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Unearthing the Significance of the Forest Setting in Wole Soyinka's *A Dance of the Forests*

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Abstract

The forest, in Wole Soyinka's play, is an allegorical space central to examining the complexities of human identity, history, and culture within postcolonial society. This paper investigates the forest's significance, not merely as a setting, but with reference to its cultural implications and emphasizes the author's vision of harmonious coexistence between humans, nonhumans, and nature. It argues that the forest setting elucidates the intersection of past and future, shaping characters' interactions and influencing the plot. This shows how the Yoruba myth considerably helped Nigerians' struggle by relevantly advancing social justice and promoting indigenous moral values in society. To what extent does Soyinka expressively depict the forest setting to delve into post-independent socio-cultural and political realities? How does he effectively use elements of nature to delve deeper into the human condition in a depressing reality? How does the forest denote a place of redemption? These are questions that the paper analyses through a Marxist approach, aspects of Western drama mixed with traditional rituals, archetypal characters, symbolism, elements of orality, ecocriticism, dialectics, and repressive radical prejudices to highlight the representation of postcolonial identity, which biased independence movements in Nigeria and Africa.

Keywords: Forest- Identity- Past and Future - Social Justice- Moral Values- Redemption

INTRODUCTION

As an outstanding Nigerian playwright, essayist, poet, and novelist who won a Nobel Prize, Wole Soyinka explores various captivating and challenging themes related to post-colonialism, its meaning, and impacts on Nigerian identity, culture, and morality. His play *A Dance of the Forests* (1963) contains a Prologue, two parts, and the ending scene, entitled: “*The Dance for the Half-Child*,” as performed in the 1960 production, as well as different characters, mainly the *Guests of Honour*, the *Town Dwellers*, the *Forest Dwellers*, and the *Court of Mata Kharibu*. They come from different worlds: the living, the dead, and the spiritual to attend the symbolic *gathering of the Tribes* in the deep forest. The play emphasizes the challenges of postcolonial societies and their temptation to recover their true selves. Soyinka is involved in Africa’s voices, deeply rooted in Yoruba culture. Actually, he uses a variety of literary devices in his work, including myth, dramatic irony, satire, imagery, allegory, and themes, to examine the influence, from a satirical perspective, of the behaviour and leadership of his people and the coexistence of traditional values impacted by post-colonial influences. As an activist in the post-colony, he was repressed by the federal government of General Yakubu Gown due to his role in peace-making between Nigerian and conflicting Biafran parties and was confined. Though in jail, he wrote a collection of poems, entitled *A Shuttle in the Crypt* (1972), which are reflective works to uncover the brutality of the military administration that had the mission to silence dissenting opinions. He later won the Nobel Prize in Literature in 1986, which makes him the first African winner. However, his work is often inspiring and rewarding to read; that is the reason why critics denote him as a talented poet and playwright. For instance, Gibbs Lindfors, in *Research on Wole Soyinka* (1993), describes him as a poet, novelist, critic, scholar, dramatist, a political activist, and a writer. As for Uzor Maxim Uzoatu in *The Essential Soyinka* (2013), Soyinka is a playwright, a poet, a novelist, a teacher, a human rights activist, a specialist, and a scholar. He is dedicated to motivating and changing his people’s attitudes. For instance, John Nkemngong Nkengasong’s critique in Samuel Beckett’s *Wole Soyinka and the Theatre of Desolate Reality* (Nkengasong), examines both Soyinka and Beckett’s plays in the context of myth criticism.

This paper investigates the significance of the forest, not merely as a setting, but with reference to its cultural implications and the postcolonial context. It shows how the Yoruba myth has considerably helped Soyinka’s resistance in the post-independent Nigerian societal struggle. However, one may ask to what extent does Soyinka expressively depict the forest setting to delve into post independent Nigerian socio-cultural and political realities? How does he effectively use elements of nature in such a context to delve deeper into the human condition in a depressing reality? How does the forest denote a place of redemption? This representation of postcolonial identity is a key issue in the play, which is influenced by the independence movements in African countries, mainly in Nigeria. The play draws on both Africa’s oral tradition and aspects of Western drama. It resembles a European play mixed with symbolic modes of traditional ritual drama infused with Yoruba mythology. If these ancestral socio-cultural values are taken into account by African writers and political actors, and fully implemented in school curricula, they would be great steps in revalorizing Nigerian culture.

