the question of bride price as a traditional prerequisite for marriage is boldly raised. Baroka's violation of the process of the tradition of bride price confronts the reader as a cultural assault, particularly when viewed against the background of Lakunle's futile struggle against it. It is in the contradiction thrown up by the violation of a cultural norm by the custodian of the culture that Soyinka's political message as a social crusader is revealed as a biting satirical commentary on the irresponsible traditional leadership with whom the emerging elite of postcolonial Africa was to work.

Sidi's cheap acceptance of her fate after the loss of her pride to Baroka and her bracing up to the challenge of the ignobleness of her predicament may appear an act in defence of the culture. In fact, her speaking on the side of the culture to finally ward off the menace of Lakunle's Eurocentric insensitivity to the tradition of bride price confirms this. It is, unequivocally, an aberration of the culture of the traditional marriage. While Baroka's act amounts to fraud, Sidi's acceptance of fate is altogether a face-saving device, a mellowing down of the ignobleness of her unfortunate predicament. The fact that others might have toed a similar line in resolving the cultural crisis, as may be gleaned from Baroka's lowly way of taking wives, does not amount to preserving the culture. It only reveals the capacity of the culture to accommodate the social dynamics which Lakunle, unfortunately, fails to discover in his ludicrous comportment. Hence, the real victory belongs to the culture. The position of power occupied by Bale makes the act of violation of the marriage tradition appear permissible. Suppose Lakunle had taken the fraudulent way as does Baroka, would the community have taken it lightly with both cultural violators (Lakunle and Sidi)? Even when the impunity Baroka enjoys is conceived of as a political privilege provided for in the culture, it engenders a biting contradiction between the old and the young generations which Baroka and Lakunle represent respectively, in so far as the play accords in principle with the vision of a progressive society of the playwright.

Within the framework of complex contradictions in which the play is subsumed, Baroka represents a revolutionary catalyst as well as its ironic advocate. Through his persistent cultural affront which his privileged political position eclipses in the eye of the community, he is inadvertently opening the path to spontaneous cultural reconstitution and, consequently, social transformation. His obsession with hedonism as a leader's philosophy

of life is bound to provoke revolutionary anger in the youth who are, in all ramifications, at the receiving end of his biting antics. It is paradoxical that Baroka inspires along the line of revolution through a powerful proverb which conveys the playwright's political intent:

The proof of wisdom is the wish to learn
 Even from children. And the haste of youth
 Must learn its temper from the gloss
 Of ancient leather, from a strength
 Knit close along the grain.

(*The Lion*, pp. 53-54)

This proverb is one out of the many which Baroka deploys at the climactic session of his deceitful ploy to deflower Sidi against her will and in defiance of the culture. Bale's proverb employed at a crucial point when he needs to transfix Sidi and go for the kill sounds a strange note of revolutionary action. Following a pattern of reasoning which the proverb inspires, cross-fertilisation of ideas across generations is needed for the development of the wisdom of he or she who wishes to advance the course of social well-being in any African society. The whole of this philosophical import is expressed in the proverb: *Omọdẹ gbọn àgbà gbọn ni a fì dá ilẹ̀ Ifẹ̀* [The wisdom of both the young and the old culminated in the ancient civilisation of Ile-Ife].

Proverb and Paradoxical Construct: The Tragic Case

"The discursive condition of the African letter", as Olakunle George observes, reflects a rather unfortunate burdening by an "embarrassing Eurocentrism or, at the least, a Victorian condescension towards the uneducated masses" whose cause the educated Africans were "writing to champion". D.O. Fagunwa, Soyinka's referred predecessor and a significant figure of the African letters on whose works Soyinka was nurtured has been implicated by scholars in this respect. It can therefore not be further from the truth that "Oedipal relationship" is demonstrated by Soyinka to the preceding generation to which his mentor belongs (George: 2003: 138-139). The tragic mode as exemplified by *Death* offers the playwright an opportunity to interrogate the supposed mentality sustaining the discursive condition. The project of redirecting the Africanist mode of thought and perception represents the link between *Death* and Soyinka's seminal Africanist literary critique, *Myth, Literature and the African World*. It might be necessary to mediate the discernible "intentional agency" (Livingston 1991: 10) aimed at an essentially Africanist discursive mode which *Death's* metaphysical probing approximates.

