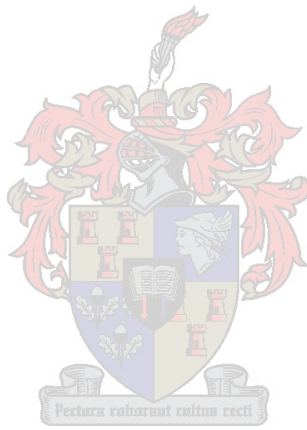


**“MEMORY IS A WEAPON”:  
THE USES OF HISTORY AND MYTH IN SELECTED  
POST-1960 KENYAN, NIGERIAN AND SOUTH  
AFRICAN PLAYS.**

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## DECLARATION:

I, the undersigned, hereby declare that the work contained in this dissertation is my own original work and I have not previously in its entirety, or in part, submitted it at any university for a degree.

Signature:

Date:

## OPSOMMING

In hierdie proefskrif word gekyk na die verwantskap tussen geskiedenis, mite, geheue en teater. Daar word ook gekyk na die mate waartoe historiese of mitiese toneelstukke gebruik kan word om die amptelike geheue en identiteite, soos deur bewindhebbers in post-koloniale Nigerië en Kenya geskep, terug kon wen of uit kon daag. Hierdie werke word dan vergelyk met die soort teater wat tydens die Apartheidbewind in Suid-Afrika geskep is, om verskille en ooreenkomste in die gebruik van historiese en mitiese gegewens te bekyk. Die slotsom is dat een van die belangrikste kenmerke van die teater in vandag se samelewing sy vermoë is om alternatiewe historiese narratiewe te ontwikkel wat kan dien as teen-geheue (“counter-memory”) vir die dominante narratief van amptelike geskiedenis. Sodoende bevraagteken die teater dan ook ‘n liniëre en causale siening van die geskiedenis, maar interpreteer dit eerder as meervoudig en kompleks.

## ABSTRACT

This thesis considers the relationship between history, myth, memory and theatre. The study explores the extent to which historic or mythic plays were used to either reclaim or challenge the official memories and identities created by those in power in the post-colonial Kenyan and Nigerian context. These are then compared to the South African theatre created during Apartheid, exploring the similarities and differences in the South Africans use of historic or mythic referents. The conclusion reached is that one of the most powerful aspects of theatre in society is its ability to create alternate historic narratives that become a counter-memory to the dominant narrative of official histories. It also challenges seeing history as linear and causal, and makes it more plural and complex.

## **DEDICATION**

I would like to dedicate this thesis to my family who have loved and supported me through my years of study. I have particularly appreciated this in the last two years when they were dealing with their own stresses and loss. I think specially of my father, who believed in me and who gave me the courage to complete the path I had set myself. I wish he had been here to share these experiences with me.

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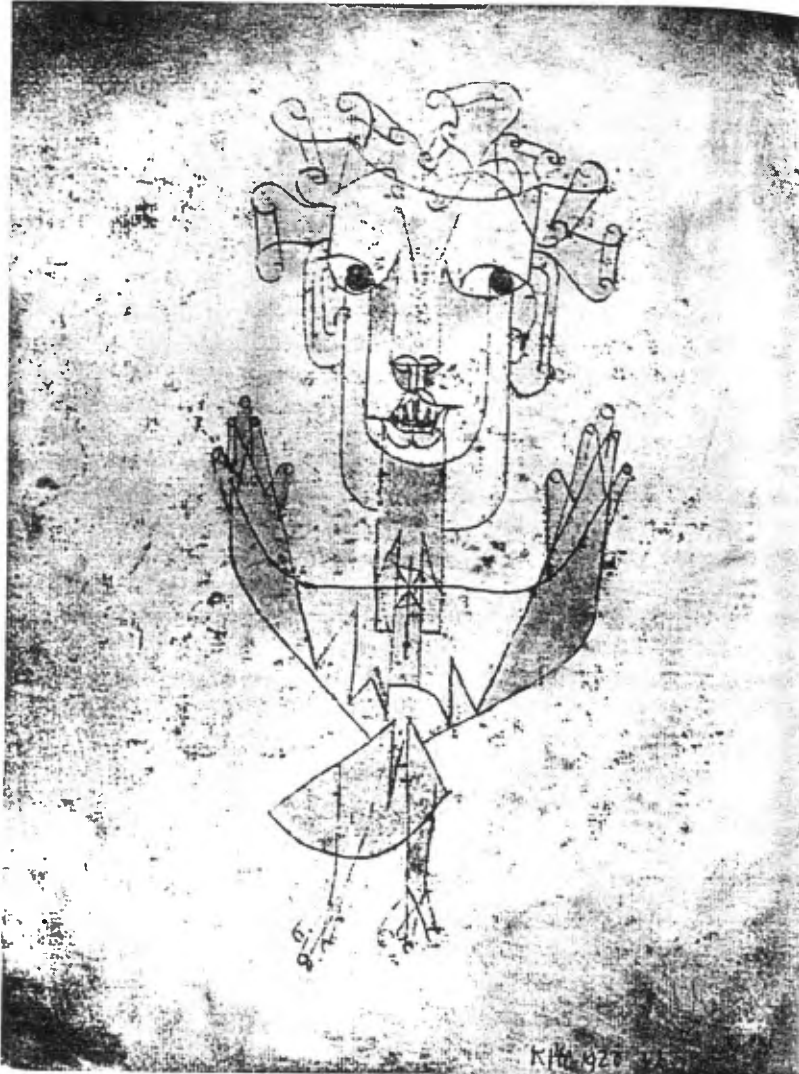
Over the years Professor Hauptfleisch, Director of the *Centre for Theatre and Performance Studies* at Stellenbosch, has taught me much about research and encouraged me to progress in both the areas and scope of my research. For your faith, generosity and encouragement I thank you, Temple.

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31. *Angelus Novus*, 1920, by Paul Klee



## Introduction

*A Klee painting named 'Angelus Novus', shows an angel looking as though he is about to move away from something he is fixedly contemplating. His eyes are staring, his mouth is open, his wings are spread. This is how one pictures the angel of history. His face is turned toward the past. Where we perceive a chain of events, he sees one single catastrophe which keeps piling wreckage upon wreckage and hurls it in front of his feet. The angel would like to stay, awaken the dead, and make whole what has been smashed. But a storm is blowing from Paradise; it has caught in his wings with such violence that the angel can no longer close them. The storm irresistibly propels him into the future to which his back is turned, while the pile of debris before him grows skyward. The storm is what we call progress (Benjamin, 1968: 259-260).*

During the five years since the end of Apartheid in South Africa and the first democratic election in 1994, politicians have been engaged in revising the constitution, educationalists the curricula and the structure of education, and theorists have been re-evaluating the place, form and history of literature and theory in South Africa. A major focus in these processes has been the reviewing, recovering, and even rewriting of histories, for one cannot understand or engage with the present, less even plan for the future, without a clear sense of the past.

Many warnings of the perils of ignoring history have been sounded: for example Opoku-Agyemang, has argued that “[h]istory that advances by denying itself is not history but a pain that perpetually begins anew” (1996:64), and Roland Barthes points out that “[n]ow it is when history is denied that it is most unmistakably at work” (1986:2). Both of these writers warn against the dangers of ignoring history or, worse still, not being conscious of the uses to which history may be applied. In this thesis I will argue that history is powerful in the way it constructs memory, and thus a conscious, informed approach to history is crucial if it is not to be misused.

In the light of how history is being revisited in South Africa, it is not surprising that special issues of journals and books dealing overtly with history and memory have appeared in the last three or four years; examples of these include Smit, van Wyk and Wade's *Rethinking South African Literary History* (1996), the special issue of *Contrasts*

on history (1997), Nuttall and Coetzee's *Negotiating the past: The making of memory in SA* (1998), and Walder's *Post-colonial literatures in English: history, language, theory* (1998). Apart from these academic publications, the Truth and Reconciliation Commission was one of the structures which was specifically designed to contemplate "the wreckage" of South Africa's past and initiate an attempt at "mak(ing) whole what has been smashed", so that South Africa is not simply swept helplessly into the future by "progress" (Benjamin, *ibid.*).

Reevaluating how history has formulated national memory and identity is not a process unique to South Africa. It has also been very much a part of the post-independence experience of most African countries. In this thesis, I have particularly chosen to consider how history and myth may be used in literature, particularly in theatre, to challenge the official memories and identities created by those in power. I have chosen to compare the use of historic and mythic plays in post-colonial Nigerian and Kenyan drama with the theatrical use of history and myth in South Africa during Apartheid. I have chosen Nigeria and Kenya because they share a history of British colonisation, but with very different experiences because of the policies of occupation in each country. I will argue that these alternate historic narratives provide a counter-memory to the dominant narrative of official histories.

I begin by tracing some of the basic premises of historic reconstruction of individual and communal memory from both a European and African historiographic perspective. I am particularly interested in the role of the artist in this process of contemplating and 'making whole' the angel of history. This study also begins to locate South Africa in the context of the debates and processes surrounding the creation of a national memory and identity through reclaiming history in a post-colonial country, or in South Africa's case, a post-Apartheid country. For so long, South Africa has stood in isolation from the wider African context, both because the ruling group preferred to maintain this distance to facilitate the perpetration of Apartheid policies and because of external sanctions in response to this. Now reintegration is imperative.

## **OUTLINE OF THESIS**

### **Chapter One**

Chapter one outlines the theoretical and conceptual frameworks that are used in the rest of the study. I begin by defining some of the relationships between memory, history and myth, and between history and literature, where theatre is more widely located. This chapter is divided into three main areas. The first discusses the theoretical issues that inform the study of history and historiography. This discussion draws on Hayden White's work on historiography (1987), and Lowenthal (1997) with reference to the debate about the relationship between history, myth and memory. In order to shift these debates into the context of colonialism, I use Naomi Greene's (1996) study of national commemoration as a process whereby public memory is formulated as a bridge. I draw particularly on the distinction that she makes between the processes by which something is officially and publicly commemorated, and the way private, personal memory functions. Walcott gives a more positive sense of how this personal reconstruction of history through the imagination can give hope, rather than be purely escapist, avoiding unpleasant aspects of the past. He also addresses the implications of these memories, both those personal and private, and those communal and public, for the fragmented, diversified societies we live in today. This fragmentation has resulted in the artist's role shifting from high priest to archaeologist. It is with this notion that I move from attempting to understand the processes of how history is written to the implications of this process. Both Nietzsche and Foucault challenge the place of the subject in history. But Foucault moves beyond this to challenge the notion of history as being linear and causal in structure.

My second focus is to trace African historiography from the ninth century to post-colonial reclamations of various African histories. Here I draw on Caroline Neale (1985), Temu and Swai (1981), Lidwijn Kaptijns (1977) and the collected essays by Jewsiewicki and Newbury (1986). One of the strongest motivations for African historians rewriting history in the post-colonial context was contesting the European assertion that Africa had had no history before colonisation. Neale argues that the drive to counter this assertion

was so great that African historians failed to interrogate the assumptions underpinning notions of 'civilisation' and progress in colonial histories sufficiently.

My third focus is on the relationship between literature and history. Here I look at Ogude, Bamikunle, Ngugi and Soyinka who all argue strongly for a direct relationship between literature and history, but have differing opinions on the place and use of myth. I then touch on the theoretical positions of Appiah, Olaniyan, Said, and Bhabha on history in the post-colonial context. Said's proposal that we approach history as "contrapuntal and nomadic" rather than "linear and subsuming" is crucial to this study (1994:xv).

Chapter one ends with a sketch of Foucault's theory of counter-memory and of how Lipsitz extends this concept of counter-memory to show how history and myth relate to one another. I believe that history provides the dominant narrative that is defined by those in power. It often supports or justifies the status quo or contemporary system in some way. In this study I argue that theatre sets up alternate, localised, rival narratives of individuals of a society who are not in power. These hidden stories often challenge the dominant narrative and demand revision of existing histories by offering different perspectives on the past.

I am aware that each of these areas, history, myth and memory, is a specialised field for psychologists, anthropologists, sociologists and historians, and thus draw only what I think is necessary to frame this study from a literary history and theoretical perspective.

Using this theoretical frame I will then discuss the overt uses of history and myth in the work of specific playwrights in Kenya, Nigeria and South Africa, and consider to what extent these plays have supported or challenged dominant narratives and contemporary conditions in these countries. I also look at the effects of addressing specific post-colonial socio-political situations through plays which refer to historic events or figures of the past, or within a mythic context. As the scope of national as well as theatre history in the three countries is vast, I have chosen to focus on specific historic moments or socio-

political issues as examples to explore how the frames chosen, whether historic or mythic, work in each play.

## **Chapter Two**

In chapter two I focus on Kenya. I have concentrated on aspects of the Mau Mau resistance struggle, particularly the issue of land dispossession, and consider how this history is used to confront both this and other neo-colonial problems in Kenya. Here I look at Kenneth Watene's *Dedan Kimathi*, Ngugi wa Thiong'o and Micere Mugo's *The Trial of Dedan Kimathi* and Tanzanian writer Hussein's *Kinjeketile*. I explore Ngugi's use of an historic frame to look at neo-colonial corruption in his collaborative plays *I will marry when I want* and *Maitu Njugira (Mother, sing for me)*. In order to explore myth, I have chosen to look at the work of playwright Francis Imbuga, comparing the effectiveness of his use of a myth rather than history in addressing neo-colonial corruption in Kenya and, by implication, in other African countries. I focus on his plays *Betrayal in the city* and *Man of Kafira*.

## **Chapter Three**

In chapter three I focus on Nigeria and look at the way Nigerian playwrights have engaged with the issue of rulership, particularly within the context of the Biafran civil war, by using nineteenth century history or legend as a vehicle to address contemporary issues, particularly the civil war. Here I look at how Ijimere in *Born with fire on his head*, Rotimi in *Kurunmi*, Sofola in *King Emene*, and Onwueme in *The Reign of Wazobia* have each used a specific historic referent for their explorations of issues related to rulership. I then shift to look at Soyinka's complex combination of the mythic and historic in his plays. Here I focus on *A Dance of the forest* and *Death and the king's horseman*. Soyinka's exploration of the metaphysical and social simultaneously with ritual and history makes his dramatisation of history complex and controversial. Finally I compare Duro Ladipo's use of the Moremi historic-legend, in *Moremi*, to that of Femi Osofisan, in *Morountodun*, again, by implication, with reference to the Biafran conflict in post-colonial Nigeria. Osofisan shows how a mythic or historic frame may be subverted to

engage an audience in the evaluation of the past and present, and specifically of the dynamics of class and power.

#### **Chapter Four**

In chapter four I look at South African history and the theatre. The situation in South Africa differs from that in the other two countries insofar as while they had entered a clear post-colonial period, South Africa had not. While South Africa was no longer a British colony after 1910, political and economic power remained in the hands of the white minority. This created very specific socio-political and socio-economic circumstances which greatly influenced both the form and content of its theatre, as well as its theatrical system. As historic theme I have chosen to look at the issue of forced removals, which are not only central to Apartheid history, but also offer interesting points of comparison with the land issue in Kenya. The plays referred to are Fugard's *Boesman and Lena*, The Junction Avenue Theatre Company's *Sophiatown* and Kramer and Petersen's *District Six*. In terms of the use of myth, I look at how, in order to challenge a system that professed to be firmly based in Christianity, South African artists appropriated the messianic figure as a mythic figure in Adam Small's *Kanna hy kô hystoe*, Percy Mtwa and Mbongeni Ngema's *Woza Albert!*, Bartho Smit's *Christine* and Deon Opperman's *Die Teken*. The use of myth in this way is not only powerful but is both similar to and very different from the way myth has been employed in Kenya and Nigeria. In the South African theatre context myth is used as a challenging rather than a distancing device, as applied in Kenyan or Nigerian theatre.

In the final analysis then, this thesis explores the extent to which theatre supports or challenges the dominant narrative, the official history; and the extent to which it provides an alternative, counter-history and counter-identity for the new nations. Dennis Walder suggests that the power of theatre "in the context of historical complexity and difference" resides in its ability to "cross the boundaries of text, performer and audience in order to reach completion ... making it the cultural form which addresses the present more directly than any other" (ALA paper, 1998:1). And of course this is enhanced in Africa by

theatre's ability to overcome many of the limitations of illiteracy, and language barriers in performance. I will argue that much of the power of theatre to challenge the dominant narrative lies in its performative aspect. This is because the performance sets up a forum where potentially the whole nation may participate, evaluate, and comment on the issues being raised.

A comparative study of this kind is naturally circumscribed by various factors: the linguistic limitations of the researcher, the lack of published material and the limited scope possible in a single study. Regarding the language issue: I acknowledge the cautionary advice of Kole Omotoso that the language and specific cultural contexts of a writer inform his/her work. The kind and extent of the critic's first hand knowledge of these aspects of the work defines the nature of the study in which he/ she may engage. As for publishing and access: much African theatre is performance work, unpublished and unscripted. The works referred to in this thesis are almost all published texts, and the discussions centre on the texts rather than on performances of the plays. This means that I am dependent on critics' notes or reviews of the actual event in writing about some aspects of the plays. Because many of these texts are out of print or not easily accessible, some of my readers may not be as familiar with some plays and histories as they are with others that are explored here. I thus sometimes include descriptions of events and interaction in the play, or quotations, that to those more familiar with the texts may seem tedious or unnecessary. In this case, I felt these to be useful for the sake of clarity in my comparisons. I thus ask the readers to bear these limitations in mind. Finally, I want to signal that this is an exploratory study. Its aim is to provoke new questions and explorations in order to stimulate the continued exploration of the artistic and cultural histories and identities of Kenya, Nigeria and South Africa, as well as other African nations.

I hope that these plays may be acknowledged as tools for processing and reclaiming the past more productively and positively. To return to the beginning: if the power of literature is properly realised, I believe that it can provide an alternative for Benjamin's "angel of history", one which may gain sufficient power to turn around and so direct us

into an informed future in which we have learnt from and thus do not repeat the mistakes of the past.





# CHAPTER 1

## HISTORY, MYTH, MEMORY AND LITERATURE

*... the sureness of "I was" is a necessary component of the sureness of "I am."*  
(Wyatt, 1964:319)

Memory and history are important because they define how we identify and understand ourselves, as individuals and as nations, in the present and thus in the future. This is true of individuals and nations. In this sense how these 'memories' are constructed and reconstructed is crucial to whom we are.<sup>1</sup>

I would like to begin this study by defining aspects of the relationship between memory, history and myth. I then trace an overview of the development of African historiography, and the responses and contributions to history by artists and literary theorists. Throughout I look at the forces exerted on Benjamin's 'angel of history', particularly in terms of the role 'progress' has played in these histories.

### 1.1 THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN HISTORY AND MEMORY

The ancient Greeks and Romans anthropomorphised Mnemosyne (memory) as the daughter of ignorance, the mother of wisdom. This paradoxical positioning of knowing and not-knowing and its significance for history is articulated more explicitly by the French historian, Philippe Aries who pioneered research into commemoration and memorials in the 1970s. Aries argues that "history deals with the horizon between the known and the unknown. It is memory that lures us to this horizon. Even the widest horizon of our knowledge is overwhelmed by the mysteries of what lies beyond" (in Hutton, 1993:168).

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<sup>1</sup> Lowenthal points out that in the European consciousness this awareness is fairly recent, a late eighteenth century revelation, cf. 1997: 98-200.

I would like to problematise these processes from the perspective of the social sciences and then look at how they are dealt with in literature, which overtly acknowledges its fictional status.

The psychologist Frederic Bartlett, in “Remembering: A study of experimental and social psychology” argues that:

... remembering is not the re-excitation of innumerable fixed, lifeless and fragmentary traces. It is an imaginative reconstruction, or construction, built out of our attitude towards a whole active mass of organised past reactions or experience, and to a little outstanding detail which commonly appears in an image or in a language form. It is thus hardly ever really exact, even in the most rudimentary cases of role recapitulation, and it is not at all important that it should be so (in Sacks, 1995:173).

Here Bartlett argues for memory as a dynamic and imaginative process that is subject to many complex 'interferences'.<sup>2</sup> The concepts of 'construction' and 'reconstruction' are important for this study, and particularly to the processes involved in both. The importance of the exactitude of the process needs to be considered carefully, though, in view of the potential role it may play when fed back into a personal or even more significantly, a national sense of identity, through history.

'Interferences' which may affect memory, and thus history, include: the context of an event as opposed to the context in which it is being reconstructed; the expectations of all involved, especially the historian;<sup>3</sup> and of course the lapse in time between event and the recreation thereof. This will be evident when looking at the plays. There is often an interesting correlation between the socio-political context in which they were written and the period or incident about which they were written.

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<sup>2</sup> See Lowenthal 1997:193-210 for the detail on the problems related to confirmability of memory, types of memory, forgetting, revising, and reconstruction.

<sup>3</sup> See discussion further on on black historiography of the 1960s, where historians were expected to consciously write in such a way as to build a nation, and support the Pan-Africanist movement, cf. Kapteijns (1977), Caroline Neale (1985) and Temu & Swai (1981).

The time lapse is often significant too insofar as what and how things are ‘remembered’ or ‘forgotten’. Robert Pope, an artist, observes that much time, often an average of five years, might elapse between the original perception or experience and its artistic recreation.<sup>4</sup> He argues that the significance of this time lapse lies in the way it shifts the experience from the personal and transforms it into myth. Pope writes:

During this gestation period the creative faculties act as a filter where personal opaque and chaotic data is made public, transparent and ordered. This is a process of mythologising. Myth and dream are similar: the difference is that dreams have private, personal meaning while myths have public meanings (in Sacks, 1995:176).

Note here that the process includes ordering and interpreting. It also affects identity, insofar as we feed these ‘meanings’ back into our understanding of ourselves and into how we relate to our conscious worlds.

In *Metahistory*, Hayden White clarifies and problematises key issues in historiography and the philosophy of history, and applies these issues to various critical literary debates.<sup>5</sup> A key concept in understanding the mytho-historical dialectic is White’s argument that in looking at the history of the social sciences

... the whole discussion of the nature of ‘realism’ in literature flounders in the failure to assess critically what a genuinely ‘historical’ conception of ‘reality’ consists of. The usual tactic is to set the ‘historical’ over against the ‘mythical’, as if the former were genuinely empirical and the latter were nothing but conceptual, and then to locate the realm of the ‘fictive’ between the two poles (1987:3, footnote 4).

He proposes that we critically re-evaluate the notions of history as ‘empirical’ and myth as ‘conceptual’, and shift the emphasis perhaps, looking at what role memory plays in the (re?)construction of history. This process is very interesting when compared with the relationship between memory and myth. If, as Pope argues, one distinguishes between myth and dream mainly in terms of their place - either in the private or public sphere,

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<sup>4</sup> See Proust on the reconstruction of memory and the processes whereby we relate and reconstruct isolated scenes in a continuous sequence which is constructed, 1983:412-13.

<sup>5</sup> Particularly that of Modernism, Postmodernism and the notion of “realism“.

then the history - literature/art difference may be comparable in terms of how their functions are perceived, and how the corresponding 'rules' for each are established.<sup>6</sup>

As this is a vast area of diverse specialisations, a useful way to explore the complex relationship between memory, history and myth, particularly in the post-colonial context, may be through an example. Much interesting research on memory and history has come out of post-colonial Algerian writing. Naomi Greene,<sup>7</sup> writing on French post-colonial film, refers to the French historian Pierre Nora when trying to distinguish "between history (or historical memory) and memory". He argues that

... places of memory do not have referents in reality. Or rather, they are their own referent: pure, self-referential signs. That is not to say that they are without content, physical presence, or history: quite the contrary. But what makes them places of memory is that, precisely, by which they escape from history (Nora, in Greene, 1996:118).

This notion that memories "do not have referents in reality", is important for our understanding of how memory, history and the mythological processes may work. In many post-colonial writings, especially of the *Pieds-Noirs*<sup>8</sup>, who often feel no longer at home in their mother country, nor have a place in the colonised land, there can be little or no real engagement with the national history of the indigenous people, a history which indicts them. Their response then tended to be withdrawal, conscious or unconscious, into a muted and silent world where "history gives way to a remembered world in which time has stopped and the past has absorbed the present" (Green, 1996:18). Greene argues that this occurs because the war was distant from France, and their defeat meant embarrassment, and so it became uncommemorable, largely ignored by the mother country. For the *Pieds - Noirs*, though, it cannot be forgotten, and at the same time it is

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<sup>6</sup> William Earle (1956) and B.S. benjamin (1967) explore the relationship between the personal and collective aspects of memory.

<sup>7</sup> The article is particularly exploring 'Empire as myth and memory' in relation to French cinema's response to France's colonial past, with many references to studies in the use of memory in both film and references to prose-fiction critics. I find many of the issues and constructs useful, in looking at the application of memory and the creation of myth and history in post-colonial African writing. It also sheds interesting light on the significance of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission in post-apartheid South Africa, where most of the oppressors remained in the country, and amnesia or nostalgia is explicitly made more difficult through these public hearings.

<sup>8</sup> A term used to refer to the French colonials who had been living in Algeria.

somehow a confused past of guilt and unease, and simultaneously also a golden time of honour, where the ideals of a colonial period 'functioned'. Thus the outlines of experience become blurred and memory moves inexorably into "an atemporal zone ... of private symbols and allusions, a mysterious world marked by displacements and repetitions of dreams" (Greene, 1996:106).

In the usual process of national commemoration there are social structures set up to 'remember' for a nation.<sup>9</sup> The process of formulating such public memory, be it in memorial statues, commemorative days, archives, reflects the dominant sense of the 'history', and often tells one more about the time in which it is written/ constructed than about the period to which it is referring. These processes are clearer when old monuments of a fallen system are deconstructed, and new monuments and commemorative days are established.<sup>10</sup> However, the situation of the *Pied-Noirs* was different. There was no 'national' commemoration of their memories, and their defeat forced them to shift the focus of memory from the exact outlines of history (public memory) to that of the private world where private symbols of an atemporal, dream world dominate. In this post-colonial context, the bleaker the present seems, the more glowing the sense of the 'lost paradise' of the past tends to be. I want to look at this phenomenon in all of the plays I will be discussing in this study, exploring the extent to which both the colonised and coloniser are involved in this process of fictionalising, or projecting private dreams or public images.

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<sup>9</sup> Much has been written on memorials. For recent publications see, for example, D. H. Dyal (1983), *A Selected Bibliography of Memorial and Triumphal Arches*. G. H. Hartman (Editor) (1993) *Remembrance: The Shapes of Memory*; K. A. Hass (1998) *Carried to the Wall: American Memory and the Vietnam Veterans Memorial*; E. T. Linenthal (1997) *Preserving Memory : The Struggle to Create America's Holocaust Museum*; D. Lowenthal (1997) *The Past is a Foreign Country*; S. Milton & I. Nowinski (1992) *In Fitting Memory: The Art and Politics of Holocaust Memorials*; C. McIntyre *Monuments of war: how to read a war memorial*. J. Winter (1995) *Sites of Memory; Sites of Mourning*. J. E. Young (1993) *The Texture of Memory: Holocaust Memorials and Meaning*.

<sup>10</sup> It is interesting to look at this in the former Soviet Union, or South Africa. There was much debate about what should be done with the Voortrekker monument in Pretoria, or the Taal Monument in Paarl. One of the most interesting decisions was not to abolish the 16 December as a holiday. It had formerly been the commemoration of Blood River, a battle in which many thousands of Zulus had died. Instead the day was kept and renamed the Day of Reconciliation, making a powerful statement about the redefinition of South Africa's history and people.

Even more startling than the nostalgia, the misrepresentation of the past in terms of private dream, are the 'silences' in memory and histories. These 'silences' represent the denials, repressions and ambiguities of memory (Greene, 1996:114). It is here that one sees the divide between events and the transformations wrought by memory. The reason for this is that of course the most troubling and guilty aspects of memory and experience cannot be represented.

But how, one may ask, are such silences possible? Greene explores some of the methods which narrators may use to avoid the realities of the past, in order to sustain the mythic, dream world. A key technique is the use of the epic form by which "memory transforms history into myth" - because this form suggests a universality, an unspecific and unreal, symbolic world. In some of the films there is a repetitive meeting of characters in different parts of the world which Greene argues "creates the sense of ritualistic drama that takes the entire globe for its stage" (1996:110). In such an epic world of cyclic repetitions, time loses its precise chronology.<sup>11</sup> This private dream world is often signalled by the use of children's songs to suggest the internal, unreal world of the characters. The South African playwright Reza de Wet uses this technique optimally to signal the dream world of her often disturbed and unreliable characters that are otherwise in an apparently realistic world. The narratives in these memory texts are often elliptical and there may be multiple narratives, shifting perspectives and temporal gaps; all of which serve to disorient the reader, viewer, and deny the ordered chronology necessary to create an historical overview. There may be a tendency towards the myopic concentration on details of daily life, while the historical or political events remain hazy and confused. This all serves to reveal a world composed of primal moments of longing and desire rather than realistic presentations of an event or period, or even the 'official' history of those in power (Greene, 1996:112-113).

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<sup>11</sup> Soyinka too works within a ritualistic, epic dramatic form, but to different purposes from these films of the Pied-Noir. Nevertheless, he too has been accused of limiting the socio-political effectiveness of his plays by the use of the atemporal myth. I shall explore his position on myth and history in detail, with examples in chapter three.

Yet, while this may be very useful when looking at the writings of the colonisers of Africa, what of the (re)construction of memory and history of a colonised, or marginalized people? Globalisation has also resulted in societies becoming less and less homogenised and more fragmented and diverse, no longer necessarily having a communal consciousness and thus a national memory. Many societies have been fragmented into smaller, distinct communal groups, each with their own 'memories'.<sup>12</sup> These groups challenge the 'grand' national history more and more. This is especially apparent when reading 'alternative' histories of those who are marginalised in societies: for example women and the 'Afro-American' or 'Black British' person in the United States or Britain.

The historian Pierre Nora summarises the shifts in society and history as we have moved further from a collective memory which is specific to the nation-state and to its history. Greene paraphrases Nora's conviction that

... the decline of traditional, largely rural societies has entailed a radical transformation in the form and function of memory and, especially in its relationship to history and the individual. In the past, he [Nora] asserts memory was largely a collective phenomenon - linked, especially, to the nation-state and to its history. ... but the 'acceleration' of history, the dislocations of the modern world, has hastened the demise of traditional homogenous societies and radically altered the role and nature of memory. Just as the collective (and frequently religious) idea of a unified 'nation' has given way to that of 'society' (with, one supposes, its connotations of diversity and secularism), so too has collective memory largely been replaced by the more 'private' memories (*la memoire particuliere*) of different social groups. ... The end of history-memory has multiplied individual memories (*les memoires particulieres*) which demand their own history (in Greene, 1996:116-117).

One of the consequences of this fragmentation and multiplication of memory has been a change in the role of the artist. Fox suggests that in

... the past the artist was a kind of priest, today's artist is something like an archaeologist of the soul, uncovering lost or hidden meanings. This is especially the case with the visionary artists of the New World, where indigenous history was unmade and the

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<sup>12</sup> See Bhabha (1990) on 'DissemiNation' and the notion of diaspora, movement and how it affects narrative, discourse on identity and nationalism; Greene (1996) on the 'discontinuity' between past and present owing to complex societies; also Hall (1996), Said (1994), Sorkin (1989) and Triulzi (1996).

historical imperatives of the Old World were imposed by force and violence” (Fox, 1986:331).<sup>13</sup>

This reference to the term ‘archaeologist’ reoccurs often when looking at memory and history. ‘Archaeology’ and the concept of genealogy are also central to Foucault’s writing on history.<sup>14</sup> Foucault extended Nietzsche’s interrogation of the subject and his shift from approaching the subject from the ‘bird’s eye’ perspective to the ‘frog’s view’. Not only did Foucault further the ‘disappearance of the subject’ and consider history as a metaphor comparable to the language model, both theories argued by Structuralism; he also challenges the very evolutionary or linear process of consciousness itself in *The Archaeology of Knowledge*. He argues that history consists of “dispersed events - decisions, accidents, initiatives, discoveries” (1972:8), which are arranged to suggest causality and continuity. At the same time he demonstrates that these arrangements of histories are so established to maintain power structures. Here he extends Nietzsche’s argument that “everything that exists, no matter what its origin, is periodically reinterpreted by those in power in terms of fresh intentions”, during which process earlier meanings are necessarily destroyed, and new ones created (Nietzsche, 1956:20). These two ideas are, of course related, as is evident in the way African history has been reclaimed in the post-colonial period.

Thus, within the context of fragmented, non-homogeneous, diverse worlds, which exist parallel to one another, memory cannot be constituted in the same way as it has been in the past. In the context of fragmented experience memory has become deeply psychological and private by nature. If one were to summarise the shifts in society, and the corresponding shifts in memory, the movement would be from the historical to the psychological, from the societal to the individual, the transmissive to the subjective, moving from repetition (in the sense of accepted continuity) to commemoration (of particular events). Thus, the ironic paradox and result of the psychologization and

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<sup>13</sup> It is within this frame that he looks at the work of Walcott’s approach to history as evidence of man’s ‘dis-ease’ with his world and himself.

<sup>14</sup> In the Enlightenment essay of 1984, Foucault combines archeology as a ‘method’, with genealogy as a ‘design’. (1984:46) See Thacker, 1997, for a detailed analysis of Foucault’s uses of these terms in his attempt to write history, exploring ‘archeology’ in terms of discontinuity and history as a discourse; and ‘genealogy’ in terms of the linguistic discourse, as applied in feminist histories, and in the revisions of modern Irish history.



individuation of memory in contemporary society is that social memory is no longer unified, obvious, repetitive in the sense of continuity, but must be constructed, defined and preserved consciously. Often the individual memory and history must be untangled from the context of a complex communal identity and context. Walcott writes “Schizophrenic, wrenched by two styles,/ ... I earn/ my exile” (*Castaway*, 1972:61). Here he refers to the phenomena of not having a clear identity and memory because he straddles two worlds and finds himself in ‘dis-ease’ with both, to borrow Fox’s pun (1986). Fanon documents this and the implications of this process at length in both *Black Face/ White Mask* (1968) and *The Wretched of the Earth* (1963).

Yet, in this context such ‘amnesia’ and myth-making need not always be perceived negatively. Walcott defines history as ‘amnesia’ in ‘The Muse of History’ (1974:4). However, both he and Soyinka see myth as having a far more positive role to play than does Greene. While Greene, and many others, focus on the negative and potentially dangerous aspects of attempting to recapture a ‘lost golden past’,<sup>15</sup> Walcott argues that the ability to make and remake one’s history through the imagination, and thus literature is what gives hope, as the self can be redefined, remade. Baugh quotes Walcott saying: “We contemplate our spirit by the detritus of the past” (in Fox, 1986:337).

## 1.2 THE HISTORIOGRAPHY OF AFRICA AND ITS RELATIONSHIP TO LITERATURE

With Walcott I would like to shift from European theories and versions of history and memory to briefly look at examples of how history in Africa has been ‘remembered’ and written by historians and then compare these to how playwrights have reinterpreted and used these same histories in literature. I try to trace who wrote the histories and what the considerations were that have informed these processes. Again, this is a field in itself. So, with the aid of specialists like Caroline Neale’s *Writing ‘independent’ history: African historiography 1960-1980* (1985), the collection of essays by Jewsiewicki and Newbury

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<sup>15</sup> Despite his own use of myth, Soyinka too has warned against the uncritical reaching back for a lost golden age in pre-colonial Africa (1968).

*African historiographies* (1986), Temu and Swai's *Historians and Africanist History* (1981) and Lidwien Kapteijns doctoral thesis *African historiography written by Africans, 1955-1973* (1977), I should like to give a sense of the differences in approach to the relationship between memory, myth and history in the West and Africa, and then relate this to the role of the artist in Africa and his/her relationship to history.

Kapteijns outlines the development of African historiography from 1850 to the mid-1970s. She suggests that prior to 1850, histories of Africa were mainly oral, with the exception of early texts written by Africans in Arabic or Arabic script for some vernacular languages, including Hausa, Peul, Swahili, Somali. There are also texts written in African scripts, designed by themselves. These include the Vai and Bassa scripts of Liberia, Nsibidi of Nigerian Efik, and the Bamoun script of Njoya, now Cameroon (Kapteijns, 1977:38). Ethiopian Amaharic writing is also important, especially since it was the only African country which was never colonized.

Prior to the 1950s, most of the available written history was recorded by Europeans or Arabs (Kapteijns, 1977:14), an exception was Johnson's *History of the Yorubas*, which was written in the 1890s. The Arabic writings in West Africa include a few chronicles like the Kano chronicle, or the famous *Tarikh al-Sudan* (History of the Sudan) by al-Sa'di. The works related to the period of the Fulani jihads deal mostly with religious issues. Then there is also correspondence, official documents (land grants, privileges conferred by a ruler on a particular family) and much poetry, in African languages and Arabic. The Arabic historiography covers the period from the 8th to the 15th centuries and consists of mainly geographical works - noting the latitude and longitude of a country, its position, routes and kingdoms, and the marvels of the countries. They were interested in types of government, the nature of armed forces, the character and direction of foreign trade, the boundaries of kingdoms and the extent of Islamisation. These accounts were predominantly ethnocentric documents, written from the perspective of outsiders with colonial aims in mind.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> For an example of a detailed analysis of the value and limitations of such Arabic accounts see Oyewese, 1988.

The European study of Africa prior to the 1850s was predominantly the preserve of the anthropologist. From the late 1500s onwards some of the writings were by travellers, traders in West Africa, sailors, or missionaries. Beyond this, most of what was known stemmed from the need to solve practical problems of administering power or the missions. Hence the dominance of administrators, military men, doctors, and missionaries in the field. In the 18th century scientific expeditions were sent out to report on Africa's geography, ethnography and natural history. The 19th century provided the bulk of the history of the colonial period, but these histories were very limited. Curiosities of the African scene were stressed and most of the writings were extremely ethnocentric. The histories go no further back than late 15th century, and deal only with coastal areas. These deal mainly with trade and African systems of government (Kaptein, 1977:36-37).