The forest here stands as a mythical and representative place interwoven with the play’s themes and symbols, representing an attempt by the author to rework Western African spiritualism and the customs of indigenous Nigerian myths. For instance, Clyde Kluckhohn’s “*Recurrent Themes in Myth and Mythmaking*” (Kluckhohn, 1968, p. 46) emphasizes this by valuing the universality of certain features of mythology, having a large diffusion in space and time, and resulting from recurrent reactions of human awareness to situations and motivations of the same general order; although, M.J. Melamu’s viewpoint while dealing with Demoke’s *Totem: The Role of the Artist in Soyinka’s A Dance of the Forests* (2001), posits that:

... Soyinka seems to stress that it is the duty of Nigerians to get rid of the evil out of the society. The play warns the people of Nigeria that if they do not remain alert, history will repeat itself and people would repeat their mistakes (Melamu, 2001, p. 43).

It is essential to examine some critical elements to better understand the allegorical import of the forests in the play. Using aspects such as theatrical space, archetypal characters, symbolism, imagery, and techniques, including interweaving elements of orality, mythology, ecocriticism, and dialectics to analyse environmental themes of forest in Soyinka’s work, Marxism, and repressive radical prejudices, we will attempt to evaluate the forest as mirroring a mixed small society while examining its relationship with tradition, ritual aesthetics, and vulnerability. Then we will assess the impact of the past and future in the play, as well as the consideration of the forest as a place for experimentation of morality.

1. An Evocative Image of an Assorted Small Society

The allegorical representation of the “*forest*” as a mixed small society in Soyinka’s play is relevantly conveyed through the characters’ interplay, events, and symbols. The characters and the play represent three distinctive worlds: the natural, the human, and the spiritual, as can be noticed in Greek and Roman tragedy and epics. Characters headed by the Forest Head, and his acolytes: Obaneji, Araba, and Agboreko, symbolize the forest itself as an entity, including different components of nature. Whereas, the human, including the ancestors and the modern world represented by characters such as Agboreko, Demoke and Rola, Adenebi, are the post-independent Nigerian people; while the Dead Man, who was previously a captain of the army, the Dead Woman, and The Half-child, a creature in-between the influence of the spiritual world and remaining with his mother, are figures that embody death and unaccomplished projects. The author describes this child as a tragic figure that has not been given the opportunity of life, evidenced in his first speech in the second part of the play as follows:

Half-child: I who yet await a mother

Feel this dread

Feel this dread

I who flee from womb

To branded womb, cry it now

I’ll be born dead

I’ll be born dead (p. 74).

His figure meant the wrong done to the dead couple and the unsolved predicaments of individuals in their past life in the society, whereas Mata Kharibu, the court historian, and the poet represent Nigerians' ancient life. Murete, the *Tree spirit*, the *River spirit*, the *spirit of Pachyderms*, the *Ants*, and other spirits of the forest represent the natural and the divine embodied by gods *Ogun* and *Oro*.¹ The play offers clear insights into broader societal issues in Nigeria, capturing the complexities, contradictions, and dynamics. Indeed, the connotation of the forest is a complex and conflicting nature of human allegorical society where different places and creatures inhabiting it represent social groups and power structures of precolonial and postcolonial Yoruba society. The prologue sets the scene by positing that:

I know who the Dead Ones are. They are the guests of the Human Community who are neighbours to us of the Forest. It is their Feast, the Gathering of the Tribes. Their councillors met and said, Our forefathers must be present at this Feast. They asked us for ancestors, for illustrious ancestors, and I said to FOREST HEAD, let me answer their request. And I sent two spirits of the restless dead ... (p. 1)

The small representation of the society with its different figures, composed of the natural departed human beings, the spiritual nature, the divine, and the living with their respective leaders, is rediscovered in Aroni's statement, sustaining that the Forest Head has taken on the appearance of a human named Obaneji. He invites the four mortals into his home, the "*forest*," to take part in the welcome dance of the Dead Man and the Dead Woman. He takes them with him, despite the refusal of the group, headed by Rola and others, to help them. Soyinka wanted to emphasize the omnipresence and visibility of the spiritual alongside the mortals to interact with them. In the first part, the spectacular entering of the dead couple shows their nearness to the world of the living, as evidenced in this passage:

An empty clearing in the forest. Suddenly the soil appears to be breaking all the head of the Dead Woman pushing its way up. Some distance from her, all other heads begin to appear, that of a mall. They both come up slowly. The man is fat and bloated, wears a dated warrior's outfit, now mouldy. The woman is pregnant. They come up, appear to listen. They do not seem to see each other. Shortly after, Adenebi enters. He passes close to the Dead Man. (p. 3)

The relationship between the humans and the spiritual is based on a complete communion with them. What is really intriguing is indeed the way the author uses dramatic irony in the play. For instance, the castrated warrior's entrance under Mata Kharibu, to face his former oppressors, is particularly evocative. Therefore, the interplay and conflicts within the forest reflect and exemplify the social and political dynamics of human life in postcolonial society.

¹ Ogun: In traditional *Itsekiri* religion, Ogun is the god of iron and war. Britannica, T. Editors of Encyclopaedia (2016, December 12). Itsekiri. Encyclopedia Britannica.