Tragedy, being a more serious form of art than comedy, provides Soyinka with enormous opportunity in *Death* to examine the Yoruba metaphysics

and, consequently, put to test the strength of the culture which is explained and sustained by the metaphysics in the face of the transition occasioned by modernity. The ritual of self-immolation epitomised by Elesin (the king's horseman in *Death*) holds a high value for the Yoruba society, but the challenges of the dogma of the ritual have inspired a new consciousness with regard to the question of the sanctity of human life.

Soyinka's construction of paradox in the play is discernible both at the characterisation and conflict resolution levels. At the characterisation level, proverbs serve to foreground the African characters of the play whose social circumstance Soyinka is primarily concerned with. Also, in resolving the complex conflict which arises on account of the failed ritual of self-immolation, the proverbs injected into the speeches of the characters assist in getting through the translucence of the paradoxical construct to realise the significance of the ironic sense in which conflict is resolved in the play.

Elesin's psychic construct lacks the required disposition to the imperative of the age-long ritual. The Elesin Oba ritual is explained and understood in Yoruba metaphysical terms and the ultimate end it serves, in human terms, is psychic relief which is anchored in the cosmic harmony which the ritual is meant to ensure. Soyinka works with the material of history (the failed Elesin Oba ritual of 1946) to creatively project a social predicament of metaphysical implication against which the capacity of the Yoruba culture to regenerate is tested.

The overall import of the play as it engages a serious metaphysical issue is encapsulated in a popular Yoruba proverb: *Bí ẹ̀rù bá kọ̀ ilẹ̀ tó kọ̀ ọ̀kẹ̀, ó ní ibi kan tí a máa gbe lé* [If a burden defies earthly or heavenly relief, there is always a way around it]. In other words, Iyaloja's worries are a self-imposed threat, for the Yoruba culture anticipates the worst of situations as encapsulated in the proverb *A kò rí irú eléyìí rí ẹ̀rù ní a fì dá ba ara wa* [To say something is unprecedented is to create fear in ourselves]. The foregoing proverbs underpin the paradoxical essence of the play and enunciate the view that the play scrutinises the Yoruba culture on which the ritual basis of the drama is established.

Elesin's official laxity which results in his tragic demise is to be understood on the terms of paradox of pleasure while Olunde's "heroic" self-sacrifice is a message communicated out of paradox of illusion. In other words, Soyinka draws the character of Elesin as an agent of the community whose weakness as an ambassador arises from a life of overindulgence. On the contrary, Olunde is portrayed in a manner that reveals him as a startling ironic outcome of illusory processes of acculturation and assimilation which the colonial enterprise used in sustaining itself. In this respect, Soyinka's critical sense takes both an inward movement towards his African society and an outward one in the direction of the colonial enterprise in Africa. An antithesis is thus provided to a Yoruba proverbial thesis that the fox should first be chased away before the hen is kept in check (*ká lé ẹ̀lẹ̀yọ̀rọ̀ jìnnà kí á*

tó bá adìẹ wí): Both “the fox” (the colonial power) and “the hen” (the colony) are lined up for examination.

In spite of the possibility of asserting that Soyinka is simultaneously critical of the colonisers and the colonised as demonstrated, the proverbial texture of the play foregrounds only the African dimension of the play’s concern(s). The special attraction which the proverbs generate accentuates the significance of the playwright’s warning in the prefatory note on the play which de-emphasises the theme of clash of cultures in calling attention especially to the metaphysical import of the play.

The unusual paradoxical timber of *Death* would require a deep search for the ultimate meaning it embodies. Soyinka’s choice of the tool of paradox for the representation of the story accounts for the difficulty in its interpretation. But the burden which the tool generates for criticism is further complicated by two Yoruba oral traditional idioms: myth and proverb. The culture-specific interpretative demand of the idioms obviously underscores the limitations that are bound to trail attempts to properly interpret the play from a purely foreign critical perspective.