From the 1850s more African historians began writing histories in English or French, or in African languages using the Latin alphabet. These individuals tended to belong to a middle class who emerged from the westernised trading communities of Liberia, Sierra Leone, the Gold Coast and the Bight of Benin, present Southern Nigeria. They were the product of the educational activities of the missions, and thus often tended to support the Western, Christian brand of 'civilisation', that is to say, to a Christianised technologically developed modern social order. They adopted and actively supported the colonial 'humanitarianism' and were committed to creating an African middle class, which would fulfil the civilising mission. These histories would thus be written from a Western Christian perspective, implicitly supporting the colonisation of their respective countries, and not criticising resultant social and political change.

Of course there were dissenting voices to these histories. Kaptein cites for example Senegalese Abbe Boilat: *Esquisses Senegalaises* (1853), James Africanus Beale Horton, EW Blyden's *West Africa before Europe* (1905), CC Reindorf's *History of the Gold Coast and Asante* (1889), Sibthorpe, ABC's *History of Sierra Leone* (1868), Mensah

Sarbah's *Fanti National constitution*, and Samuel Johnson's *History of the Yorubas* (1890).

However, until the 1870s many African writers upheld a conservative, even positive approach to colonialism and supported histories being written from a colonial perspective (see Johnson as a good example of an African writer writing from a European perspective. He wrote from the Yoruba acceptance of inevitable change). This positive sense of colonialism began to change after the 1870s as a result of an increasing colonial racism, mainly stemming from the classification mania of biologists and anthropologists, and the British's new policy of territorial annexation. The greater possibility of white settlement in West Africa, largely owing to the discovery of quinine to combat malaria, changed the arrangement of natives doing the work of colonial officials. An example of this is the church's reversal of its policy of 'native agency'.<sup>17</sup> This contributed to the image of the African becoming steadily harsher and more negative. This change was partially due to the changing needs of the colonial administrations. At the outset British rule had been indirect, with the policy of 'finding the chief' necessitating a more detailed knowledge of the subject people. However, after World War I Britain adopted more direct rule and control of Africa. With this came the need for different knowledge. Together with an increasing economic and political interest in Africa, this led to the co-ordination and sponsoring of African studies. In 1926 the International Africa Institute was founded in London - it became an important centre for ethnological, sociological and linguistic research on Africa. It was soon publishing the journal *Africa*. After World War II African Studies became more widely institutionalised.

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<sup>17</sup> This involved manipulating African clergymen to support colonial purposes. African clergymen were invested with considerable authority. This movement climaxed with the confirmation of S.A. Crowther as the first African bishop (see Ajayi on Crowther and his involvement with the British in mediating the Ijaye war.) Crowther was particularly ambivalent about his fate; and about slaves who were trained and returned to Sierra Leone or Yorubaland, while having to be grateful for their salvation from paganism.

Kaptein argues that the institutionalisation of African studies was monopolised by Europeans until 1950s, dominated by them until early 1960s. She argues that there were two phases in the development of African historiography. The first phase was from 1930 to 1955/60, with the institutionalisation of African studies in Europe and Africa (see 1977:17-20 for details on Institutes, departments, and journals in both France and Britain). The second phase was from 1955/60 to 1965, with further institutionalisation; but more importantly, the Africanisation of the subject, research personnel and institutions of African history as well (1977:20-22).

The establishment of University Departments like the International Africa Institute (London, 1927), the Institut Francais de l'Afrique Noire (IFAN, 1937), the First International Conference of Africanists of the West (Dakar, 1945) and the series of conferences that followed at SOAS (London, 1953, 1957, 1961), the introduction of North Western University's inter-disciplinary African Studies programme in its curriculum (1947), the Ecole Pratique des hautes Etudes (EPHE, 1954), the Centre d'Etudes Africaines of E.P.H.E. (1958) and the Centre des Recherches africaines (Sorbonne, 1962) all aided the establishment of the field in academia. Unfortunately, at the same time, it also served to entrench African studies primarily as a Western domain of research. This meant that although most of these institutes had branches for research and teaching in African countries, the departments and universities were dependent on the 'mother' institutes for direction and control. These Universities and Colleges did not have the authority to award their own degrees, set their own standards, curricula, or examinations. A major problem was Britain's obsession with standards. So, much of the Africanisation had to wait for independence for the university colleges to obtain full university status. At this stage African history received an enormous impetus, since it became a major concern of History Departments and multi-disciplinary Institutes of African Studies.

Soon departments set up their own institutes, like the I.A.S (Institute of African Studies) established in July 1963 at the University of Ibadan. The I.A.S. began to publish its own journal, *African Notes*, as well as an Archaeological newsletter and *The Journal of West*

*African languages*. Soon other Universities were established: the University of Nigeria, Nsukka (1960), Ahmadu Bello University (Zaria); the University of Ife, Ile-Ife; and the University of Lagos all in 1962. By 1977 Nigeria had ten universities and three university colleges, and by 1965 African history had been institutionalised, made professional and were headed by Africans.<sup>18</sup>

These shifts in focus of these departments, and African historicism was partly a response to the world wars, with the Italian occupation of Ethiopia, the way Jews were treated in Germany, Ghandi's nationalism, and the developments in North Africa. These events shocked many of the Black intellectuals into changing their view of the West and rejecting European models; shifting towards a more aggressive assertion of 'the African Personality'. This coincided with the growth of the Negritude movement, beginning with the black Francophone intellectuals. Although they did not write history, they were to profoundly influence the rediscovery of traditional African values, which in turn influenced the content and tone of histories. Marxism and the American Negro Renaissance of the 1920s, or New Negro movement influenced the Negritude and later Pan-African movements a great deal. From here history was seen as a means to 'rehabilitate' the African and vindicate Africa's greatness.

The African historian and writer now had to (re?)define his aim, methodology, and place in the newly dependent countries of Africa. The questions being the why and how of African historiography, the role and responsibility of the African historian. The answers to these questions were in constant flux.

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<sup>18</sup> Kapteijns argues that French West African institutions did not develop as much independence as institutions in the Anglophone countries - with the exception of the University of Dakar and Institut Fondamentale pour l'Afrique Noire (post independent IFAN) and that there are still relatively few professional historians of Francophone West African origin (1977: 21). The possible reasons for this cannot be explored in this study.

One aspect of the reaction to the prevailing colonial histories whose opinions had dominated was the need to ‘demythologise’ African history. The issue then was which were the myths? How did one go about demystifying and demythologising history? Many of these debates and the reactions to colonialism have fed into the later post-colonial debate and the problems involved in defining or not defining personal or national identity in relation to the colonial Other. All of these issues have profoundly influenced the construction of national memory and identity.

The second aspect of the new historiographic project was their definition of a clear, new function for African historical writing, outlining a programme for making the past usable and relevant to modern Africans. Here one needs to consider how Africa had been defined by European historians and to what extent these assumptions or historic traditions were, and still need to be, challenged by the African historian.

Temu and Swai suggest that “the purpose for which postcolonial historiography was constituted: first and foremost [was] as an ideological rejoinder to colonial historiography” (1981:28). The most important colonial claim that needed refuting was that “the African past was not historical” (1981:21), or, as Trevor Roper has so often been quoted as saying, that there was no pre-colonial African history. These claims were primarily built on three arguments. Firstly, they were built on the perception of Africa as static, passive, a *tabula rasa* on which invaders had left some outward traces, no more than the “space Europe swelled up” (ibid). Secondly, on the argument that there were no written sources for these histories (as has been noted earlier, this is not entirely accurate either). And finally, it was said that Africa had no historical consciousness (see Ki-Zerbo for refutation 1957:34).

An example of the representation they were reacting against is given in the epigraph of *Der Ruhelose Kontinent* (The restless continent), published in 1958. The author, Rolf Italiaander dedicates his history of Africa to the historian Leo Frobenius, quoting from his work of 1923, *Das sterbende Afrika* (Dying Africa):

Unser heiliges Wissen von der Herrlichkeit der Zukunft ist erschüttert. Sturm fegt über die Erde ... Das Wetter stieg auf in Europa ... Afrika bebt! Gerade dieses Afrika, das drei Jahrtausende lang in ungestörtem Schlafe träumte. Der dunkle Erdteil, der schwarze Erdteil, der Erdteil der schlafenden Rasse! Afrika ist erwacht. Wir haben es geweckt. Nicht zum Tageswerk der Arbeit, des Friedens - zum Zweikampf, zum Entscheidungskampf. Auch Afrika wird zur Arena.

Our holy knowledge of the glory of the future is shaken. A storm sweeps over the earth ... Clouds gather over Europe ... Africa quakes! Even this Africa which has dreamt in undisturbed sleep for three millennia. The dark continent, the black continent, the continent of the sleeping race! Africa has awoken. We have awoken her. Not to work, nor for peace - but to combat, to a decisive battle. Africa too becomes an arena.

He ends his history by saying: "Afrika wird der Kontinent des 21 Jahrhunderts sein!/ Africa will be the continent of the 21st century!" (1958: 645). Here one sees the representation of Africa as passive, a homogeneous continent of one 'race', that had slept until it had been awoken by the colonial impact.

Temu and Swai, Kapteijns, and Neale all point out that refuting these myths was seen as the historian's first task. But more important than this, was the need to create "continuity with the world and ourselves" (Cesaire, 1970:160). Achieving this continuity was seen as a way to cure the alienation created by colonialism and retrace an African identity. Dike said that:

African Studies will be the means to the achievement for the African, of greater self-respect, the means to the creation of a surer African personality in the face of the modern world (quoted in Kapteijns, 1977: 25).

So, new myths were created and the ancient civilisation of Egypt, the great Empires of Mali and Ghana were highlighted as the roots of African civilisation. This served to suggest autonomy and originality. History became a means to contribute to the unification of Africa. In the absence of a common language, religion, and often even 'race', new nations were calling upon history and the historian to define a national identity, and to create and mould a national consciousness. Diop argued:

I am convinced that history and culture are factors as important in the construction of a nation as more material considerations, for a nation without a distinctive history and culture is without content (Diop paraphrased by Moniot, 1962:124).



By linking the new leaders to great and glorious ancestry, historians attempted to give them legitimacy in the eyes of the people, and the historical connection between new states and great medieval empires suggested that current problems are only temporary and that past greatness could be reattained in the future.

It is here that it may be useful to stop and consider the basis for these various historical approaches. Caroline Neale, Temu and Swai argue strongly that the formulations and assumptions of the European frame have been of central significance for the contemporary African historian. Temu and Swai specifically refer to the “empirical method which in the nineteenth century had helped to usher in a dawn of scientific, that is, critical historiography” (1981:21). This method has meant the assumption of the Western historian’s obsession with ‘fact’ as opposed to ‘myth’, and the necessity of written testimony as verifiable or reliable source of histories as the norm from which early African histories were written and evaluated. Effectively these assumptions dismissed the oral tradition, and thus discredited any valid pre-colonial African history.<sup>19</sup>

Neale points to an even more serious issue with regard to the extension of African historiography from the Western tradition. She argues that the African historians challenged the content of histories rather than the assumptions (1985:9). Here I would like to return to the opening reference to Walter Benjamin’s wind of ‘progress’ sweeping the Angel of History unwillingly into the future. The word ‘progress’ is key here. Neale refers to the British historian E.H. Carr as having said:

History properly so-called can be written only by those who find and accept a sense of direction in history itself. The belief that we have come from somewhere is closely linked with the belief that we are going somewhere. A society which has lost belief in its capacity to progress in the future will quickly cease to concern itself with progress in the past (Neale, 1985: 7).

Here the European assumption is that progression needs to be linear, forward-moving toward something. This ‘something’ tends to be defined in terms of city-states or empires

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<sup>19</sup> Hayden White contests this notion in the Western context too, see reference earlier, 1987:3, footnote 4.

(Neale, 1985:10-13, 30, 38-40). Thus a stable society, shifting from migrant hunter-gatherers to cultivators was seen as more 'civilised' and progressive. This assumption is European, in line with its own historical development. Wrigley writes: "The whole meaning of progress is the transition from tribe to state, from segmentary to centralised political system" (1971:120).<sup>20</sup>

Thus what black historians tended to do was return and focus their research and writing on proving that they had been progressive and did have history and Empires in Mali, Ghana, Songhai and a number of the Hausa states<sup>21</sup>. There was also the rewriting of Shaka as hero, state builder, unifier of many peoples. The rhetoric of empire and unification became an answer to the colonial assertion that there was no pre-colonial history and to the segmentary nature of African culture. Yet there was no questioning of the nature of the assumptions underpinning the West's assertions about Africa. This was partly because regaining a sense of self-worth was so important at the time, and because it served the nationalist purposes of the new leaders of independent states. Political theorist Kasfir states that: "Ancient African Empires are important today precisely because modern African leaders say they are" (1968:16), and the reason they do so is due to "the unifying role of the myths left behind" (1968:18). Thus rhetoric of Empire served the aims of the newly independent African states.

Yet these rewritings were not unproblematic. If the artist or historian committed him/herself to rewriting a positive sense of Africa's past, what would happen when faced with silences or unpleasant aspects of this past? The issue of slavery is a case in point. Looking at historical accounts, one notes that pre-1960 very little, if any, mention is made of the slave trade in Africa, despite its having a long and extensive history. Yet in the 1960s there was the need to address this issue and, at the same time, not weaken the

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<sup>20</sup> See for example Forde and Karberry's collection: *West African kingdoms in the Nineteenth century* (1971). Here professors from various Institutes of Social anthropology, Anthropology, Ethnology, the director of IFAN and an African studies professor, most writing from Britain or Europe, trace the Kingdoms of Benin, Oyo, Dahomey, Hausa, Kom in West Cameroon, Mossi, Gonja, Ashanti, the Mende chiefdoms of Sierra Leone and the Wolof kingdom of Kayor.

<sup>21</sup> See for example Fage (1969a, chapters 2 and 3) on the great states of the western and central Sudan, and Fage (1988) on states in the Near East and the Mediterranean, Sudan, Guinea, North-East and Bantu Africa, Arab empires.

fragile positive sense of self that was being formulated, nor aid the colonial image of Africa as negative and barbaric. Interestingly, the historians seemed to feel unable to simply reflect the history; they attempted to justify it as well. Fage suggests that slave trade was “purposive” because while it “tended ... to weaken or destroy more segmentary societies”, it sped up the process of centralisation in the stronger kingdoms (1969:402). He argues that slavery in West Africa is not comparable to that in the west, as all were slaves to the king and had rights “far in advance of the rights of any slave in any colony in the Americas” (1996:394).<sup>22</sup> Here one sees how the need to define Africa in progressive economic and state terms, in terms of African Empires, has influenced the way this history has been reflected, within the “processes of exclusion, stress and subordination”, in Hayden White’s terms.

### 1.3 THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN HISTORY AND LITERATURE

I now want to compare how some of these issues were dealt with in literature. In an article published in 1996, Kwadwo Opoku-Agyemang suggests that there has been very little to no literature from Africa dealing with the slave trade, rather African literature has tended to focus almost exclusively on post-colonial issues. She argues that the significance of this silence is that the literature has not explored how this history made people ‘feel’, what did it DO to the people involved, and their families, societies? (1996:51). Opoku-Agyemang criticises Achebe for ignoring these issues, and Ama Ata Aidoo for dealing with them as a frame or motif in *ANOWA*, rather than as a focus (1996:58). She says that even novels in the 1970s with titles referring to slavery (like Buchi Emecheta’s *The Slave Girl* (1977) and Elechi Amadi’s *The Slave* (1978) do not deal with the slave experience, but rather with the servant experience or ‘slave labour’ as workers in concentration camps (1996:63).

Ogude, though, points out that the early writing on slavery was the first and only significant theme in many of the mid- to late 1700s. He refers to Francis Williams, James

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<sup>22</sup> For responses to Fage see Wrigley, 1971; Temu/ Swai, 1981: 67-9; Neale, 1985:13.

Albert/ Ukawsaw Gronniosaw, Phillis Wheatley (1773), Ignatius Sancho's *Letters* appeared in 1782, Equiano's *Interesting Narrative* (1789), Ottobah Cugoano (1787), a selection of poems by George Horton *Poems by a Slave* (1829) (Ogude, 1991:3-4).

This is interesting when one looks at what was happening in this period. The historian Hallett points out that there was a marked increase of trade in Africa from 1775. He says, "British exports to Africa, valued at 130,000 pounds in 1720, had risen to 866, 000", and the slave dealers were calling for more, as were the merchants of London and Paris and industrialists of Manchester and Lyons. He also suggests that Africa became a major focus in the Peace negotiations after the Anglo-French wars in 1763 and 1783 (Hallett, 1995:58).

The slave issue highlights the nature of the correspondence or relationship between history and literature. The latter is responding more immediately to the circumstances of its time both in the 1700s and the 1900s. Then the slave issue was paramount, and in the twentieth century it is less the effect of slavery as the development from slavery to 'legitimate trade' on the colonial's behalf that the African writer feels needs to be assessed and explored. The overt issue of slavery has not been ignored. Rather, it has been subsumed into the larger field of the colonial experience. The limitations of such exclusive and binary approaches to the colonial experience was taken up in the 1980s by post-colonial theorists and philosophers like Appiah, Olaniyan, Said, Bhabha and Spivac. These second-generation writers began challenging historians and writers of the immediate post-colonial period because of their reactionary response to the Western uses of myth, history and ways of defining identity. The primary focus was on redefining difference and not simply working from a counter-hegemonic position as the post-colonial and negritude writers had tended to do.

However, it is important to note that not all early historians uncritically supported a blind adoration of the state or national leaders, or were ready to serve as unquestioning handmaidens to nationalism. An example of a more critical historian is the Nigerian historian Biobaku and the Kenyan M. Ochieng, who carefully disassociated themselves

from the African historiography of the early 1960s. And even those who may have at first identified themselves and their work with the new nation soon became disillusioned with the extreme and uncritical nationalism and the form independence had taken in many countries. None of these more so than Soyinka. In 1967, writing just before the Nigerian Civil war he said:

The African writer needs an urgent release from the past. Of course the past exists ... the past exists now, at this moment it is coexistent in present awareness - It clarifies the present and explains the future, but it is not a fleshpot for escapist indulgence ... (Soyinka, 1970:140).<sup>23</sup>

These references to East and West African historians and writers raise the interesting comparison between their respective approaches to history. Neale suggests that the differences in historiographic approaches to Africa are not so much in terms of black and white as between East and West African historians (1985:104). The reason for this is perhaps the differences between how these countries experienced British colonialism and post-independence. Neale argues that East Africans were far more defensive for longer than West African historians. She argues that Temu and Gwassa are very definite about redefining 'resistance' and 'collaboration' and defending nationalism in the East African history, especially of Tanzania, going so far as to excuse what may be seen as 'collaboration' as manipulation of the coloniser in order to further personal or ethnic aims (1985:108).

The West African historian in contrast seems less defensive and does not place reaction to the colonial in central position. Neale gives as an example the Nigerian historian Tamuno's inaugural lecture of 1973, which does not scruple to suggest that not all were heroes in the struggle. He identifies collaborators and states the failures of the Nigerian amalgamation of 1914, and the hypocrisy of the national leaders. This is possibly because Nigerian historians were more confident in themselves, sure of their moments of strength to be able to expose the weaknesses. Also, they had seen the potential weaknesses of the newly independent country early on, in the civil war after amalgamation. Nigeria also had

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<sup>23</sup> In *Myth, literature and the African world* Soyinka criticises various histories (1976:x), in particular Diop, Williams, Frobenius (see responses discussed in Soyinka, 1976:99-110 on these historic and literary reconstructions which have been seriously influenced by national leaders call for 'authenticite').

had a longer tradition of urban living, with all the problems this involves, and longer interaction with Western capitalism, Western culture and political forms.

Kenya, on the other hand, had been more physically occupied by Britain than Nigeria had been. This meant that she had to fight for the return of the physical land. Kenyans idealistically believed that independence, self-rule, would solve all her problems. She also had a definite need to rebuild self-esteem and reconfirm the reality of her independence. Both Kenya and Tanzania had hosted many scholars and artists who were very positive about the success of socialism in Africa. These circumstances meant that these countries engaged critically with their post-independence problems differently and much later than historians and artists in Nigeria.

A second issue, which emerged with post-colonial nationalism and historiography, is that of defining a specific African identity. Initially this too was a positive move to recover a sense of the lost self, the 'continuity' Césaire speaks of. But as Marxist historians were to point out, this, like the discourse about women, the Native Americans, Black Americans, Australian Aborigine, and other marginalised groups, did not change their positions socially or economically. In many cases this focus on 'otherness', defining self in terms of difference, even if this seemed to be positive, was not enough.

The tendency in histories and literatures had been to focus on State or Empire, on the dominant group instead of the majority in a country and the material circumstances that define these groups and their respective histories. The shift towards the majority and peripheralised was important because one can change the circumstances of a people more easily than one can change cultural identity. As many scholars, like Walter Rodney in *How Europe Underdeveloped Africa* (1973) and A.G. Hopkins in *An Economic History of West Africa* (1973) point out: Europe ignores these post-colonial redefinitions of self because they are insignificant in relation to economics which defines control. America and Europe no longer need physical authority over countries in order to access labour or resources. This can be successfully managed through technological control and the co-

operation of leaders. As Neale says, in her extended analysis of the relationship between Marxist and Nationalist historicism:

To focus on politics as separate from economics, to get caught up in nationalism and the achievement of independence, is merely to distract the attention from the fact that this relationship between Africa and Europe has not changed; it was not overturned by independence (Neale, 1985:169).

The key then seems to be to shift the focus from kings, diplomacy, military conquests to peasants and slaves, ordinary people, economic and class issues. However, while Marxist readings of history are interesting and have broadened the base for looking at the past, Marxism is a coherent theory, which negates rather than adds to others. Temu and Swai give a sense of these various debates, their successes and limitations and the complexity of the ways ahead.

It is at this point that I would like to shift the focus to look at the relationship between history and literature as perceived by artists and literary critics specifically.

#### **1.4 THE ARTIST AND LITERARY CRITIC'S APPROACH TO HISTORY IN LITERATURE**

I would like to suggest that literature has a significant place in these processes of redefining histories because, by virtue of its 'fictional' status, it may offer an alternative, less 'centred'<sup>24</sup> exploration of history, which can challenge both the past and the future. Foucault advocates a self-reflexive use of history. He comments that: "recourse to history ... is meaningful to the extent that history serves to show how that-which-is has not always been; ie., that the things which seem most evident to us are always formed in the confluence of encounters and chances" (1988:37). Literature may go even further, using reflections on history not only to explain how things came to be, but to suggest alternatives and to prompt change in society.

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<sup>24</sup> I use this term in the sense of the post-colonial debate with the Centre being the dominant Power base which tends to define identity, history, and has the controlling voice; as opposed to the disempowered on the peripheries of society - the colonised, the Afro-American, women, etc.

Africa traditionally does not insist on the binary separation of 'mythical' and 'historical' truths as is commonplace in the European tradition.<sup>25</sup> Neale has analysed a number of myths of East and central Africa and shows how these function to explore the complex socio-political issues the community were experiencing. The myths revealed ambiguities in the societies' responses to changing government and power. With subtle complexity, the mythic tales explore these changes and reveal them to be neither entirely beneficial nor ultimately detrimental to the community.<sup>26</sup> With various examples Neale points out that it is often "the storyteller's intention to make the ambiguities of their historical experience available to his listeners" (1995:1194). Often these ambiguities convey a more realistic sense of the complexities of the realities facing a society, than traditional historic accounts do.

This is then where one needs to consider the relationship between history, memory and the artist, particularly dramatist in Africa. Lerner argues that "fiction differs from history in not making a claim to truth" (in Walder, 1990:336). Hayden White in *Metahistory*, argues that the difference between 'history' and 'fiction' lies in the fact that "historical works are made up of events that exist outside the consciousness of the writer". He goes on to explore how the processes of exclusion, stress and subordination are carried out "in the interest of the constitution of a story of a particular kind" (1987:6, footnote 5). The earlier example of the sensitive issue of slavery in Africa is a case in point. In this sense then, there may not be such a great divide between history and literature, even in the traditional Western frame.

Let us turn now to how some of the African writers saw the role of history in the 1960s and 1970s, how this related to the African historiographic view, and how post-colonial theorists have responded to these debates.

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<sup>25</sup> See Schipper, 1982.

<sup>26</sup> See see C. Neale, *Pride and Prejudice in African History: The idea of Progress in the revision of African history 1960-1970*, unpublished D-Phil thesis, Uni of Sussex. Also, Neale, 1985, Chapter 7.



S.E. Ogude suggests that the mainstream of African literature to date is 'historical' in the sense that it dramatises actual historical events or social conditions, and that this history "has tended to be the history of the Europeans in Africa" (1991:1). He suggests that African literature is "the story of the black man's attempt to reassert his political rights, defend the integrity of his culture and reassess his relationship with Europe and its institutions" (1991:5). Thus, he argues "that a primary role of literature in Africa today is to document the social and political history of the continent" as then literature is "both a record of and creative recreation of the black man's experience in Africa" (1991:8-9). Here the focus seems to be to challenge the history of the West and write the unwritten histories and experiences of Africa's peoples.

Bamikunle subscribes to a similar view. He sees literature as a product of history upon which it depends for its various constituents, but it takes from history to reconstruct history, according to the visions of literature (Bamikunle, 1991:73-4). In this sense literature is Janus-like in that it allows the society to look forward and back simultaneously, to take from the past to reconstruct the future (1991:74). Here, I would argue, lies one of the potential strengths of literature.

Baminkunle goes on to argue that Achebe, Soyinka, and Ngugi wa Thiong'o have seen the role of the artist as teacher, to enlighten society and bring it to self-awareness and knowledge, reminding it of what still needs to be done. Many Nigerian, and indeed African authors demonstrate their agreement with Bamikunle's belief that "literature is where our history, from pre-colonialism, colonialism, independence and post-independence can be enacted and be assessed or re-assessed as necessary and reconstructed to give the future a desirable direction" (Bamikunle, 1991:75).

Ngugi sees the artist as someone who is "trying to probe into society, to probe into the kinds of tensions and conflicts in society. He might indicate areas of past conflict, and areas of possible development. He might give moral guidance in a struggle. And I see the artist trying to get people to come more together and with society's struggle, to create a

different type of society from the one we inherited from the colonial set-up” (interview in Sander and Munro, 1973:26).

Soyinka, though, argues for a more complex relationship between not only art and history, but also art and myth and ritual. In *Myth, literature and the African world* Soyinka outlines how he sees myth in literature, particularly drama, both secularly and religiously. From the first essay he argues that myths are universal and “arise from man’s attempt to externalise and communicate his inner intuitions” (1976:3). These are then expressed through drama or ritual as “essence” (1976:34). He compares his view of myth to Jung’s sense of the archetype which “mediates between the unconscious substratum and the conscious mind...”, it “throws a bridge between the consciousness of the present and the natural, unconscious, instinctive wholeness of primeval times” (1976:35). The latter reference is explained or applied in *The Fourth Stage*, an appendix here, which presents a complex Yoruba cosmology - suggesting man alienated from the spirit realm and longing to be united. This unity, or wholeness, is partially satisfied through drama, through ritual that mediates between alienated man’s subconscious and the spirit realm where he was once whole in ‘primeval times’. Soyinka sees “the singularity of theatre is its simultaneity in the forging of a single human experience” (1976:42) and the artist as bridges - with the past, “between the entrenchment of deities ... as mentors of social perspectives, and works of an assertive secular vision” (1976:87).

In mapping his mythic sense of the role of theatre and the dramatist, Soyinka argues for parallel or comparable accounts, stereotypes and experiences for the Yoruba, Greek and Judeo-Christian. He parallels Ogun with Nietzsche’s Dionysos-Apollo in an attempt to formulate the conflicts and struggles common to humanity. Like Walcott, Soyinka sees myth as powerful because the ancestral memory is enshrined in myth, and thus more valuable than the ‘historic’ account.

Yet theorists, especially Marxist theorists like Jeyifo criticise Soyinka’s mythopoeic approach to history, and the metaphysical emphasis in his work as a betrayal of history itself (Jeyifo, 1985:97). Many argue that the problem in the use of myth in relation to

history is that it is not temporally specific and, Jeyifo argues, can thus be used to naturalise the principles of a master culture as universal forms of thought. Thus the presentation of events or projects may be presented as authorised representations of Truth. He argues this because he sees myth as taking no account of the class or material structure underpinning a society. Looking particularly at *Death and a King's Horseman*, he suggests that it looks at the destiny of an individual representing “the patriarchal feudalist code of the ancient Oyo kingdom” (Jeyifo, 1985:102), rather than the people as a whole. He contrasts this to Hussein's *Kinjeketile* where the protagonist is ‘one of the people’, and ultimately the myth “released the dormant energies of the people” (Jeyifo, 1985:104). I would like to return to readings of these plays, both in terms of history and myth in detail in later chapters. For now, though I want to trace the various voices in these debates on myth, history and literature facing the African dramatist.

Appiah picks up the debate on Soyinka's use of myth and contests Soyinka's assertion of a single African worldview (1992, chapter four). It is interesting that he does not consider the idea of an homogenous Africa as supporting such an argument, or that the Yoruba myth may be representative of all myth, as Soyinka suggests in his comparisons with Greek and Judeo-Christian traditions. Rather, Appiah points out that part of the reason for this presumption on Soyinka's behalf has been the shift from a primarily oral to a more literary world. With this has come the shift from the communal, the public ‘we’ implicit in the oral form of performance, story-telling, to the private ‘I’ of the author, reader. He argues that this dialectical struggle between “self-as-whole and self-as-part” is the core to understanding the tensions in Soyinka's work and theories, especially those in *Myth, literature and the African World* (Appiah, 1992:83). Yet, Appiah does admit that this new individuality cannot be escaped, and calls for a positive response to it: “Let us celebrate it ... and celebrate it in the work of Soyinka” (1992:84).

All of these arguments or proposals of the role and position of the artist seem to be in line with the position adopted by historians in post-colonial Africa. They saw their role as being that of the voice reclaiming a history and identity lost or broken by the colonial

presence. It is committed art, which engages with the socio-political-historical issues of their various communities.

Together with the acceptance of and adjustment to a new sense of individuality, precipitated by European contact with Africa, comes the issue of how the African author or artist defines him/herself and his/her historical subject. The early post-colonial tendency, much influenced by the Black Consciousness movement from the United States of America (especially du Bois, Langston Hughes, and later LeRoi Jones/Amiri Baraka), has been toward an Afrocentric approach to identity and culture. Theorists and critics such as Chinweizu, Onwuchekwa Jemie and Ihechukwu Madubuike and to a lesser extent also Adedeji, Minneke Schipper, Bakary Traore, Oyin Ogunba, and Oyekan Owomoyela were influenced by the Black Consciousness or negritude movement's dedication to develop a particularly black aesthetic and identity, and to varying degrees was anti-Eurocentric and anti-imperialist. Part of the definition of this aesthetic is the formulation of a nationalistic, collective black identity. Baraka formulates it thus:

I would like to .... say that my conception of art, black art, is that it has to be collective, it has to be functional, it has to be committed and that actually, if it's not stemming from conscious nationalism, then at this time it's invalid. When I say collective, that it comes from the collective experience of black people, when I say committed, it has to be committed to change, revolutionary change. When I say functional, it has to be have a function in the lives of black people (Jeyifous,<sup>27</sup> 1974:41).

Here one notes the references to 'nationalism' and the concept of a 'collective experience', very comparable to the histories being written in the 1960s in Africa.

Yet, while acknowledging the significance of these theorists for their time, throughout *In my Father's House*, Appiah warns against a simple nationalistic approach to history or the use of myth in African literature, arguing that "the discourse of racial solidarity is usually expressed through the language of *intrinsic* racism, while those who have used race as a basis for oppression and hatred have appealed to *extrinsic* racist ideas. This point is important for understanding the character of contemporary Pan-Africanism"

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<sup>27</sup> Later he used the name Jeyifo, and dropped the anglicised "s" from his surname.

(1992:17). The reason for this is that many Pan-Africanists argue for a single, African identity, literary history etc. Olaniyan argues that Afrocentric cultural nationalism is “proposing a disabling, expressive identity” because of its ‘relativism’ and ‘culturalism’ (1995:32).

In explaining what he means by relativism, one needs to look at the arguments proposed by advocates of cultural nationalism. These are most clearly stated by the Nigerian authors Chinweizu, Onwuchekwa Jemie and Ihechukwu Madubuike in *Toward the decolonisation of African literature* (1980) where their central insistence is that “African literature is an autonomous entity, separate and apart from all other literature. It has its own traditions, models, norms” (1980:4). While it is true that African literature is its own entity, and does have its own forms, models, traditions; there are two problems: firstly, these traditions vary from group to group, one cannot speak of ‘Africa’ as an homogeneous whole. There are plural traditions and entities that may interact creatively with one another and need to be considered within their specific contexts. Secondly, as Fanon suggests, cultural relativism is only possible if “the colonial status ... is irreversibly excluded” (1969:44). It is not possible to ignore or contest the Western influence on African literature. Chinweizu, Jemie and Madubuike are themselves, to some extent, influenced by their Western education, all of whom did their post-graduate studies at American or Canadian institutes.<sup>28</sup>

Theorist-historians like Amankulor (1993:144-150) and Michael Etherton (1982) have pointed out in some detail the influences that the educational systems, missions and BBC radio have had on the development of African literature, particularly drama. And, while it is important to break with, and challenge the Western tendency to define, evaluate, criticise African literature from its own perspective and with its own criteria,<sup>29</sup> one cannot

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<sup>28</sup> See Steadman (1998) on the problems associated with essentialist Africanisation in post-Apartheid SA.

<sup>29</sup> For a prime example of the implications of misapplying criteria, see Ruth Finnegan’s early assertion that there was no pre-colonial drama, based on her assumptions of what constitutes drama (1970:500), and Oyin Ogunba’s argument that counters her view on ritual and its exclusion from the ‘dramatic’ on the assumption that there is no role change in ritual performance, where the ‘real’ king or priest is performing the ritual. Yet, Ogunba maintains that the ritual is only possible because there is always a role change which “enables the audience to cut out the individual and substitute the character” (1978:10).

ignore the effect these systems have had, or the importance of evaluating the impact and values these have imposed on African literature.

The post-colonial legacies are many and complex. They include the issue of language (cf. Ngugi, 1986, 1993), the issue of the divide between literary and popular performance forms; and the diversity of experiences and people in any one country. For example, Appiah objects to Soyinka's assumption that Yoruba myth may speak for or exemplify other diverse cultures. Olaniyan, Said, Bhabha, Spivak have all pointed out that to a greater or lesser extent much of the post-colonial theory has tended to be reactionary, as it presents nothing new. Many of the arguments are the opposite side of the same coin, couched in the terminology of the colonial discourse. Appiah argues that these essentialist positions are merely 'reverse discourses' because:

... the terms of resistance are already given us, and our contestation is entrapped within the Western cultural conjuncture we affect to dispute. The pose of repudiation actually presupposes the cultural institutions of the West and the ideological matrix in which they, in turn, are inebriated. Railing against the cultural hegemony of the West, the nativists are of its party without knowing it (1992:59).

Olaniyan, in the same vein, argues that there is a lack of counterhegemonic infrastructures: "Thus it is often the rule rather than the exception that many Afrocentric formulations unwittingly borrow supporting props, albeit in an inverted and most often subversive form, from the colonialist Eurocentric epistemology" (1995:20). The positive side of this is that it relativises the Eurocentric position, the danger lies insofar as these discourses often propose equivalent binaries.

In *Culture and Imperialism*, Said argues that a linear approach to the representation of the Empire from Imperialist to anti-Imperialism in much of the writing (for example Conrad, Gide, Kipling) is impossible, for they often simultaneously contain both Imperialist and anti-Imperialist sentiment. He thus proposes that

... to ignore or otherwise discount the overlapping experience of Westerners and Orientals (and Africans?), the interdependence of cultural terrains in which colonizer and colonized co-existed and battled each other through projections as well as rival geographies, narratives, and histories, is to miss what is essential about the world in the past century (Said, 1994:xx).

In this study I would like to explore these ‘rival geographies, narratives, histories’. Olaniyan, Said, and Bhabha propose more complex approaches to and uses of history. Said outlines two approaches to history: the first is linear and subsuming, and the second he describes as ‘contrapuntal and nomadic’ (1994:xv). He argues for the adoption of the second, which acknowledges ‘crossings’ (1994:201), or ‘overlapping territories and intertwined histories’ (the title of chapter one). Said points out the ‘silence’ regarding imperialism on the part of many writing about colonialism and power: including Foucault, most Marxist theorists (including Habermas), the French theorists (excluding Deleuze, Todoroz and Derrida), and most Anglo-Saxon cultural theorists (with the exception of Raymond Williams and Stuart Hall). He then suggests that the only way to break the ‘shackled unity’ of ‘universalism’ which for centuries has connected culture with imperialism is

[f]irst, by a new integrative or contrapuntal orientation in history that sees Western and non-Western experiences as belonging together because they are concerned with imperialism. Second, by an imaginative, even utopian vision which reconceives emancipatory (as opposed to confining) theory and performance. Third, by an investment neither in new authorities, doctrines, and encoded orthodoxies, nor in established institutions and causes, but in a particular sort of nomadic, migratory, and anti-narrative energy (1994:279).

One may argue that the first, even the second are possible - but I wonder whether it is possible to avoid establishment, to be nomadic, and work historically through anti-narrative? Perhaps, in order to understanding how this may be possible, even for a moment, one must go back and think of the relationship between myth and memory.

Foucault, in *Language, counter-memory, practice*, introduces the idea of counter-memory as the thing which “must record the singularity of events outside of any monotonous finality; it must seek them in the most unpromising places, in what we tend to feel is without history - in sentiments, love, conscience, instincts ...” (1977:139-140). This counter-memory is not necessarily accurate, and does not attempt to achieve accuracy. He insists that it will not “confuse itself with a quest for their (values, morals, asceticism, knowledge) ‘origins’, will never neglect the vicissitudes of history. On the contrary it will

cultivate the details and accidents that accompany any beginning ...” (1977:144). Here Foucault is arguing against understanding events or experience in terms of finality in a linear causal sense. It rejects repetitions and commemoration. It is the ‘singularity’ of the event that becomes the focus. In this sense Foucault is working in an extremely open system where there can be no certainty, it is “the endlessly repeated play of dominations” (1977:150). In this system the event stands outside a grand, linear narrative.