<https://www.britannica.com/topic/Itsekiri>

In Soyinka's *A Dance of the Forests*, he is the god of iron, war and craftsmanship of the Yoruba people. Together with Eshuoro and Oro represent the divine world.

The presence of the dead in the forest is a means that indicates and enlarges the vision of African literary texts, the spiritual forms, and their nearness to human beings. Though, it fails to address the question of the kind of relationships that arise between them. It is useful to elaborate the appeal to rethink the approach to African literature and put an emphasis on human connection with nature. Some researches argue that the idea of nearness helps readers interpret the innovative ways of literary texts while paying attention to the fact that 'nonhuman' forms, for instance, the spirits, the dead, are part and parcel of the society. It is likely what James Gibbs and Bernth Linfors, while dealing with Tutuola's work, termed a "*local embarrassment*" (p. 372) of Nigerians, regardless of the Western Critics. Yet, Soyinka's subject raised a great challenge to the modernist vision of post-independence. He is appealing to a Yoruba cosmology, including different worlds such as: the living, the dead, the spiritual, and even the unborn to challenge the human centrality of his time. Jennifer Wenzel's *Reading the Politics of Survival in Mahasweta Devi's "Dhowli,"* depicts the forest as: "*a thoroughly and self-consciously cultural space*" that is to say, a place that has "*always been peopled by lovers, misfits and fantastic creatures*" (Wenzel, 2011-2015). The relationship between creatures occurs when they are brought close together in the same environment, as in the forest in the play narrative. Indeed, the species inhabiting Africa live together in harmony. The forest is a contact zone for proximity, which is the place par excellence where the narrative dramatizes the relationship between different characters. Besides, these moments of interaction provide an occasion for resolution concerning the different actors of the tribe by contrasting the animate and inanimate forms sharing the same environment. The forest place is home to artistic perspectives, such as characters like Yoruba supernatural beings and the world of humans sharing the same environment, together with the traditional aesthetic that play a crucial role in ensuring social harmony, rediscovered in the following passage of the second part of the play:

CHORUS OF THE WATERS: Let no man then leave his feet

In any stream, in any lake

In rapids or in cataracts

Let no man think to bake

Her cornmeal wrapped in leaves

With water gathered of the rain

Hell think his eye deceives

Who treads the ripples where I run

As kernels, his the presser's feet

Standing in the rich, and red, and cloying Stream

SPIRIT OF THE RIVERS: Then shall men say that I the Mother Have joined veins with the Palm my Brothers.

CHORUS OF THE WATERS: Let the Camel mend his leaking hump Let the squirrel guard the hollows in the stump.

INTERPRETER: Spirit of the sun! Spirit of the sun!

SPIRIT OF THE SUN: Red is the pit of the sun's entrails, and I

Who light the crannies of the bole

Would speak, but shadows veil the eye

That pierces with the thorn. I know the stole

That warms the shoulders of the moon.

But this is not its shadow. And I trace

No course that leaves a cloud. The sun cries Noon

Whose hand is it that covers up his face! (pp. 75- 76)

There is a mutual and beneficial relationship between these groups, one of whose main objectives is reconciliation and understanding; there can be no question of it being a substitute for the need to maintain good relations. This situation, by these means, is a way of fostering positive relationships which can reflect the actions and obligations to others. This is to show how the human world is abused and criticized in a wide range of society. The characters in the play represent a parcel of society, including those who adhere to traditional values, those who espouse Modernism, for instance, leaders, and the frustrated people. Each of them represents a distinct perspective, aspiration, and challenge, reflecting a complex diversity.

The concept of *multifaceted presence* in the forest setting in Wole Soyinka's play is also relevant in Amos Tutuola's novels *The Palm Wine Drinkard* (1952) and *My Life in the Bush of Ghosts* (1954), termed as '*multispecies presence*' in the forest. In these works, the notion of '*proximity*' is underscored by characters of diverse and different natures, as in Soyinka's. Together, they challenge social problems and perspectives. The idea also matches D.O. Fagunwa in *The Forest of Thousand Daemons* (1938), which Soyinka brought outside the Yoruba readership. In this work, the narrator is conscious of the heterogeneity of the forest dwellers. The conflicts between characters that embody personal ambitions, such as Adenebi, Agboreko, Demoke, Rola, and those who support a sense of communal responsibility, illustrate the inherent tensions in their social roles. The forest setting is accordingly, a small symbolic and mixed representation of both physical and metaphysical space in which social issues are at the heart of the concerns. The Forest Head represents, in essence, the forest itself in spiritual union with other beings that are all figures of the natural world. The following passage illustrates a relevant discussion between the Old Man and Adenebi that makes all the essence of the appeal of the tribes in part one:

OLD MAN: Yes. My son carved it.