It must be realised that the criticism of the play reaches a most complicated point in the manner the central conflict of the play is resolved. Quayson’s brilliant interpretations of Olunde’s acting as a supplement for his incapacitated father exemplifies the notion of supplementarity in the Yoruba sacrificial rites which, according to him, is partly traceable to the Yoruba culture itself. Before measuring Quayson’s observations against the truth of the Yoruba proverbial idiom deployed in the play and those idioms drawn to in the Yoruba culture which lend credence to the play’s messages, there are crucial interrogations vis-à-vis Olunde’s ritual suicide, which Quayson engages us with:

If Elesin’s death at a specific time of night was crucial for bridging the abyss of transition and to ensure continuity for the culture, is this effort on Olunde’s part not belated and futile even if to a degree restorative? What does it mean for the culture’s self-conception that they have to find a substitute for the ritual suicide outside the parameters established by the hallowed ritual practice? What does this say about the play’s attitude to its cultural material?
(Quayson 1997: 93-94)

The salient point the foregoing interrogations raise is the phenomenal condition of a serious stalemate which portends monumental tragic consequences for the Yoruba world. Quayson invites us to observe the pathetic condition through his borrowed Derrida’s notion of the “conceptual ambiguities of the supplement” which, in an attempt to correct, complicates the condition of abnormality (Quayson 1997: 94).

First, Derrida’s critical tool applied by Quayson is to be held suspect on the grounds of its un-African origination and, hence, its inherent inability to grasp the essential cultural import of the ironic resolution of the conflict

engendered by Elesin's failure to meet the ritual expectation. Nevertheless, Quayson's aspiration to cross-examine deserves an appraisal on the merit of the critical consciousness informing it. Hence, the only question in the triad which embodies the essence of other segments of the interrogations leads to a crucial observation: What does Olunde's supplementary action say about the "play's attitude to its cultural material?" In other words, is the notion of substitute in ritual suicide or sacrificial rite outside the parameters laid out by the Yoruba culture and what are the parameters?

A Yoruba proverb affirms the flexibility of all culturally prescribed parameters for Yoruba sacrificial rites generally: *Bí a kò bá rí àdán, á sì fì òòbè⁵ se ẹbọ* [In the absence of a bat, an *òòbè* would make the sacrificial object]. The bat is a metaphor for the ideal sacrificial rite while *òòbè* is the contingent supplement. The notion of human generic correlation is implied in the common family to which the bat and *òòbè* belong. Indicated in this proverbial provision for sacrificial rites generally is the preparedness of the Yoruba culture for the mutability of life's condition. Measured against this contingent cultural provision in matters of ritual sacrifice, Quayson's submission on the notion of supplementarity as exemplified in Olunde leaves much for further Yoruba cultural reading of the play to posit that

[i]n supplementing or completing a ritual that has already failed in the terms laid out by the culture, his supplementarity is the hint of new models of agency for the culture. This mode derives *partly from within the culture itself*.

(Quayson 1997: 94; my italics)

On the authority of another Yoruba proverb, it is to be noted that the point Quayson logically drives home imposes a character of rigidity on a flexible culture which anticipates the occurrence of a worse scenario: *Bí ẹrù bá kò òkè tó kò ilẹ̀, ó ní ibi kan tí a máa gbe lé* [If a burden defies earthly (human) or heavenly (spiritual) remedy, there is always a way around it].

In the scenario depicted by Soyinka, there can only be a non-human hero of the play, for what ultimately triumphs is the indigenous culture which affirms its identity and simultaneously redefines itself within the bounds of its own projected laws of mutation under a condition of contingency. In this way, Elesin and Olohun-Iyo's proverbial discussions are ultimately a display of proverbial virtuoso which underscores the culture's mutability at the level of language use. This display in honour of the culture's mutability is twofold: the proverbial cautioning against Elesin's tendency towards cultural affront by Olohun-Iyo, and Elesin's own self-serving proverbial and anti-proverbial pronouncements.