Lipsitz extends Foucault’s use of the term, in suggesting that it begins with the immediate but then he suggests that its power to challenge and renew lies not in rejecting its connection to history, but rather in its relation to both history and myth. He argues that counter-memory is

...a way of remembering and forgetting that starts with the local, the immediate and personal. Unlike historical narratives that begin with the totality of human existence and then locate specific actions and events within that totality, counter-memory starts with the particular and the specific and then builds outward toward a total story.. Counter-memory looks to the past for the hidden stories of those excluded from the dominant narratives. But unlike mythical narratives that seek to detach events and actions from the fabric of any larger history, counter-memory demands revision of existing histories by supplying new perspectives about the past. Counter-memory embodies aspects of myth and aspects of history, but it retains an enduring suspicion of both categories. Counter-memory focuses on localised experiences with oppression, using them to reframe and re-focus dominant narratives purporting to represent universal experience (1989:162).

Counter-memory thus is a blend of myth and history. One needs both the non-linear histories of the oral traditions and the specific context of history for understanding an action. History in this sense becomes more pluralist, ambiguous, contradictory (as opposed to static and linear). It negotiates, is inclusive, rather than super specific and exclusive. “Counter-memory is ... not a denial of history, only a rejection of its false priorities and hierarchical divisions” (Lipsitz, 1989:170).

Within this frame myth becomes important as it provides “legitimation for current actions; it reconciles people to the disparity between their desires and their opportunities” (Lipsitz, 1989:165). It is based on cycles, repetitions and suggests patterns, which thus relate every present experience to a wider context of human experience and history.



Barthes (1986) contends that myth functions primarily as a means for rendering 'natural' (and consequently inevitable) that which is social (and subject to revision). In this way myth can explain the past and order the present if one agrees to the inevitability of the idea of cycles. Soyinka seems to subscribe to the view that history is pessimistically cyclic. In an interview with Jeyifous he says: "There is something depressing about the repetitiousness of history" (Soyinka, 1973:63). Yet, simultaneously he argues for revolutionary action against injustice and oppression. He speaks of "revolutionary action (as) the ultimate expression of will, an assertion of the human intellect as instrument of choice, change, self-destination". He reconciles these two apparently contradictory views by saying that pessimism does not preclude challenge, and argues that the mythic patterns do not suggest stasis, but movement within the cycles as there is clearer understanding of them and the position of the individual. I shall illustrate this in detail with examples from his work in chapter three.

However, it is because of the atemporal, cyclic, repetitive inevitability that a mythic approach is so unacceptable to many Marxist critics. They also object to the neglect of the material base for conditions within a mythic frame. Instead, they call for a dialectical approach to history, which suggests constant challenge and change.

I would argue that one cannot reduce this to an either-or decision. Rather, I would support David Moody's proposal that history is in itself 'a mythopoeic discourse'. He makes this statement by reversing Jeyifo's dialectic on Soyinka (myth as opposed to history) versus Hussein (myth dialectic to 'total life circumstances of the people's hero') and refers to Hayden White's argument that history is itself textual; he points to "its (history's) position as narrative, as a point of view and, in terms of theatre itself, as 'performance'" (1991:98). This relativises the clear placing of history and myth as oppositional or dialectical concepts. We must then ask how may it be possible to mediate between them and bridge the gap articulated by Jeyifo?

Another question concerns where South Africa might lie in these debates? For so long it has been treated as a separate entity, removed from 'African' debates at large. In fact,

many histories were defined as ‘sub-Saharan, excluding South Africa’. For a long time, South Africa has been ‘another country’. Now, though, it has a desperate need to be reintegrated, to learn from and perhaps also contribute to these wider historical and literary debates. South Africa now is going through the process ‘rewriting’ of self and history which other African countries experienced in the 1960s and 1970s. Sadly, though, much of the theory, literature and debates have been physically unavailable to many writers and scholars. Now, many writers in exile are slowly returning. Conferences in and out of the country and exchange scholarships also are addressing this gap. On the other hand, South Africa is dealing with a very different ‘post-colonial’ situation, insofar as it achieved independence from Europe in 1910, but only achieved democracy in 1994. The ‘struggle’ was different from that of Kenya or Nigeria, and the nature of silence and ‘amnesia’ different too. For this reason I propose to discuss the specific issues in and approaches to history, myth and memory in detail separately in the fourth chapter.

## 1.5 CONCLUSION

However, before I begin these specific readings of historic plays I want to briefly reconsider Said’s proposal that history in reality is not linear and causal, historians construct it to appear so. He sees history as ‘nomadic, migratory, and anti-narrative’, in the sense that disparate events happen simultaneously and may or may not have anything to do with one another. It is we who create a narrated, linear, causal story from these events. This notion is particularly important for reintegrating the stories or experiences of those that are marginalised, because of race, class or gender. Their narratives often challenge traditional historical-narratives, and thereby fashion plural counter-memories which reflect the complexities of multi-cultural societies.<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> Lipsitz shows how this is possible with reference to black American women writers like Toni Morrison, Eudora Welty; the Native American Indian author Leslie Marmon Silko, the Japanese-American writer John Okada and Chicano novelist Rudolfo Anaya, 1989:165.

The analysis of how counter-memory functions shows that while it has some responsibility for historical accuracy, it is not bound by the same rules as history. Literature inhabits the realm between myth and history, and mediates between the two. It does not claim to be 'factual' in the sense of its being able to supply evidence based on empirical sources, but neither is it set in an abstract place and time, as myth tends to frame its narrative. Perhaps, simply put, history shows what has happened, and literature shows what might have happened and explains how it might have happened. Literature also tells the stories historians often choose to ignore. In my discussion I shift my focus from literature in general to drama and theatre in particular, suggesting that theatre can more effectively access both the oral and literary forms to express various popular collective memories.

The extent to which counter-memories can be truly nomadic and anti-narrative is limited, for we need the narrative to make sense of our world. Thus, if we acknowledge the processes of construction, keep the frames open, and resist the temptation to construct 'master narratives', to some extent we may escape the limitations of single exclusive histories and identities.

One of the most powerful keys to accessing and understanding these counter-memories is in the stories of the various people in the three countries I have chosen to explore. Dennis Walder and Temple Hauptfleisch have written extensively on the significance of the notion of "bearing witness".<sup>31</sup> I have thus chosen representative plays from Kenyan, Nigerian and South African drama as examples to explore how the experiences of colonialism and Apartheid have been expressed in nomadic, contrapuntal visions and voices which reflect the complex realities and experiences in these African societies.

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<sup>31</sup> See Walder's discussions on 'testimony' in Fugard's plays (1992); and 'the refashioning of the culture of silence' in the discussion of drama in the chapter on South African literature (1998:179-186), also Hauptfleisch 1997, section III: the playwright as witness.

## CHAPTER 2

### KENYAN THEATRE:

#### HISTORY AND MYTH IN THE POST-COLONIAL CONTEXT

*I don't think individuals are saviors as such. They are more symbols of certain social forces which are started, and the individuals are mere agents of those forces which are already in society.*

*(Ngugi in Sander, 1973:26)*

I now move from a theoretical look at history and myth and their relationship to literature, to a consideration of how specific historical events and people were portrayed in East Africa, particularly Kenya, in the post-colonial period. I shall attempt to evaluate the extent to which the playwrights followed the pattern of the historians of the 1960s and 1970s and how these depictions by both historians and playwrights may have affected the way post-colonial nationalism developed in East Africa.

Many East African writers have used history to explore their colonial and post-colonial experiences. I begin with the plays that revisit the history of the Mau Mau<sup>32</sup> resistance to explore Kenyan history and identity. I begin with Kenneth Watene's *Dedan Kimathi*, published in 1974, and Ngugi's response to the same historical figure in *The Trial of Dedan Kimathi*, which he began writing with Micere Githae Mugo in 1971 (completed and published in 1976). Hussein's *Kinjeketile*, which was published in 1970, although not Kenyan, offers an interesting comparison with the first two playwrights' presentations of the histories and leaders. It deals with the Maji Maji resistance in Tanzania in 1905.

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<sup>32</sup> There are many understandings and definitions of what a 'Mau Mau' is or was. *The Random House Dictionary of the English Language* (1970) defines a Mau Mau as: "A member of the revolutionary society in Kenya, established in the early 1950s, that consisted chiefly in the Kikuyu tribesmen and then engaged in terrorist activities in an attempt to drive out the European settlers and to give government control to the native Kenyans." But the Kenyans themselves did not see it as a 'terrorist' movement and referred to themselves as 'Freedom Fighters'. This also occurred in South Africa, where the Apartheid government referred to the ANC cadres and other freedom fighters as 'terrorists'.

I then move on to explore later plays that deal with neo-colonial issues of the 1980s. Here I return to Ngugi and look at how he implicitly uses history to comment critically on contemporary Kenya with *I will marry when I want* (*Ngaahike Ndeenda*<sup>33</sup>), which he wrote with Ngugi wa Mirri; and *Mother, Sing for me*, which Ngugi workshopped with the Kamiriithu Community.<sup>34</sup>

Finally, I juxtapose these plays which draw overtly on history with Francis Imbuga's plays *Betrayal in the City* and *Man of Kafira*, which take a more mythic approach and look at how this less direct approach affects an audience's reception of his plays, as opposed to Ngugi's plays.

Each playwright has used history in some way as a frame to explore contemporary Kenyan or Tanzanian issues. As pointed out in chapter one, there are various 'interferences', both conscious and unconscious, which affect memory and the recovery and formulation thereof, whether it be personal or national. The artist is consciously formulating, and thus also interpreting, events and in this sense s/he is actively involved in shaping public memory and opinion. Often in his/ her use of history, the artist is responding more immediately to the circumstances of the present than the past, which is a frame for these issues. I have specifically chosen the history of the Mau Mau Resistance and the problems of neo-colonialism in post-colonial Kenya to explore how this is apparent in Kenyan drama. The processes of reclaiming history and memory have been important factors in the formulation of Kenya's post-colonial identity.

I have not included the works of any East African female playwrights, although there are many of note: Rebecca Njau, Micere Githae Mugo, Bole Asenath Odaga, Alakie-Akinyi Mboya, Joyce Ochieng, and Penina Muhundo. This is because I have chosen to focus on overtly historical or mythic plays, and although there are powerful plays on political themes written by women (cf. Mboya's *Otongolia*, 1986), they have tended to write about more social and domestic issues - like arranged marriage, female initiation and

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<sup>33</sup> *I will marry when I want* was first performed in 1977, and published in 1980. I shall refer to it as *Marry*.

<sup>34</sup> See Björkman (1981) for details on the project.

circumcision. This is not to underestimate or negate the work of these playwrights. In many of these societies, women are the keepers of oral histories.

From early Anglophone literature written in Africa, history has been used consciously to challenge the dominant power structures. In the Foreword to the *Dedan Kimathi Papers* Ngugi wa Thiong'o suggests two reasons why "history [is] subversive" (Maina wa Kinyatti, 1987:xiii). He says that it is because it "is about human struggle: first with nature ...; and secondly, struggle with other humans over the control of [...] wealth [and] Labour" (Ibid). Firstly, by 'nature' he means that time brings change and movement so that "history is ever reminding the Present of any society that even you shall come to pass away" (Ibid). This is true because of the dynamic nature of history in general as well as the threat implicit in any particular struggle movement. Ngugi goes on to say that "because history is the result of struggle and tells of change ... it is perceived as a threat by all the ruling strata in all the oppressive exploitative systems" (Ibid). So, he argues, one of the ways in which the ruling class attempts to "arrest the wheels of history", is to "try to *rewrite* history, make up official *history*" so that "*the people* will not hear the *real* call of history, will not hear the *real* lessons of history" (Ibid, his emphasis). In this way the partisan perceptions of the past will coalesce and support the present system's ideology and its sense of national identity. Hence the lessons of history are rendered ineffective. As an artist, Ngugi aims to use history to subvert these 'official' histories and make history more effective didactically to the present and future.

His second reference to history relates to the "struggle with other human beings over the control of wealth [and] labour". This assertion suggests that Ngugi believes that economics rather than politics underpins power, when one relates the control of economic resources with power. This is particularly true in Kenya where the land issue has been paramount throughout the colonial and post-colonial periods of struggle.

Within the frame of these arguments, Ngugi explores why he believes the neo-colonial government of Kenya has chosen to adopt the official history defined by the British,

which justified colonialism and the exploitation of Kenyan labour and land appropriation. The colonial view on land ownership particularly was not challenged by the government following independence in Kenya. It is thus not surprising that the historian Maina wa Kinyatti, who according to Ngugi saw his role as the “ears and eyes of the people”, was arrested and imprisoned for six years, from 1982. This would suggest that his rewriting of past histories, and challenging literatures, threatened the contemporary government and that historians and artists do have power in defining the past and thus the present. Much of their power lies in their ability to awaken the consciousness of people to their individual and national identities and situations and challenge them to choose their own futures.

This consciousness is important when one considers the powerful impact British culture has had on Kenya. Mbughuni shows that the foundation for present trends in modern English theatre and drama in East Africa was laid during the period of 1921-1960 when most of East Africa was under direct British colonial rule (1984:248). Most historians agree that the educational system, the missions and BBC radio were designed to convert the local people to accept British cultural norms, decorum and language. During this period, Mbughuni notes, there is “no evidence of published dramas written by East African dramatists, despite the fact that from 1940 onwards the teaching of English language and literature had advanced with the opening of secondary and high schools” (1984:249). While the schools read and performed English plays, particularly Shakespeare, the Little Theatres showed film versions of classic performances brought out from Britain and drama societies mimicked these styles and plays.

After Independence in 1960, the National Theatre in Kenya continued to produce colonial plays. Despite the pressure for literature in Kiswahili and other local African languages, the use of English increased rather than declined. This was largely due to the failure to reach a clear national consensus on a national language.

Slowly drama in East Africa became more indigenous in both form and content. The universities became important centres for new artists, writers, and performers.

Travelling theatres and touring groups emerged from the English Department of Makerere University College, the Theatre Arts Department of Dar es Salaam and Nairobi's Literature Department (see Banham, 1976:3-7). Many schools participated in the Annual Schools Drama Competition. They chose to challenge the very colonial forms and criteria which had previously been set in these competitions, thus forcing judges to reformulate criteria for judging this new, very performatively focussed theatre. Dramatists like Hussein, Ngugi wa Thiong'o and John Ruyendo emerged from these universities to explore and promote the socialist and/or Marxist ideologies of their leaders. They began to explore and re-write their nation's histories and thus paralleled historians' efforts to demythologise colonial histories and define a new national history and identity.

One of the most controversial and significant aspects of East African experience, particularly in Kenya, was the Mau Mau resistance movement. This therefore became an important historical focal point for novelists and playwrights.

## 2.1 THE LAND ISSUE

The land issue lay at the heart of the Mau Mau resistance movement. Before the turn of the century Kenya had been part of the 'British East Africa Protectorate'. Even then the land issue was at the centre of the controversy between the Kenyans and the British. Many British writers and historians inaccurately portrayed Kenya as a spacious, beautiful land, which was largely unoccupied.<sup>35</sup> However, many indigenous people, particularly the Kikuyu people, were forcibly moved in order to make this land available to European settlers. In 1934 the Humphrey Commission, acting on the directives of the Kenya Land Commission, recommended the removal of many of the Kikuyu from the overcrowded South Nyeri District reserve, which had a density of 542 persons per square mile<sup>36</sup> to the Yatta Plains, which were less fertile and belonged to

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<sup>35</sup> See for example Elspeth Huxley's *White man's country: Lord Delamere and the making of Kenya*, 1967:79-81.

<sup>36</sup> Quoted in Ndirangu wa Ngunjiri, 1989:8.



long-time allies of the Kikuyu. This overcrowding was one of the most significant factors leading to the initiation of the Mau Mau armed struggle, which began after the State of Emergency was declared in the Kikuyu reserve on October 21, 1952.

Jomo Kenyatta argued that besides the restoration of land by colonials, the struggle was also to preserve African traditions, and institute their representation in government, which would allow the airing of grievances (1971). Ndirangu wa Ngunjiri says that the many interviews he held in Kenya show that the burning issue for the people was not power, but land (1984:17-21). The land available to the Kikuyu was limited, and their survival itself was dependent on the land, which was the symbol of religious unity, for it provided food, a place to live and burial for their dead. Libations were poured onto the ground to appease or supplicate the ancestors who they believe had gone before them as mediators between them and God. To the Kikuyu then, existence and land were sacred and inseparable (Ndirangu wa Ngunjiri, 1984:3-5).

The British were aware of this. Ngunjiri traces the land consolidation program and how it was accelerated by the policy of 'villagization' in 1954 where Kikuyu who were neither in the forest nor concentration camps were placed in villages specially built, which they could not leave without escort, within specific hours and for specific destinations. Thus the British used control of land to consolidate their power - they gave land to supporters, and confiscated the land of the opposition. By 1960, the State of Emergency had ended. However, by this time the key Mau Mau leaders had been imprisoned, so that when Kenya was granted full political independence on 12 December 1963, power was handed over to British loyalists. Odinga points out that the new leaders chose not to highlight the role of the Freedom Fighters in Independent Kenya (1967:253). Many of the new leaders had either been loyalists or in prison for many years, like Kenyatta, and had lost touch with the actual movement and events. Then too, many Mau Mau soldiers were not fully supportive of the new government, because they believed that Independence had been negotiated in opposition to their ideological stance.

The land issue remained one of the most serious points of conflict the new government faced (Ndirangu wa Ngunjira, 1984:188-191). Their refusal to return land to the Kikuyu caused much conflict, as can be seen in the example of Bildad Kaggia, a member of Parliament from Kandara, who resigned as Minister of Education in 1964 over this issue. In his mimeographed statement at his resignation he said:

As a representative of the people I find it very difficult to forget the people who elected me on the basis of definite pledges, or to forget the freedom fighters who gave all they had, including their land, for the independence we are enjoying. I, therefore, decided not to give the assurance required of me, ... I felt that to remain muzzled, I was betraying my innermost convictions for the sake of a salary or position (quoted in Ndirangu wa Ngunjiri, 1984:191).

It is against this history, and these debates that I want to consider the following three plays which in different ways retrace the Mau Mau armed struggle.

### 2. 1.1 Kenneth Watene: *Dedan Kimathi* (1974)

Kenneth Watene's plays *A son for my freedom*; *The haunting past* and *The broken pot* were published as a collection in 1973. These plays look at changes in society; at how traditional life is often challenged by western values and ways, and they dramatise the problems involved in reconciling pre- and post-colonial experiences and life-styles. The first play in this collection deals explicitly with the complexities and conflicts involved in the choice of whether to support the Mau Mau resistance movement or not. He dramatises the tragic consequences the rigidity of the Mau Oath may have had on a family, where the protagonist literally has to pay for the freedom movement with his son's life. I have chosen to focus on the later historical play *Dedan Kimathi*<sup>37</sup> because it is such a focal point in Kenyan history and also because the controversies surrounding Dedan Kimathi as a heroic figure in Kenyan history highlight the complexities involved in reclaiming history.

Watene forewords his play with a résumé of Dedan Kimathi's life: his place of birth, schooling, and employment. He then he briefly outlines Kimathi's political career from

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<sup>37</sup> All future references to the text will be indicated by the abbreviation *DK*.

his position as youth winger of the Kenya African Union (KAU) through to his being pronounced a criminal by the British for organising and spreading the Mau Mau doctrine, to his arrest and trial in 1956 and his execution in Nairobi in February 1957. The summary is short and relatively unemotive, although he does reflect positively on Kimathi as a 'freedom fighter'.

The play is written in three parts in verse form. I want to explore the effect of Watene's looking at both the general conflicts of the fighters and the specific, personal conflicts of Dedan Kimathi in the context of Kenya in 1974.

The first scene opens on a dispute between Kimathi and his lover, Lucia about an execution. The first words of the play are: "Why, why, why, did you do it?" (*DK*, 7) Lucia sees this execution as a display of Kimathi's "fury and a show of his power" (*DK*, 9). Thus from the outset the play raises the issue of Kimathi's use of power, and the audience shall be expected to evaluate his leadership.

This execution provokes the events that finally lead to Kimathi's own arrest and execution. Lucia's jealousy at Kimathi taking another woman's advice provokes her to betray their hiding place. Kimathi wrongly attributes this betrayal to his friend and comrade, Nyati, and so Kimathi murders him.

This question, 'why?', opens and echoes through the play. Why did Dedan Kimathi and the movement as a whole execute their own people at times? Why was there betrayal? The adoption of a personal and specific approach to a general question in Kenyan history makes one re-evaluate the history. It challenges the interpretation of this war in purely heroic and idealistic terms and suggests the human and negative elements present in this, as any conflictual situation.

This exploration of the war on very personal terms, beyond the broad, heroic depictions of men bravely fighting and dying, is evident in the presentation of the hardships facing the forest fighters. They lack food (*DK*, 19, 21), money (*DK*, 48), and arms (*DK*, 28).

They face constant danger, and discipline is rigidly enforced with no sign of weakness or disloyalty tolerated. The Mau Mau oath called for unswerving loyalty, even if it meant the death of their own. In the first scene one sees how the men respond to a shell-shocked soldier: “We’ll shoot him if he goes mad./ He’ll be of no use to anyone” (*DK*, 15). Later Wahu shoots a mad soldier (*DK*, 56). They kill Kenyan Christians and loyalists in the struggle (*DK*, 10-11, 30). This issue of the spilt blood of Kenyans is central to the play and Mau Mau history. Rhino, a commander close to Kimathi, articulates this conflict in his first speech:

I think the bitterness of our strife  
 Is made even more bitter  
 By the fact that we,  
 Even though we know it to be wrong,  
 Have to kill our brothers and our sisters  
 While yet we suffer for them,  
 Living like beasts of the forest.  
 According to our traditions of war,  
 Women and children are spared:  
 But now we kill them in cold blood  
 And burn them alive in their houses.  
 We fight ourselves instead  
 Of fighting our enemy, the settler (*DK*, 10).

Later Kimathi himself says: “We’ve killed, we’ve murdered for our cause/ And soaked our country with the blood/ Of her valiant sons and daughters” (*DK*, 36). This and other passages like it through the play have evoked commentary, such as Maina wa Kinyatti (1987:12) who suggests that Watene’s play is comparable to Ian Henderson’s *The Hunt for Kimathi*, which reinforces negative images of barbarism by the native African. However, I would argue that both here and throughout the play, one senses the desperation of men forced to deny their traditions and commit acts that offended them, even drove them mad (*DK*, 15, 50, 56). The onus for these actions lies less with these men than with the insanity and harshness of the imposed system. This version of history is more of an indictment of the colonial power, than a history which supports the colonial version of barbaric Mau Mau brutality. People cannot easily be divided into friends and enemies, the colonials and the Kenyans, good or bad. The ideology, which the soldiers believed represented justice and freedom, required them to act against their own people. In this sense Watene is negotiating a history which is often presented in

exclusive terms, whether this is the colonial or Kenyan perspective. He challenges the simple binaries of victim and oppressor or the civilised and the barbaric. It is important that a nation should not forget the darker side of its history. For only with memory can one learn, and perhaps avoid the same pitfalls.

In this sense Watene offers counter-memory, a revision of the existing history by supplying new perspectives on the past while simultaneously challenging the colonial version of the war. The general colonial belief is that many Europeans were massacred, but the reality is more complex than this. In 1960 Corfield wrote that it has been estimated that “32 European civilians were killed by Mau Mau during the 1952-1956 period, as against 1 819 Africans” (quoted in Buijtenhuijs 1982: 171). This does not include those killed by the British government forces, alleged to be 11 503 (Maughan-Brown, 1985:38), six times the official number killed in the Mau Mau wars. Maina wa Kinyatti argues that this estimate by the British is “grossly erroneous”. A conservative estimate is that at least 150 000 Kenyans lost their lives, 250 000 were maimed for life and 400 000 were left homeless” (Maina wa Kinyatti, 1977:297). These reports give one a sense of the desperation of this war and the extent of the violence Kenya faced.

The inevitable results of such a situation may be understood by looking at the work of Fanon, speaking from the context of Algeria before independence. He explains internal violence in the following way:

In the colonial context (...) the natives fight among themselves. They tend to use each other as a screen, and each hides from his neighbour the national enemy. ... Veterinary doctors can throw light on such problems by reminding us of the well-known “pecking order” which has been observed in farmyards. The corn which is thrown to the hens is in fact the object of relentless competition. Certain birds, the strongest, gobble up all the grains while others who are less aggressive grow visibly thinner. Every colony tends to turn into a huge farmyard, where the only law is that of the knife (Fanon, 1990: 248-9).

In the play the scouts talk about themselves and others in the forest as “monkeys” (*DK*, 40, 70, 92) and “chimpanzees” (*DK*, 93). Kimathi himself says that they have become “beasts”. These references may function in two ways - firstly, to interrogate the colonial assumption of the African as primitive; and at the same time suggest that war often does

reduce people to beasts. Either way, Watene is careful to show that this transformation is the result of war rather than an inherent barbarism.

While the play does not deal overtly with the British detention camps<sup>38</sup>, the play does give a sense of the harshness of the conditions in the villages where the people are tortured: “women are whipped to nakedness./ Starvation is the order of the day ... people are beaten and tortured/ To make them reveal our secrets” (*DK*, 21). This extends the obvious harshness of the civil war situation to show the pressures facing the people. It also suggests why the fighters did not trust the British promised Independence through a negotiated settlement (*DK*, 34-35).

It is against these general crises, conflicts and complexities that Watene presents Dedan Kimathi - who is simultaneously the heroic political leader, and a man beset by fear of arrest and doubt regarding the loyalty of his close friend and companion, Nyati. Here Watene shows the human conflicts experienced by even the strongest of men and leaders. It hints at the kind of hidden stories, which are inevitably excluded from the official historical narratives, while dramatising how the process of mythologising an historical figure occurs.

Kimathi is characterised in relation to his interaction with his friends and comrades. The catalyst for the play is his friend Nyati who is depicted as a “valiant man/ A true friend and a good fighter” (*DK*, 23). He is Kimathi’s old friend who has cared for him in a number of conflict and life-threatening situations, in Kenya and Japan. (*DK*, 52, 66). Nyati’s loyalty and trust are evident in his refusal to contemplate Kimathi’s fear and planned murder of himself (*DK*, 52-55). He is a man of feeling and compassion who struggles to kill his countrymen whom Kimathi refers to as “our people ... educated ... upright and honest” (*DK*, 30). Nyati is horrified at their murder of loyalists, recounting how he shot a man and slaughtered his wife “in front of her children” (*DK*, 30) and how

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<sup>38</sup> It is estimated that in these camps some 90 000 Kikuyu were detained, their cattle confiscated, their former homesteads destroyed and where they were forced to dig trenches around Mt. Kenya and the Aberdares to cut off supplies from the forests to their own people (Maughan-Brown, 1985:37-38). In the play the characters in the forests rather inquire as to the conditions of people in the villages.

he can still hear the children's screams of terror and see their eyes as they pleaded for their mother (*DK*, 31). However, Watene suggests that there was no tolerance for such compassion in the movement. Kimbo wishes to silence Nyati immediately. Rhino intercedes, saying:

How dare you even consider  
Raising it [a gun] against him!  
What he needs is understanding,  
Not the dumb barrel of a gun.  
Have you been completely reduced  
To a bloodthirsty maniac?

...

(to Nyati) What, does your great heart now break  
Under the weight of years of suffering? (*DK*, 31)

This compassion and sadness at the realities of civil war is perceived as psychic disturbance, a "sickness" (*DK*, 43). Kimathi interprets Nyati's "dreams of returning to the graves/ Of his wife and children", his need of peace even if this is through death, intention to betray him and so he decides to kill Nyati first (*DK*, 44). Watene uses this situation to sketch the convolutions of a desperate situation, which denies normal compassion or the normal desire for a quiet, peaceful life. It gives a sense of the everyday life in civil war and insight into Kimathi beyond the stereotypical freedom fighter and leader. The fictive frame challenges the simplicity of the heroic figures in history books.

In the style of a classic tragedy, Watene creates a great man with a weakness: his fear of imprisonment. Kimathi's fear and uncertainty grow as he feels himself now "dull and tremulous" and the supernatural powers he held so confidently, seem to slip away from him (*DK*, 47). He attributes his inability to sleep to Nyati: "because Nyati still walks" (*DK*, 49). Watene cleverly interposes the scene with the soldier who has been driven mad by battle and runs about making noises of guns firing, between the pre- and post murder scenes with Kimathi. This interposition may be implying that the same pressure that has caused this soldier's mental breakdown has affected Kimathi's own powers of reason. Later Kimbo admits that he is aware that Kimathi had been "too abrupt", but says: "I do not feel unduly concerned/ Considering his sustained command/ of all the

forces of the forest” (DK, 62). Here Watene differs from many historians of the 1960s and 1970s who did all in their power to record only positive things in their histories. Irritability, unreasonableness, even uneven judgements are inevitable in situations of intense and sustained pressure, especially in a leader who carries all the responsibility.

These complexities which Watene introduces move Kimathi from the simplistic role of a betrayed victim. Through his own decisions and actions he is also to some degree responsible for his own entrapment and death. He murders unjustly, he refuses to heed the warnings of trustworthy friends, and he underestimates his relationship with Lucia, who leads him into a trap.

Watene chooses a minor character, Nyati, as a foil to highlight the fallible human aspects of Kimathi. Nyati never doubts the loyalty of those close to him. He can feel and acknowledge the horror of their situation and weep. Wahu says that it is “beautiful” to know “that even in such outrageous hardships,/ We still can find a man whose heart/ Is big enough to feel for peace, /A heart that still retains/ A touch of kindness and love” (DK, 53). Kimathi, in contrast, rejects emotions, seeing men who succumb to feelings as being “weak at heart” (DK, 87).

While portraying Kimathi sympathetically, Watene exposes what he sees as faults in the man. He may even elevate Nyati as a figure worthier of emulation than Kimathi, perhaps implying that Nyati’s qualities are necessary in post-war Kenya. But at the same time, his death questions whether there is a place for such men in Kenya, as he dies for these same qualities. This may be an implied indictment of the values embraced both in the war and post-war situation.

Watene has used the classical Shakespearean tragedy as form, with allusion to *Julius Caesar*. Brutus says in his funeral oration for Caesar:

... As Caesar loved me, I weep for him; as he was fortunate, I rejoice at it: as he was valiant, I honour him; but as he was ambitious, I slew him. (Shakespeare, 1949: 3.2.24-27)



Kimathi explains to Wahu that he “loved (Nyati) highly and deeply” (*DK*, 84) and later says to her:

He was noble.  
Who said he wasn't noble?  
For his nobility I loved him,  
For his humanity I esteemed him  
For his love I revered him  
But his spirit longed to be free  
From the hot pursuit of victory,  
Therefore I killed him (*DK*, 88).

While I can see the relevance of the allusion insofar as leadership and the degree which power is used or abused, I do not think the comparison to Nyati appropriate. The comparison between Brutus and Kimathi functions only if one sees Kimathi as an idealist without any real political sense. Brutus's conflicts were defined much more in terms of the general good of Rome than for his personal security. Again I do not find this an accurate or equivalent comparison. The reference to Caesar and fascist abuse of power, however, is interesting in the context of post-colonial Africa.

Rhino and Kimbo are similarly juxtaposed with one another. The latter is impulsive, and thinks literally. He does not seem to have the sense of ambivalence to the situation or decisions that Kimathi or Rhino feel. He is clear from the outset that “those who left are cowards”, while Rhino suggests that perhaps it is not cowardice, but that “they had no more hope” (*DK*, 20). Kimbo simply and unquestionable sees Kimathi as their leader: “strong, invincible;/ unswerving in his determination/ To see through his noble purpose” (*DK*, 61).

Rhino, in contrast is subtle, thoughtful, compassionate. His response to Kimbo's clarity on Kimathi is: “But I fear some dreadful shadow/ That's obviously haunting him./ I'm not used to see him fret (sic)/ Or look at insignificant issues/ With such levity of temper,/ Such smallness of mind and heart” (*DK*, 61). He is very clear on the difference between death and murder (*DK*, 86, 96), and upon hearing the truth about Nyati's murderer he repeats the initial question of the play: “Why?” Yet, he demonstrates the position of the politician who has a clear sense of the importance of Kimathi as a

symbol of their movement. When it is suggested that Kimathi's name or reputation may be tarnished, Rhino responds by saying: "Our most important duty/ Is to protect the dignity of Kimathi. ... We must keep his secrets tight/ So that if nothing else survives him/ At least there will be some mystery/ To protect his name from destruction" (62-3).

Watene uses these fictional characters to dramatise the processes of mythologising a man and movement. These characters formulate the various motives that may underpin the myth: the need to maintain the myth in order to maintain power. This debate also parallels the contemporary historians' views that excluding negative aspects of history or historical figures is justified in a time in which a positive history is an important aspect of creating a positive new African identity.<sup>39</sup> A potential danger of such exclusion and resultant amnesia is that the repetition of errors made is inevitable; and it may even negate or ignore the suffering of many people who died that these lessons may be learnt and that history need not be endlessly repeated.

Ngugi is one of the pioneers in acknowledging the role and contribution of women in the histories in Africa, and his female characters testify to this. Watene too traces the various positions and roles of woman in Kenyan society. In the figure of Wahu Watene explores a female soldier who, while being completely committed to the movement, also has the ability to love and show compassion. She is wise, strong and practical. However, when she must choose between "the truth or the lie" about Nyati's "sickness" (*DK*, 43), she is unsure as to where her primary loyalty lies: to a friend, or to the cause. She asks: "Can't I be loyal/Without being disloyal?/ Or shall I be loyal to the truth?/ But they don't want the truth./ They don't want justice./ Each one looks at the truth/ And makes all falsehood of it./ No, I shall stand for the honest truth" (*DK*, 55). Here she sets truth and justice against one another, a serious indictment of the situation they find themselves in in this war. Wahu's conflict suggests the complex relationship between ideology and truth. She suggests that perhaps loyalty to the former can only be upheld so long as they do not negate the values that underpin them. She indicates this by her

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<sup>39</sup> See for example Fanon "On National Culture" in *The Wretched of the Earth*, 1963.

decision to reveal Kimathi, as Nyati's murderer, thus insisting that Truth is of paramount concern to her.

Lucia provides an alternative perspective on the role and power of women in Kenyan history. She is petulant and selfish, a woman who betrays her lover because she is jealous. Watene also includes reports about Kimathi's wife, who is in custody and tortured for knowledge about his whereabouts, and his mother who has gone mad. These references both acknowledge and give a powerful and real sense of the role of women in Kenyan history.

The inclusion of the traditionally marginalised extends beyond the depiction of women to include the ordinary soldiers. Through the commentary on their tasks, their perceptions of orders and Kimathi's commands, one gets a sense of the average soldier's experience of this war. The play clearly defines the aims of the movement: to fight for the freedom and dignity of all. Kimathi's speech on these aims may be a reminder to the contemporary Kenyan government. One of the issues raised is that 'honour' is accorded to the deserving, and that there be "no despicable show of greed for power" or tolerance of "opportunists" (*DK*, 65-66). Later, in a similar rousing speech to the soldiers, Kimathi urges them: "You must not give in to the ways/ Of those who play the game of politics,/ Whose main interest is their personal fortune" (*DK*, 79). This may be an implicit reference to the conflict over the Land Act in post-colonial Kenya, which serves to remind the contemporary audience for what these men fought and hoped to attain; but which had not been achieved in the newly independent Kenya.

In this play, Watene suggests how myth and history are constructed, and the role historic figures may play in contemporary society. Perhaps he is also asking his audience to evaluate the validity of this process. He challenges the simplistic mythologising of a man who had weaknesses, as all men have.

This depiction of Kimathi stands in sharp contrast to that of Ngugi wa Thiong'o and Micere Mugo, both in form and presentation.

### 2.1.2 Ngugi wa Thiong'o & Micere Mugo: *The Trial of Dedan Kimathi* (1976)

Ngugi wa Thiong'o and Micere Mugo began writing *The Trial of Dedan Kimathi* in 1971.<sup>40</sup> In the Introduction Ngugi traces the history of the play itself and the thinking that informed its writing. In 1971 Ngugi and Micere Mugo discussed the history of the Mau Mau struggle in the context of "the Vietnamese people's struggle against American Imperialism". It is then that they began formulating questions which informed the play, and also which seemed pertinent to contemporary Kenyan history and literature:

... was the theme of the Mau Mau struggles exhausted in our literature? Had this heroic peasant armed struggle against the British Forces of occupation been adequately treated in our literature? Why was Kenyan Literature on the whole so submissive and hardly depicted the people, the masses, as capable of making and changing history? Take the heroes and heroines of our history: Kimathi, Koitalel, Mary Nyanjiru, Waiyaki, and Me Kitilili. Why were our imaginative artists not singing songs of praise to these and their epic deeds of resistance? Whose history and whose deeds were the historians and creative writers recording for our children to read? (*TDK*, 1976:i)

Ngugi and Mugo directly address the issue of history, and note that Kenya found herself in the same position as many other African countries who were/ are perceived as having no pre-colonial history of their own. The questions posed here regarding approaches to 'writing' a new history are parallel to those of many of the African historians of the 1960s and 1970s. They defined the artist's first task as being to contest the colonial myths and highlight the heroes of the African peoples, thus creating a new national consciousness and identity. An important difference of this work from that of the historian, was the desire to highlight the stories of everyday people who are traditionally marginalised in histories. Ngugi and Mugo decided to use Kimathi as a representative of all the individual people, from "the 15th and 16th centuries when the Kenyans and other

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<sup>40</sup> The project began in 1971, but writing only began in earnest from 1974. It was published in 1977. All abbreviated references to the text will be indicated by *TDK*.