ADENEBI: Your son? Was that your son?

OLD MAN: Yes, don't look so surprised. We come from a long line of carvers.

ADENEBI: Oh. Well, in addition I said; . . . no, you said, and I took it up, that we must bring home the descendants of our great forebears. Find them. Find the scattered sons of our proud ancestors. The builders of empires, the descendants of our great nobility. Find them. Bring them here. If they are half-way across the world, trace them. If they are in hell, ransom them. Let them symbolize all that is noble in our nation. Let them be our historical link for the season of rejoicing Warriors. Sages. Conquerors, Builders. Philosophers. Mystics. Let us assemble them round the totem of the nation and we will drink from their resurrected glory (p. 32).

The gathering of all members of the tribes is a ritualistic event, which prompts reflection, social arrangement, and cohesion.

Though the '*totem of the nation*' is a powerful emblem without which building a nation will not be possible, this ritual is relevant in the play setting, as with the '*harvest festival*' in the Nigerian community's life. The forest, as the cornerstone where individuals in society meet symbolizes the values and cultural heritage which mirror the Nigerian identity in its whole. In this same perception, Joel Adedeji, in *The Stamp Dwellers*, interprets Soyinka's use of "*the theatre to make statements of human needs and values*" (Adedeji, 1987, p. 127). These cultural assets go beyond Nigerian and African needs; they are universal. Furthermore, they evidence the existing gaps between personal aspirations and collective demands in the narrative. Therefore, these diverse events highlight the importance of a community in solving tensions of different natures between individuals in society.

The dramatic conflict between characters in part one definitely highlights dwellers' social tensions, going through corruption, moral decay, and identity issues. Such attitudes are relevant in the heated discussion about past deeds, which opposes some characters in the play:

DEMOKE: When?

ROLA: [*shuts her eyes tightly.*] No, no, no, no...

OBANEJI: Yesterday. That is why they have called it the incinerator since yesterday. Of the seventy people in it, five escaped. It overturned you see, and the body was built of wood.... Dry and brittle in the Harmattan season too. They were all on their way here-to the gathering of the tribes.

[*There is a short silence.*]

ADENEBI: Seventy did you say?

OBANEJI: Excepting five. Only five escaped.

ADENEBI: Seventy. It couldn't have been one of ours.

OBANEJI: Mr. Adenebi. What office do you hold in the council?

ADENEBI: [*angrily.*] What do you imply?

OBANEJI: You misunderstand me. I only meant, are you in a position to find out something for me?

A DENEBI: [*warily.*] That depends. I am only the official Orator to the Council, but . . .

OBANEJI: You do wield some authority.

ADENEBI: Yes. Certainly.

OBANEJI: You see, I want to close my files on this particular lorry-the Incinerator. And my records won't be complete unless I have the name of the man who did it-you know the one who took the bribe. Do you think you can help me there?

ADENEBI: Since you are so clever and so knowledgeable, why don't you find that out yourself?

OBANEJI: Please . . . it is only for the sake of records . . .

ADENEBI: Then to hell with your records. Have you no feeling for those who died? Are you just an insensitive, inhuman block? (.....)

DEMOKE: Envy, but not from the prowess of his adze. The world knew of Demoke, son and son to carvers; Master of wood, shaper of iron, servant of Ogun, slave, alas, to height, and the tapered end of the silk-cotton tree. Oremole (pp. 17-26).

There is a blatant contrast between the individuals' conduct and positions of authority and the expectations of society; this parallels the widely observed political dynamics in Yoruba society. Characters are engaged in a struggle for power and self-recognition; this also echoes the political environment, which shows the relevance of ethical authority and responsibility.

The social environment of the forest emphasizes the theme of transformation and renewal, mainly the characters encountered with social altercation in the play. Indeed, Soyinka asserts a clear vision for renewal and social justice. The characters' experiences in the forest through a retrospection of their previous lives are an occasion for change and appeasement of the social climate, which echoes the struggle for contemporary socio-political issues in Nigeria and Africa. Thus, Soyinka offers deep insights, going through the challenges of identity, community, and social responsibility in the pursuit of an unprejudiced, assorted, contemporary Nigerian society.

2. The Forest as a Sanctuary of Ritual Aesthetics and Destruction

According to the Cambridge online dictionary, the word *sanctuary*,² as a holy or sacred place, has an allegorical meaning in the play. It is an environment where spiritual entities, together in a holistic climate of communion with human beings, often perform rituals. In these perspectives, Ropo Sekoni in *"Ritual and Communication in Soyinka's Drama"* (1987) appreciates that the use of ritual in Soyinka's work is not only destined to producing and conveying meanings but also used in commenting on the entire process of communicational act, of which it is an element (p. 87).