5. *Òòbè* is a creature that resembles a bat, though smaller in size. It is otherwise known as *microchiroptera niloticus*.

Soyinka is, again, faithful to his structural placement of the proverb which embodies the crucial dramatic import contained in his character as in *The Lion* – an instance of the playwright’s discursive strategy bordering on the mediation of the textual agency. We notice Elesin’s anti-proverbial talk which reveals his lack of will to carry out the ritual of self-immolation. At the start of the play, Olohun-Iyo observes Elesin’s abnormal hastening to reach the closing mark and thus, his expressing his worries proverbially:

Praise-Singer: Elesin o! Elesin Oba! Howu! What tryst is this the cockerel goes to keep with such haste that he must leave his tail behind? [proverb]
 Elesin (slows down a bit, laughing): A tryst where the cockerel needs no adornment. [anti-proverb]

(*Death*, p. 10)

Other anti-proverbial statements of Elesin trail the opening one. And before Elesin goes too far in their deployment as a delay tactic, Olohun-Iyo is quick to notice the process of comprehension which Elesin deliberately hampers in his moment of fright for death:

Praise-Singer (smiling): Elesin’s riddles are not merely the nut in the kernel that breaks human teeth; he also buries the kernel in hot embers and dares a man’s fingers to draw it out.

(*Death*, p. 11)

In the linguistic structure constructed by the playwright, Elesin’s anti-proverbial responses to Olohun-Iyo and Iyalaja’s proverbial ones assume the status of a “riddling performance with one party proposing and the other responding” (Okpewho 1992: 239). What the whole of this means is that Soyinka is truly a wrangler with words. *Death* is a play steeped in the Yoruba proverbial idiom, and this provides Elesin with the speech techniques with which his evasiveness is hidden and eventually revealed.

In the trajectory through concealment to ultimate revelation which Elesin’s characterisation follows, the play’s paradoxical effect is further heightened by the wide gap the riddling performance creates between the reader in the relaxation provided by the linguistic delicacy and the final outcome that is to befuddle him or her. As can be further explicated, “the inversions that attend the cultural ritual are an extension of the effects of language which sustain the dramatic framework of the play”. That is,

[[t]he play prepares for the inversions on several levels simultaneously. On the level of action, we see Elesin failing and being replaced by his son ... a more subtle signification where the dense texture of proverb usage is itself the slippery foundation for articulating the culture’s self-awareness.

(Quayson 1997: 94-95)

Conclusion

In *The Lion and Death*, Soyinka's social crusade is unmistakable. His reaction to social inequity is holistic. Perhaps this makes him a social crusader of the idealist mode whose vision of a better human condition may be considered utopian. The largeness of his social vision challenges the critical faculty. The characteristic manner in which his message of social well-being is wrapped up in paradox simultaneously heightens critical interest, leading criticism of his works in the direction of geometric rather than arithmetic progression. In the whole of this, the place of paradox in Soyinka's literary career is strategic to his achievement of aesthetic feats. In this characteristic style of literary creativity, proverbs are of significance in the structure of paradox that sustains the playwright's creative engagement. This is in agreement with Iyasere's position that proverbs in works of such writers as Kwesi Brew, Amos Tutuola, J.P. Clarke, Chinua Achebe and Wole Soyinka "do not merely add 'colour'", but are an integral part of the narrative design ... providing a means of evaluating and defining the characters" (Iyasere 1975: 114).

As the article has shown, proverbs approximate the clues to the riddle which Soyinka uses as literary device of paradox to construct in the two representative texts that the present study focuses on. The reading pattern is underpinned by the theoretical postulate that "critics' ability to individuate literary works of art may require reference to the action of relevant agents and not merely to features of texts" (Livingston 1991: 10), enabling a bit of exploration of Soyinka's cultural (proverbial) background and reference to his vision of social transformation. Perhaps this is to some extent validating George's thesis that Soyinka like D.O. Fagunwa, Amos Tutuola and Chinua Achebe is qualified for a categorisation as a theorist of agency on the basis of his literary productions (George 2003: 104) which cannot but include *The Lion and Death*.

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