East African people first took up arms against European colonial power”, to the present (TDK, 1976:ii). They argued that:

... [a]n even more important spur was the realisation that the war which Kimathi led was being waged with even greater vigour all over Africa and in all those parts of the world where Imperialism still enslaved the people and stole their wealth. It was crucial that all this be put together as one vision, stretching from the pre-colonial wars of resistance against European intrusion and European slavery, through anti-colonial struggles for independence and democracy, to post- independence struggle against neo-colonialism (TDK, 1976: iv).

They wanted to “imaginatively reconstruct [their] history, envisioning the world of the Mau Mau and Kimathi in terms of the peasants’ and workers’ struggle before and after constitutional independence”. They insist that

... it is *not* a reproduction of the farcical ‘trial’ at Nyeri. It is rather an imaginative recreation and interpretation of the collective will of the Kenyan peasants and workers in their refusal to break under sixty years of colonial torture and ruthless oppression by the British ruling classes” (TDK, 1976:iv).

In this way Kimathi “symbolised the masses”. Their version of the Kimathi history, as opposed to that of Watene, is defined by their belief that “the only historically correct perspective“ from which to depict the people “truly” would be to depict them “positively, heroically and as the true makers of history” (TDK, 1976:v). They refuse to explore any negative, personal aspects of the man.

As an artist, when using historical events Ngugi argues that he is “guided ... by the nature of the historical event. ... you use even a small village as a symbol of the larger concern ... I use a small village as a guide for the whole African struggle for identity“ (in Sander, 1973:26). Here it is evident that the individual character and his motives are not important to him. Ngugi rather consciously creates ‘types’ to promote what he defines as the ‘larger concern’.

Within a Marxist perspective, Ngugi sees the “progressive movement forward” of history as important. Here a dialectical approach to history becomes crucial and seems to be irreconcilable with a traditionally mythic presentation of historic events. For Ngugi the traditional concept of myth, as used by Soyinka, is problematic as it denies

the specificity of time, place, and the context of the events. Yet, at the same time, Ngugi argues for a certain kind of mythologising in his creation of a symbolic figure in Dedan Kimathi and the use of a community as a microcosm of a nation. Ngugi's does not elevate a single figure to represent an elite universal stereotype, to be emulated or avoided. Rather, he argues that each hero in some way represents the people as a whole.

In an interview Ngugi argues:

I don't see individuals as such as saviours as such. They are more symbols of certain social forces which are started, and the individuals are mere agents of those forces which are already in society ... I'd be more in line with Tolstoy when he sees in the country the social forces creating certain individuals -- individuals as such do not create situations, situations create these individuals" (in Sander, 1973:26).

For Ngugi, heroes represent that which has prompted the change within a system as a whole. For this reason he believes that idealism, the creation of a unequivocally positive hero, is justified as it aids the building of a positive sense of a national identity in the face of negative colonial propaganda.

This suggests an interesting example of the tension between history and myth. Ngugi as artist wants the figure to stand symbolically as an example for the purpose of nation building, yet at the same time he points to a specific event within its material and political context in order to do this.<sup>41</sup>

From these statements it is clear that Ngugi believes the artist must play a socio-political in society (see Killam, 1980:5). In the preface to *Homecoming* he says, "Literature is of course primarily concerned with what any political and economic arrangement does to the spirit and values governing human relationships" (1978:xvi).

He sees the artist as

... trying to probe into society, to probe into the kinds of tensions and conflicts in society. He might indicate areas of past conflict, and areas of possible development. He might give moral guidance in a struggle. And I see the artist trying to get people to come more together and with society's struggle, to create a different type of society from the one we inherited from the colonial set-up" (in Sander, 1973:26)

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<sup>41</sup> I am not sure that these tensions are resolved as successfully in the plays as in Ngugi's novels.

Within this frame of social critique and seeing the history and heroes of the past as ‘symbols of larger concerns’, it is understandable that many Kenyans, including Ngugi, were incensed by Watene’s depiction of Dedan Kimathi. Maina wa Kinyatti, in his Preface to the *Dedan Kimathi Papers* (1987) says: “Kenneth Watene’s play, *Dedan Kimathi*, like Ian Henderson’s book, *The Hunt for Dedan Kimathi*, portrays Kimathi as a lone, sadistic dictator, who used his position in the movement to eliminate those compatriots who criticised his leadership” (1987:12). I do not think that Watene goes this far, but he certainly suggests that Kimathi was human, a man who made mistakes under the demands of a long and pressurised leadership.

Kinyatti himself admits that Kimathi’s writings show that ideologically Mau Mau “was based on patriotic nationalism rather than on the theory of dialectical materialism”. Kinyatti goes on to argue that the significance of this nationalist position was that there was no attempt to “transform nationalist consciousness into class consciousness, the class struggle, nor was there any serious and systematic analysis of imperialism, the class struggle, and the relation of socialism to the Kenyan revolutionary process” (1987:12). These comments indicate negative aspects of the Mau Mau ideology and suggest how retrospective positions can and do define how histories are analysed or read. Yet none of these limitations are dealt with in Ngugi and Mugo’s *Trial of Dedan Kimathi*. In the play Kimathi faces personal temptation and is tried. He courageously withstands all temptation and remains true to himself and the cause. There is no real analysis of the possible problems the Mau Mau soldiers or leaders faced, or their faults and mistakes. Nor is there an analysis of why the transition between the old and new systems has failed. There is only myth turned into nationalist zeal.

In the English translation of *Dedan Kimathi*, much of the original KiSwahili text was not translated. This serves to remind the English audience that they experience this play and history as outsiders. The play is structured as three ‘movements’, including songs and dances. These movements provide the frames of the play and contextualise Kimathi’s resistance and trial, and the consequences of resistance for the fighters and colonials.

The first movement opens on a flashback of “the Black people’s history”, after the *Song of Kimathi* from Njama’s *Mau Mau from Within*. Images of slavery and oppression follow, and suggest the complicity of certain blacks with the white masters. By Phase IV the oppressed people have united in an angry procession, protesting Imperialism and exploitation. They are shot down, and thus begins the introduction of the present history of the Mau Mau. Guerrillas have escaped and soldiers are rounding up townsfolk in search of the fighters, to whom they refer as ‘bloody terrorists’ and ‘hooded collaborators’ (*TDK*, 7). This opening scene gives the audience a sense of how the people interact with the soldiers. The mixture of English and KiSwahili keeps the immediacy of the context before the audience, and underlines the alien position of the English speaking audience member. The scenes are structured as traditional African drama, flowing from one to another, without scene breaks typical of Western style drama. It also mixes the historical songs, events with the fictionalised, dramatic abstraction of larger histories.<sup>42</sup>

The second movement focuses on the Trials - both the literal trial in the courtroom and the symbolic trials, which occur in Kimathi’s cell.<sup>43</sup> This symbolic trial takes place privately where Kimathi’s convictions are tested under extreme and varied modes of duress.

The third movement involves the consequences of resistance, for Kimathi in particular and the characters in general.

In this way the play is structured like a piece of music. Various themes are interwoven throughout the play. The personal story of Kimathi is paralleled by those of ordinary citizens. Ngugi introduces the soldiers, the Boy and Girl, Orange Seller, and the Woman in the first movement. These are the agents who are acting to change the colonial

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<sup>42</sup> See later commentary on the use of this in SA theatre, and Breitingner’s comments on the effect of mimetic performance and “emotional documentation” as the writer/s collate actual events and transform them into theatrical material (1994:151).



system. These characters and their interaction with one another illustrate how colonialism has divided people from one another. In the first movement Ngugi addresses the issue of guilt for the average Kenyan. Included in the consequences of colonialism is a consideration of how people have turned against one another, as survival has become the dominant consideration.<sup>44</sup> This is evident in the black soldiers who express their anxiety and tension before Kimathi's trial. Later Kimathi challenges them as they torture him.

The Woman formulates one of the worst consequence of this civil war as being "the way the enemy makes us thirst to kill one another" (*TDK*, 14). She refers to the soldiers who fight with the British as "the lost sons of the soil". The play here addresses the issue of so-called 'collaborators' whom, Ngugi and Mugo argue, are less consenting traitors than victims of complex psychological and socio-economic circumstances. One of the manifestations of the "thirst to kill", the latent violence evoked by this conflict, is the unofficial sexual harassment. In the first scene the soldier demands the Woman's pass and sexual harasses her; thus setting up the classic relationship between power and sexuality. Sexual abuse and oppression is often an intrinsic part of an abusive system, and is tolerated as an expression of power and domination. It is also a common secondary result of war. The dramatists do not let this binary of oppressor-oppressed go uncontested, though. Instead of accepting the role of victim, the Woman uses the very femininity that makes her vulnerable as a weapon to distract the soldier, and the weapon she has concealed remains undetected by him (*TDK*, 11). Nyathira does the same thing at the end of *Mother, sing for me*, when she flirts with a soldier so that the Workers can examine his gun in order to copy it. This is an inversion and subversion of the usual power systems and suggests another role women have played in Kenyan history. This introduction of the Kenyan soldier and women's stories extends the representation usual to official histories.

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<sup>43</sup> The trials of Dedan Kimathi here are reminiscent of the trials of Thomas Beckett, the Archbishop of Canterbury in T.S. Eliot's *Murder in the Cathedral*.

The dramatists extend the exploration of the effects of the colonial sociological and economic policies and structures by the Woman's commentary on the results of the foreigners having taken their resources. This has left the people hungry on the leftovers of what should have been theirs entirely (*TDK*, 18). This hunger has caused internal civil conflict, which has reduced many people to being "beasts and brutes". The Boy and Girl's violent struggle over five shillings, which they had stolen from an American, illustrates this; and their involvement in the resistance is seen as the first step towards their being re-humanised. Ngugi and Mugo argue that the people were not brutes or barbaric, they were just responding to desperate socio-economic and political forces in this society.

Ngugi and Mugo do not limit their use of 'types' to the Kenyan characters. The European characters are also depicted stereotypically. Neither Shaw Henderson, who is governor and judge, nor the other settlers' colonial arrogance is moderated at all. Even when the play explores the position of the settlers who have suffered loss in the struggle, in the outburst by a settler who has lost family, cattle and crops to the Mau Maus, the arrogance of the colonial overrides his appeals as a struggling 'worker', a man who was a "simple soldier/ Fighting against banks, mortgages,/ the colonial office" when he arrived (*TDK*, 28). In Marxist terms he would be regarded as much a victim as many of the Kenyans. However, his arrogant colonial condescension is demonstrated in his argument that he had a good relationship with his 'boys', that he had built them a school and dispensary. He defends the colonial status quo, by insisting that the workers all spoke of his farm with awe, that they were "loyal, meek, submissive" (*TDK*, 29). He argues that Kimathi changed this situation when he came and "poisoned simple minds/ led astray God fearing souls/ with his black mumbo jumbo" (*TDK*, 29). While this sketch does acknowledge the loss of the colonial who has no understanding of the realities that underpinned the Kenyan rebellion, it also ruthlessly exposes the colonial rhetoric of ownership. This is indicated by phrases like "my boys", and the perception

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<sup>44</sup> See the earlier references to Fanon, 1990:248-9; and also see Primo Levi on the Jews in German concentration camps and the issue of the relationship between complicity and survival, 1988: Chapter 3, entitled 'Shame'.

of the Kenyans as innocent, simple children who are unable to care for themselves, their property or hold rights as mature adults. Ngugi and Mugo suggest that this naive thinking is as dangerous, if not more so, than the conscious manipulation of the British governor holding power by force. However, binary stereotypes are often dangerous as they limit the possibilities of analysing the complexities of situations and roles, which are well argued by Said and Appiah. Here these are ignored for a simple coloniser - colonised binary, which is limited in unravelling the histories.

The second focus in the play is on Kimathi himself. He becomes representative of the Kenyan people's struggle for independence. His response to the charges brought against him in the opening scene and the following trials is symbolic and central to the Mau Mau struggle. Kimathi's refusal to plead regarding the criminal charges brought against him by the British in the opening scene establishes a tension which underlines the broader issues facing the Kenyans under colonial rule. Here Kimathi overtly challenges Britain's legal rights in Kenya:

Kimathi: By what right dare you, a colonial judge, sit in judgement over me?

Judge: (*playing with his glasses, oozing infinite patience*): Kimathi, I remind you that we are in a court of law.

Kimathi: An imperialist court of law.

Judge: I may remind you that you are charged with a most serious crime. It carries a death sentence.

Kimathi: Death ...

Judge: Yes, death ...

Kimathi: To a criminal judge, in a criminal court, set up by a criminal law: the law of oppression. I have no words.

Judge: Perhaps you do not understand. Maybe your long stay in the Forest has ... I mean ... we are here to deal fairly with you, to see that justice is done. Even handed justice.

Kimathi: I will not plead to a law in which we have no part in the making.

Judge: Law is law. The rule of law is the basis of every civilised community. Justice is justice.

Kimathi: Whose law? Whose justice?

Judge: There is only one law, one justice.

Kimathi: Two laws. Two justices. One law and one justice protects the man of property, the man of wealth, the foreign exploiter. Another law, another justice, silences the poor, the hungry, our people (*TDK, 25-26*).

Land ownership and property was the primary cause of the Mau Mau war and would continue to divide the country. In post-colonial Kenya many of the Mau Mau fighters had

to buy back their own land. In the late 1970s, Ngugi and Mugo remind Kenyans of the original issues and question to progress Kenya has made in these areas twenty years after independence. They use this historical frame to speak to the present situation and challenge the 'justice' of post-colonial Kenya where, they argue, there are still "Two justices": one for the "man of property, wealth" and another which "silences the poor, the hungry, our people".

The trials move away from the literal courtroom to four allegorical 'trials' of Kimathi. The purpose is to interrogate his motives as a freedom fighter, as well as to highlight some of the temptations facing Kenyans on the cusp of independence.

During the first trial Henderson makes two appeals to Kimathi. The first is to Kimathi's natural desire for life and peace. The second is as a fellow sufferer, as a Scotsman, against the English as colonisers. Henderson attempts to establish himself as an understanding mediator between the Kenyans and the English (*TDK*, 35). Yet, paradoxically he reiterates his unwillingness to forgo the dominance of the coloniser:

[w]e too have the right to struggle, to persevere, conserve, maintain healthy standards: Christianity, civilisation. I am a Kenyan. By might and right. Right is might, believe me. I grew up in Nyeri. I'm only fighting for my own, spoils of war if you like. But sweat and thought have gone into it. Dedan Kimathi: you must plead ... Only you can end this strife. Plead guilty for Life! (*TDK*, 35)

Here one perceives the confused rhetoric of the colonial who argues for both right and might, Christianity and civilisation along with the spoils of war. The mixed basis of these appeals suggest the various 'voices' or rhetorical strategies of the colonials. Kimathi rejects this proposal as 'selling out', saying: "I will not sell Kenya/ to the British or to any other/ Breed of man-eaters, now or in the years to come" (*TDK*, 36). Here, as in many other places in African drama, the playwrights use the image of cannibals to convey how men feed, symbolically, off one another.<sup>45</sup>

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<sup>45</sup> See for example the Warrior in Soyinka's *A Dance of the Forests* (1977:49) or Osofisan's *Another Raft* (1988:69).

This offer of 'life' leads Kimathi to ponder his desire to "dance the dance of [his] people" (*TDK*, 36). Dance is traditionally associated with joy and communal renewal. However, as he watches the dances in his mind's eye, they change from those of initiation and rituals to dances of fear and humiliation under the colonialists (*TDK*, 36-7). Ngugi and Mugo may be suggesting that initially the people negotiated contracts with the colonials in an attempt to secure peace and life. However, these compromises led to the people becoming "slaves of hunger, disease, sorrow". The juxtaposition of Kimathi's temptation and the dances suggests a correlation in experience and an interpretation of history, of how Kenya came to be subject to foreign powers. It also warns against such compromise in the future.

The second appeal made to Kimathi is presented by a Banker's delegation, consisting of a European, Indian and African man, the latter does not speak at all. He merely nods his head in agreement to what is said. Kimathi is called upon to compromise the Mau Mau struggle for complete independence from Britain in exchange for the promises of foreign investment and 'progress'. Kimathi's challenge to the Indian man regarding the poverty and hunger in post-independent India both indicates his rejection of the temptation and uses the comparison of another colonised country's history to support his decision. The Indian responds by saying that they have their religion, flag, national anthem and 'ewen (*sic*) Indian bankers'. Ngugi-Mugo though suggest that these are only outward trappings of freedom and representation (*TDK*, 39). Under 'progress' the bankers envision

Then we can finance big Hotels ... International Hotels ... Seaside resorts ... Night Clubs ... Casinos ... Tarmac roads ... oil refineries and pipelines .... Then tourists from USA, Germany, France, Switzerland, Japan, will flock in. Investment, my friend, development, prosperity, happiness (*TDK*, 40).

In this vision, there is no proposal for the development of the country or its people.<sup>46</sup> This is ultimately a capitalist business proposal where a few people benefit, with little regard for the land or its people. The first world powers will be benefiting from such a system, it will be the 'legitimate trade' that replaces slavery which "may have been

necessary in the 1930s" (*TDK*, 40). Kimathi rejects this vision of Kenya, arguing that fundamentally nothing will have changed and their struggle will have been futile.

The scene that follows presents some of the negative consequences of the industrialisation and urbanisation proposed so positively in this second trial. The Boy and Girl, who represent the masses, again struggle with one another for survival. The Girl narrates her constant 'running' from male abuse, and how finally she was forced into prostitution in the city, in order to survive. Here the play uses individual characters as reflections of the social forces that define their realities and choices, while suggesting what the effects decisions made by men in Kimathi's position may have on the individuals in society.

Representatives of the three bases of society, namely big business, politics, and religion, present the third temptation. All of these positions are presented by Kenyans. They proclaim that they have won the war. This victory they define in the abstract; as their having overcome racism.

The businessmen argue that their contract with the colonials shall result in "partnership in progress", which will enable Kenyans to "buy land in the White Highlands" (*TDK*, 45). Kimathi exposes the lack of logic by pointing out that it is their land which has already been bought "with streams of blood" (*TDK*, 45). The play suggests that the business sector has been seduced by promises of partial gain, the sharing of the profits of the colonial endeavour. Again the play refers directly to the Land Issue, which had not been settled at the time of this play's performance in Kenya.<sup>47</sup>

Next, Kimathi rejects the politician's positive response to Britain's proposal that independence be given to Kenya province by province, through District and Provincial Parties, instead of handing over complete power to the people of Kenya. Kimathi rejects the idea of a divided land and power, and of being 'given' independence by outsiders.

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<sup>46</sup> One notes, though, the rather racist attitude towards the Indian here. This is unfortunate as the tension with the presence of Indians in Kenya is still very emotional and controversial.

<sup>47</sup> For more details see discussions on *I shall marry* and *Mother, sing for me*.

He sees these Kenyan politicians as neo-colonial betrayers, men with “Black skins, colonial settler’s hearts” (*TDK*, 46). He repeatedly condemns this suggestion as a basis for ‘neo-slavery’. This is harsh criticism of the way in which the British handed over power to Kenyan loyalists from 1960-1963.

The priest takes a neutral position on the struggle. He quotes Jesus who said “my kingdom is no part of this world” when asked whether he would overthrow the Roman government, then oppressing the Jewish nation (*TDK*, 48). However, his is not a completely neutral position. The Kenyan church-leaders were seduced by being given relative autonomy and some power by the British. He insists that the Africanisation of the Church, with “drums in church, African Bishops, African Moderators, African Cardinals” is sufficient. But Kimathi rejects this argument, seeing it as a “barter for (his) soul” (*TDK*, 49). In all of his plays, Ngugi rejects the Christian church for its self-serving collaboration with the colonial powers in their oppression and manipulation of the people.

Finally, Kimathi has withstood all these arguments. In some ways the issues raised in this second trial echoes the arguments in Soyinka’s *A Dance of the Forests*. In the judgement between the gods and men, The Triplets, who personify the relative positions, are named: The Means that Justifies the End, The Greater Cause, and Posterity” and they are “fanged and bloody” (Soyinka, 1977:69). These personifications echo the arguments of the businessmen and politicians who justify their aims in the abstract terms of ‘progress’.

The Fourth and final trial cyclically takes the audience back to the beginning where Henderson and Kimathi face one another, in opposing positions. The action reverts back to the literal conflict as Henderson attempt to break him with force. Kimathi is calm, while Henderson has given up the charade of reasonableness, as he beats Kimathi and then gives the command for torture. As in the opening scene of the play, the specific image of Kimathi being whipped fades into the general history of the black man being whipped. This connects the specific historic event and figure of Kimathi with the

broader history of Africa under colonial domination. Through the torture, which devolves to electric treatment, the only commentary from Kimathi is when he asks the black torturers their reason for their acquiescence in this process.

It is significant that this play's central focus is not Dedan Kimathi, the man. Both the first and third movements focus on the wider significance of his trials and refusal to compromise. The notes for the scene which culminates between the Woman and children direct that: "It should be symbolic: the Woman now represents all the working mothers talking to their children" (*TDK*, 59). Within this overtly didactic frame, the Kenyans, who again are represented by the children being taught here, are encouraged:

Woman: Instead of fighting against one another, we who struggle against exploitation and oppression, should give one another strength and faith till victory is ours.

Girl: (*despondently*): It is hard. It is hard seeing that we are weak.

Woman: United, our strength becomes the faith that moves mountains (*TDK*, 60).

Here the history of Dedan Kimathi is used didactically to raise consciousness and create a positive sense of post-colonial Kenya. The last act thus shifts to a consideration of Kimathi's significance for contemporary Kenya. The children formulate the mythological image of Kimathi as invincible. They retell the various stories of sightings of him after his arrest, and that he is believed capable of performing miracles. The Woman acknowledges that he was all this and more: "He, Great commander that he was, Great organiser that he was, Great fearless fighter that he was, he was human! (*almost savagely, bitterly*): Too human at times!" (*TDK*, 62)

Here Ngugi and Mugo respond to the conflict between uncritical idolised representations of Kimathi, and representations of him as a jealous and ruthless leader who commanded the execution of anyone suspected of treasonous behaviour, including his own brother. In a flashback the play thus dramatises his response to two British soldiers and an African K.A.R. who are brought in as captives. Kimathi's interaction with the British soldiers illustrates the importance of Marxist socialist thinking for Ngugi and Mugo. Kimathi asks these men whether they came from "wealthy parents or workers" (*TDK*, 63). When they protest that they come from poor working stock, he



offers them the opportunity to renounce their allegiance to the Queen in exchange for their lives. Only at their refusal does he give the command for their execution. This suggests that the issue at stake was less colonialism than access to and control of resources for production and land ownership.

Kimathi's response to the Black soldier is different, however. In verse Kimathi condemns the soldier for betraying the cause for so little. He then recounts the history of the Mau Mau movement and the British response to it, praising fighters and condemning collaborators. Kimathi formulates the role of their history thus:

Here in the forest armed in body  
mind and soul  
We must kill the lie  
That black people never invented anything  
Lay forever to rest that inferiority  
complex  
Implanted in our minds by centuries  
of oppression.  
Rise, rise workers and peasants of Kenya  
Our victory is the victory of the working  
People (68).

The play then dramatises the trial of men who are brought in for trial because they have negotiated with the British to end the struggle. The men include Kimathi's brother. Kimathi's relates his personal circumstances: how Germans killed his father, his elder brother died in the Battle of Mathari, his mother has become insane and now he only has this brother and a sister left. This explains his decision to allow the men to live. Their escape leads directly to Kimathi's betrayal, arrest, trial and execution. This background explains the Woman's claim that he was "too human", too compassionate in the face of a war. This interpretation clearly juxtaposes the interpretation of Kimathi's executions by Ngugi and Mugo's, and by Watene. Where Watene portrays Kimathi's decisions having been influenced by his fear and misplaced generosity and trust, or lack thereof, Ngugi and Mugo see compassion and integrity as the bases for his decisions. They will countenance no representation of weakness after he has overcome so much, for Ngugi would see this as reiterating the colonial attitude that African leaders lack focus, judgement and responsibility.

The play ends with Kimathi's final, defiant speech about the determination of Kenyans to be united and free. The Woman, Girl and Boy's heroic attempt to save Kimathi is transformed into the People's song and dance, a thunderous freedom song which is an emotive argument for the rising of thousands to take Kimathi's place. This ending suggests that Kimathi's spirit lives on in Kenya. It suggests the power history may have in defining a national identity and focus for a new nation.

While this play is an interesting and important challenge to earlier portrayals of Kimathi and Kenyan history, its significance is even greater in the post-colonial context. In an interview in 1978 Ngugi expresses his views on history at length, suggesting that he believes that:

Our history up to now has been distorted by the cultural needs of imperialism, that is, it was in the interest of the imperialists to distort Kenyan history with the view of showing that Kenyan people had not struggled with nature and other men to change their natural environment and create a positive social environment. .. had not resisted foreign domination. ... Now I feel that Kenyan writers, intellectuals, historians, political scientists, must be able to show us Kenya's past which accurately evaluates Kenya people's achievements in the past, in the present, and at the same time, pointing out their creative potential for the future (Ngugi, 1978a:10).

In this statement Ngugi echoes the feelings of many of the historians of the same period. In his writing, especially in his novels, Ngugi uses the more distant African past and black diaspora to show "three phases of social formations: a long period of precapitalist and precolonial relations, then colonialism, and finally neocolonialism" (in Sicherman, 1989: 350). In many ways this approach to and use of history is aimed at nation-building, which "necessarily involves myth building" (Sicherman, 1978:352). The Tanzanian historian Nelson Kasfir suggests that "perhaps the most fundamental use of myth is to decolonise African peoples by restoring their dignity" (Kasfir, 1968:20).<sup>48</sup> The play *Dedan Kimathi* is an example of this process.

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<sup>48</sup> Kasfir here uses 'myth' to mean a false but gratifying version of history.

Ngugi and Mugo have mythologised Dedan Kimathi into a man of the people who withstood all temptation and corruption for the reclamation of Kenya. What this means in a practical sense is not made clear. It is simply a positive rewriting of a negatively portrayed history. They create types like the Woman, Orange Seller, Boy, and Girl to represent and inspire individuals in society. The representatives of the opposition are stereotypical too. They are soldiers, collaborators, and settlers. This Ngugi argues is positive in terms of seeing situations not in terms of individuals, but rather in terms of the social forces which define them. However, it may also be negative in terms of not allowing for the complexities of individual character and the ambiguous, often paradoxical choices, actions, events that are more true to real living and history. Although I think that *Dedan Kimathi* does challenge the standard histories of Mau Mau integrity and reinstate Mau Mau history in post-independence Kenyan history, it does not challenge some of the irregularities or problems involved in the vision sufficiently. These may include the fundamentalist demand of loyalty to the Cause, above all else, and the binary approach to the ideology of the struggle.

Before I go on to look at later plays by Ngugi, which do address these problems, I want to pause and introduce a third play on this issue. I want to compare Ngugi's *Dedan Kimathi* to the Tanzanian writer, Hussein's version of the Maji Maji confrontation with colonial Germany, in *Kinjeketile*.

### **2.1.3 Hussein: *Kinjeketile* (1969/1970)**

In his paper "On German intervention and African resistance in Tanzania" the East African historian Gwassa begins by saying that:

An African viewpoint of African resistance to colonial rule has long been overdue. Most historians in the past have tended to regard the African as a lesser member of the human race. African resistance was dismissed as merely foolish, fanatical and retrograde or simply as the work of the uncivilized. In most cases such erroneous historical interpretation arose from the mistaken practice of looking at the resistance through European eyes (1969:85).

Gwassa then shows how the Tanzanians were colonised by the Arabs, Germans and British. He traces various forms of resistance in different areas of the country, showing how local government, inter-chief diplomatic relations, trade routes, and socio-health situations defined the manner and intensity of occupation by the Germans and the corresponding resistance this occupation provoked. He suggests that resistance was a continuous process, both shifting and diversified in intensity approach and form of resistance. He relates the defeats of the colonials to their lack of understanding of the African psyche and their own context in Africa. The colonial defeats mentioned here by Gwassa are often brushed over or ignored in European versions of these histories. In the section dealing with the Maji Maji wars of 1905-1907 Gwassa argues that these wars were significant, despite their defeat, because they “enlarged separate traditional methods (of resistance) into one dynamic movement” (1969:116), they “came long after German intervention had taken place and they arose out of African initiative. The African struck first” (1969:117). He suggests that in the past this period has been described as “an episode in the history of colonialism arising from the blind fanaticism of the Africans.... It is now looked on as an epic in the history of the country. It is regarded as the beginnings of the struggle for lost independence” (Gwassa, 1969: 117-118). President Nyerere first articulated this viewpoint at the United Nations in 1956. This argument exemplifies some of the reasoning that informed a positive rewriting of history by post-colonial historians.

In the 1960s there was a growing awareness of the relationship between the Maji Maji and the new nationalist movement in Tanzania. It became part of the monuments, dedications and attempts to create a Tanzanian nationalism. The historian Kasfir relates these memorials to the process of mythologising history. He argues that myth is a fundamental aspect of nation building:

Myths are an extremely important part of national authority in all countries of the world. Myths convince people that the government has a right to give commands and pass laws. Without such myths the government would be very weak and the nation might collapse ... Myths also help to forge the nation by creating a sense of national unity and a willingness to work hard to achieve national goals (1968:19).

Hussein's play *Kinjeketile*, provides a point of comparison between these historic endeavours and the role art could play in using historic events or figures to forge a nation, while simultaneously examining contemporary issues critically.

*Kinjeketile* was a prophet who called for Tanzanian resistance against the demands of the Germans on their cotton plantations. It was performed in 1969 in Swahili, and in 1970 was translated and published in English. Hussein explores the mysteries surrounding *Kinjeketile* and the themes of unity and solidarity. The source for Hussein's *Kinjeketile* is *Records of the Maji Maji Rising*, edited by C.C.K. Gwassa and John Iliffe (1967), which include fragments of interviews with eye-witnesses of the rising. David Kerr argues that Hussein keeps close to the source, and that it is "from this commentary that Hussein has borrowed the important theme that *Kinjiketile* was a proto-nationalist leader, and the Maji Maji rising was a foretaste of what was later to develop into Tanzanian nationalism" (Kerr, 1979:60). Yet, at the same time as he stays so close to the published historic record, Hussein insists that:

The *Kinjeketile* of the play - *Kinjeketile* - is not an historical evocation of the real man. *Kinjeketile* here is a creation of the imagination, and although the 'two men' closely resemble one another in their actions, they are not identical. I have had to mould my character to suit artistic needs, borrowing freely from the imagination when historical facts did not suit my purpose. History should not be used as the measuring stick for this play therefore, rather, its failures or successes should be gauged against rules determining a work of art (Hussein, 1970:v).

It seems paradoxical that Hussein would choose a very specific historical event, and then argue that it is being used for particular, self-conscious artistic purposes some sixty-four years after the event, and is consciously not necessarily historically accurate. Hussein sees the power in the use of history in terms of how it may be "mould[ed] to suit artistic needs". These needs he defines as being to demonstrate three things:

First, ... to show how the Wamatumbi felt about the cruel invasion by the Germans, especially to show the master-servant relationship then pertaining. Secondly, ... to show briefly the political climate of that period (1800-1904). Thirdly, I have touched on the theme of economic exploitation of the Africans by the Germans, when Tanzania was being deprived of her produce and manpower, and yet her people were being made to pay taxes, without being given any chance of earning an income (Hussein, 1970:vi-vii).

Despite this statement, though, I do not think that these are necessarily the only important focii of the play. Although the play does frame the historical realities that prompted the revolt, the real focus and conflict in the play arises out of the internal conflict and mistrust between tribes and individuals. It is the issues and problems related to unity and unifying Tanzania that become central to this play. However, it may be argued that the material circumstances of the people, the oppression and scramble for resources, exacerbated their mistrust of one another.

The play is divided into four acts. The first act outlines the problems with the colonials: the physical hardships, hunger, corruption and betrayal of the indigenous people by desperate individuals. The local problems involving the people's fear, their weakness through hunger and hard work, and the lack of weapons and tribal conflict. Right from the start the problems involved in resistance and tribal conflicts are clearly presented. At a secret meeting where the men discuss resistance Kitunda, a prominent Mmatumbi, argues that they must wait until they have sufficient arms. Mkichi, a leader of the Wakichi responds:

Mkichi: That is a coward's point of view. But then, since when were the Wamatumbi warriors?

Old man: We did not come here to quarrel over tribal issues.

...

Mngindo: We came from afar, to unite with one another, not to fight. If we fight one another, tribe against tribe, how can we hope to fight the white man?

*(Silence. They resume their earlier positions.)*

What we must first do is unite.

Mkichi: What we must first do is fight

Old Man: But to be able to go to war against the Red earth we must be united. To go to war disunited, fighting against one another, is impossible (*Kinjeketile*, 6-7).

Later Mngindo, leader of the Wangindos, suggests that Kitunda was able to aid his brother who had problems with the colonials because he betrayed his people. Here one sees how little trust there is between people of different tribes, which obviously weakens their stand against the common enemy. Their helplessness and fear against a powerful and corrupt system is sharply dramatised when Kitunda's daughter is taken and raped by the overseer, and no-one dares to help Kitunda defend his family.

The second act shows Kinjeketile, possessed by the river god Hongo. After this possession he convinces the people to unite and resist the Germans with the promise of protection by the river god's holy water.

Here Hussein problematises unification and the manner in which the resistance movement is formulated. He does this through the psychic conflicts of Kitunda and Kinjeketile. In a possessed state, Kinjeketile argues that "the water" will unite the various peoples, bringing them from darkness into light (*Kinjeketile*, 16-18):

When we are united,  
we will be free.  
We will be the children of Seyyid Said.  
The Red earth<sup>49</sup> will be destroyed,  
he will be kicked out of this country.  
...  
He who partakes of this water  
no harm will befall him.  
No bullet will penetrate his body (*Kinjeketile*, 16).

This bravado and complete confidence in their invincibility is moderated in the third scene of this act when Kitunda confronts Kinjeketile with his apparent possession and the prophecy that they 'will be the children of Seyyid Said', the Sultan of Zanzibar<sup>50</sup>. Kinjeketile is horrified:

I've been cheated! They have killed me - no, I have killed myself! It was a dream, yes, I was dreaming! No, no, no, no! I have been cheated! No! (*He gives a terrible cry and falls down.*) (*Kinjeketile*, 21).

The reference to their being "children of Seyyid Said" after the Red Earth is ominous as the slave trafficking from Zanzibar increased rather than decreased during Said's reign, despite his treaty with the British. Kinjeketile says:

... If this Seyyid Said could with our consent enslave us body and mind, he would be a far worse enemy than the German. He could rule us without ever setting foot in this country. Let us therefore wait. We will be strong; but not by being strengthened by some dubious aid from the outside. We will be strong because this strength comes

<sup>49</sup> The Red earth is a reference to the Germans who controlled Tanzania.

<sup>50</sup> Zanzibar became a British protectorate under a treaty signed by Seyyid Said in 1836. By this treaty the Sultan achieved recognition and informal protection from the British in exchange for his agreement to reduce and limit the slave-trade in Zanzibar.

from us - our own strength. With this we will fight and we will win. Be patient (*Kinjeketile*, 29).

This is an important comment on dependence and independence for African countries. Many chiefs had lost their power by aligning themselves with the colonials in the hope of overcoming tribal enemies, only to find themselves subjects of a foreign power. In the post-colonial situation this is subtler as the dependence is often not political, but economic, through “aid from the outside” which can also be “dubious” aid.<sup>51</sup>

Ironically, as the preparations for war grow more intense, with more men joining the unified training from various parts of the country, Kinjeketile’s conflict and uncertainty grow proportionally. Here Hussein highlights his second concern: that of unity based on an emotional foundation; in this case on belief in some external, supernatural aid, rather than on oneself. With religion being the focus, both the external and internal policies become unclear. From this time on Kinjeketile repeats the refrain:

A man gives birth to a ...word. And the word ... grows ... it grows bigger and bigger. Finally it becomes bigger than the man who gave it birth .... (*Kinjeketile*, 30).

A man gives birth to a word ... the word grows bigger and bigger ... and destroys the man who let it loose. A word born of a man grows strong, and ends by enslaving him (*Kinjeketile*, 36, see 39).

Yet, despite Kinjeketile’s ambivalence to the ‘word’, he refuses to take it back and dissolve the growing army. For Kinjeketile the power of the myth to unify overrides all potential danger. Perhaps here Hussein demonstrates how easily leaders may take the simple route at the cost of long-term security, or planning. Nevertheless, Kinjeketile cautions Kitunda:

... let us agree on this. When you lead the people to war you will act and plan as if the water did not exist. Use your own strength. You must not depend on the water! Promise me that (*Kinjeketile*, 36).

Kinjeketile insists that they focus on their own resources, plans, and strategy rather than the holy water. It is precisely because the people are overconfident and do not follow Kitunda’s well-thought through plan that the final assault fails and the initial resistance



is harshly crushed, resulting in the death of thousands, as prophesied by Kinjeketile (*Kinjeketile*, 36). At no time does Hussein question the validity of belief as such; he rather questions religious or mythic belief as a base for national unification and battle. It is the schism between the religious and ideological leadership and the military aspects of resistance that bothers Kinjeketile. The results of such a schism are seen in the disastrous failure of this first campaign, caused by the men's overemphasis of the religious at the expense of leadership and tactics.

The final act dramatises the consequences of this initial failure: Kitunda and other soldiers are captured and taken to a German camp where they find Kinjeketile, who has been captured and tortured for a week since the war began. The Germans want Kinjeketile to "admit before the people that the water was a lie". The lives of the captured men are the price for his agreement. Kinjeketile has refused to cooperate. One of the soldiers asks whether he refuses to save them: "... because we are not of your tribe?" (*Kinjeketile*, 52) Again Hussein dramatises how quickly the issue of ethnic difference reappears in moments of crisis, as a basis for conflict between different peoples in Africa, even when faced with a common external enemy.