Actually, the relationships and conflicts within the forest reflect the social and political dynamics of the human condition, infused with rituals, beauty, and danger. Indeed, these elements link with complex yet coherent issues that confidently examine the concept of Nigerian traditions, identity, and social norms through a narrative firmly rooted in Yoruba cultural values. This holy place is where rituals, worship, trials, and other traditional ceremonies often take place, and it is the connection where the accounts of the past interconnect with the present, giving a clear environment to honour historical and cultural heritage. The rituals performed within the forest prove that neglected tradition has antagonistic effects and potential for social upheaval. For instance, the dance is abruptly interrupted by an uninvited spirit known as Eshuoro, invoking retaliation for the death of Oremole, the apprentice of Demoke, the woodcarver and disciple of Oro, the god of punishment and death. His entry into the scene can be explained by the tragic death of one of his devotees, who was pulled off the top of the araba tree where Demoke and Oremole were carving together. In these same perspectives, comes Ogun, the Yoruba

deity associated with iron, war, and craft, which makes his admission to defend his disciple against the deadly deity Oro. This antagonism embodies forces that endlessly interact until their theoretical synthesis, through which the mortals would reach mutual understanding. This situation in the forest setting depicts its appreciation as attractive and perilous. Indeed, its natural beauty is harshly contrasted with the looming threat of violence between nature and humans. This duality reflects the inherent complexities of human nature, coupled with the coexistence between beauty and destruction.

The following interconnected elements in the forest, presented in the setting, are of great consideration. Indeed, the rituals are significantly imbued with Yoruba cultural practices and spiritual beliefs. The forest is allegorically an area where some traditions are enacted, exemplifying the interconnection of the physical and spiritual. Besides, the concept of change is relevant to the play's setting, as the rituals frequently result in moments of characters' altercation. The forest is, therefore, a space favourable to introspection and confession, convincing characters to face their authentic selves and interpersonal relationships.

The rituals performed in the forest serve as a fundamental auto-critique of prevailing social dynamics and the moral fabric of the Nigerian community. This is evident in the Interpreter's actions in the second part of the play, as when he:

moves and masks the three

protagonists. The mask-motif is as their state of mind-resigned

passivity. Once masked, each begins to move round in a slowly

widening circle, but they stop to speak, and resume their sedate

pace as they chorus the last words.]

FOREST HEAD: [When the three are masked.]

I take no part, but listen. If shadows,

Future shadows form in rain-water

Held in hollow leaves, this is the moment

For the welcome of the dead (p. 73).

This stage in the ritual denotes a crucial moment of truth, such as when the dead make their entry into the scene. Besides, Soyinka posits in the play that the mask, however, functions from the same source as its music, from the archetypal essences whose language derives not from the plane of physical reality or ancestral memory but from the numerous territories of transition into which the artist obtains fleeting glimpses by ritual, sacrifice, and a patient submission of rational awareness to the mythical beliefs and rituals of the Yoruba people.

Indeed, the symphony of songs and dances illustrates the representation of images from the depths. The first part of the play illustrates Dirge-Man and Agboreko, the Elder of sealed lips, performing the hymn accompanied by celebrants, singing and dancing through the music and rhythm of drums and other traditional instruments. It exposes the importance of this ritualistic event, which announces the welcoming of *The Guests of Honour*, Dead Woman, and Dead Man to the scene.

² Sanctuary : https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english-french/sanctuary#google_vignette

DIRGE-MAN: Move on eyah! Move apart I felt the wind
breathe-no more

Keep away now. Leave the dead some room to dance.

If you see the banana leaf freshly fibrous like a woman's
breasts

If you see the banana leaf

Shred itself, thread on thread

Hang wet as the crepe of grief

Don't say it's the wind. Leave the dead

Some room to dance.

AGBOREKO: The loft is not out of reach when the dust means to
settle. Oracle to the living and silence.

DIRGE-MAN: [goes to the drummer and gives him the two-fisted
greeting. The acolyte, who has finished her sprinkling, begins to
dance softly, growing rapidly more intense];

Ah your hands are vanished and if it thunders.

We know where the hands are gone.

But we name no names. Leave the dead.

Some room to dance (pp. 39-40).

The motifs of the dances illustrate the mythical rhythm of life represented through different forms. In fact, Sam Ukala in his *"Dance and Music in Wole Soyinka"* (1993) emphasizes an *"expectation of a celebration in which leafy boughs are borne by dancers to give the impression of dancing forests"* (p. 121). Ukala significantly categorizes three styles of dances and music in the play; he terms them as *"Background music and Dance music"* (p. 126). He believes that these devices help to strengthen the *"main motifs of the play-namely, the hostility of hosts to guests, contradiction (or disharmony), and (mis)application of freewill"* (p. 128). Besides, the dance of welcome, the dance of the Half-child, the dance of exorcism, and the dance of the unwilling sacrifice each give significant directions to dramatic techniques in Soyinka's play. According to Maduakar's critical essay, *Wole Soyinka: An Introduction to his Writing* (1991), the word 'dance':

Operates at various levels of meanings in the play, and is not always associated with agitated body movement. In most of the Yoruba ritual dances, a step or two might be sufficient. We have dance as drama, dance as ritual dance as the movement of transition, and dance as festival. The entire dramatic enactment itself, as the title of the play implies, is conceived as dance (Maduakor, 1991, p. 178).