The final confrontation between Kinjeketile and Kitunda answers both Kitunda's questions: "Was the water true? Did you believe it?", and why Kinjeketile did not withdraw the word, despite his misgivings and insistence that they rely on themselves. Both he and Kitunda had formulated plausible reasons for suspecting the vision: that Hongo does not have power over life and thus cannot make such promises of protection from death. Finally, though, Kinjeketile refuses to deny the efficacy of the water, even at the cost of all of their lives, because:

The officer will say that we are wrong. He will tell our children that we were wrong in fighting him. He will tell that to our children, Kitunda. That to fight him is wrong! *That to fight for one's country is wrong!* And he wants me to help him by retracting all that I said. he wants me to say that the water was a lie. Do you know what that means? The moment I say that, people in the north, south, east and west will stop fighting. They will fall into hopeless despair - they will give up. I will not say that! A

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<sup>51</sup> For a complex and stimulating look at the issues surrounding Aid see the Somalian novelist, Nurrudin Farah's *Gifts*, 1992.

word has been born. Our children will tell their children about this word. Our great-grandchildren will hear of it. One day the word will cease to be a dream, it will be a reality! (*Kinjeketile*, 53)

This final paradox powerfully dramatises the complexities of political history. Although the ‘word’ from Hongo was ambiguous, it did bring some unity and initiated the resistance movement. *Kinjeketile* seems to feel that the end justifies the means. Hussein, though, never defines the ‘word’ - it could be ‘resistance’, ‘Maji Maji’, ‘freedom’, ‘independence’, ‘unity’ or something else. Nevertheless, it seems that Hussein is suggesting that the myth is justified in its effect - be it mobilisation or national unity.

Hussein seems to have written this play using history retrospectively. The audience would know that this uprising was the forerunner of the later resistance movement. Gwassa shows that within six weeks of the first strike the whole area south of the central line from Dar es Salaam and Kilosa, and on the west from Kilosa to Lake Malawi, was in turmoil. The Governor panicked, brought in mercenaries and German soldiers. By November 1905 the movement had been suppressed, and there was little or no fighting by March 1906. However, martial law was only lifted in August 1907. The effect of this uprising, though, was the “universalisation of leadership. In other words local leaders from different parts were brought together and worked together for a common end” (Gwassa, 1969:119-121).

The significance of this play for a post-colonial Tanzania seems two-fold: on the one hand, it is a recovery of a history that has been negatively written from a colonial perspective; and on the other it may also be a warning. *Kinjeketile* was published shortly after the traumatic Biafran war of secession in Nigeria. Issues of ideology and nationalism are central to the debates regarding identity, ethnicity, unity and the development of post-colonial African countries. Hussein reminds his audience of the destructive nature of ethnic prejudice and the dangers of attempting to build a society on a purely nationalist or reactionary base.

Hussein does not limit his socio-political commentary to theme or content, but extends it into the style and structure of his drama. Jeyifo holds up Hussein's choice of hero as an example in African literature, particularly in comparison to Elesin in Soyinka's *Death and a King's Horseman* (1985) because Kinjeketile is 'one of the people', not a member of the ruling elite like Elesin, or even Dedan Kimathi.

Another stylistic feature of *Kinjeketile* is Hussein's choice of the 'epic theatre' style, in which the Brechtian influence is clear in both content - in its focus on a major political issue in East Africa; and in the structure - which is open, with an episodic sequence punctuated by dance, and the use of direct address to the audience. This is typical of one of Brecht's most successful alienation techniques.<sup>52</sup> The effects of these techniques are obviously to make the audience more critically conscious of the historic events and the application of these on their own present situation. Fiebach suggests that Hussein extends beyond simply using the Brechtian techniques to create new theatrical forms in Tanzania in his adoption of a "Tanzanian/Swahili traditional narrative form" which was "tied in with the overall search for the resumption, continuation, and renewal of an authentic African performance culture" (1997:24). These forms have been apparent in East Africa since the late 1960s.

*Kinjeketile* gives an alternative to the old colonial histories, creates a critical frame through which Tanzanians are invited to evaluate their present post-colonial situation and basis for unification, and it provides an exciting renewed theatrical form.

## 2.2 NEO-COLONIAL ISSUES

*Dedan Kimathi* began the reclamation of Kenya's history and it encourages people to remember the spirit of heroes like Kimathi. However, Ngugi's two later works really challenge post-colonial Kenya.

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<sup>52</sup> See Fiebach, J. 1997 on Hussein's contact with Brechtian concepts, plays and its influence on his writing in a non-realist theatrical mode.

It is within the historical frame of the conflicts that informed the struggle, especially the land issue, that one must read/ see the two plays by Ngugi wa Thiong'o and Ngugi wa Mirii, *I will marry when I want* and the collaborative play *Mother, sing for me/ Ngaahika Ndeenda*. Ngugi insists that in his plays he is a spokesman for the group, the communities who create the plays (1983:42). This is most true of the latter play, workshopped with and presented by the Kamiriithu village in Autumn 1977. Both plays were created in Kikuyu, and were later translated into English by Ngugi, although the latter has not been published.

In his collection of essays, *Barrel of a Gun* (1983), Ngugi formulates the significance of the Mau Mau resistance for contemporary Kenya (then 1983). Much of his commentary was provoked by the government's response to *Ngaahika Ndeenda* on 12 March 1982, when they destroyed the open-air theatre the Kamiriithu Community Education and Cultural Center had built (1983:1). The staging of both of these plays was stopped without explanation by the Kenyan government in 1977 and 1982, respectively.

### 2.2.1 Ngugi wa Thiong'o and Ngugi wa Mirii: *I will marry when I want* (1977)

In *Barrel of a Gun* Ngugi describes this play as a

... dramatised documentary on the forced labor and 'kipande' laws in the colonial Kenya of the twenties and thirties. It shows the attempts in one community to repulse these and other injustices and to survive as a unit despite tremendous official intrigue and brutality. It shows indirectly the genesis of some of our peoples' subsequent political movement and the seeds of their defeats and partial triumphs (1983:46).

In this play Ngugi has used the history of the 1922 Massacre, where the British shot labourers who protested the *kipande* system,<sup>53</sup> and the 1950s Mau Mau armed struggle to indirectly criticise his own contemporary government. The structure of the play expands the potential audience, by its incorporation of songs, dances, and rituals of diverse groups of Kenyan traditions, including Mau Mau songs and Christian hymns.

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<sup>53</sup> This system was similar to the pass system in South Africa: by law all African workers had to carry their passport and identity documents in a metal box around their necks.

The marriage both literally and symbolically refers to union, commitment, and the promise of a fruitful future for the family and community as a whole. As this image is undermined, the expectations suggested by the reference to marriage become increasingly parodic, and thus convey the extent of the neo-colonial betrayal.

The play looks at class, land ownership and the role of religion in post-colonial Kenyan society, with some reference to generational conflict. Kiguunda is a labourer who had fought in the Mau Mau war. In the first scene he proudly refers to his title deed to one and a half acres of land. This introduces the issues of land ownership and class. Kiguunda's wife asks:

Wangeci: What do you want to do with the title deed?

Why do you always gaze at it

As if it was a title for a thousand acres?

Kiguunda: These one and a half acres?

These are worth more to me

Than all the thousands that belong to Ahab Kioi wa Kanoru (*Marry*, 1985:3).<sup>54</sup>

The land represents that for which these men and women fought. It gives Kiguunda pride and independence.

Where Kiguunda, and Gicaamba, his neighbour, are workers, Ahab Kioi wa Kanoru, is a wealthy farmer and businessman, who together with Samuel Ndugire and Ikuua wa Nditika, and their wives, represent the wealthy, landed class. The problems of the growing class stratification and its relation to neo-colonial corruption become clearer as the play progresses. Nguunda, another worker, says: "The difference between then and now is this! Now we have our independence!" (*Marry*, 19). Beyond this, nothing has changed – the masses still have no money, and are still so poor that they eat saltless food and are unemployed (*Marry*, 19). They remember the time of war and recall the men and women, who were "fearless" and who "had faith and were sure that, One day this soil will be returned to us" (*Marry*, 26), but Kiguunda says, after singing of their suffering:

How many years have gone

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<sup>54</sup> I shall abbreviate all references to the play text thus.

Since we got independence?  
 Ten and over,  
 Quite a good number of years!  
 And now look at me!  
 (*Kiguunda looks at himself, points to the title-deed and goes near it*)  
 One and a half acres of land in dry plains  
 Our family land was given to the homeguards.  
 Today I am just a labourer  
 On farms owned by Ahab Kioi wa Kanoru (*Marry, 28-29*).

These references suggest that nothing fundamental has change din Kenya – the people are in the same position as they were in the colonial period. It is only the masters, rulers, owners who have changed.

Another negative consequence of neo-colonial corruption is unemployment and rising alcohol abuse. The drunk lost his job at a security company and then turned to “that poisonous stuff at the bar” (*Marry, 4*). This is a premonition of what is to happen to Kiguunda. Much of the unemployment and suffering is due to the greed of industrialists who run chemicals and cement factories with no concern for the health of their employees. Many workers lack basic resources, especially medicine.<sup>55</sup> Njooki says: “Exploitation and oppression/ Have poisoned our land” (*Marry, 42*). The characters argue that nothing has intrinsically changed in Kenya. The people continue to suffer and are still oppressed.

Njooki criticises the charismatic church movements for their collaboration with the corrupt land and factory owners. Ngugi wa Thiong’o has been very outspoken in his criticism of the Christian church and the role that it has played in Africa’s politics. These criticisms are dramatised throughout the play. They are evident in the Christian delegation that demands money from Kiguunda, despite his obvious poverty. Ngugi is ruthless in his parodic criticism of Kioi and his wife, Jezebel, who is ironically and fittingly named. They are ostentatious with their external expressions of Christianity, in their prayer, and Kioi’s reference to his wife as ‘Sister-in-Christ’ (*Marry, 44*). These prayers are parodic as they condemn desperate criminals, insisting that “everybody’s

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<sup>55</sup> *Marry*, pp. 33, 35-6, 38.

share comes from Heaven/ Be it poverty or riches” and thus all should “be contented with [their] our lot” (*Marry*, 45). The irony is that the common ‘lot’ is not ‘our’ lot, but that of the poorer majority of Kenya and that the Kiois are in fact the real criminals here. This conclusion is not left to the audience to make, but is dramatised in the subsequent action of these men who unscrupulously manipulate Kiguunda into giving up his land and with it, his self-respect and hope.

The church is also criticised for its earlier support of the British against the Mau Mau fighters, especially in attempting to force confessions and retraction of the Mau oath (*Marry*, 56-63). Gicaamba argues that religion has been a way of distracting people from their concerns and poor conditions. He says, “religion is the alcohol of the soul!/ Religion is the poison of the mind!” (*Marry*, 61). The justification for this view is argued by dramatising by Kioi and Jezebel’s version of Christianity:

Jezebel: This business of not being satisfied,  
 And of not being contented with one’s station in life  
 As clearly ordained by God,  
 Comes from not being a good Christian.

Helen: These are earthly trials.  
 We should pray for these people,  
 Knowing at the same time that  
 There are many sects  
 Now misleading the masses (*Marry*, 78-9).

The height of hypocrisy, both in terms of class and religion, is evidenced in the pseudo-believers’ ghoulish response to the suggestion of eight hundred million Chinese souls perishing forever in hell extends the criticism. The parody is so exaggerated that it needs no explanation:

Ndugire: Yes, they say that in China there’s no rich or poor.  
 But how can a country progress  
 Unless led by the rich?

Kioi: In China, they don’t even believe in God.

Jezebel: Didn’t the missionaries get there?  
 Does it mean that all the Chinese,  
 The whole country, will burn in hell?

Kioi: Yes, eight million souls.  
 To burn for ever!

Ndugire: Nebuchadnezzar’s clansmen.

Let them burn.

Helen: Flames jumping in the sky.

Ndugire: Like flames from a pile of dry firewood.

Jezebel: Their bones breaking: crack! crack!

Kioi: And all because of

Getting rid of the rich (*Marry*, 87-88).

An interesting relationship is suggested here between missionaries, Christianity and capitalism. Socialism or Communism here is equated with pagans and traditional Christendom's rhetoric of fear is used to justify economic exploitation and control. In these scenes Ngugi relates class, power and control to religion. These parodic versions of basic Christian teachings interpreted from a completely self-interested perspective are shocking and suggest the role corrupt religion has played in Kenyan history.

Traditional songs, dances and ceremonies are offered as an alternative to Christianity and what is presented as merciless doctrines and manipulation. Kiguunda sings and dances the Mucung'wa, a dance he previously danced in courtship for his wife, while he simultaneously celebrates the memory of the Mau Mau fighters (*Marry*, 11-13). Again, in the metaphor of the wedding, the social contract is reintroduced. The audience is reminded of what is owed the Mau Mau soldiers. The scene ends as Wangeci tells Kiguunda that "an aging hero has no admirers" (*Marry*, 13). The amnesia of the time includes 'forgetting' and ignoring those who fought to regain their land.

The account of Kiguunda and Wangeci's traditional wedding, which was attended by the whole community and which has been blessed by children (*Marry*, 64-67), is juxtaposed to the proposed Christian wedding for which they mortgage all they have. Their fantasy enactment of their ideal vision of the Christian ceremony (*Marry*, 92-95) is ironically interrupted by their daughter's announcement that the son of their corrupt neighbour, John Muhuuni, has left her, and that she is pregnant. This initiates the conflict which ends with Kiguunda's being shot by Jezebel, being fired by Kioi, his bank loan being recalled, and his land being auctioned and sold for very little. Initially both Gathoni and Kiguunda reject the respective marriages proposed for them. Gathoni's sees the arrangement as 'slavery', and says, "I shall marry when I want"



(*Marry*, 16). Sadly, though, both she and Kiguunda compromise and both are destroyed. Gathoni is lost in the city as a barmaid, with prostitution her most likely option for survival. Kiguunda loses his property; self respect and hope for the future and is drinking heavily.

At the end Njooki and Gicaamba loyally support Kiguunda and Wangeci, in contrast to men like Kioi and Ikuua wa Nditika who have betrayed their own people. Earlier Nditika was described as one of the “agitators” who had “roamed the whole land/ Telling us that we should not buy land/ For which we had all shed blood” (*Marry*, 73). He too had been a Freedom Fighter. Now he is extremely fat. This is the physical manifestation of his material wealth. He is clandestinely buying land for foreigners who want to build a factory for Americans, Germans or Japanese who want to “build a factory/ for manufacturing insecticide/ For killing bedbugs” (*Marry*, 30). They buy the land of men like Kiguunda because the chemicals for the insecticide are “bound to produce a mass of smelly gases/ and therefore cannot be built in an area/ Where important people live” (*Marry*, 75). Kioi has built his fortune on factories, smuggling coffee, gold and ivory. At the end he is described as “The Oppressor, Son of Grab-and-Take” (*Marry*, 111).

Ngugi uses the history of the Mau Mau war and the period directly after to challenge the post-colonial situation in Kenya. The play addresses more than the land issue, which epitomises the corruption that pervades neo-colonial Kenya. Exploitation and oppression continue in the guise of ‘legitimate trade’. The play ends by calling on people to “think hard/ Let’s wake up and reason together, now” (*Marry*, 113-114). The final song and dance of the play calls for action, a united effort to end neo-colonial exploitation.

While I think that many of the issues of the play are topical and very relevant, one of the limitations of this play is that the characters tend to be too stereotypical and binary. Ngugi juxtaposes the oppressed workers with the neo-colonial land and factory-owners. The Marxist binary is too simplistically applied here. The same is true of the

generational presentation - Gathoni and John Muhuuni are both self-indulgent youths who have no sense of themselves or their futures. These simple binaries fail to sufficiently problematise responsibility and guilt realistically.<sup>56</sup>

I question the depiction of the workers as relatively powerless, even in the face of initiated action they are victimised. Also, while the final call to awareness and action is clear, perhaps it would be more useful to see possible avenues or examples of what such action may be, or have been. This is different in the next play, *Maitu Njugira (Mother, Sing for Me)*, which Ngugi wa Thiong'o workshopped with the Kamiriithu Community and Education Centre in 1982.<sup>57</sup>

## 2.2.2 Ngugi wa Thiong'o & the Kamiriithu Community and Education Centre: *Maitu Njugira (Mother, Sing for Me, 1982)*

The history of the Kamiriithu people's theatre group is outlined in detail by Ngugi in *Barrel of a Gun* (1983:39-51). Again the play is collaborative and Ngugi's influence is evident in the use of history to frame the criticism of neo-colonial Kenya. Although it was written in Gikuyu, the choice of the musical drama, with songs in different languages allows for a wide audience-appeal.

The play looks at the ultimate aims of independence and evaluates to what extent these have been realised. The action takes place on a colonial plantation in the 1930s where African workers suffer under the tyranny of a European owner, who has total control over them because of the *Kipande* system. The workers finally rebel, and kill the owner. Everyone rejoices and hopes that through this they have won back their freedom and land. Their foreman, however, betrays them. He has grown rich and powerful through

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<sup>56</sup> I think that comparison with much of South Africa's theatre suggests how a more complex exploration of oppositional positions and roles is possible. See chapter 4.

<sup>57</sup> I rely very heavily on Björkman (1989) and Ngugi (1983) for my discussion of this play as there is no published text. Ngugi himself translated a text into English, but Björkman suggests that it is very different from the Kikuyu original and intended for a different, European, audience. She bases much on her analysis of the play and its response - both audience and government, on interviews with 37 people from 6 Kenyan

collaboration with the colonial owner. He has the leader murdered and the oppression continues. After a second rising, when all seems to have finally succeeded, the governor calls for negotiation. A former collaborator, a priest and Kariuki, who has replaced the first leader meet. Only the first two return. The new leader, Mwendanda, has had Kariuki imprisoned and mutilated, and proclaims himself leader and decrees, against former agreement, that the land must be bought back. The farmers have no money and the land is sold to an American multinational corporation. The foreman becomes the plantation manager and continues to torment and exploit the farmers. The play ends with a call for unity and action.

The parallels between this plot outline and Kenya's history under colonialism, the Mau Mau war and the post-colonial period are clear, despite being set in the colonial period of the 1930s. The recognition of implied criticism is evident in the government's refusal to allow access to the National Theatre, as agreed, on 19th February, and the refusal of performance rights in March 1982. Nevertheless, the university theatre was made available to the performers, and the rehearsals were attended by thousands of people daily. Many people travelled across Kenya, including Masai, whose language was not represented in the play. Rehearsals began at 6:30 p.m., but by 3 p.m. all seats had been taken. After 10 rehearsals, the government refused to allow the company the use of the university venue. The Kamiriithu community then built a cultural centre and open air theatre at their own expense (of 150 000Ksh). It seated 3000 people. The day after Ngugi's press conference explaining the events leading up to this, the police arrived and razed the theatre and centre to the ground. The company was refused exit visas to perform in Zimbabwe and Ngugi wa Thiong'o, Kimani Geau and Ngugi wa Mirii, the company's administrative director, were forced to flee the country.

One may wonder why there was such a negative reaction to this play? Officially the government accused Ngugi of seeking to promote his own Kikuyu culture at the expense of other indigenous cultures, thus undermining unity in Kenya, which

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ethnic groups: Luo, Kamba, Luhya, Masai, Kikuyu and Gujarati Indian. They represented both literate and illiterate Kenyans. One third were women.

composes of forty national languages, of which 4 million of Kenya's 18 million speak Kikuyu. Yet this does not seem to be the opinion of the various people interviewed. They seemed to feel that the play overcame ethnic and linguistic barriers and called for unity in Kenya.

A key to understanding this may lie in comparing the reaction of these same critics to *Devil on a Cross* (which is available in both English and Kikuyu), and which dealt with many of the same issues even more overtly. Surprisingly, there has been barely any censorship of the novel. Björkman argues that the difference in reaction lies in the accessibility of the play, as opposed to the novel. About 70% of the Kenyan population are illiterate. The play reached many of these people, including those who spoke or understood little or no Kikuyu. Many of the non-Kikuyu interviewees understood the main thrust of the play, particularly the repeated image of unity - presented visually by an old man and then later Kariuki, both of who cannot speak after being tortured and mutilated. These characters repeatedly take and break a single stick, and then show how it is impossible to break a bunch of sticks bound together. An illiterate non-Kikuyu woman said:

Throughout the play he was doing that. He was showing how one person could be crushed, but if we come together it's difficult, it's not possible to crush them. I took that as a solution. because that means, if people organise to be together with that understanding, then it's hard to be broken. That came out very clearly (Björkman, 14, see later similar expression, 20)).

Some of the students suggest that in using history that Ngugi "wanted people not only to realise the past but also connect it with the present and from there debate what we are going to do" (Björkman, 1989:16).

Ngugi was able to reach and touch such a wide and diverse audience because of his use of audience participation and interaction, with the use of traditional African song-dance routines, and by encouraging audience participation.

Each act opens with music, a song and documents that were back projected. Act one, scenes one and two open with the mourning song *Kaleso*, sung in Kamba. It is a song

indicating the dream of liberation. This happens against the backdrop of two workers holding a map of Kenya inscribed with the words: “George Scott: Kanoru Farm 1930”. This places the action in the colonial period. The song of liberation is soon transformed into Western music with ‘fascist or military undertones’. At the same time colonial labour laws are presented and must be learnt by the workers. Among the ‘documents’ to be learnt are:

Kenya - Winter Home for Aristocrats

Kenya - Colony and Protectorate

A white man’s country: ... a territory admirable suited for a white man’s country, and I can say this, with no thought of injustice to any native race, for the country in question is either utterly uninhabited for miles and miles, or at most its inhabitants are wandering hunters who have enough settled home or whose fixed habitation is ... outside the healthy area. This will be one source of profit to the United Kingdom (Johnstone, 1901).

Native Registration Ordinance 1914

The colonial philosophy of force: force and the prestige which rests on the belief in force are the only way you can do anything with these people ... these people must learn submission by bullets - it’s the only school ... (Hardinge, April 25 1879).

(Björkman, 1989:63)

The action is set against the oppressive propaganda and rhetoric of the colonials. Here the colonial myth of Kenya as a huge unpopulated land is perpetuated. The play also ties this issue in with Kenyan collaboration as Kanuro cracks the whip and Nyabaara translates the orders.

Scene two’s documents presented are:

Colonising Africa is to Make the Negro Work - Fisher/ Lugard

Civilization = Christianity, Commerce Plus Five Per Cent

A Good System of Compulsory Labour Would Do More to Raise the Nigger Than All the Millions That Have Been Spent In Missionary Efforts in the Last Fifty Years – Major (Björkman, 1989:68).

Again the colonial rhetoric frames the scene, but this time economics and religion are foregrounded. Despite the rebellion against the colonials, they are betrayed by one of their own and are placated with trifles, while the land issue remains unanswered.

The third act begins as the former two, with the song and the woman who was searching for her lost child is pregnant again. No year is marked on the map of Kenya, it bears only the inscription: “Anglo-American Fruit Storage Company”. The documents presented are:

Strikes Banned on This Farm

Trespassers Will Be prosecuted

Every Worker on the Farm Will Have To Carry Identity Papers *Mbwa Kali* (Beware of the Dog) (Björkman, 1989:72)

These headlines suggest that in the post-colonial situation nothing has changed. The issues of land, control and exploitative labour continue. Colonials have simply been replaced by corporations who benefit at the expense of the people, with the co-operation of the new leaders.

These introductions visually outline the key images and developments that are dealt with in more detail in each act. It gives the audience a frame of reference and also overcomes some of the linguistic barriers.

Ngugi further overcomes linguistic limitations with the use of powerful visual images which would be familiar to a diverse audience: whips, security companies and dogs, which most Kenyans would recognise as referents to control over the property of the upper class. Invisible dogs chase and terrorise the people. Dogs were a popular method of controlling and terrorising workers in the colonial period. These images augment their significance by their repetition in different scenes.

In the same way patterns are developed in the action of each act. There are two burnings of the passes, a repetition of the suppression of the rebellions by force, the rape of Nyathira by both Kanuro and Mwendanda, both rapes occur after she has incited fellow workers to action. The first time she becomes a prostitute, the second time she returns to the group and is integrated back into society. However, both times there is no one to help or defend her. This suggests some of the problems the people faces, as well as

suggesting the need to move away from the role of victim, to stand in opposition to oppression as a community.

Implicitly Ngugi criticises the society for being passive and taking refuge in religion. As seen in *I shall marry*, religion is criticised for distracting Kenyans from their actual circumstances. The play depicts the Christian leaders as being complicit with the neo-colonial oppressors. The action suggests that religious difference soon becomes ethnic difference and disunity breaks out. The dramatic answer is Kariuki who reunites them by replacing the religious song with a patriotic freedom song (Björkman, 1989:68). Here the didactic nature of this use of historic theatre is overt.

As with the songs, and visual images, Ngugi uses characters to mobilise individuals to action, as they see the 'social forces' of which they are 'agents'. Both the rebels Kang'ethe and Kariuki bear the names of recognised Freedom Fighters.<sup>58</sup> In the play they both protest oppression and corruption, and are both martyred for their resistance against the colonial or neo-colonial oppressors, respectively. While the repetition and failure of these men is depressing, they, together with the old man who enacts the first image of the sticks, suggest that there shall always be individuals with indomitable spirits who will protest each successive system of oppression.

The image of the grieving mother who seeks her child who was killed by bullying security men is symbolic of Kenya's "collective search for their children: i.e. the liberators" who are nowhere to be found, is another recurring image in the play. Half way through the play this woman stops mourning and madly circling the stage and mimes the ceremony of a second birth, indicating a resurrected second generation. This scene parallels Kariuki's decision to embrace the freedom struggle. These events are paralleled by Nyathira's being healed, abandoning her Western dress and prostitution and actively

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<sup>58</sup> Kang'ethe was the founder and leader of the KCA, Kikuyu Central Association which protested neo-colonialism. He was martyred in the mid-1970s. Kariuki was a Mau Mau fighter who was in detention, released after the war and then taken from a Nairobi hotel, beaten, tortured and shot in the Ngong hills on 2 March 1975, by whom is not clear.

joining the struggle. These images suggest that after the symbolic rape by colonisers and oppressors, the country can bear new children, Kenya can heal and be fruitful again.

However, Ngugi and the company chose not to end the play on this note. Rather, it ends with a messenger from the governor announcing that a peace conference is to be held. The fighters emerge from the forest to negotiate. Kariuki, the priest and Mwendanda, a member of the new domestic bureaucracy, are their representatives. The people demand permission to hold passports, the abolition of passes (Kipande), slave wages and forced labour, torture and the rape of their women. National culture must be free to develop and the land taken must be returned to its rightful owners.

Mwendanda returns triumphant to announce the abolition of the Kipande. He is positive and patriotic, but ambiguous:

Hear me to the end  
 Kanoru's plantation is to be sold  
 At least some part of it!  
 White Highlands no more!  
 And it will be sold to anybody  
 Without any colour bar  
 Or any other form of discrimination  
 In a word, there is no colour bar  
 In the selling and buying of this plantation  
 If a black man has got money  
 Or if a group of black men have money  
 They can buy this farm  
 From today money is the bar.

...

Doubtful Worker: But how can we buy back a plantation that was stolen from us?

People: Yes! this land is ours.

Mwendanda: There are ways and ways of achieving the same end.

I tell you: Let's not wrangle over details  
 You go and collect money among yourselves  
 A ten cent here; a shilling there  
 And we liberate this land with money  
 Without a further single drop of blood  
 We get back our stolen heritage (Björkman, 1989:72).



Yet, nothing changes. The people remain shackled and oppressed. The pregnant woman, who represented the hope of a new generation, seeks refuge behind the map. She is pulled away to reveal Mwendanda sitting in a rickshaw pulled by Africans. He is just as much the modern African bourgeois as Kanuro was, with the colonial whip, whistle and watch-chain hanging across his stomach and pith helmet enscribed with the anagram of a multinational corporation. He is the native director of the company's plantation. The overt colonial presence has been replaced by economic imperialist exploitation. Two armed policemen and the priest accompany him. These men represent the civil structures that should protect and represent a society. However, they have chosen to collaborate with the neo-colonial economists. The priest intones an ironic parody of 'The Lord's Prayer'. He ignores Mwendanda's fondling of the young women and endless praise of money. He delivers a platitudinous eulogy over Mwendanda as Mwendanda rapes Nyathira. The play resists a positive happy ending, insisting that representatives have (and do) betray the people, and that oppression continues.

Yet, despite this bleak cyclic of betrayal, the play ends with the people singing *Twiyuumiririe* (Let us stand firm), despite the guns trained upon them. These final images remind the audience of Kariuki's loyalty and reliability, and the image of the strength of the unified sticks is repeated. According to Björkman, the ending is more positive in the English version. A woman gathers the loose sticks and they enact the mime of the bundle again. At the end the woman lifts the bundle, aims it as if it were a rifle and, joined by the rest of the cast, singing a song of defiance and a warning that dawn will break for Kenya (Björkman, 1989:74-5).

Ending with song involved many in the audience who may not understand Kikuyu. The songs play a powerful role in this play. The British banned many patriotic songs because of their power to remind and unify the people, despite their ethnic diversity. The songs of this production served the same purpose - they united people of different ethnic groups who recognised the songs. They sang one another's songs, regardless of language or ethnic group, recognising common problems. Eloquence is also highly valued in Kenyan society, so the incorporation of riddles and proverbs is important,

making the audience active - they became cheerers, ridiculers, riddle-guessers or even opponents, and thus become active participants in the interpretation of their own history and experience. It is a clear didactic call to resist the neo-colonial corruption evident in the land issue, the presence of multi-national corporations and the clear class stratification in post-colonial Kenya.

By setting the play in the 1930s the group aimed to safeguard themselves from easy accusations of subversion, while still drawing a continuum between the events during colonialism and many of Kenya's post-colonial problems. One educated Kikuyu interviewee said:

[i]t took the people's side in the 80-year struggle for land and freedom. Its content was sound: tracing the continuum of oppression and exploitation from 1890 to date and the dialectical opposite of resistance from Wayaki wa Hiinga to Dedan Kimathi to J.M. Kariuki.

The old songs conveyed the mood of that time to resist oppression and dehumanisation (Björkman, 1989:88).

In this play Ngugi and the Kamiriithu group make Kenya's past relevant to its present. They draw parallels between Kariuki and the Mau Mau heroes, thus arguing how and why the struggle should go on. Again Ngugi uses the lives of ordinary people to show how the social forces in which they live, be they political, economic or religious, define them. Thus he writes an alternative memory, which runs counter to the dominant, official histories of post-colonial Kenya; and so Ngugi suggests how history may offer strategies for liberation.

## **2.3. USE OF MYTH IN KENYAN DRAMA**

### **2.3.1. Francis Imbuga: *Betrayal in the City* (1975) and *Man of Kafira* (1979)**

Imbuga, unlike the other playwrights discussed thus far, was born in Maragoli, Western Kenya and grew up with little contact with the Mau Mau movement. His plays deal less

with this specific historic period and more with the problems of Independence, the notion of freedom, and social inequality in post-colonial Kenya. He also has much less tension about colonial influences in his work. His plays can be roughly divided into three groups: the family plays, *Aminata*, *The Burning of Rags*; the political plays, *The Successor*, *Betrayal in the City*, *Man of Kafira*; and the psychological play, *Game of Silence*.

I want to focus on the so-called political plays to see how Imbuga shifts away from the use of specific historic frames, and how he uses stereotypical characters, and Brechtian techniques in a mythic context to explore the socio-political realities and role of the artist in post-colonial Africa.

I thus look at the political plays here. I have chosen to focus on *Betrayal in the City* and *Man of Kafira*. Imbuga's use of a mythic, fictive world is of special interest insofar as it distances his critical commentary from specific history or personalities, while remaining close enough for his audience to understand the referents. These two plays follow one another and have the same characters. Both plays use a play-within-a-play to comment overtly on the role of the artist and the relationship between art and society.

*Betrayal* was first produced at the Kenyan National Theatre in May 1975. *Man of Kafira* was first produced under the title *Day of Truth* for President Moi at the Creative and Performing Arts' Festival held at Kenyatta University College on 18 May 1979.<sup>59</sup>

*Betrayal* is set in post-colonial Kafira, an anagram for Afrika, an imaginary African State that represents the continent. It opens with an old couple at the graveside of their son who has been murdered and whose grave someone has attempted to burn, in order to destroy the body before the shaving ceremony, which in the Luhya community is believed to usher away the dead and cleanse the immediate family. Adika, the dead man, was shot at a student protest rally. The students were protesting against the

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<sup>59</sup> It was then revised and dedicated to Stella Muka, the late Kenyan actress, in 1983. It was first published in 1984.

number of expatriates teaching at the university. His ghost haunts his brother, Jusper, causing him to murder the sub-chief's son who he suspects shot Adika. The crack across the grave becomes metaphoric of the crack across Kafira. This betrayal and sadness in the small village becomes symptomatic of what is occurring in the country, and by implication, the continent. The play widens to this perspective when Jusper is taken to prison. Nepotism, corruption, neo-colonialism, repression and dictatorship are evident in individuals and groups of people: from Boss, the leader, to his committee, led by the most corrupt, Mulili; to civil servants, intellectuals and the general populace, including the guard.

Illness and madness are used as powerful metaphors to reflect the condition in Kafira. From the start Jusper is mad, and his parents speak of his "illness" (*Betrayal*, 8). Jusper's natural anger and grief at his brother's death is described thus:

He became wild at the funeral, singing songs of vengeance; then they came and took him away. Said he was dangerous to peace loving people and had to be cooled down. When they brought him back after three months, he was no longer the son we knew" (*Betrayal*, 10).

'They' obviously refer to government officials. Here, as in many oppressive states, mental illness becomes the label of the "illness" of resistance. Jusper's response to this is:

People think I am mad ... (points to his head) My here is powerful ... That is why I know the difference between the sun, Jupiter and Jusper. Hey, come to think of it! You and I have never seen Jupiter, except ...? Except on paper. *Jupiter!* - *Absent sir.* *Jusper!* - *Present sir!* *Justice!* - *Absence sir.* Yes I've got it. Jupiter and Justice are one and the same. They are neither here nor there (*Betrayal*, 10-11).

Here, he assumes the role of the fool who in his madness has the licence to say the unspeakable. Jusper argues that in Kafira Jupiter and justice are comparable. Both are believed to exist, but are distant and cannot be seen by the naked eye. Jusper's name is a fascinating combination of Justice and Jupiter. He argues that both these things one cannot see with the naked eye, but one accepts their existence on trust, at the word of those who 'know'. In many ways he too is both present and absent, sane and insane, a fitting guide to this complicated world.

The references to insanity in these plays are complex, and within the world of political oppression, they may be paradoxical. Within this world the megalomaniac dictator, who may be truly insane, if one defines this as a condition of being disconnected from reality, has the power to define sanity. Foucault traces the development of the concept of insanity and confinement from the 15th century to the 18th centuries. He demonstrates the processes whereby particular authority figures like doctors, judges, and rulers, gained the power to define what was good or evil, normal or pathological. Once these normalising decisions on what constituted acceptable or unacceptable behaviour had been made, they decided how this behaviour would be enforced through treatment, discipline and punishment, often through institutions (hospitals, prisons, clinics, schools, factories, or madhouses). The result tends to be docile subjects, who are 'civilised'. Those who do not co-operate are reinstitutionalised. However, this is not to suggest that such men have all the power and members of society are defenseless victims. Foucault argues that society is itself normalising, and thus complicit in the systems which control them. Imbuga's plays dramatise many of these arguments and processes. He particularly explores how power is misused and the social norms applied to control dissidents.

This relation between illness, insanity and control is comically expressed in the prison scene between the guard and Jere, a soldier who is arrested for refusing to prevent the shaving ceremony for Adika:

Askari: My God, this is the wrong place for you. The place for lunatics is three doors down the corridor.

Jere: You mean three doors up the corridor?

Askari: That could land you in more trouble. Three doors up the corridor is the office of the head of the institution.

Jere: Is he in or out?

Askari: In, and he won't be much use to you when I start educating you.

Jere: Has it ever occurred to you that the outside of this cell may be the inside of another?  
(*Betrayal*, 21)

The implication is clear, the real madmen are the authorities and the prison is their lunatic asylum.

The extent of this 'illness' is seen in Mosese's dream. He was a university staff member who protested Adika's death and was arrested for possession of (planted) drugs. In a dream Mosese mimes a corrupt ruler and then returns to his bed. Jere comments: "When the madness of an entire nation disturbs a solitary mind, it is not enough to say that the man is mad" (*Betrayal*, 35).

In *Man of Kafira*, this madness becomes particular to Boss in exile. The Abiaran (again an anagram for Arabia) government, recognising his insanity, code-names their plan to manipulate his departure "Operation Headless". They argue: as "the man is acting as if he is mad, and madmen have no sense of reason, and an unreasonable man is as good as a man without a head, so, 'Operation Headless'" (*Betrayal*, 20). Boss himself agrees: "Yes, I am mad. So mad that I could even mastermind the third world war, if I chose to" (*Betrayal*, 31-32). He believes that he is a "black Hitler", "Shaka too", born again and that no one can deceive him (*Betrayal*, 32). This is the extreme self-deceit of the megalomaniac. It comments on the relationship between insanity and dictators, the kind of obsessive, manic mind that can seize and hold such power. This mania is also evident in Boss's excesses with women and food (*Betrayal*, 35). However, the ultimate manifestation of his delusion is his belief that the people who hate him and wish to tear him to pieces will welcome his return. He mistakes their cries for his blood as a welcome clamour (*Betrayal*, 54, 56).

However, he is not the only one who is insane. Regina, one of Boss's wives, says that there are as many mad people in Kafira "as ... there are independent thinkers" (*Betrayal*, 44). The reference here is to the policy of controlling political dissidents by defining them as 'mad' and thus dangerous to the society. She says that in Kafira "there is no cure for those branded crazy." Juser explains that he was made "a patient! A permanent mental case" as a means of controlling him. But he warns, "even madmen have an ear for truth" (*Betrayal*, 62). The result of this, though, is sad as, he insists, "the tears of a madman mean nothing to normal people ... normal people are blind and deaf. Normal people are mad. Yes, the world of normal people is a world of madmen" (*Betrayal*, 62-

63). He suggests that this numbing, the refusal to see, hear or feel is actually what makes people mad or mentally unwell.

Illness as abnormality is extended to the physical in most of the plays. Blindness and deafness are highlighted in relation to power in both *Betrayal* and *Man of Kafira*. *Game of Silence* (1977) was written between these two plays and is dedicated to “Byron Kawadwa, playwright and director of the Uganda National Theatre who died in silence in February 1977”. The protagonist is a man who is spied upon and finally institutionalised for questioning the causes of injustice, suffering and death. He had lost his mother, daughter and sister. His questions are personal and metaphysical, but are treated as threatening and “anti-establishment”. He is accused of having “suffered a severe stroke of political insanity, an infectious disease that seems to be spreading fast, and to which we can attribute the present wave of strikes in the country” (*Game*, 50). Throughout the play he calls for the silence to be broken and people to listen to the calls of Beggars and the suffering of the mass of people. In the end these cries become overwhelming and overthrow the oppressive order.

In *Betrayal* there are similar references to silence. Askari advises Mosese that “silence is the best ship home” (*Betrayal*, 24). Mosese in turn argues that they do not understand that silence may also be used as a weapon (*Betrayal*, 32). Regina, Mosese’s sister and Jusper’s fiancée, has been beaten until she has lost her hearing in one ear in an attempt to make her give evidence against her brother. This means that she is handicapped with partial deafness, which also causes a lack of balance. This deafness becomes an implicit metaphor for what has happened in the country, how the people have been tortured and become deaf to the cries, as well as being silenced themselves. This, Imbuga suggests, brings a lack of psychic balance. Finally, though, the manipulations and political manoeuvres of those in power are useless. Regina kills Boss, who has forced her to marry him after he had murdered her whole family. This may be both an implicit metaphor and a warning to such a state that at some point the victim will rebel and refuse to be endlessly abused in silence.

The silence extends to the people as a whole. Jusper tells Regina that “it doesn’t matter what the masses think if they have no voice”. Adika is murdered, and Mosese and Jusper are imprisoned because they “tried to provide voices for the masses” (*Betrayal*, 39). The ultimate silencing is of course death. This is made explicit when Boss orders Mulili to “come report to me that he (Kabito) is silent” (*Betrayal*, 63). The rest of the Committee does not contest the corruption or murder of colleagues or Boss and thus their silence makes them complicit in the corruption and their own subjugation to the tyranny Boss wields over all (*Betrayal*, 65). The corruption includes tenders for milk and potato sales to the university (*Betrayal*, 54, 56). This financial corruption easily extends to murder. Imbuga then shows how such corruption extends beyond commerce and politics, to include the arts and humanities in the rigging of the play competition which Jusper “wins” in a few minutes (*Betrayal*, 52).

*Betrayal* underpins everything in the play. Manipulative, deceitful, avaricious rulership sets the pattern for the country and its people. The betrayal of a people by their ruler is serious as it breaks an important social contract. This will inevitably lead to the leader’s end, as he can depend on no more than he himself can give. Thus Boss’s betrayals must end with Mulili’s betrayal of Boss in the end. The swiftness and totality of Mulili’s accusations of Boss’s corruptions, which despite being true, are horrifying, coming from Mulili, suggest that even, or especially, a ruler is not immune to the system he creates.

Another important focus for Imbuga is the issue of art’s relation to the socio-political context. In *Betrayal* this is primarily explored through Jusper, a student who writes creatively. No one will publish Jusper as he is considered too dangerous (*Betrayal*, 50). The relation between social and political repression is made clear in what is ‘allowed’. When a foreign dignitary visits, he is met by school children lining the road to the airport and tribal dances (*Betrayal*, 57). The arts are confined to unthreatening ‘traditional’ performance modes.



Imbuga uses the play-within-a-play to comment on the role and power of art. Boss commissions a play for a foreign visitor. He clearly defines and limits the theme and ideology. Boss wishes to demonstrate how liberal and humanitarian their state is. Ironically, the prisoners are forced to present this fantastic vision of freedom. The men are fed at each rehearsal so that they will look well cared for. He insists that the play outline should address the “achievements” of the post-colonial state and must have the words “progress” and “achievement” on every other page (*Betrayal*, 53).

Imbuga underlines the parallels between his play and the play-within-the-play by entitling them both *Betrayal in the city*. The plot is also ironic, and unsubtly comments on Boss. It narrates the story of an army cadet who becomes active in politics. Juser explains:

Juser: The main drama is built around what he doesn't do, or rather what is done for him. In the first place, he is promoted to the rank of captain within six months of his enrolment ...

Boss: Mmm, very hard working.

Juser: Because he didn't quite know how to handle a gun, he accidentally shoots his colleague in a pass-out parade.

Boss: That is manslaughter.

Juser: The climax is reached when it is discovered that he is not, in fact, a relative of the army commander as he had been thought (*Betrayal*, 71-72).

This fictional world represents the same corruption of advancement through contacts and murder that one has seen in the government of Kafira. Boss then asks if this is a comedy or tragedy and whether someone dies. Juser answers that “[I]t is possible to have a death that is not tragic” (*Betrayal*, 72).

The ultimate irony and power of this self-reflexive, critical play-within a-play is the outcome. Throughout Boss has insisted on his own talent as an actor and its importance for a political career (*Betrayal*, 69, 73). In many ways, including this aspect, Boss seems to have been modelled closely on the Ugandan dictator Idi Amin. Soyinka, in an interview with Art Borreca said that Amin:

... really knew how to fool the whole world. He fooled his own countrymen for some time. You only have to see how very closely he studies the character he thinks he is or wants to be ... So these victims of power (dictators) - because they are both

abusers and victims of power, in a sense - like a prime example, Hitler, were great actors. They acted all the time (Soyinka, 1985:34).

However, Boss, like most dictators, underestimates the potential power of performance in the arts. He is so seduced by his own dream that he insists that his guards give the prisoners their guns, as they lack props, and this causes his downfall (*Betrayal*, 67ff., esp. 74-5). Here Imbuga suggests how inevitably the myth can deceive even its author, destroying him. Thus, for him, art has a power beyond even its specific creator.

Without using an overt historical frame, Imbuga addresses the relation between the past and the future in his plays. The first reference here is made by Mosese in prison where he explains that he has changed his name from Nicodemus to Mosese. His name change stands in strong contrast to that of the Boss who changes his to an unpronounceable name to link him to a mythic past and create a mystic aura for himself. Mosese changes his name from Nicodemus - a Christian Biblical name, which refers to a man who was part of the Jewish Sannhedrin who had faith in Jesus, but was too afraid to admit this publicly. Mosese, like characters in Ngugi's plays, is opposed to the idea of the kingdom of the heavens, believing that it paralyses people (*Betrayal*, 31). The reason for his rejection of his name is explained in Jusper's comment to Regina: "We asked God to help us drop our Christian names" (*Betrayal*, 43). This ironic pun comments on colonialism and Christianity and implies that Kenyans need to interrogate both, and shake off their repressive bonds and the residuals of this system, obvious in neo-colonialism.

However, the fact that Mosese's new African name means "remember the past" indicates that they are not calling for a blind rejection or forgetting of the past. One of the objections he makes is that "we have killed our past and are busy killing our future" (*Betrayal*, 32). In the context of discussing the colonial situation he says "it was better while we waited. Now we have nothing to look forward to" (ibid). Like Kiguunda in *Marry*, Mosese argues that at least under the colonialist system there was hope of change, improvement, but there is only disillusionment in the post-colonial period as colonialism has given way to neo-colonialism. Mosese argues that the key to changing

this is that each individual should take responsibility for “remembering” the past – the events, including the mistakes, and who they as a people are.

In the African context, as opposed to European drama, the individual is not the focus; it is the society or group that is most important. So here, as in Ngugi’s plays, the individual represents the types in a society. However, in his use of types, Imbuga creates more complex, developed characters than Ngugi does.

In relating the issues of the individual representing a type or role in society to the past and future, the Boss is more than an individual dictator. He represents corrupt leadership in Africa. In an earlier conversation with Boss Jusper obliquely refers to Boss’s eventual death in terms of Christ’s sacrificial death, for the greater good (*Betrayal*, 69). Yet, unlike Ngugi’s plays, which end with defiance of oppression and a call for the death of the oppressor, this play does not end with the execution of the Boss. Despite Jusper’s cries: “Shoot now! Shoot now!” (*Betrayal*, 75), Jere insists that they do not kill Boss:

Our wish is not to swim in human blood, but to provide a mirror for Kafira. A mirror that will reflect the real faces of Kafira’s front men. But it is not enough to provide only a mirror. No. We must learn to sacrifice ourselves for a better future. A future where these events that now take place need not be repeated” (*Betrayal in the city*, 76).

Jere is proposing that they, the common people, the prisoners including students, common soldiers, an academic and others, are to speak for truth and justice and offer a merciful direction for the future rather than repeating the mistakes of the past. This suggests that in understanding the past one can change the direction of the future of a country and history. This is made explicit as the play cyclically returns to the old couple. This shift away from the general, communal towards the specific dramatises how such action and decisions effect individual people in the community, who are often largely unaware of the struggles informing such decisions.

This use of the mythic rather than an overtly historical frame allows Imbuga more scope for criticism. Ruganda argues that Imbuga avoided giving offence by distancing himself

from specifics in contrast to Ngugi. In the 1970s and 1980s Imbuga travelled abroad, to Ghana and Nigeria where, for example, he saw the growing corruption at the highest levels of Colonel Acheampong's National Redemption Council in Ghana, and the violent arrests of 90 protesting students in Ibadan. These experiences, and his reading,<sup>60</sup> gave him sufficient distance from the specific Kenyan situation, enabling him to evaluate the problems of his own country in relation to the neighbouring states and then present these general, pan-African issues in a broad way in the context of a mythic African state. Ruganda argues that this also gave him a measure of safety from the political attacks that Ngugi has experienced.

Like Ngugi, Imbuga uses specific dramatic devices whereby he forces a critical engagement with the dynamics and aesthetics of the ruling ideology. By interrupting the linear development of the plot, he is able to defamiliarize and demystify the rhetoric. This, together with the use of parody, proverbs and especially the play-within-the-play achieves a Brechtian Alienation effect, highlighting the constructed, fictive nature of the play. This counteracts Identification, making the spectator's critical faculties far more acute. It also serves to challenge what is 'real' and 'true'. One is left in no doubt that what one sees is staged experience, but at the same time, the audience is invited to compare this construction with the processes whereby we understand the world and a nation's history. It implicitly poses questions about the constructed nature of 'reality' and history, both past and present.

*Man of Kafira* extends the explorations begun in *Betrayal in the City*. The plot assesses the events post-revolution: Boss flees Kafira and Jere takes over rulership. Boss seeks asylum in Abiara, an anagram for Arabia. This is an implicit reference to Idi Amin's exile in an Arab country at the time Imbuga was writing.

Once again Imbuga uses the play-within the play to arouse his audience's criticality, especially with regard to the role and power of art in society. Beginning *Man of Kafira*

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<sup>60</sup> See Ruganda's extended analysis of the influences on Imbuga, especially Colin Legum's report on Kenyan problems in the wider context. (1992: xviii esp).

with the rehearsal of a play immediately reintroduces the issue of the relationship between art and society. The overtly Brechtian manner in which the rehearsal is interrupted and the director discusses the play, its characters, themes and the context in which it is to be performed with the actors overtly highlights areas requiring the audience's critical awareness. The power and place of theatre is shifted from being the means by which an oppressive system is overcome, to being the means of influencing people's thinking. Osman, the director says:

This play has been written for a specific audience. Now we don't want to preach to them because other people have tried elsewhere and failed. Our target is the subconscious mind, that part of the brain that refuses to be cheated. And our primary weapons are symbols and images, not swear words (*Man of Kafira*, 8).

He argues that it is their "responsibility as free thinking artists to be sincere in [their] portrayal of what [they] consider to be the truth" (*Man of Kafira*, 10). Part of their role, he believes is to preserve the dignity and value of human life. He also insists that they avoid "anything that amounts to preaching". The conflict comes between art's perceived function as entertainment and its use as a didactic weapon. One of the actors suggestion that they "just scrap the play off and only sing the songs and do the dance sequences. That way we won't offend anyone" (*Man of Kafira*, 11), initiates the consequent debate on censorship and self-censorship. All of these issues inform the decisions artists make in defining their place and role in society.

These debates frame the play. The effect of this overt self-criticality in the play is evident when the scene is rehearsed again, and the audience must actively engage critically as it can no longer assume that this is all just entertainment. However, Imbuga extends his intervention by interrupting the rehearsal a second time: the commissioned play is cancelled in favour of a wrestling match, which in turn is later cancelled for a variety show (*Man of Kafira*, 54). Each change suggests illustrates the application of Jere's ambition in *Betrayal*. He argued that they as artists wished to hold a mirror up to the world. This entertainment does exactly that: the wrestling match, where men fight to the death, reflects the value this society places on life, and the excitement blood sport evokes. This is extended when Osman expresses horror at their having found men

willing to sell their lives so cheaply, and Bin-Bin, political Jack of All Trades, warns Osman that survival here depends on the suspension of the senses and feelings (*Man of Kafira*, 16, 17). This is in opposition to the necessarily sensitive base from which a socially engaged artist must work. This exchange then questions the extent to which an artist can avoid corruption in such a system.

The idea of performance is extended from the theatrical to include the world of politics with the preparations for Boss's reception on his return to Kafira in Part Four. Two workers decorate the walls of the reception room with the Kafiran national flag. The flags are the "symbol of power". When asked why they are decorating the room, one answers:

Zefa: Sometimes we dress up the whole country .... It is possible, isn't it that most of them think that their countries are covered with national flags.

Kasim: Whom are you talking about?

Zefa: The leaders of the world.

Kasim: Why would they do that?

Zefa: Because they are only shown what they are supposed to see, flags. That is why even the most unpopular of them all still think they are popular.

Kasim: Yes, I quite agree with you. Dancing with flags on a windy day can be quite deceptive ... (*Man of Kafira*, 58).

This reintroduces the assertion Boss made in *Betrayal* that all successful politicians are good actors. They may know the role good sets and props make, but may also in turn be deceived by these outward signs of power themselves.<sup>61</sup> Thus the political show becomes equivalent to the variety show put on for a diplomatic visitor.

In *Man of Kafira* the artistic world explored is extended from theatre to include prose fiction. Bin-Bin tells Regina that he is writing a novel entitled "My life with an ex-president/ The travelling disease" and she suggests that it should be called "Man of Kafira". As in *Betrayal*, this reference again signals a conscious metafictional engagement with the play as artefact. In a Stoppardian way while presenting leap frog arguments and counter-arguments, Imbuga challenges a single stable view of reality and any clear distinction between art and life and art within art. The effect is to suggest that

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<sup>61</sup> See Ngugi (1997:12): "The war between art and the State is really a struggle between the power of performance in the arts and the performance of power by the state – in short enactments of power."

understanding the frame is the key to understanding the significance or meaning of an event or text. This fictive play's echoing the play the audience simultaneously watches, challenges the audience to look for the parallels between the world they assume is real, the fictive world being created before them, and the events Bin-Bin and Regina discuss in their creative works.

Imbuga also encourages artists to be courageous in the face of opposition. Boss has destroyed Regina's own book because it made him "transparent". Bin-Bin says: "My ideas have been destroyed too, by those who feared them. The fear of ideas is the beginning of man's death" (*Man of Kafira*, 43). He encourages her not to despair, but begin again and one day "the pod will explode and scatter the seeds on fertile ground" (ibid). Again this is an image of the active power art may have in and on society. Imbuga argues that art cannot be entirely passive or only entertaining.

However, despite having written creatively herself, Regina admits that her idea of a writer is "a dull creature, full of internalised sensitivities". She tells of her fiancé, Jusper who was "a good playwright", whom people laughed at and called crazy until he went mad. This may be another consequence of remaining sensitive in a desensitised world. Those that look at life must see and hear the unbearable. This may result in insanity, or perceived insanity. Imbuga suggests that to be Apollo's Cassandra, doomed to know, see and not be believed, is the ultimate torment. Perhaps in this Imbuga moderates his earlier optimism about the power and place of art. Interestingly this play does not end with the victory through theatre. The insanity and tyranny ends by force, by violence, when Regina stabs Boss. She trusts the proposed legal trial as much as the welcome pageant, and takes justice into her own hands. Yet, despite this resolution of tyranny at Regina's hands, the centrality of art and artists for truth is highlighted as important through both plays.

The references to Jusper and Regina's "illnesses" remind the audience of this theme in *Betrayal*. Here 'illness' is directly related to the issue of truth. After Osman and the actors leave Bin-Bin says:

Conscience! Truth! What is truth? Just a disease, that's all. Priests call for truth, artists call for truth, and even the politicians of the world advocate truth; yet truth still remains the greatest killer disease in this life. Yes, truth is a disease. Remove truth and there will be life upon life. So why? Why kill yourself crying out for truth in a world that is afraid of it? That is what is wrong with that man and his tribe of fellow artists. They are blind and deaf to the other truth, the truth of reason and experience. That is why they stink of the hangover of truth (*Man of Kafira*, 18).

At the end, in the return to Kafira, the soldier Jere, who had idealistically proposed a new democratic beginning at the end of *Betrayal*, says that he now understands “why cells are a necessary evil on the continent. People don't want to respect their own freedom” (*Man of Kafira*, 66). He has imprisoned Jusper by declaring him permanently mentally ill, to control him. During the press conference Jusper chooses to stay close to the people “where truth still is truth” (*Man of Kafira*, 67). He relates these issues when he says to Jere: “My illness is your lie” (*Man of Kafira*, 68). Because Jusper will not remain silent, Jere's lies are exposed. Jere as ruler has the power to normalise society and behaviour, so his recourse to Jusper's dissidence is to pronounce him ‘ill’.

And as most illness leads to death, this is true of political illness too. At the end Regina and Jusper insist that Boss has killed himself. Boss's corruption of power and loss of a clear sense of reality leads to his own mental disease, damage to the State, and finally his death. In this sense he does betray and destroy himself too.

The metaphor of illness is extended from individuals to encompass the whole country which, to Regina, is likened to a dark coffin “in which the advocates of truth lie ... a hunted people, that is what we are” (*Man of Kafira*, 41). Yet, this vision of society is not entirely negative or pessimistic. In the play-within-the-play and through Regina there is a sense that the spirit of the people, particularly the women, cannot be killed. Amina, one of Boss's other wives, says of Regina: “she still has something in her that he cannot kill. Her fighting spirit. ‘Our men don't die, they live on forever’, that is her secret war cry” (*Man of Kafira*, 21). Amina here unwittingly quotes from the rehearsed play at the beginning. This surreally distorts the separateness of the ‘fictive’ and ‘real’ worlds



constructed within the frame of Imbuga's play and suggests how the worlds of art and life conflate with one another, and art comments on society.

Just as the exploration of art's relation to reality becomes sharper, more critical and complex in this play than the earlier play, so too its exploration of religion. The exposé of hypocrisy and correspondent criticism becomes explicit. Boss's belief in visions makes him vulnerable to manipulation by an actor impersonating the Pope's emissary. Thus the play suggests that clergy often 'perform' or act, and thus manipulate not only people in general, but also the rulers.

Religious figures are also depicted as being politically involved: either complicit or actively opposed to the oppressive government. On the one hand, priests are reported to have kidnapped Regina and forced her to marry Boss after he murders her brother (*Man of Kafira*, 42); and on the other, Boss murders the Archbishop who opposes his marrying a second wife in the church (*Man of Kafira*, 45).

It also explores the confusion in the acceptance of the Moslem and Christian faiths, intolerance and the relationship between politics and religion in Africa. Boss, although a Moslem seeks the Pope's advice (*Man of Kafira*, 19), and both religious groups are involved in the political struggles. Ultimately, Imbuga seems to support Boss's assertion that men of religion are the "silent politicians. Always quietly nursing hopes of rising above the surface of the waters of the sea of politics" (*Man of Kafira*, 31). Imbuga invites us to evaluate the legacy of political Christianity in the pan-African context critically, but without guiding the audience as overtly as Ngugi does in his plays.

It is significant that Imbuga chooses to end this play with the execution that was withheld at the end of *Betrayal*. The play ends with Jusper and Regina making a stand against Boss and the hypocrisy of Jere's apparently tolerant rulership. Ruganda argues that the reason for Imbuga's choice is that:

Imbuga's ideal figure(s) of authority seems to be a combination of gender, on the one hand, and art, on the other. He sees Jusper and Regina as fitting that role. Both have been victims of misguided leadership, and both - having mounted, in their differing

ways, a concerted struggle to topple the oppressive regimes - are better placed to lead their society into the future. More significantly, their entire struggle has unwaveringly embraced the societal dynamics over and above personal interests and concerns. But as Fanon pointed out, for Juser's and Regina's revolution to be meaningful, "the struggle has to be made against those who made the revolution" - the likes of Jere who betrayed it in *Kafira* (1992:188-9).

I am not sure that art is as powerful as Ruganda suggests. In some ways Regina rejects art as something too indirect. She rejects the manipulations, plans and theatre of Bin-Bin and Jere. And Juser fails to act at all. There is also no definite sense that they shall lead the future or that Jere is actually displaced.

However, what is significant is that Imbuga has not chosen to idealise the history of the revolution, as Ngugi has done. He has also not written a psychological play, like that of *Watene*, which explores the mind of a leader. He chooses typical characters that, while psychologically realistic, represent types in society: dictators, advisers, old people, women, the people that constitute a society. He chooses to explore general problems of post-colonial Africa rather than address, in a counter-discourse, allegations against colonialism. One has a sense in these plays that he looks at the present with a sense of evaluating what is useful in the past rather than any attempt to reclaim the past, as seen in the historical plays discussed earlier in this chapter. In many ways it makes these plays more dynamic and complex, and less vulnerable to over-simplification. Instead of offering a challenge to history, it suggests the role art plays in formulating an abstraction of essential issues and positions while being able to practically interface with and challenge actual socio-political realities.

## 2.4 CONCLUSION

Richard Nturu describes five phases in the development of African writing:

The progression towards the modern status of the individual can be apprehended in five phases. Before the colonial period, the social order may have been unjust, but is stable and guarantees human dignity as it was understood and defined. With the advent of dominating foreigners, the attitude 'collaborators' notwithstanding, is to hang together in the face of a common enemy who threatens their common interests, values and rights, including life. At the dawn of independence and the

period roughly coeval with the first legally constituted generation of leaders, the feeling is one of the blinding euphoria followed by a desire not to 'wash their dirty linen in public'. All these three phases we have lived through. The contemporary phase is the one of disenchantment as the emissaries to whom we entrusted our fate fail to deliver the goods. The last phase - the phase that signals social cataclysm - is one in which the individual does not see society as any more capable of guaranteeing his basic rights than himself on his own (in King and Ogungbesan, 1975:xix-xx).

The plays by the Kenyan authors discussed here reflect these phases from the colonial period to disenchantment and the individual acting for him/ herself. One of the roles of art is to explore the complexities of history, and the fictive nature of literature often makes such an exploration more possible than it may be in an historical frame because there is more scope to explore the irregular, particular, individual.

Watene explores the historic figure of Dedan Kimathi in terms of interrogating the pressures facing a committed leader. He explores the doubt and fear of the man. Watene also looks at how the men responded to him – supporting his position and even actively developing the mythic figure of Kimathi for the cause. He seems to acknowledge the need to reclaim history, but is unwilling to do so uncritically, and simply romanticise the past. Ngugi's *Dedan Kimathi* makes an even greater argument for the need for positive historic figures; not only in terms of Kimathi, but also in the way the individuals in society are presented - as "agents of the social forces, which define them". Thus Ngugi, like the historians of the 1960s and 1970s, consciously writes a positive version of the Mau Mau struggle against colonialism. Even in the plays dealing with post-colonial issues, the betrayers are seen very much in unsubtle, binary positive or negative terms. There is a definite unwillingness to 'wash dirty linen' in the early plays, but he does signal disenchantment with those in power, who are corrupt and have established a neo-colonial system in Kenya, in the later plays. Nevertheless, the characters themselves are never ambivalent or complex, as in Watene's play, or as one sees in Osofisan's plays.

Imbuga's plays shift from the movement of reclaiming or rewriting a history in which the Kenyan experience was related more positively or accurately, to the fourth or fifth phases outlined by Nturu. There is disenchantment with the emissaries to whom the people have

entrusted their fate, and characters tend to act on their own behalf for human or personal rights. He uses a mythic rather than an historical frame to explore postcolonial experience in Africa. This allows him greater freedom to criticise, as it is more indirect and thus apparently less threatening.

Thus it would seem that the playwrights in the 1960s and 70s paralleled the historians' attempts to reclaim a more positive sense of self and national history. This functioned as part of the nation building project in post-colonial Africa. Literature was seen as an important tool in this process, and drama particularly so, as it is most able to overcome language and ethnic barriers. The images alone are memorable and unite people: I think particularly of the image of unity in the bundle of sticks in *Mother, Sing for me*. It is only later that drama shifted away from the historical project of positively rebuilding a nation-state to challenge the depictions of a ruler and the problems of neo-colonialism in Kenya. The mythic frame, characters and events set in a mythic context, then becomes a safer frame within which to formulate this criticism.

### CHAPTER 3

## NIGERIAN THEATRE:

### HISTORY AND MYTH IN THE POST-COLONIAL CONTEXT

*Gbebe: My duty is ended, which was to lead you through the hidden channel in the wave of history to the turning edge of knowledge.*  
(Osofisan, *Another Raft*, 1988:69)

Nigerian drama and its history is a vast topic, to which many scholars have dedicated their life's research. I thus have made severe selections in order to illustrate ideas rather than cover this area of African literature in depth. The particular texts that I have chosen to look at focus on how the time and mode in which the plays were written relates to the historic incident and theme they have chosen. As the Osofisan reference suggests, one of the most significant roles of theatre in Nigeria has been to challenge and conscientise its people, especially in relation to their history.

There are many versions of Nigerian history. One of the earliest accounts of northern Nigerian history are Arabic, dating back to the 9th century. These accounts deal with the history as far back as 1800 A.D. However, Oyewese points out their positive and negative contributions as historic documents. He argues that they are limited by their particular and skewed Islamic perspective, but useful insofar as they belie the claim that the Nigerians are a "people without a history", and insofar as "they have demonstrated that the meeting of the various Nigerian peoples was neither a colonial creation nor a recent event" (Oyewese, 1988:12-13).

The impact of the claim that "the African past was not historical" is not to be underestimated. Disputing this claim was the first task African post-colonial historians set themselves (Temu/Swai, 1981:21). Thus the historians Temu and Swai argue that "the purpose for which postcolonial historiography was constituted: [was] first and foremost as an ideological rejoinder to colonial historiography" (1981:28). Part of this "ideological rejoinder", which was bound to history, was the reclamation of identity and nation. Cesaire saw African historiography as part of the building of a nation and creating a sense of

“continuity with the world and ourselves” (Cesaire, 1969:160), as a means of both curing the alienation caused by colonialism and retracing an African identity. The historian Dike asserted that: “African Studies will be a means to the achievement for the African, of greater self-respect, the means to the creation of a surer African personality in the face of the modern world” (quoted in Kapteijns, 1977:25).

Thus as new histories were written, new myths were created and the ancient civilisation of Egypt and the Empires of the past were highlighted as the roots of African civilisation. History actively contributed to the unification of nations. This notion has been extended to the idea of a unified African continent. It served to suggest autonomy and originality, although this was less idealistic in West Africa than East Africa.<sup>62</sup> I want to now turn to specific plays to explore the extent to which writers supported the positions of the historians in ‘re-writing’ African history and identity.

I begin with the historical plays that explore leadership and corruption. The first is Ijimere’s *Born with fire on his head* (1965), which is set in the mid-nineteenth century and tells of the Bale<sup>63</sup> of Apomu who commits suicide in order to save his people. I contrast this play with Ola Rotimi’s historic play *Kurunmi*, which was first performed in Lagos on 15 January 1970, the day of Biafra’s surrender. It uses the Ijaiye War of 1860 as a frame to explore the authority of a chief and his conflict when tradition is challenged and his people call for change. The exploration of aspects of leadership is further extended by Zulu Sofola, Nigeria’s pioneer female dramatist, in *King Emene*, which is comparable to Rotimi’s *The Gods Are Not to Blame*. Here King Emene’s failure is bound up with his inability to face truth or any apparent challenge to his power. The kings in both of these plays suffer from Oedipal myopia. Like Zulu Sofola, Tess Onwueme also utilizes an historical incident and figure to explore the role of women in a patriarchal

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<sup>62</sup> See the Nigerian historian Tamuno’s inaugural lecture of 1973 where he does not scruple to suggest that not all were heroes in the struggle for independence, he identifies collaborators and states the failures of the Nigerian amalgamation of 1914, and the hypocrisy of the national leaders (1985:113).

<sup>63</sup> “Bale” refers to a provincial ‘king’ or mayor. It is an hereditary title. These kings are lords of their town or district from which they take their title. They are invested with power from Oyo, and a sword of justice which they are given by the Alafin (king) at their installation.

society, and also question the basis of patriarchal rulership in contemporary society in *The Reign of Wazobia* (1988).

I then shift to look at the use of myth in relation to history in plays by Soyinka, Ladipo and Osofisan. I begin by outlining how Soyinka's theory of myth and ritual relates to his use of historical frames in his plays as a means to communally retrieve a sense of self, nation and the supernatural. Although one can trace this in all of the plays, I have chosen to focus on *A Dance of the Forests* (1960) and *Death and the King's Horseman* (1964).<sup>64</sup>

I then proceed to a comparison of Duro Ladipo and Femi Osofisan's use of myth and history, particularly with reference to their dramatisation of the Moremi legend. Osofisan is the more radical of the contemporary playwrights in his approach to and use of history. This is evident when one compares his *Morountodun* (1979), with the treatment of the same mythico-history by Duro Ladipo in *Moremi* (1967). I shall also site examples of Osofisan's argument for an active engagement with history in *Another Raft* (written 1986, first performed 1987). The latter play was a direct response to J.P. Clark's *The Raft* (1964), which created the metaphor of Nigerians on a raft floating helplessly down to sea, unable or unwilling to save themselves or even attempt to direct the raft. This image Osofisan uses as a physical metaphor for history.

It should be noted that in Nigerian theatre there is a greater tendency to blend what may be perceived as history and myth than is the case with the East African writers. There is also a greater emphasis on the ritual, mystic dimension in Nigerian writing than in Kenyan. This may be because of the modes of colonisation and the extent to which Christianity did or did not make inroads into the two cultures. Whatever the reason for these differences, it should just be noted that it is far more difficult to make these divisions here than it was in the preceding chapter.

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<sup>64</sup> Duro Ladipo's *Oba Waja*, written in Yoruba, deals with the same event, but unfortunately is not available in English.

### 3.1 JOHNSON'S *THE HISTORY OF THE YORUBAS* AS PRIMARY HISTORIC SOURCE

My primary historic source for these analyses has been Samuel Johnson's *The History of the Yorubas*, first published in 1921, the original text having been completed in 1899. I have made this choice because Johnson has been the sole source of historical information for many West African writers. These writers are then reacting to a particular interpretation of history. Comparing Johnson with these writers challenges the notion of historiography as being more objective than creative writing where authors are said to 'invent' their fictive worlds. This is especially clear when comparing Johnson's late 19th century histories with Jacob Eghareuba's corresponding history (1968).

The early part of Johnson's history covers the background of the early (almost mythic) history of the Yoruba people: their religious beliefs, form of government, ethnic groups, structure of towns and villages, the principles of land law and a summary of manners and customs. Part II traces the various kings, heroes and 'despotic' rulers. Part III traces 'revolution and disruption', with the rise of the Fulani and wars for dominance and land. Part IV starts with the history of the Yoruba sovereign, Prince Atiba, and takes the history through many fratricidal wars until the law of succession was established and Atiba handed power over to his son, Adelu, among these accounts is that of Kurunmi who opposed this as contrary to tradition. This led to the Ijaye War between Adelu and his chieftains and Kurunmi. This war was fought from April 1860 until March 17 1862. The sequels to this war are traced in unrest for the next three years, including the 16 Years' War and conflicts in the north, and Alafin of Oyo's failure to reconcile the various factions, which resulted in the intervention of Christian missionaries and the British government. Johnson climaxes his history with the end of the war. He strongly suggests that this was only possible because of foreign intervention and seems to support the establishment of the British Protectorate and the terms, which were agreed upon in 1893.



Included in this agreement are the British contracts with local authorities.<sup>65</sup>

While Johnson's is an extensive and interesting overview of Yoruba history, with very useful explanations of cultural and religious norms and beliefs for the outsider, it often fails to give precise dates for key events, or even periods. It is also overtly skewed by Johnson's Anglophile Christian mission bias. At times this makes his interpretation of events or legends not only unbelievable, but also ridiculous. An example of this is Johnson's suggestion that in the Moremi account the reader may "discern ... a confused idea of the story of Jephtha, and that of the Blessed Virgin and her Son perverted" (Johnson, 1973:148). At the time these events being narrated occurred, there had been no Christian contact with the Yorubas, and hence no possibility for perversion or confusion, at best a comparison of stories and roles is possible. However, this too serves to illustrate some of the forces that affect the writing of histories.

### **3.2 THE HISTORIC REFERENT AND THE ISSUE OF RULERSHIP**

The overt use of history as a frame in Nigerian drama began with the Mbari Club in Ibadan. Artists and intellectuals including Wole Soyinka, J.P. Clark, Chris Okigbo, D.O. Fagunwa, the South African Ezekiel Mphahlele, Uche Okeke, Demas Nwoko and Ulli Beier founded this club. The latter is a European writer-researcher that lived and worked in Nigeria from 1950-1967. His significance here is his contribution to the place and use of history in Nigerian drama.

Inspired by this club in Ibadan, Duro Ladipo created a similar club in his basement in Oshogbo, called Mbari-Mbayo ("when we see it, we shall be happy"). The Centre opened with the musical drama *Oba Moro*. Demas Nwoko writes of Ulli Beier's contributions at this time:

Ulli Beier is not an artist, but he ... created by suggestion, a theatre troupe basically after the style of the existing Ogunmola and Ogunde vernacular troupes. He suggested

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<sup>65</sup> For example the statement that "it is not the intention of the Lagos Government to interfere with the domestic slavery as long as it is conducted on humane principles, as the country will still remain vested in the Ibadan authorities" (Johnson, 1973:639). Johnson does not seem to engage critically with these terms of agreements.

a historical theme from the legends ... Through further suggestions during production; original indigenous music and appropriate dances (along with poetry) were used ... (quoted in Ogunbiyi, 1981:338).

Thus from Ladipo's acceptance of Ulli Beier's suggestion to explore the use of legends and history, came a spate of historical plays. Soyinka's *Death and a King's Horseman* follows Ladipo's *Oba Waja*, which is an earlier version of the same event. Thus Beier's significance as catalyst in the historic explorations in Nigerian drama is not to be underestimated.

Various critics, such as Oyekan Owomoyela (1979) and Olundare Olajubu (1993), argue that the Nigerian playwright Obotunde Ijimere is actually Ulli Beier's *nom de plume*. Both of these writers are critical of Beier's being mistaken for a Yoruba writer, and they object to these plays being seen as "authentic interpretations of the Yoruba world-view" (cf. Soyinka, 1966, 1976 and Adedeji, 1972). Despite the criticism by Owomoyela, particularly on inaccuracies in reflecting Yoruba culture (see especially 1979: 47-49), it seems that Ijimere gives an interesting alternative vision of the history and the way it may be seen. Personally I believe that even if the critics are correct and Ijimere is Ulli Beier, it does not change the validity of his offering another interesting version of the old histories, particularly as he writes from within the culture and language. I want to look at this play now in terms of what hoe the historic referent comments on socio-political issues in Nigeria post-1960.

### 3.2.1 Obotunde Ijimere: *Born with Fire on his Head* (1965)

*Born with Fire on his head*<sup>66</sup> looks at the issue of corrupt rule, the dilemma of personal integrity and the trust placed in a ruler to do the best for his people in the face of corruption. It is set during the reign of the Yoruba king Aole, who succeeded his cousin Abiodun. The protagonist is the Bale of Apomu, who had made an enemy of Aole during his cousin's reign. Johnson tells how Apomu was a market town where Oyos, Ifes, Owus and Ijebus met for trade. Raiding and man stealing was rife at the time and many Oyos

<sup>66</sup> All references to this play in brackets will be indicated by the abbreviation *Fire*.

had been seized and sold in the area. King Abiodun sent orders to the Olowu and Owoni to keep strict watch and prevent this from reoccurring. They in turn sent the orders on to the Bale of Apomu to keep strict watch on the trade routes in his area.

Aole, a subject then, was trading in the area and bartered his friend for merchandise. The Ijebus were taking the prisoner away when it was reported to the Bale of Apomu that an Oyo man was being sold. Apomu intervened, released the man and arrested Aole. On discovering that he was an Akeyo (prince) and “could not be more severely dealt with, in order that justice may not miscarry, he was ordered by the Bale to be severely flogged” (Johnson, 1973:188). On his accession as king, according to custom, the army invited Aole to name his enemy that they should demonstrate their power and loyalty. Aole named the Bale of Apomu. The Bale appealed to the court of Owoni of Ife, his over-lord, whose orders he had obeyed, but as the offence was now against the supreme ruler, no one could save him. The Bale of Apomu decided to commit suicide in order to save his people from destruction. He had his head cut off and delivered to the Oyo, to appease the offended monarch; and thus he thwarted Aole’s plans for revenge against him and his people (Johnson, 1973:188-189).

The play sets out very clearly that the Bale of Apomu is an honourable man. He both obeys an order and acts with integrity within his own sense of what is right and just:

Messenger: He threatens us,  
that if we cannot stop the offence  
he’ll send his seventy Esos  
to lay both Ife and Apomu in ruins.

Bale: I’m horrified to hear  
such things have happened in my town.  
...  
But tell my Lord the Oni  
the sacred king of Ife,  
the Bale of Apomu does not need  
the Alafin’s threat  
or the Oni’s admonition  
to make him stop the trade in human lives (*Fire*, 1970:66).