Soyinka employs some traditional practices, such as the punishing of crimes and the rewarding of virtue, to challenge the characters' actions and encourage them to reflect on their choices. He also employs strong imagery and poetic art, which is considered an important asset of African-Negro Aesthetics, to depict a multidimensional relationship between Yoruba ritual drama, the splendour of the natural world, and the ambiguous contrasts of chaos, moral decay, and danger. This invites the readers to reflect on the cultural identity, societal values, and the enduring 'dance' between tradition and changing attitudes. Consequently, the forest as a sanctuary symbolizes not only the characteristic duality in human experience but encompasses promises and threats. It serves

as a remembrance of the interwoven nature of life, death, and rebirth within cultural narratives.

3. A Symbolic Depiction of Past and Future

This notion of symbolic representation is important in that each mortal character possesses dual identities, representing their current and past selves. Their future is a representation of their past lives, which suggests that nothing is entirely lost. The interest lies in the necessity for human beings to learn from their past lives. Whereas the relationships between past and future in Soyinka's play are infused with symbols reflecting the intricate and multidimensional cultural heritage of Nigerian Yoruba society, the forest with its ancient trees and mythical creatures represents the collective burden of the past, exerting influences on future outcomes. The symbolic representation of these periods is relevant through the role of the forest inhabitants, both human and animal, who are engaged in an ongoing process of negotiating tensions between past and future. It is a place in which ancestral spirits are dwelling, thereby embodying the traditions and heritage of the society. Equally, the forest is a laboratory of transformation and possibility, indicating a future for Nigerians that can be reshaped through self-examination and an understanding of their roots. It denotes the continuity of history and the possibility of regeneration.

The very concept of ancestral spirits represents a significant aspect of numerous cultural traditions. Indeed, their existence demonstrates the considerable impact of the past on the future. The play explores the past atrocities and future perspectives of Nigerians through the interaction between Yoruba divinities and the community of living people. To illustrate, spirits such as the Forest Head, the spirit of the River, the spirit of the Palms, and the spirit of the Volcano are entities that ensure the link between humans and the natural world. They function as a network of connection for the perpetuation of cultural and moral values, standards, and traditions, which Nigerians must uphold to build a meaningful and sustainable future. This is also a means for Africans to highlight the importance of learning from history while simultaneously navigating the essential complexities of the modern world.

The assets of traditional African rituals, such as music, masks, and dance, are of great interest as they carry out the mythical and artistic import effectively. Moreover, masks have a symbolic meaning of identities and roles assumed by individuals in Yoruba culture of Nigeria. They denote the historical legacy of the past, aspirational visions for the future, and also highlight the tension between individuals, how they present themselves, and their true selves. The performances of the masked faces in the forest setting have an artistic turn. Indeed, the performer is no longer considered a simple human being but a spirit. Hence, Soyinka's adoption of Yoruba masquerade narrative devices, to which the mask motif becomes a state of mind-resigned passivity (p. 73). For example, during the welcoming of the dead, the Forest Head transfers the masks from the three protagonists, such as Demoke, Rola, and Adenebi, as he calls on the spirits of different elements of nature, the masked figures begin dancing. This draws attention to the essential challenges in reconciling one's historical legacy with one's aspiration for future generations of Africans and the diaspora disconnected from their cultural heritage. As characters confront their masked counterparts in a ritualistic dance, they may well

discover pathways towards more authentic forms of self-expression.

In the broader context of the play, the ritualistic elements of the drama, mainly those pertaining to the *harvest festival*, serve to gather the customs of the past with the aspirations of the future. To illustrate, a figure in *red*³ clothes, engages in playful pursuits with the Half-child of the Dead Woman during the welcoming of the dead. Such rituals include the ceremony of self-discovery for the mortal where the living must confess their crimes in their previous lives. The Forest Head supervises the confessions and secrets of the three creatures by listening to all the spirits' complaints to expiate their transgressions before the beginning of the three triplets:

FIRST TRIPLET: *[speaking as he comes in]*: Has anyone found the Means? I am the End that will justify it. *[The interpreter turns and does a round of ample 'with him. Enter Second Triplet. An over-blown head, drooling.]*

SECOND TRIPLET: I am the Greater Cause, standing ever ready, excusing crimes of today for tomorrow's mirage. Hungry come, hearing there was a feast for the dead...