In the play Aole identifies himself as “the prince of Oyo” and his father as “Abiodun, the Alafin of Oyo” (*Fire* 68), rather than as a first cousin, as Johnson argues. This makes the Bale’s dilemma clearer as it is thus more definite that Aole will one day be ruler. When facing Aole, the Bale recounts the aspects of Abiodun’s rule that has made him a great and powerful king: he has cleared corruption from the land, and makes no exceptions to the law that he has fought so hard to secure, even for his own son. From the outset Ijimere clearly defines the characteristics and qualities of a successful ruler. These are contrasted with prince Aole’s arrogance as he insists that “no citizen in my father’s kingdom/ calls himself free before me” (*Fire*, 70).

These qualities in a ruler are then set against the choices of integrity facing other authority figures in the society – the chiefs, councillors and generals. Right from the opening of the play the Bale is warned against taking action against Aole. The freed slave articulates the danger facing the Bale: “... I pray, Kabiyesi,/ Do not offend the prince,/ lest he avenge himself/ on you and your town” (*Fire*, 70). The Bale’s advisors concur with this warning, they advise him that: “the world is ruled by wisdom -/ not by justice”, “when you are chased by a wild elephant/ will you tell him he is trespassing on/ your land?” and “when Sango strikes your house with fire/ will you say you are innocent?” (*Fire*, 71). They all agree that expediency and survival are more important than justice is, or moral right. They demonstrate how the application of power is often more defined in practical than moral terms. They argue that although Abiodun would not protect his son when he has broken sacred law, he will not live forever. The debate of justice versus expediency is set out as follows:

Bale: Is my justice to be dictated by fear?

Lisa: Not what is right matters here,  
but what serves our town.

Bale: Can a town prosper  
where crime goes unpunished?

Otin: Can a town prosper  
if it wilfully offends the mighty?

Bale: Shall I sacrifice my honour  
and bow to dissolute youth?

Balogun: Not to him but to Apomu town  
must you give this sacrifice.

Bale: Will you proudly show your head

when it is said:  
 there goes the Apomu man  
 who dare not do  
 what he thinks is right?

Lisa: I'd rather be laughed at in my house  
 than be respected, sitting on a pile of ashes (*Fire*, 71-72).

When the Bale consults with the Diviner he is told:

Babalawo: Kabiyesi,  
 the cock is born with fire on his head!  
 If he carries it proudly all his life,  
 will he complain in the end  
 if he is consumed by fire?  
 ...  
 For the justice you do  
 you must pay in the end.  
 The choice you have is simple:  
 live and despise yourself:  
 die, and be remembered as Apomu's greatest Bale.

Bale: I am decided:  
 let me carry the fire on my head with pride:  
 let it consume me - when my time comes (*Fire*, 72-73).

Here the issues seem to be binary – either justice or wisdom, life with compromise or death and integrity. The Bale, though, is seen as choosing death with honour, rather than being a victim caught between orders and a vindictive ascendant prince.

Aole is punished with twenty lashes of the cane, wherefore he swears revenge. Scene III shows his ascendance to power and bloodthirsty intent. He sends the army out and commands them not to return without the Bale's head in a calabash as a "sacrifice to my own pride" (*Fire*, 76). His Basorun, Prime Minister, though, comments on the lack of wisdom of this action on the part of this new young ruler. He says that while these unjust orders must be obeyed, they "will prove to be a matchet/ with a thorny handle,/ which rips the hand that wields it" (*Fire*, 78). This suggests that violent dictatorship is unwise in a ruler as it teaches violence and injustice that shall later turn upon its source.

The play goes on to show cowardice at other levels of the ruling society: when the Bale appeals to the Yoruba monarch, the Oni at Ife for justice, the Oni proclaims the Bale's

decision as having been “stubborn rashness” (*Fire*, 80), despite it having been a command of the Oni of Ife. But the Oni reverts to reference to “discretion” and orders him out of Ife. This interaction demonstrates how a ruler may lack of courage when faced with pressure. The Oni knows that the Bale of Apomu is right and that Aole is being unjust and misusing his power, but he is unwilling to oppose Aole’s corruption, and have Aole’s wrath upon his own head. This decision by the Oni is significant insofar as Ife was the Yoruba spiritual centre. Thus Ijimere implies that not only are political, but religious decisions are also influenced by expediency. Neither the chiefs, nor the religious head will make an entirely moral stand against corruption or injustice. Thus the Bale stands alone and he commits suicide to save his people, having ordered Babalawo to present his head to Aole thereafter.

Babalawo describes this action as “a royal death ... like a pelican who rips its breast to feed its young on its own blood” (*Fire*, 82). He compares this act of self-sacrifice with Aole’s lack of care for his people. His Basorun (head of the army) challenges Aole: “are you prepared to lead a fratricidal war/ against our ancestral home?” and suggests that it is a “senseless war”, based on private revenge (*Fire*, 84). Aole’s questionable motivation is verified when the Bale’s head is presented to him, without war or victory, and he screams: “my enemy is too big for me” (*Fire*, 86). This pattern of selfish, egotistical abuse of power is traced when asked to name his enemy a second time he unwisely names Kakanfo, head of his army. The Basorun again cautions Aole not to name an honourable man whom his army respects. It is this petty intrigue and meanness that Babalawo says shall lead to Aole’s downfall:

Your pride is satisfied  
 Alafin Aole  
 too small-minded, you, to be king ....  
 In Abiodun’s reign we obeyed the law,  
 in Aole’s reign the law obeys Aole.

...

Already I see you working your own downfall.  
 Afonja is too powerful for you.  
 Before another rainy season  
 you may pay with your own head  
 for the Bale’s head.

...

What Afonja's army cannot accomplish  
you have achieved yourself.  
You shall walk into battle  
with a curse on your head  
and death in your heart (*Fire*, 87-88).

This does cause war, a siege and Aole's suicide. Although, historically the reasons for the war are more complicated than here suggested. However, it is ironic that he dies as the Bale, at his own hand, pre-empted by the demand for his head in a calabash from the Kakanfo and other chiefs besieging his city (Johnson, 1973: 190-192).

Ijimere has adapted some of this history for his own purposes: first, making Aole the son of Abiodun. This makes the issue clearer as his ascendancy is more definite, and thus the Bale's dilemma more real and pressing. Secondly, he suggests at the end that Aole intrigues against Afonja. While it is true that Afonja was Aole's greatest threat, as he challenged Aole's claim to the throne, Johnson suggests that Aole was "unwilling to initiate any civil war, and refused to take any action against Afonja after he had granted him the title" (of Kakanfo, chief of the army, 1973:189).

This play's use of history only highlights early Yoruba history for the audience; it also challenges corrupt rule, and calls for the personal integrity of rulers at various levels of the society. Although the Bale dies, he keeps his good name and power. However, the title also cautions that as a man lives, he shall probably die: if one wears a crown of distinction, it shall perhaps be the cause for one's death too.

This play also introduces an issue that reoccurs in many of the plays of this period, namely the focus on kings, rulers, the Kabiyesi, instead of the people. Niyi Osundare coins the phrase the "Kabiyesi syndrome" and looks at how this focus on history and myth is a way to retain power in the monarchy (1988). He traces how power through the ages has been maintained through myths like that of the Elizabethan 'chain of being' or African king-worship, and shows how colonial rule perpetuated this system and used the kings for their own purposes (e.g. to collect tolls), primarily to establish control through 'indirect rule'. He goes on to criticise certain playwrights and plays specifically: Ladipo's

mytho-historical kings for wielding supernatural and secular power in the *Oba* plays; Soyinka's kings in *The Lion and the Jewel*, *Kongi's Harvest* and *Death and the King's Horseman*, Rotimi's *Kurunmi*. He argues that all of these rulers are arrogant and the people are portrayed as having no real voice or power. Osundare does however make exception for Rotimi's *Ovonramwen Nogbaisi*, which seems to be more critical and less romantic than the earlier play. He also looks at Zulu Sofola's experiment with the cohabitation of matriarchy with patriarchal power in *King Emene*.

Osundare's article raises an interesting question in the uses of history, and the purposes to which it is put. It seems to me that Ladipo and Ijimere want to explore something about the nature of leadership and the choices available to men in these positions rather analyse the validity of these systems, as later playwrights like Kole Omotoso and Femi Osifisan have done. Thus in *Born with fire on his head*, the focus is on the tragic choice of the Bale, not on the implications of a world order where men and women may be stolen, bought and sold; where the king sees his subjects as possessions. Even the Bale's right to choose whether or not to punish Aole, with or without the agreement, or advice, of his chiefs; and then to prevent war by his own suicide, is not interrogated in the play. So, although presenting a leader who makes positive choices for his people, there is no challenge to the status quo and voice or power allowed the people themselves. The feudal power system is firmly in place. There also is no hint that challenging such a king and his corruption may have been an option. In this sense the play is written very much within the form of the western styled tragedy, where individual choice and consequences of it for the individual is paramount.<sup>67</sup>

I move now to look at how history and myth are used in the second generation plays of Ola Rotimi, Zulu Sofola and Tess Onwueme.

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<sup>67</sup> By western tragedy I mean, for example *Macbeth*. Obviously the choice made by Macbeth affects the whole kingdom, plunging it into civil war, but the focus is on the man, and the consequences of his actions for him psychically, morally; and how the 'natural order' can be reestablished.



### 3.2.2 Ola Rotimi: *Kurunmi* (1971)

Rotimi is a contemporary Nigerian playwright. His first major plays, *To Stir the God of Iron* (Boston 1963, reworked 1968) and *Our Husband Has Gone Mad Again* (written 1965), were written during his stay in Boston and at Yale from 1959 until 1966. He has written various history plays, including *The tragedy of King Christophe* (1970). Perhaps his best-known play is *The Gods Are Not to Blame* (1968). It was commissioned by Michael Crowder for the first Ife Festival, and is based on a reinterpretation of Sophocles *Oedipus Rex*.

Obafemi writes that

[a] preoccupation with the essence of fashioning his ‘creative innovations’ from his cultural and historical background led Rotimi to research into the historical struggles of the Nigerian traditional oligarchies as documented by modern historians. These include the late nineteenth century warfare in the Yorubaland and the overthrow of the Benin monarch Nogbaisi at about the same time. Rotimi’s purpose is to raise his audience’s perception to these events in a way that makes the material relevant to the contemporary reality (1996:95).

I have chosen to focus on his play *Kurunmi* (1971), which, like the plays by Ijimere deals with an historical leader who chooses to oppose the ruler and act in accord with his own beliefs. This brings war upon his people, which ends with Kurunmi’s suicide. Rotimi forewords his play with an historical note, explaining that the Alafin, ruler of the Oyo Empire, was the one who gave authority to the ruler of Ibadan (the Basorun, or Prime Minister, of Oyo) and the ruler of Ijaiye, Kurunmi (the Are-Ona-Kakanfo or Generalissimo).

In 1858, when Alafin Atiba was about to die, he called his leading chiefs to acknowledge the Crown Prince Adelu as his successor. This was contrary to the constitution of Oyo, which required the Aremo, Crown Prince, who enjoyed great power during his father’s lifetime, to commit suicide on his father’s death. Ibadan supported the suggestion of change. This, Rotimi suggests “reflect[ed] its own position as a new town with a constitution without precedent among the old towns of the Oyo Empire” (foreword, 1971). The Ijaiye people, led by Kurunmi, opposed this decision as contrary to tradition.

This rebellion, though, was also a contravention of tradition, which required absolute loyalty to the Sovereign and his decrees. Thus the armies of Ibadan and Oyo rose to crush the rebellion, and so began the Ijaiye wars.

The history is more complex than suggested here. It was not simply this issue that prompted war. Johnson argues that the Sovereign king was loath to war with an old ally of his father. The war was eventually instigated over the property of a wealthy man who died intestate whose treasures and escort, including the ten daughters of the head priest of Sango, were kidnapped by Kurunmi. He set a high ransom for these women and thus provoked war. Rotimi, though, has chosen to narrow this conflict to the clash between tradition and change. He says

... the play centres on Kurunmi, the Are-Ona-Kakanfo, of Ijaiye, the supporter of tradition, and the Ibadan chiefs, led by Ibikunle, who supported the recent change in Oyo on the grounds that it would strengthen the new Oyo Empire which, after this war, they were effectively to dominate (*Kurunmi*, 1971:8).

From this note it is clear that Rotimi is contrasting old and new world orders; showing the conflicts involved in the choice between tradition and change, especially with regard to leadership.

The play opens with an overview of the qualities and personality of Kurunmi. The people praise him in song, with the refrain: “Our leader”, who is both a lion, and “unfathomable”, “Granite” (*Kurunmi* 13), a “demander of absolutes”, “lord of the giant iroko tree itself” (*Kurunmi* 14). He is not seen in unequivocally positive terms. While the people note his courage and strength, they also comment on his hardness and rigidity.

Kurunmi’s opening words are about Tradition:

When the gaboon viper dies,  
its children take up its habits,  
poison and all.  
The plantain dies,  
its saplings take its place,  
broad leaves and all.  
The fire dies, its ashes  
bear its memory with a shroud

of white fluff.

*That is the meaning of tradition.*

*(He crosses towards stool, stops again half-way there.)*

My people, we too have tradition.

That is what makes us men.

That is what makes us ... people, distinct from mud (*Kurunmi*, 15-16).

All of these comparisons convey his belief that tradition should be valued for itself, accepted without evaluation, and perpetuated: the good with the bad. *Kurunmi* implies here that the essence of a people is embedded in their tradition, as a viper is defined by its poison, even if this definitive characteristic is negative and dangerous. He completely rejects the suggestion that Oluyole makes that “tradition adapts ... to times .... Tradition must change with man” (*Kurunmi*, 20).

The need for change and growth as opposed to *Kurunmi*'s static and somewhat rigid rule is evident early in the play. Besides Oluyole's challenge regarding time and change, the elders warn *Kurunmi* that they are not prepared for war (*Kurunmi*, 29). The young men resistant *Kurunmi*'s arrogant autocratic rule militantly. During their short confrontation with *Kurunmi*, the young man Amodu repeats the accusation that he has “grown too powerful” seven times (*Kurunmi*, 37-42) They challenge him:

Epo: What is all this about the land going to war?

Akiola: You did not consult with the people.

Fanyaka: When a man has placed himself far above his people, he is ready to gamble with their lives.

Asegbe: You talk so much about the breakers of tradition.

Amodu: You have grown too powerful, my lord.

Fanyaka: It is better to be loved than feared.

Epo: Answer my question, Great One.

*Kurunmi*: Do you dare ...

Akiola: You will not bully us, Old one. (*Kurunmi*, 37)

*Kurunmi* power, secular and religious, is absolute, as he is both Chief and Chief Priest to all the gods. He apparently acknowledges and considers their objections to his having so much unmoderated power, but in reality he manipulates and placates them into complacency. He congratulates them on having enough pride to challenge even him, gives them cowries, and agrees, to consult with the elders in future. This satisfies these

young warriors, despite the fact that consultation is far from agreement or accession to advice.

Ajayi says of Kurunmi:

At Ijaye, Kurunmi ... who succeeded to the title of Are Ona Kakanfo established a personal ascendancy. He was king, judge, general, entertainer, sometimes also executioner ... He was shrewd, cheerful, cynical, authoritarian; casual and generous to his friends, but implacable unscrupulous (sic) where his enemies are concerned. He bolstered up his power not only by judicious feasting of the masses every fifth day but also by usurping the headship of the cults, particularly that of Sango. In short, he was said to have been feared more than the Gods (Ajayi and Smith, 1964, 67).

Here Rotimi sketches the danger of a ruler with so much power he cannot and will not be contested or moderated. It is ironic that he challenges the Supreme king for making decisions regarding change in opposition to his chiefs and tradition, for he is guilty of similar behaviour autonomous decision-making in his rule of his own people.

Another aspect of Kurunmi's personality that Rotimi explores is his tendency to value ideals or beliefs above people. This is evident in his interaction with the pregnant woman who is carrying a baby during the war. Kurunmi takes the child from her, registering it and his own humanity. He "holds it close to his bosom, regaining as it was, and if only fleetingly, a sense of humanity long lost in the grim distraction of war" (*Kurunmi*, 84). When she inquires as to her husband's whereabouts and what has happened to him, Kurunmi replies:

Kurunmi (*dreamily*): We lost thousands ... most of our best soldiers.

Woman: Lejofi is not one of your best soldiers, he is only a boy -

Kurunmi: I did not notice him then.

Woman: Why not? Was he not fighting for you? How could you not have noticed him?

Kurunmi: Where elephants are being slaughtered by the thousand, how could a man take notice of the death of a house rat? (*Kurunmi*, 84)

This is harsh, but true. For a man who will stake his people's lives on a principle, the individual being sacrificed cannot be reckoned. Kurunmi's own sons become part of this sacrifice. This act takes its title (*The soft touch of dew*) from his words in response to the news of their deaths, he movingly says:

It is not the beating of rain-drops that hurts ... it is the ... the touch of dew ...  
the soft touch

of dew ... (*Silence*) (*Kurunmi*, 90).

It is after this news that Kurunmi concludes that “a leader of men who has led his people to disaster,/ and what remains of his present life/ is but a shadow of his proud past,/ then/ it is time to be leader no more” (*Kurunmi*, 93). He drinks poison and dies.

Kurunmi, like the Bale of Apumo, lives and dies for his beliefs. Yet Kurunmi seems far more culpable than the Bale of Apomu. The audience is invited to evaluate his choices: whether his rigidity was not responsible for this disaster, and to what extent he should have graciously acceded to advice given him by his councillors. Rotimi does not make this conflict between tradition and change too simple, though. For example, when Kurunmi does overcome his reservations and crosses the river with the Egbas, against traditional taboo, he is defeated beyond hope.

Rotimi sets up a second challenge to tradition that is subtler - and that is the impact of colonialism on Nigeria. This he does through Reverend Mann and his wife. There are two comic, yet powerful scenes where Rev. Mann speaks to Kurunmi about his own success, or lack thereof in converting the people. He is offended that they will not listen to him and appeals to Kurunmi to mediate for him with the people to accept Christianity and abandon their traditional religious beliefs (*Kurunmi*, 32-36, 52-55). This appeal to Kurunmi is the ultimate arrogance, of which Rev. Mann seems blissfully unaware. Yet Kurunmi patiently and ironically points out that he cannot believe Rev Mann had had a father if he can so lightly ask a people to give up their traditional beliefs, as he does. This issue is brought into context when Rev. Mann retorts that “the people of Oyo have accepted the faith, and in Ibadan, the Reverend Hinderer is doing very well, not to mention the Reverend Townsend in Abeokuta, and other -” (*Kurunmi*, 35). These are the same towns that have accepted the challenge to tradition by the king. They have not rebelled and clung to tradition as Kurunmi does.

However, while Kurunmi loses the battle, and his life in this war, the suggestion is that perhaps the loss of these other towns, who so easily give up their traditions, shall be

greater because the same flexibility and adaptation that aids them in this issue will facilitate their acceptance of the colonials. After Reverend Mann leaves, Kurunmi says: “It is the tragedy of our race, and the victory of his own. The day we let them into our midst, was the day we let them dig our graves. The day we shall let them bury us in them, will be the day we shall all -” (*Kurunmi*, 36). When Reverend Mann offers the British Consul as arbitrator in this war the people refuse. Yet historically this initiative is significant because Kurunmi died in 1862, and the British set up a protectorate in Nigeria in 1893, only thirty years later. Nigeria regained independence only in 1960, sixty-seven years later. Rotimi deals with this later history in *Ovonramwen Nogbaisi* (1974). Obafemi traces how the internal dissension and the menacing presence of the British led to the fall of Ovonramwen Nogbaisi in 1897, after his having taken the throne and title from his father Adolo in 1888. He argues that the Ovonramwen could have survived the internal turmoil with the Itsekiris and Deji of Akure had it not been for conflict with the British consulate. One of the chiefs executed by Ovonramwen is said to have predicted that “The whitemen that are greater than you and I are coming shortly to fight and conquer you” (Obafemi, 1996:96-97).

So, finally one senses ambivalence in Rotimi’s attitude to tradition and change. He sees that rigidity is potentially destructive, but so is too easy acquiescence to change. He indicates the power systems behind adaptation and encourages his audience to evaluate their leaders’, their own decisions and the basis for these carefully. This play dealing with leadership and civil conflict was written at a key time in Nigeria’s own history, as Nigeria was then in a state of Civil War (1967-1970). In an interview with Margaret Folarin on the reception of *Kurunmi* and the audience’s understanding of its relevance to the civil war at the time, Rotimi says

... when I wrote *Kurunmi*, I was aware of the prevailing situation in the country then - in terms of the Civil War. I did not however studiously relate the play to it. But to my surprise, when audiences watch the production of *Kurunmi* they nicknamed characters in the play judging from their actions and utterances, after some prominent Nigerian war lords (in Obafemi, 1996:98-99).

This illustrates the power history may have as a frame for addressing a contemporary history moment of conflict or crisis. Ibikunle’s comment on “battles against one’s own

bloodbrothers” being “most horrible and most heart-breaking” (*Kurunmi*, 50) and Kurunmi’s own sense of the his tears at the loss of his sons being harsher than the “beating of rain” underscores the pain of contemporary Nigeria which was in the midst of civil war when this play was first produced in Ile-Ife in 1969.

### 3.2.3 Zulu Sofola’s *King Emene* (1974) and Tess Onwueme’s *The Reign of Wazobia* (1988): women and rulership

Zulu Sofola is Nigeria’s pioneer female dramatist, a decade before Tess Onwueme, Stella Oyedepo or Catherine Oyedepo (see Zell, 1983: 484-5). *The Disturbed Peace of Christmas* and *King Emene* were both first performed in 1968.<sup>68</sup> *Queen Omo-Aku of Oligbo* is reported to be an interesting play, which examines the position of women in relation to leadership during the period of a society in crisis. Here the term ‘queen’ refers not to the king’s wife, but to the head of the woman’s section of government. The play is set during the Nigerian civil war, and, according to Dunton it

... examines the position of communities such as Ahaba and Oligbo, which, because of their relative proximity to the West were placed in an especially exposed position, accused by Biafra of collaboration with Lagos, accused by the Federal Government of harbouring Biafran troops. The play focuses on the practice in such communities of hiding the king for the duration of the war, and of his duties being taken over by the Head of the women’s section of the traditional government: here, Queen Omu-Ako of Oligbo and the Eze-Omu Ahaba (1992:39).

Sofola, like Ngugi, addresses the role of women in the resolution of national conflicts. Sofola extends this exploration of their place in history to include the debate on their contemporary place in Nigerian government. As *Queen Omo-Aku of Oligbo* is still unpublished, I focus in more detail on *King Emene* (1974) to illustrate how Sofola uses history to explore the position and role of women in society.

*King Emene* and Rotimi’s *The Gods Are not to Blame* both explore an unresolved crime and its impact on the king and his subjects. Sofola, though, extends the frame to critically

<sup>68</sup> Chris Dunton writes of how the first production of *King Emene* was both on stage and television by the University of Ibadan School of Dramatic Acting Company in 1967, and the published text based on the reworked text for the 1971 University of Ibadan production, directed by Sofola. See footnote 5, 1992:155.

look at the negative consequences the traditional king's obsession with having unchallenged power can have on his people. The crisis in the play is twofold: the first crisis relates to the queen mother's murder of the present king's half brother. This leads to the oracle's prohibition of the king's participation in the Peace Week. The second crisis is a consequence of this prohibition. Although the king has no knowledge of the murder, he sins by arrogantly ignoring the oracle and his councillors and his insistence on going ahead with the ritual despite all warnings against this action. These crises result in a schism between the traditional structure of government and the religious system of the society.

The play avoids making the king a tragic victim by allowing him choice. Although ignorant of his mother's crime, his arrogance and refusal to listen to his wife (*King Emene*, 20-21), the elders (*King Emene*, 23-26) or even his godfather's advice (*King Emene*, 10-12, 17-20, 31-35) makes him as culpable as his mother. His inordinate fear of opposition to his right to rule warps his judgement. His godfather, Ojei warns him:

Ojei: Evil men have cocked your ears. The Oracle pronounces doom for you because of an unrevealed crime in the royal family. You have added another crime to destroy all of us.

King: I have committed no crime, Diokpa Ojei. I am not a child. I know how the Olinzele members killed my father with their deliberately planned and evil advice. I know how the Omu in collaboration with the Olinzele people colluded to kill my father ...

Ojei: You have been wrongly informed ... (*King Emene*, 11).

So, the king bans the Omu, chooses the new Omu without consultation, and believes what he is told by the messenger he has independently chosen and sent to inquire of the Oracle. This behaviour is unwise and signals the weakness of a leader obsessed with his own autonomy. Like the Bale of Apomu and Kurunmi, his decisions lead to his death by suicide. However, unlike these earlier communities, for whom these deaths end conflict, here there is no return to peace. They are left in the Peace Week with the blood of the king flowing and no hope of Peace or reconciliation for another year. The play explores how intrigue and a man's own insecurity can subvert power and rock, even destroy a community.



Sofola's Master's thesis (1965) provided the research for this play. In an interview with Dunton she suggests that the play encompasses four generations of Oligbo history and points to the initial impact of colonial rule as a primary factor in destabilising systems within the society (Dunton, 1992:34).

Sofola creates an interesting contrast between the queen mother, Nneobi, and the Queen. Both women are strong, speak their minds freely, and make a firm stand for what they want or believe. This is true too of Obiageli, the wife of the former king and mother of the murdered prince. She has waited patiently and suffered much while waiting for justice to be done. Yet the focus is still predominantly on the mode of male rulership, rather than the role of women in government in this play. This suggests that within the historic frame Sofola is limited in the extent she can challenge a changing world regarding gender and power related issues. This suggests how historic frames may be successfully appropriated for certain issues, but are limited with regard to others, particularly challenges in gender relations.

Tess Onwueme is a later and prolific Nigerian playwright. By 1990, in a decade, she had completed nearly twenty plays, many of which deal with issues related to enforced marriage, (cf. *A Hen Too Late*) and marriage relations (cf. *The Broken Calabash*). *The Reign of Wazobia* (1988) looks at women in Nigerian society, taking as its starting point, as does Sofola, the Bendel-Igbo kingship system, where a woman may rule as king-substitute for a limited period during crisis. Wazobia, though, has no intention of handing over power, and publicly calls the community to "share your thoughts on the rules of governance" (*The Reign of Wazobia*, 25), insisting that women and youths too have a part in the debate. Interestingly it is not only the older men that object to these innovations, but some of the older women too, suggesting female collaboration in male oppression. Yet in this play, unlike that of Sofola, or even the Ghanain playwright Ama Ata Aidoo with *ANOWA*, Wazobia is able to convince the women to stand by her and even in the face of the divorce by a man who beats his wife, remain undaunted. Finally the women celebrate the walkout of the men as a sign of their own power in sustaining resistance.

This play deals with more than the liberation of women, it is also about self-realisation, and challenging everything that underpins oppression – whether it is a dictatorial government, a colonial power or chauvinistic patriarchal systems which treat women as objects. The significance of the name “Wazobia”, meaning “come in”, is indicated in its source in the three main Nigerian languages: “wa” - Yoruba, “zo” – Hausa, “bia” – Igbo. The men and women in the rest of Nigeria live under the dominance of these three ethnic nationalities. In this play Onwueme here interestingly parallels the race and gender debates. Many of these same issues are explored in Osofisan’s *Morountodun*. Dunton , though, rightly points out that resistance lies chiefly in the dialogues and under the impetus of Wazobia. The other female characters remain thin, and the issues are not democratically discussed (Dunton, 1992:99). Rather the women tend to be extensions of Wazobia’s own sense of women and how she sees their position in society.

Nevertheless, Onwueme’s plays are powerful, challenging leadership and how leaders, both men and women, are perceived within society. Both Sofola and Onwueme also call for the place of women in history and contemporary Nigerian society to be recognised. These plays suggest how the historic frame can be extended from challenging modes of rule to include gender issues in relation to power. However, the very traditionalism that goes with the historic period probably limits the use to criticism rather than positive commentary. Although this notion is challenged by Osofisan in his use and subversion of Moremi in *Morountodun*.

This signals the move to look at the relation between historic and mythic frames in Nigerian drama. I begin with Soyinka’s work and end this chapter with Osofisan.

### **3.3 THE RELATION BETWEEN MYTH AND HISTORY IN NIGERIAN DRAMA**

#### **3.3.1 In Soyinka’s drama**

Wole Soyinka was a contemporary of Ijimere. He writes very much within the Yoruba mythic-cosmological frame. It is thus important to define Soyinka’s own sense of myth

and ritual and their relationship to history and society before looking at the plays specifically.

In *A handbook to literature*, Holman defines the traditional sense of myth as

... anonymous stories having their roots in the primitive folk beliefs of races or nations and presenting supernatural episodes as a means of interpreting natural events in an effort to make concrete and particular a special perception of man or a cosmic view (1960:298).

He goes on to say that

... in the modernist redefinition of the word, myth is seen as containing vestiges of primordial ritual and ceremony, or the repository of racial memories, or a structure of unconsciously held value systems, or an expression of the general beliefs of a race, social class or nation or a unique embodiment of a cosmic view (1960:299).

Interestingly, in both these references the idea of ‘racial memory’ and a worldview are implicit. There is also a sense of timelessness, the idea of that which is ‘cosmic’, hence the idea of universal truths seems to be implicit to myth. This stands in opposition to history, as no matter whom writes it, or from what ideological perspective, by definition it has to be more specific. It is for this reason that many critics, particularly those influenced by Marxist thinking, object to a mythic approach to time, and history because, they argue, it ignores the specific socio-economic-political frame which informs the event or person.

Soyinka, however, advocates such mythic writing and criticism, although he does take cognisance of and engages with the arguments of the Marxist critics.

Soyinka’s approach to mythico-history and tragedy is best understood from the background of “The Fourth Stage”, in which he challenges Western notions of tragedy, particularly those set out by his lecturer, the Shakespearean critic, Prof. G. Wilson Knight.<sup>69</sup>

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<sup>69</sup> Prof Knight influenced Soyinka’s understanding of myth and ritual during his studies at the University of Leeds.

Within the Yoruba world-view, tragedy originates from “the anguish of severance” (Soyinka, 1976:145) between man and the gods, caused by sin or default. Both the gods and man attempt to bridge this estrangement. Much of Soyinka’s terminology is borrowed from Nietzsche, who in turn draws on the ancient Greek myths. Thus Ogun battled with the forces of the “chthonic realm”, (the Nietzschean term used to represent the estrangement which is symbolised in metaphysical terms as a thick undergrowth of matter and non-matter), and through which will bridges the gap. This abyss of being and non-being Soyinka calls “the gulf of transition” (1976:149). Thus in Yoruba drama, Ogun is the first actor, the first to dare and to conquer this transitional gulf by entering the space between these worlds. In Soyinka’s terms, drama, and the ritual implicit to it, allows the performer also to bridge this gulf of transition. It is in the abyss, where he overcomes his fear of loss of self that the actor enters this space which Soyinka terms the ‘fourth stage’ of being.

This involves embracing processes of chaos, creativity and potential destruction. The actor has “first to surrender his individuation once again (the first time, as a part of the original Orisa-nla Oneness) to the fragmenting process; to be reabsorbed within universal Oneness, the Unconscious, the deep black whirlpool of mythopoeic forces” (Soyinka, 1976:153). This includes plunging into the ‘chthonic realm’, the seething cauldron of dark world will and psyche, the transitional yet inchoate matrix of death and becoming” (Soyinka, 1976:142). This place is “the source of creative and destructive energies” (Soyinka, 1976:154).

While this may seem very esoteric, even deeply religious, it is interesting to note the centrality of the creative, poetic and the intuition. Comparable to Nietzsche, one sees the centrality of both the Promethean/Apollinian (rebellious yet reasonable) and the Dionysean (the relationship between chaos, destruction and renewal). The concept of ritual and the ritual archetype for Soyinka is synonymous with “the drama of the gods”, which is essentially a ritual, and rite of passage, and the gods are the first actors (original also to Western drama through the Greeks). Soyinka uses drama and ritual

interchangeably, for him there can be no separation, particularly in the African dramatic context.

This fourth stage allows passage between the worlds of the living, dead and the unborn for both man and the gods. Yet, for such passage and knowledge there is also a price. This is most clearly dramatised in *The Road*, where the Professor wants knowledge of the Fourth Stage above all else. This is a form of 'hubris' for which he must pay with his own life. Nietzsche too believed that 'hubris' is at the root of all tragic myth. Wisdom, Nietzsche says, is a crime committed against the gods, for it equips the sage with divine secrets. But a high price or penalty accompanies the acquisition of this precious knowledge. This, Nietzsche says, is the inexorable logic of the law of Karma: "Whoever, in pride of knowledge, hurls nature into the abyss of destruction, must himself experience nature's disintegration" (1956:99).

Thus morality in Soyinka's worldview is bound up with mandatory compensations, demanded by the natural world. These compensations are predicted on the dialectics of challenge and response, of action and counteraction. Drama thus presents cycles of ordeal, death and rebirth, of dirth and plenty, drought and rain. Soyinka sees the world as cyclic whereby "life, present life, contains within it manifestations of the ancestral, the living and the unborn" (1976: 144).<sup>70</sup>

It is within this abstract and philosophical frame that one has to read history in Soyinka's plays. He inevitably brings these apparently oppositional forms together in his plays. This is clear, for example, in *The Road* (first published in 1965) where while the play explores the Professor's search for knowledge of the Fourth Stage, the socio-political conditions of the society is the frame for the play. Soyinka uses both characters and language for this exploration. This implies that at knowledge of the Fourth Stage, life and death, are still very firmly defined by the socio-political realities of the context. Implicitly Soyinka challenges whether wholeness is even possible in a society where people live off

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<sup>70</sup> This view is very close to that of the Elizabethan world, which was ordered hierarchically, and aimed to maintain a harmonious relationship between man and gods, and between man and his environment.

one another, hence the title: *The Road*. The physical road is the source of income for most of the characters, from the professor, to the drivers and gang members who most clearly demonstrate the metaphoric aspect of the title as they literally live off the road kills, they pillage from the accidents and thus live off the dead.

It is with this sense of Soyinka's use of myth, ritual and history that I move to look at *A Dance of the Forests* and *Death and the King's Horseman*.

### 3.3.1a *A Dance of the Forests* (1960)

*A Dance of the Forests*<sup>71</sup> addresses history more directly than *The Road*. The play was commissioned for the Nigerian Independence Celebrations in October 1960. It is set during a festival to unveil a new totem carved by Demoke from a giant silk-cotton tree. For the occasion the Council Orator and Historian of the village has invited "Illustrious ancestors" as Guests of Honour. However, instead of heroes of the past, they are sent the castrated Dead Man and pregnant Dead Woman, pathetic "accusers" (*Dance*, 13), figures of an unresolved past to whom Rola refers as 'obscenities' (*Dance*, 11). This situation of the past and present meeting at an auspicious historic moment was significant for Nigeria at the moment of Independence.

The parallels between the past and present are underlined as each of the major contemporary characters having historical doubles: Madame Tortoise is Rola; the Court Poet is Demoke, who while carving the totem pushed his assistant from the tree to his death as he was jealous that he could climb higher; the Captain of Mata Kharibu's army is the Dead Man and the Captain's Wife is the Dead Woman, the Court Historian is Adenebi and the Soothsayer: Agboreko. These parallels suggest the cyclic nature of time and history. Obaneji is a clerk, and described as an unofficial "keeper of the nation's secrets" (*Dance*, 16), especially those of corruption and the consequences. One of the things he 'records' is eighteen people were incinerated in a lorry because the corporation bribed the council to allow them to put 70 men in a lorry, which should only carry 40

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<sup>71</sup> All references to this play will be referred to by the abbreviations *Dance*.

(*Dance*, 17). This story suggests that all people, no matter their position or station in society, bear responsibility for history.

From the outset this festival is placed in an overtly historical context. The Council Orator and historian, Adenebi asks Demoke why he is not in the village celebrating:

Adenebi: ... Have you no sense of history?

Rola: What history? Or doesn't it matter?

Adenebi: The accumulated heritage - which is what we are celebrating. Mali, Chaka. Songhai. Glory. Empires. But you cannot feel it, can you? (*Dance*, 11)

Adenebi formulates the meaning of this festival for the community:

Adenebi: ... I said ... we must bring home 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 symbolise all that is noble in our nation. Let them be our historical link for the season of rejoicing. Warriors. Sages. Conquerers. Builders. Philosophers. Mystics. Let us assemble them round the totem of our nation and we will drink from their resurrected glory.

Old Man: Yes. It was a fine speech. But control, at some point was lost to our enemies. The guests that we were sent are slaves and lackeys. They have only come to undermine our strength. To preach to us how ignoble we are. They are disgruntled creatures who have come to accuse their tormentors as if it were a court of law ...

...

Old Man: I hope he kills them all over again. (*Angrily*) Slaves! Can't they forget they once had lives of their own? How dare they pester the living with the petty miseries of their lives!

Adenebi: Mali. Songhai. Perhaps a descendant of the great Lisabi. Zimbabwe. Maybe the legendary Prester John himself ... . I was thinking of heroes like they. (*Dance*, 31-32)

Here Soyinka is looking at how newly dependent African states may perhaps try to look at their histories, ignoring the harsher realities of these histories. What they do not realise is that the gods have set up a moral lesson for them: the Dead Man and Woman have been brought as 'witnesses' (*Dance*, 13). This is because there cannot be a future until the past has been faced, processed and understood in all its facets, both positive and negative.

The Town Dwellers are the humans, and the Forest Dwellers are the spirit creatures and gods. In a strange way the conflicts and envies of men are paralleled here too. It is even suggested that the actions of men are often largely the consequence of the struggles

between the gods, especially between Ogun and Eshuoro. This introduces Soyinka's cosmic views on drama, ritual and myth in relation to history. So – the living, dead, unborn and deities are gathered for a ritual dance. Demoke, Adenebi and Rola, the characters that represent aspects of society both past and present, are escorted into the Forest, a traditional setting for Yoruba initiation rites, and the meetings of secret cults.