Am I expected?

[The interpreter and the Second Triplet _ampe', then interpreter with the First, and then the two Triplets together.]

SECOND TRIPLET: *[stops suddenly. Goes to where Demoke, etc., stand huddled together. Sniffs them, turns them to the Interpreter.]*

But who are these?

FOREST HEAD: They are the lesser criminals, pursuing the destructive path of survival. Weak, pitiable, criminals, hiding their cowardice in sudden acts of bluster. And you obscenities ...

THIRD TRIPLET: I find I am posterity. Can no one see on what milk I have been nourished? (pp. 79-80)

These triplets revived in the second part, constantly reveal the end that will justify the means, the wrong done, and the posterity, as represented in the symbolism of the Half-Child. Besides, the welcoming dance performed by the Forest Head before delivering a speech, and the dance of the Half-Child to define with whom he will go, are additional examples of ritualistic practices in the forest setting in Soyinka's play. These literal events illustrate the significant influence that cultural practices exert on the formation of individuals' identities and the strengthening of community cohesion that make up the essence of Soyinka's narrative.

4. A Place of Experimentation for Morality

³ Red: the red color: for example, shades of red, called 'Pupa', are associated with the Orisas Oya, Sango, and Osun, and express passionate fiery personalities. https://everson.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/05/Yoruba_Lessons.pdf

The masked figure in red in Soyinka's play represents the spirit of the sun.

The moral quest in the forest setting in Soyinka's play is relevant in the interconnection of species that stand as a forum where people explore ethical issues. In such a context, the characters are bound to engage with ethical responsibilities that they encounter to confront the implications of their actions. For instance, Adenebi, a disrespectful official in the play, is involved in corrupt practices. He has changed to another position, that of a council orator, who often uses arrogance in his discourse in earlier times. As a court historian, he did not hesitate to send innocent people to capital punishment. From these perspectives, he is the embodiment of political immorality in Nigerian society, such as when the Dead Man refused to serve in Emperor Mata Kharibu's unjustified war. He is then castrated and sold into slavery on the instruction of the offended monarch. As for the Dead Woman, she is dirty, ragged, interested in opulence from the anticipated future world, and has her life shortened while she was pregnant. Her expected child will establish the hope for a better future of the human race, found in her request for the continuity of life derived from motherhood, even in her tarnished condition. Thus, this experimentation shows clarity through the plot and interactions between the characters, and the deceiving themes that pervade the play.

The events that occur in the forest are moral tests for the characters and for their salvation. These purposes lead the Nigerian playwright to make a specific use of *dialectical Marxism*⁴ in a historical perspective. This literary device illustrates the confrontation between the monarchy, represented respectively by the ruler Mata Kharibu and his wife Rola, alias Madam Tortoise, and their subjects, including the warriors. It is less dialectical and more destructive in its disapproval of the elites and institutions that determined this. Indeed, resistance is a natural action for an activist. Rather than trying to initiate new socio-economic development projects for their communities, the new elites benefit from the wealth of their countries. Actually, there is a difference in social formations between the rulers and their people, who are mainly composed of the working class, as in Karl Marx's theory of classes. However, the intellectuals of the black middle class hardly find effective ways of making the masses aware of their precarious social situation. As a result, here is a discussion between the corrupted Physician and the warrior to convince the Captain (the Dead Man) to confront the ruler Matha Karibu:

PHYSICIAN: Was ever a man so bent on his own destruction! ...

WARRIOR: Mata Kharibu is leader, not merely of soldiers but of men.

Let him turn the unnatural pattern of men always eating up one another.

⁴dialectical Marxism or dialectical materialism: is a philosophical approach to reality derived from the writings of Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels... Marx and Engels understood materialism as the opposite of idealism, by which they meant any theory that treats matter as dependent on mind or spirit, or mind or spirit as capable of existing independently of matter. For them, the materialist and idealist views were irreconcilably opposed throughout the historical development of philosophy. Britannica, T. Editors of Encyclopaedia (2024, November 15). Dialectical materialism. Encyclopedia Britannica.

<https://www.britannica.com/topic/dialectical-materialism>

The need for changing the mindset in postcolonial society through questioning shameful historical events is one of Soyinka's main concerns in drama. To this point, this stratagem is more in line with his role as an artist, a revolutionary vis-à-vis Nigerian postcolonial morality and artistry, to instigate upcoming socio-political changes. Therefore, the action of the characters within the forest serves to reveal their true nature and the consequences of their choices in their past lives. An evaluation of this environment as a laboratory of morals allows readers and audiences to analyse and compare their actions and, subsequently, the consequences, to see whether they are positive or negative, to improve changing attitudes.

This article reveals that Nigerian society, as many African societies, is built upon its ancestral cultural values, which are considered codes of conduct and moral obligations that must be infused into global education in society and safeguarded for posterity. Though in this postcolonial context, current elites have become increasingly immoral and corrupt. The case of the level of corruption in Nigeria shows how the social and political system is infected. This mirrors today's loss of cultural heritage in innermost West African societies. Therefore, the literary devices used in the play serve to analyse the ritualistic past events that are a means of preserving Yoruba cultural values according to their particularity in myth, civilization, ethnicity, religions, and socio-cultural beliefs that are in harmony with nature and its sacredness. The paper also argues that the Yoruba rituals, mainly those involving spirits such as *Ogun*, are components of the mythology of gods. It is in this same environment that traditional societies carry their social problems to be wisely solved through moral concepts.

The solution to the problem of Nigerian society appears contradictory, since the readers are still unable to provide a definitive resolution for socio-cultural reparation. Indeed, having just freed itself from the bonds of colonialism, the Nigerian country is embarking on a new and glorious journey of true independence. Soyinka uses his creativity to raise a collective consciousness by accusing his people of being victims of a shameful past and a corrupt present, but draws for them a better future imbued in traditional values and morals. Moreover, the critics of the officials' dramatization of the play are the result of a long-lasting neo-colonial system that opposes any form of socio-cultural progress in societies. Therefore, the interrelationship between gods, the living, and the dead, as well as the artistic dimension of the play, reveals a strong belief in the author's vision of a modern Nigerian society. The symbolic representation of the forest thus connects the inner and outer realities of existence, making Nigerians aware of their struggle for moral evolution, to which man is always dependent because of his defective nature. Indeed, those who resist this persistent tragic fate can only make futile signs of resistance.

Considerably, the forest, as a symbolic place representing a society of ordinary and spiritual beings, is at the same time a laboratory of morals in which characters are subjected to a trial to reveal their true selves through different rituals. Though it is an opportunity for them to engage in an introspective reflection on their past deeds and the moral implications of their future decisions, this reflective process of seeking redemption is crucial to the appreciation of the forest's essence in the play's moral values. The playwright uses different cultural assets to awaken his people's perception regarding their changing attitudes under foreign influences and to boost African cultural values, without which positive changes in

society cannot take place. Some of the characters in the play face the dilemma of being in-between two different cultures. The solution to this problem is relevant in Yoruba cultural principles that are strong weapons against Western cultural domination and the greediness of current elite classes. In short, African literature is involved in a new conception of arts, so-called *conscious-writing*, mainly oral literature based on drama, myth, historical texts, ritual verses, and arts such as dance, masks, sculpture, and paintings. Consequently, all these cultural devices have been a means for writers to examine and affirm their cultural values to fight Eurocentric threats.

The role of ancestral spirits in the forest setting serves to emphasize their wisdom and moral guidance. They are the mediators of truth, interpreting the internal conflicts and ethical responsibilities that people must own for social justice. This concept is a pivotal element in the play as it relates to the notion of being accountable for one's errors, regrets, and moral shortcomings that must be confessed to find salvation. In essence, the forest connotation offers a critique of individualism, which contrasts personal desires with the greater morality of the community. The author encourages his readers to a deep exploration of their fundamentals as far as ethical conduct, cultural heritage, and individual actions within the context of human involvement in society are concerned. Eventually, Soyinka's play not only offers radical answers to postcolonial issues but also proposes a new African aesthetics in drama, which is exclusively Yoruba and African, to fight Western cultural indoctrination.

CONCLUSION

The forest in Soyinka's play, *A Dance of the Forests*, is a symbolic representation of the postcolonial society, interweaving the personal, the political, the traditional, the modern, the collective, and the individual. The author elaborates the links of ritual, aesthetic appeal, and fatality to remind readers to reflect on the interconnection between cultural identity, societal values, and the enduring tension between tradition and change. The forest, as a sanctuary, a powerful symbol of the duality in the human experience, is a means to illustrate the connected nature of life, death, and rebirth within cultural narratives. Moreover, the concept of a conscious and well-informed commitment with past and future aspirations suggests a meaningful reconciliation which can facilitate social progress and renewal. In an allegorical sense, the forest stands as a complex environment for moral exploration, with characters engaged in self-introspective discourses, their societal roles, and moral responsibilities. This ultimately results in the understanding of their identities and relationships with the community. By situating morality at the core of Soyinka's narrative, he prompts readers to engage in a more profound reflection on the nature of social justice, the implications of cultural heritage, and the impact of individuals' actions in society. In essence, the forest in the play is a potent representation that encapsulates the complexity of Nigerian society, the importance of traditions, and the enduring conflict between progress and destruction. Consequently, its setting serves to intensify the play's allegorical quality, enabling the author to delve into profound themes with outstanding artistry, leaving a great improvement in modern African literature.

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