The key to understanding the conflict in the play is the issue of murder. The topic is introduced by the confession that Demoke has murdered his assistant Aroni. This murder is then contextualised by a flashback to the Court of Mata Kharibu and his Queen, Madame Tortoise, “about eight centuries” ago, “one of their great empires. I forget which” Aroni comments (*Dance*, 46). The queen is cruel in her coquetry, killing men to demonstrate her power. The Court Poet (Demoke) tells of how “a soldier fell to his death from the roof two days ago”, and now she sends a boy to fetch her canary for her from this same roof (*Dance*, 47). When he returns with the golden cage and canary she is disappointed to hear that while the boy did fall, he merely broke his arm (*Dance*, 55). In the same careless manner her husband condemns the Warrior (the Dead Man in the contemporary play) to slavery for refusing to lead his army in an unjust war over the queen (*Dance*, 48). However, like the bale of Apomu, the Warrior will not lead the army in this war, even when his wife and Unborn Child are threatened. He says:

Warrior: Unborn generations will be cannibals most worshipful Physician. Unborn generations will, as we have done, eat one another up. Perhaps you can devise a cure, you who know how to cure so many ills. I took up soldiering to defend my country, but those to whom I gave power to command my life abuse my trust in them (*Dance*, 49).

The parallels between this story of Madame Tortoise and Helen of Troy are clear. However, the Historian's argument that what lifted Troy “to the ranks of gods and demi-gods” was Helen of Troy over whom the Trojan War was fought, signals how history may be misused to manipulate people.

Historian: Would Troy, if it were standing today lay claim to preservation in the annals of history if a thousand valiant Greeks had not been slaughtered before its gates, and a hundred thousand Trojans within her walls? ... (*Dance*, 51)



Here the argument for posterity seems to justify everything. Not only are the warrior and his men sold into slavery, but they are also condemned to the most appalling conditions. The Physician argues that the slave-dealer ‘stuffs’ his victims into a ‘coffin’, and while they arrive down river alive, “the wretches have gone through the twenty torments of hell”. He pleads for death as more merciful than this sentence (*Dance*, 52). The man is castrated and sold. The Woman commits suicide, leaving her child between life and death.

Soyinka’s point here is that these aspects of history: the slave trade, dealing unfaithfully with servants and subjects, and unjust wars are also part of the history that has to be looked at alongside that of great Empires. The Unborn and untimely dead need to be acknowledged too. He creates a counter-memory in this mythico-history for these voices, which challenge contemporary idealisation of the past.

The play climaxes with those of the forest and town dwellers meeting and struggling over the fate of the Unborn or half-Child, who represents both the spirit of the future and the memory of a violent past. This begins with the rites of The Chorus of the various Spirits of the Forest and Ants, the Masque of the Triplets and the Dance of the Half-Child. To begin, the Half-Child plays and loses a game against a Figure in Red, Eshuoro. Then the Triplets enter and are identified as The Means that Justifies the End, The Greater Cause, who is “standing ever ready, excusing the crimes of today for tomorrow’s mirage”; and Posterity, “fanged and bloody” (*Dance*, 69). These figures represent the justifications for abuse of power.

It is important that it is to Demoke that the fate of the Child falls. Aroni warns him:

Aroni: Demoke, you hold a doomed thing in your hands. It is no light matter to reverse the deed that was begun many lives ago. The Forest will not let you pass (*Dance*, 71).

Despite this warning, Demoke returns the Child to his mother. Although Eshuoro attempts to kill him by burning him on the totem he carved. However, Demoke is caught by Ogun, and awakes to speak of “expiation” and of knowledge paid for dearly (*Dance*,

73). Soyinka thus insists that the flawed individual, potentially a murderer, holds his own expiation or redemption in his own hands by addressing the misdeeds of the past.

Although 'commissioned', this play was a reworking of an earlier Anti-Apartheid play, *The Dance of the African Forest*. It is significant that at the celebration of Nigeria's Independence Soyinka sets out to deliberately challenge the expectations concerning the future of the country. He urges his fellow countrymen to temper their euphoria with a sense of reality and the history of oppression and exploitation. While he suggests that it is possible to confront and learn from the past. Included in this potential for the future and redemption, though, is taking responsibility for the past which may require burning the totems of which we are so proud.

Soyinka's position with relation to Nigeria's past or future was ambiguous. This is signalled by the fact that there are four (known) endings to this play (Gibbs, 1986:66). This may be because for Soyinka history is not simple. He seems to think of it as pessimistically as cyclic. In an interview with Jeyifous he says "[t]here is something depressing about the repetitiousness of history" (Soyinka, 1973:63). Yet, simultaneously he argues for "revolutionary action [against oppression and injustice as] the ultimate expression of will, an assertion of the human intellect as instrument of choice, change, self-destination" (ibid). He reconciles these two apparently contradictory views by saying that pessimism does not preclude challenge. This is evident in many of his protagonists, where the artist are often challenging, defiant and directly participate in history in a way that often costs them their lives, while also directing their people's future. This is clear in *Dance*, where Demoke risks all to change history and release the Unborn Child, a symbol of all previous injustice, and take the consequences and responsibility for this, and his own wrong, upon himself.

Katrak, in exploring Soyinka's approach to history, says that "*The Swamp Dwellers* suggests the history of a community, *A Dance of the Forests* portrays the history of a nation; and *Madmen and Specialists* evokes the history of humankind itself" (1986: 130). In each of these plays, he argues, there is a pattern of disintegration, followed by

resemblance, which again leads to disintegration (Katrak, 1986:130). This pattern challenges the simplistic sense of myth as merely cyclic. This suggests progress insofar as the protagonist's courage in confronting old or corrupt systems allows for a redirection of history. Thus myth as used here becomes a powerful and real force for challenging a particular system.

Demoke as artist, is warning against the inhumanity of the past continuing in the present. The image of cannibals reoccurs often in Nigerian drama. This was a timely warning, as in the next decade Nigeria would be plunged back into war, civil war this time. Ironically Demoke has unconsciously carved the image of Madame Tortoise, the "bestial", into the totem. This is hardly a positive model for the future: "Madame Tortoise is the totem - most of it anyway. In fact, you might almost say she dominated my thoughts..." (*Dance*, 23). It is significant that it is Demoke that recognises this danger, and finally chooses to try and change the course of history, for he too is guilty of violence and murder. This introduces the idea that each individual in a society must expiate his or her guilt. He fears that the Dead Man is Oremole: "Does he accuse me?" (*Dance*, 25) Yet he is able to purge himself through entering the suffering of transitional Fourth Stage, by facing and accepting his responsibility and guilt. Soyinka thus suggests that redemption for the community is only possible through individual redemption. For Demoke and Rola it lies in their acknowledging their pasts. He argues that individuals only can choose and shape the future. Aroni says that it is primarily for this purpose that they have been gathered:

It is enough that they discover their own regeneration. ... Let the future judge the living by reversal of its path or by stubborn continuation. ... The living will themselves speak for the future" (*Dance*, 59).

Forest head finally says:

Trouble me no further. The fooleries of beings whom I have fashioned closer to me weary and distress me. Yet I must persist, knowing that nothing is ever altered. My secret is my eternal burden - to pierce the encrustations of soul-deadening habit, and bare the mirror of original nakedness - knowing full well, it is all futility. Yet I must do this alone, and no more, since to intervene is to be guilty of contradiction, and yet to remain altogether unfelt is to make my long-rumoured ineffectuality complete; hoping that when I have tortured awareness from their souls, that perhaps, only perhaps, in new beginnings ... (*Dance*, 71).

This statement echoes both Soyinka's sense of pessimism in the repetitiousness of history, and the hope that through individual self-awareness, a new beginning may be possible through their "tortured awareness of their own souls", and responsibilities. 'Bearing witness', and hearing this witness, even if uncomfortable and harsh, is crucial to the process of moving to wholeness. Here Soyinka not only creates a counter-memory, but also suggests ritual drama as a means of exploring the past and healing the nation, as it processes its history.

### 3.3.1b *Death and the King's Horseman* (1975)

While *A Dance of the Forests* deals with Nigeria's extended past in relation to its immediate future, following the achievement of Independence, *Death and the King's Horseman*<sup>72</sup> steps back into a specific incident in the recent past to explore the colonial impact on the Nigerian psyche. It was written in 1975 and is unique in the sense that it was published before it was first performed in 1978. It is based on the same event as Ladipo's *Oba Waja*. The incident took place in 1946 in Oyo, an ancient Yoruba city, where a well-meaning District Officer intervened to prevent the ritual suicide of the Yoruba Chief, Elesin. This has drastic consequences for all concerned.

According to Yoruba tradition, thirty days after the King's death his chief horseman, a hereditary office, must die in order to accompany his King into the next world. This ritual suicide is accomplished by will alone. His death is also seen as beneficial to the community as a whole, as he is believed to intercede on their behalf. He is said to "die the unknowable death of death" (*Death*, 43).

In an Author's Note, Soyinka cautions against the "reductionary tendency" to read this play primarily as a "clash between old values and new ways, between western methods and African traditions" (*Death*, 5). He insists that

The confrontation in the play is largely metaphysical, contained in the human vehicle which is Elesin and the universe of the Yoruba mind - the world of the living, the dead and the unborn, and the numinous passage which links all: transition. *Death and the*

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<sup>72</sup> All references to this play will be indicated by the abbreviation *Death*.

*King's Horseman* can be fully realised only through an evocation of music from the abyss of transition (*Death*, 6).

Just as in *A Dance of the Forest*, the dance was the climax in the transitional state, during which Demoke could catch the child and shift history, so here Soyinka evokes “music from the abyss of transition”. In both these plays Soyinka uses the extended image of dance and music as mediating between times and worlds. Both are central to ritual and ritual necessary for re-establishing harmony within the community and within its sense of universal wholeness. Again there is a link between the ritual, mythic and historic. This play traces how and why the dance is broken, and the implications of ‘the dance’, for the psychic and cultural harmony of Oyo society.

The action begins in the market - which Izevbaye argues is a microcosm of the society. He argues this as the major Oba is addressed as ‘Alaiyeluwa’, meaning Owner of the world and of life, and the minor Oba who are the founders of their towns have the title ‘Oloja’, which literally means Owner of the market since there is always a market in front of his palace (in Gibbs, 1980:119). The Elesin says, “this market ... is my roost ...” (*Death*, 10), and the Market Women sing: “We shall all meet at the great market” (*Death*, 17), Iyaloja is described as the “mother of multitudes in the teaming market of the world” (*Death*, 22). When Elesin faces death he says: “This is where I have chosen to do my leave-taking, in this heart of life, this hive which contains the swarm of the world in its small compass. This is where I have known love and laughter away from the palace” (*Death*, 40). This places the issues in the community, although the focus seems to be Elesin as an individual, the context suggests that his actions impinge on the community’s future.

The conflict between the spiritual and material is signalled from the outset, where there is a sense that the Elesin enjoys the physical world too much. The Praise-Singer warns him of the women, saying: “They love to spoil you, but beware. The hands of women also weaken the unwary” (*Death*, 10). The larger significance of Elesin’s potential failure to fulfill his traditional role is suggested when the Praise-Singer asks “if the world leaves its course and smashes on boulders of the great void, whose world will give us shelter?”

(*Death*, 11) Elesin, however, insists that: “When the hour comes/ Watch me dance along the narrow path/ Glazed by the soles of my great precursors. / My soul is eager. I shall not turn aside” (*Death*, 14) Later Iyaloja says: “Elesin, even at the narrow end of the passage I know you will look back and sigh a last regret for the flesh that flashed past your spirit in flight. You always had a restless eye” (*Death*, 22).

The preparations for this important ritual are framed against the colonial preparations for receiving their king with a masquerade ball. Simon and Jane Pilkings are first seen Tangoing in fancy dress. The premonition of the more serious clash of cultures to come is suggested by their insensitive wearing of the Yoruba *egungun* death cult costume to their fancy dress ball. The ‘Native Administration’ policeman Amusa, despite being Moslem, is shocked to see them parading in *egungun* costume and masks. He says: “It belong to dead cult, not for human being” (*Death*, 24).

This lack of consideration for another culture is an ominous warning of how the issue with Elesin Oba will be viewed. To Pilkings it is a ‘confounded nuisance’. There are a number of occasions and comments that demonstrate the colonial arrogance and insensitivity. Pilkings lacks respect for these people as adults, and he consistently speaks in terms of ‘they’ and ‘them’. He inconsistently accuses them of being either “rather close” or tending to “open their mouths and yap with you about their family secrets before you can stop them” (*Death*, 29). Yet, when Jane suggests that perhaps they do not tell him anything really significant, like the custom of the King’s Horseman, Pilkings responds: “sly, devious bastards”. Such commentary occurs in front of Joseph, with no sense that he is one of ‘them’, or even that he is there (*ibid.*). Later, the girls in the market place mock the British arrogance and sense of ‘the natives’ and their social interaction with one another. In an ironic parody, as Elesin dances into the unknowable death, Pilkings and Jane jokingly demonstrate the dances and sounds of the *egungun* and the adaptations with press-button controls, which they have added to their costumes. This makes a mockery of a profound ritual and marks their lack of comprehension of the Yoruba people. Elesin’s son Olunde summarises these impressions when he formulates his experience among the English as a student for the past four years, saying “I

discovered you have no respect for what you do not understand” (*Death*, 50). Here Soyinka ruthlessly exposes colonial arrogance and the complete lack of understanding of local affairs or culture.

Throughout the play the clash of these two cultures is evident, despite Soyinka’s disclaimer at the start. Part of this is their respective notions of death and the value attached to life. The discussions between Olunde and Jane highlight their respective views on suicide and ritual death. Jane views ritual suicide as “barbaric” and the death of the captain, who sacrificed himself by blowing up a ship in the harbour to protect the town “morbid”, but Olunde finds it “rather inspiring. It is an affirmative commentary on life” (*Death*, 51). The difference in their opinion lies in how they see the individual in society, and the sacrifice of the one for many. This debate underlines their different opinions on the meaning of life and death. Olunde challenges Jane:

What can you offer him in place of his peace of mind, in place of the honour and veneration of his own people? What would you have thought of your Prince if he had refused to accept the risk of losing his life in this voyage? (*Death*, 53)

This debate on life, death and the sacrifice of the individual for the greater good of the society as a whole takes place in the context of the First World War. Olunde says that “by all logical and natural laws this war should end with all the white races wiping out one another” (*Death*, 53). From this he learnt that “the greatest art is the art of survival” (*ibid.*). The ritual suicide of Elesin is compared to the sacrifice of the young men sent to die in the Great War. Soyinka’s point here is how a nation constructs for itself what is justified, acceptable and what is not. How much more barbaric is Elesin’s death than the deaths of these young men?

The significance of Elesin’s ritual death is emphasised by Olunde’s avoidance of his father prior to his death: “I didn’t want to do anything wrong, something which might jeopardise the welfare of my people” (*Death*, 57). After his failure to die, Elesin says to Pilkins: “You have shattered the peace of the world for ever” (*Death*, 62), and then he asks whether it was all a plan to break Elesin - by sending his son away, and then breaking into his path at death. He asks whether it was all to “push our world off its

course and sever the cord that links us to the great origin?" (*Death*, 63) Here Soyinka has Olunde formulate one of the most serious consequences of colonialism on African society, which has steadily lost a sense of its own rituals and identity.

Yet, Soyinka clearly shows that Pilkins alone does not have such power. Elesin admits that his weakness was "not merely from the abominations of the white man, who came violently into my fading presence, there was also a weight of longing on my earth-held limbs" (*Death*, 65). He himself was not sufficiently focused and willing to die, especially after taking his last wife. Thus his son, Olunde dies in his stead, bringing shame on Elesin, and turning the natural order of things on its head. Although Elesin does die, committing suicide by strangling himself with his chains, it is a dishonourable death. Iyaloja says "he will arrive all stained in dung" (*Death*, 76).<sup>73</sup>

Johnson writes about those who are traditionally immolated at the death of the sovereign. They receive as a badge a beautiful silk damask wrapper known as the "death cloth", which they wear on special occasions. Those who died with the sovereign included: the crown prince, the three princes with hereditary title (the Magaji Iyajin, the Agunpopo, and the Olusami), two personages not of royal blood: the Osi Wefa and Olokun-esin (master of the horse); generally names 'Ab'obaku', that is, 'one who is to die with the king'. The women include the King's official mother, the Crown Prince's mother, various priestesses of Ifa and the King's favourite wife. During his lifetime they are closest to the king and have great privileges. To make their lives dependent on his is to ensure his safety against the risk of poisoning or assassination.

Johnson writes that these customs were dying out in the late nineteenth century, especially since King Atiba abolished the required death of the Crown Prince in 1858 (see the discussion of this event and its dramatic version by Rotimi in *Kurunmi*). Instead of dying these either continued in the service of the next king, or retired quietly to reside in the country, to prevent confusion of people bearing the same title. This holds true also

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<sup>73</sup> An interesting parallel in this sense can be made with Okonkwo in *Things Fall Apart* where Achebe analyses the effect of colonialism on Igbo society, while looking at internal weaknesses in the individual and society which made such infiltration possible.



for the Crown Prince if the King-Makers reject his succession to the throne (Johnson, 1973:56-57).

One wonders, then why in the 1970s Soyinka chose this event from 1946 to discuss a custom that seems to have been fading for almost a hundred years. In “Who’s Afraid of Elesin Oba?” Soyinka analyses the uses of history in creative writing; and the use of mythological figures for contemporary historical writing. He says that:

The truly creative writer who is properly uninhibited by ideological winds, *chooses* ... when to question accepted history - *A Dance of the Forests*; when to appropriate Ritual for ideological statement - *The Bacchae of Euripides* and equally when to ‘epochalise’ history for its mythopoeic resourcefulness - *Death and the King’s Horseman*. In the last event he deliberately eschews distractions from the mythopoeic intent, especially such as happen to be fashionable ... (and) locates it (mythopoeic intent) legitimately in the *dramatis personae* of the period and locality, in the ‘probable’ events of the period, the ‘probable’ courses of these events and sometimes, even in the ‘probable’ resolutions (1988:76).

Firstly, it is evident that Soyinka is opposed to the Marxist’s very specific approach to history, which he sees as “inhibition” by “ideological winds”, which he believes to be too prescriptive. The Marxist-materialists, including Jeyifo, Osofisan and Ngugi, have charged Soyinka of deliberately falsifying experience and reality, distortion, mystifying, mythifying, prettifying, and transforming reality in the metaphysical, trans-historical, mythic dimension.

Soyinka has countered these accusations by pointing out that myth and ritual are necessary to the spiritual needs of people, perhaps even representing the historical processes on a spiritual dimension. In 1967 he urged the Negritude writer to abandon the ‘historic’ (in the Marxist sense of history) vision and centre his gaze on the immediate realities of his society. He argues this as he sees the Negritude movement as simply reacting to the assertion of white supremacy, and their counter arguments as being simple inversions of the same structures it attempts to reject.<sup>74</sup> He argues that synthesis is the ultimate cancellation of racial concepts or prejudice, when workers of the world can and

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<sup>74</sup> For a discussion of Soyinka’s objection to the romantic idealisation of the Negritude movement, especially Senghor, see Lindfors 1962:85, and Soyinka in Ciira, 1986:26.

may unite. Thus Soyinka believes that an artist can be selectively eclectic, he or she can take and transform, assimilate to create “a dynamic relationship which consists of an internalised dialectic of phenomena and perception.”<sup>75</sup>

Within this debate on the place of myth in literature from a Marxist perspective, Adebayo Williams says that *Death and King's Horseman* is interesting because in feudal societies ritual was part of the cultural dominant. It was “part of a complex and insidious apparatus of cultural and political reproduction employed by the dominant groups” (Williams, 1993:67). This reference to the ‘feudal society’ relates back to Osundare’s criticism about the focus on the kings or rulers in these plays. Here Williams argues in Western societies from the 19C “scientific reasoning gained ascendancy over the imaginative apprehension of reality with the Enlightenment”, and so “the phenomenon of ritual has lost its power and social efficacy” (1993:67). However, within the colonial experience, where the history and identity of people have been marginalised, “ritual has become a means of reclaiming sacred origins, re-establishing contact with the ontological essence of the tribe” (Williams, 1993:68). Within this frame, the mythicisation of historical events and prominent figures by some African writers, like Soyinka, is part of this renewed attempt to recover an African heritage and challenge the dominant colonial version of African ritual and tradition.

Williams goes on to relate ritual to cultural memory when he quotes Stanley Macebuh as saying that for Soyinka

...‘history’ has not been so much a record of human action as a demonstration of the manner in which social behaviour so often symbolises a sometimes voluntary, sometimes unwilling obedience to the subliminal impulse of the ancestral memory (Williams, 1993:79).

The cultural memory here refers to tradition, continuation. It is thus not surprising that ritual plays such a central role in Soyinka’s plays, and especially the idea of sacrifice bridging worlds or orders. The ritual deaths include those of the Professor in *The Road*, Eman in *The Strong Breed*, Pentheus in *The Bacchae of Euripides*, Demoke in *A Dance*

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<sup>75</sup> These references are taken from Maduakor, 1986:34, from an unpublished article by Soyinka.

*of the Forests* (although Ogun catches and restores him to life) and Elesin in *Death and the King's Horseman*. The end of *Death and the King's Horseman* may illustrate the answer to how this may work.

*Death and the King's Horseman* end with both Olunde and Elesin's deaths, one may ask how and why Soyinka chooses to end the play with the inversion of ritual. In fact, Elesin's death ironically has even less meaning than that of the Professor in *The Road*, or Pentheus in *The Bacchae*. However, despite Elesin's having died an ignoble death, the women perform the traditional sealing of Elesin's eyelids and then the focus shifts to the girl, his last bride. Just as *The Bacchae of Euripides* ends with Pentheus's blood turning to wine as a symbol of rejuvenation and hope; so here perhaps Elesin's failure may be remedied in the seed he leaves behind. Iyaloja says to the girl: "Now forget the dead, forget even the living. Turn your mind only to the unborn" (*Death*, 76). The abortive death is over and the women sing a dirge, but new life has been created too. Perhaps this is Soyinka's point - many cultural things have been broken or lost, perhaps even a large part of the African world has been shattered by colonialism, but perhaps by focusing on the new, the next generation can find a way to regain a means of metaphysical and cultural transcendence, and become whole again. In the meantime each individual, and the society as a whole, must face and redeem its own weaknesses, as Elesin, Demoke, Professor, and Pentheus finally must do too.

Thus Soyinka creatively and with complexity, uses history to comment on the role of ritual and tradition in the post-colonial context. He suggests a complex relationship between history and myth, suggesting that both the specific incident and the mythic, communal memory must combine to evaluate the past to face and transcend the limitations of the present for the future.

Next, I want to consider Osofisan, a playwright who pays respectful tribute to Soyinka, while rejecting his approach to history and ritual.

### 3.4 The use of the Moremi legend in Ladipo's *Moremi* (1966) and Osofisan's *Morountodun* (1979)

In order to consider how legend may be seen as a combination of history and myth, and used to comment on contemporary ideas and concerns of a society, I shall compare Duro Ladipo and Femi Osofisan's use of the historic figure Moremi. Their respective interpretations and applications of this legend show how the use of history in the contemporary setting may say more about the present than the past. It may also set up a counter-position in the present.

Duro Ladipo, together with Ogunde and Kola Ogunmola, was one of the early playwrights who consciously and extensively drew on the oral tradition, Yoruba myths, legends, history, poetry, music and dance (cf. Clark, 1980:9). Both Eben Clark and Ulli Beier note "Ladipo's concentration on historical plays" (Clark, 1980:22). Later Clark suggests that just as "the musicians of the forties turned their talent to the monotonous glorification of God so the present renaissance of oral tradition under Ladipo was in danger of becoming a monotonous glorification of traditional deities and kings" (Clark, 1980:120-121). These comments suggest the extent of Ladipo's conscious use of and engagement with history.

Ladipo was both musician and playwright. He produced some twenty full-length plays and fifty or more sketches for Nigerian television. His development of the Centre, *Mbari-Mbayo*, in the basement of his house answered the need of venue and kept him in touch with his community and culture.<sup>76</sup> The plays fall largely into the tradition of the Alarinjo,<sup>77</sup> drawing on myth, history and tradition. Ladipo gives his reasons for the use of historical themes:

... first, to ensure that Yoruba folklore and traditional stories are never forgotten; secondly, to amply demonstrate the richness and uniqueness of Yoruba culture, a culture which has resisted the assault of Christian religion; thirdly, to ensure that the

<sup>76</sup> See Yemi Ogunbiyi for a detailed history of the development of Ladipo's work and the influences upon it, 1981: 333-353. Also Ulli Beier's *Yoruba Myths*, 1980:410.

<sup>77</sup> The Alarinjo is a traditional Yoruba theatre form which emerged from the *egungun* masquerades during the reign of Alaafin Ogbolu in about 1590. For detail see Adedeji, 1981.

dances, the music and the splendour of Yoruba as a language never become things of the past, a splendour so easily discernible in such traditional chants as *ijala*, *ofo*, *ewi*, *oriki* which I have used severally in my works; finally, to proudly enshrine in our hearts the names of great Yoruba kings and mythic heroes, for in the end they are the real gods (Quoted in Ogunbiyi, 1981: 340).

In these aims one sees the relationship between the use of history and the idea of continuation, tracing a direct line from the legendary past to the present, even the idea of a conscious development or reinforcement of an ethnic or national sense of Self, as opposed to the (colonial?) Other. This approach endorses the approach to rewriting histories, which were proposed by the African historians of the 1960s and 1970s.

Ladipo began his historical plays with a trilogy based on the Oyo empire: *Oba Moro*, *Oba Koso* and *Oba Waja*. Then later he wrote *Moremi* and *Obatala*. Ogunbiyi suggests that even when Ladipo did not use historical subjects, he tended to historicise his material and so ended up with “what seemed like a page of Yoruba mythico-legendary history” in works like *Te’ni begi lo ju*, *Aaro Meta*, *Otun Akogun*, *Ajagunnla*, and *Karunwi* (Ogunbiyi, 1981:341).

According to Samuel Johnson, *Moremi* was the wife of one of the ancient heroes of Ile-Ife, probably Oranmiyan. The legend tells how for years Ife was subject to the constant raids of the Igbos who appeared as gods or demi-gods in their battle costume. The raiders stole goods, women and children. After supplication to the Gods met with no response, Moremi took it upon herself to free her people from this calamity. She resolved to find out who the Igbos really were and the secret of their power so that they could defeat the Igbos. At the river Esinmirin she vowed to the deity thereof that if she were successful in her plans, she would offer to the God the most costly sacrifice she could afford. She undertook to be captured at the next raid, and, owing to her great beauty was given to the King, as part of the booty. Slowly she gained both the king and the people’s trust and confidence and learned the secret of their power. Johnson explains it in terms of the Ekan grass and bamboo fibre, with which they covered themselves from head to foot, making them appear superhuman. Her husband the king also tells her that the secret of attack lies in rushing in among the Igbo warriors with lighted torches. Having discovered the source

of their strength, Moremi escapes back to the Yoruba people and hastens them to prepare themselves for the impending attack. They do as she says, and defeat the Igbos. Moremi then goes to the river, prepared to sacrifice lambs, rams, goats, a bull, but none are acceptable, the deity demands her only son, Olurogbo. After supplication, she agrees to the sacrifice and the people bewail her loss for their salvation. Legend tells though, that Olurogbo, when supposed dead, was only half dead and climbed a rope ladder to heaven where the Ifes believe he resides until one day he shall descend again to the earth to receive full reward for his good deeds (Johnson, 1973: 147-148).

This legendary figure is traditionally remembered for her sacrifice on behalf of her people, and the maintenance of the status quo and power systems. I would now like to look at two dramatisations of this legend.

Ladipo's *Moremi* was first performed on the 26 March 1966 in Oshogbo by a group of Igbo dancers, the Otu Osomeze, from Agbor. His source for this play, as with most of his histories, was Johnson's *History of the Yorubas*, but as Ulli Beier and Yemi Ogunbiyi point out, with important adaptations or innovations. The first is that in Johnson Moremi is unaware of the gravity of her promise as she is deceived into having to sacrifice her son. Ladipo, however, allows Moremi full choice and knowledge. She is told beforehand the price for the knowledge and promise of success. She is thus able to choose and thus is not a victim. She is perceived to heroically put the welfare of her community above personal feelings or personal happiness. This serves to reinforce the validity of the system presented, as it implicitly suggests that such a system be worth this ultimate sacrifice.

The second innovation involves the interpretation of the spiritual dimension of the play. Johnson naively suggests that the Ifes mistook the Igbo masks for divine beings. Moremi discovers that they are humans beneath grass costumes, which would burn. Ladipo rightly believes that the ancient Ifes did indeed realise that these were humans, but with supernatural powers from the ancestors which the masks and costumes represented. Thus what was to be discovered is the secret of their spiritual power. Also, they have to

overcome the silence of their own deities. In the third scene Esinmerin reveals the source of their powerlessness:

Esinmerin: Oduduwa seized the land  
 on which your city stands  
 from the owners of the soil;  
 with the power of the sword  
 he drove the Igbos into the forest;  
 with the power of his sword  
 he installed his four hundred and one gods  
 to rule in Ife.  
 He disregarded us  
 the spirits of the place.  
 Without atonement  
 your city shall not thrive. (*Moremi*, 1987:11-12)

It is then that Esinmerin names the price of the atonement: Moremi's only son Oluorogbo. Thus, as Ulli Beier both in his introduction, and a review of the first production in *Nigeria Magazine*, shows that: the conflict of power becomes a spiritual conflict and "the sacrifice of Oluorogbo is a sacrifice for peace. He is deified because he has become the link between the Ifes and the spirits with whom they have entered a new relationship." (Quoted in Ogunbiyi, 1981:350-351) Moremi does not allow the Igbo king to be executed, and the Igbos is given a place to settle within the walls of Ife. It is reconciliation of old differences integration between warring factions. The sacrificed child becomes the symbol of peace, "the messenger between heaven and earth" (*Moremi*, 28). Thus on a spiritual level Ladipo has adjusted the historical presentation of events and given a sense of the role Yoruba religion is seen to have played in Yoruba history.

The third innovation in this play is Ladipo's experiment with form. In the review of the play "An experiment in Drama", the critic says:

By incorporating them (the Agbor dancers) into his play, Ladipo enriched his drama with new dances, new rhythms and new tunes. The producer's task was not an easy one: the Agbor dancers had no experience on stage. They speak little Yoruba. Only a very skilful composer could blend the Agbor calabash horn with *Igbin* drums of Ife. Yet, the first performance of this play on 26th March 1966 in Oshogbo was carried out with great aplomb. (*Nigeria Magazine*, 1966:157)

Here Ladipo writes a folk opera in which he deploys folk resources like choral singing, co-ordinated dancing, drumming, and chanting from various ethnic and cultural groups and across various ethnic barriers. This functions similarly to Ngugi's use of song and dance in *Mother, Sing for Me*, which although written in Kikuyu had songs and dances from five other languages and cultural groups. Through the play these techniques reveal dramatic contrasts as conflicts that and frame the historical contexts of the action and atmosphere.<sup>78</sup> The incorporation of performance forms outside of the Yoruba cultural frame reinforces the idea of co-operation and tolerance, which enrich not only artistic form, but also understanding between people. This serves to challenge a monocultural, here Yoruba, interpretation of this history. The form thus parallels the thematic focus on the clash between two cultures and the reconciliation between them.

This approach to multiculturalism in theme and form is even more profound when considered in the context in which this play was created and performed. Often an historical play tells one more about the time in which it was written than about the history upon which it is based. This play was first performed in 1966 - Nigeria had gained independence from Britain on 1 October 1960, but a legacy of regional and ethnic hostility reigned and would lead to violent political disturbance and bitter civil war in the decade to follow. The struggle for power escalated and in 1964 an unpopular premier, a friend of the federal prime minister, was imposed in the west. In 1965 there were federal elections during which violence, murder, and the destruction of property was the order of the day. The election dissolved into chaos as the AG-NCNC coalition and NNDP disagreed about results; and there was a consequent general breakdown of law and order. 15 January 1966 saw the first military coup which at first was welcomed as an end to the chaos and violence, but soon fears grew that the Igbos were taking advantage of the fact that one of their own, especially among the northerners. Major J.T. Agunyi-Ironsi, was now head of the government. Some people feared that that he would abuse his position at

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<sup>78</sup> For example, compare the opening songs of the women in the market place in praise of the Oni of Ife (3-6, 7-8) to the various war drums and dancing of the raiding Igbos (6, 14), or their victory dance after capturing Moremi (17), or their preparations for war and incantations (23-24), the victory dance of the Ifes (25), the women's wailing at Oluorgbo's death (27-8), the solemn and dignified drumming of the Igbos as they come to negotiate with the Yoruba Oni (29) and the final dance of unity, with the drumming of the two sides playing "side by side" (32).



the expense of the rest of the Federation. Riots flared up and the Major was assassinated on 29<sup>th</sup> July 1966. The tension between North and South escalated and the Eastern Region refused to acknowledge Lt. Colonel Yakubu Gowon as the new Head of State. On 29<sup>th</sup> May Lt. Colonel Ojukwu announced the secession of the eastern area which, with its oil reserves could sustain an independent Biafra, as he called his proposed country. Thus in July 1967 the Biafran War broke out and would rage until Ojukwu fled Nigeria and left his army commander to announce the end of succession on 12 January 1970.

It is significant that Ladipo chose to give a multi-cultural 'interpretation' of this history during a time when so much tension was building in Nigeria: in his interpretation of this history both the Igbos and the Yoruba benefit from Moremi's sacrifice and heroism. Ladipo here uses history to positively reclaim the past in an attempt to unite the different people in Nigeria.

Femi Osofisan offers a second version of the Moremi story in *Morountodun* which was first performed at the University of Ife Theatre, Ile-Ife, where Moremi performed her act of sacrifice. One can expect a very different use of the legend here than in Ladipo's play. Femi Osofisan is greatly influenced by Marxist thinking and in particular by Marxist Materialist dialectics. While he acknowledges Soyinka's influence on his work, he challenges Soyinka to move beyond his use of myth, which he finds static and reactionarily backward. In an interview with Olu Obafemi Osofisan says:

I think it is inevitable that he (Soyinka) arrives at these tragic conclusions because if you are always thinking of individuals creating, history will always look like a series of tragedies. The revolution itself is a mass of people always doing things together (Obafemi, 1982:119).

Thus Osofisan is closer to Ngugi wa Thiong'o than Soyinka on the uses of myth and history. He sees individuals as less important than the combined forces of masses, yet he acknowledges the individual in this process more than Ngugi does. Like Ngugi, Osofisan is very interested in history and myth and has written on both subjects. In an interview with Enekwe in 1980 he clearly outlines his approach to myth: "I may use myth or ritual,

but only from a subversive perspective. I borrow ancient forms specifically to unmask them” (Enekwe, 1980:78).

I want to look at this use of history in terms of use of character, how, for Osofisan; literature overtly interfaces in this process and how he uses form to aid his subversion of the historic frame.

In plays I have analysed thus far the tendency has been toward tragic figures that act for or represent their societies. Osofisan argues for a change in how the ordinary person is perceived in society. Like Osundare, both Jeyifo and Osofisan object to the ‘Kabiyesi syndrome’. Jeyifo criticises Soyinka for the choice of an elite hero in *Death and the King’s Horseman*, comparing Elesin Oba to Hussein’s Kinjeketile whom “is not a man apart, he lives and speaks and acts for the people” (Jeyifo, 1985a: 105). This is important, Jeyifo argues because it challenges the assumption of a lone tragic hero who is a great historical personage or cultural hero whose connection to their audience is “never dialectical; it is symbolic” (1985a: 107). He argues that the work of Hussein, and Césaire probes the archetypes of tragic action and the socio-cultural milieu “within in the framework of real historical circumstances and confrontations” (ibid.). And this is not just the confrontation of individuals and society, but individuals and societal forces, which embody aspirations, or goals of particular social groups, classes or nations. Jeyifo argues that this reveals “the dialectical operations between politics, material existence and the superstructural categories - the morality, the myths and the metaphysics of the society” (ibid.).

As Osofisan holds a similar view to Jeyifo on the uses of tragedy and history, one expects subversion in *Morountodun*, which he subtitles “a play based on the legend of Moremi of Ile-Ife”. Osofisan’s adaptation of this legend and the development of a protagonist who represents an elite class, suggest how the tragic form and history may be used to achieve the goals Jeyifo sets for contemporary drama.

The play revolves around Titubi, the daughter of the wealthy merchant woman Alhaja Kabirat who has markets throughout the town. She undertakes to infiltrate the ranks of rebel peasants. Her role is made clear even before the proposed play as she is “wearing conspicuously the ‘Moremi necklace’ then in vogue” (*Morountodun*, 7). The terms in which the Superintendent refers to her class, or group, though, is not flattering or heroic, he challenges her: “if you are really serious, if you really want to save your fat-arsed class, why haven’t you offered your services to crush this peasant revolt?” (*Morountodun*, 13) Titubi refers to the legend, and her role in the present conflict, saying: “Now, when I wear this necklace, I feel a passion deeper than any passing vogue,/ It is as if I have become history itself” (*Morountodun*, 20). Here Titubi sees her role in saving her class as parallel or comparable to that of Moremi saving her society from the invasion of the Igbos.

Titubi’s fictional identity for infiltrating the rebels is taken from a local story of a woman who attempts suicide and kills her children, because she hates her husband. It becomes a strange blend of Moremi, who sacrifices her son to the deities of the land, and the classic Greek legend of Medea, who sacrifices her sons because of Jason’s betrayal and the threat to their futures and her status as wife, end insulted semi-divinity. This story is desperate and savage, and in many ways a strange choice here as it is the opposite of what Titubi shall be. But perhaps it suggests her initial hatred of Marshall, and the potential destruction of all Nigeria’s children because of this hatred. It also suggests how a desperate sociological situation can lead to unnatural, desperate action. In many ways this is what often underpins armed conflict.

Although the subtitle *Osofisan* gives *Morountodun* is “a play based on the legend of Moremi of Ife-Ife”, there are only two ‘Moremi’ scenes. The first is when Titubi awaits capture and imagines what Moremi must have felt, and the other Moremi’s confrontations with her friend, Niniola, and her husband-king, Oranmiyan. Both try to convince her to abandon her plan. Moremi appears only once more, a silent fidget, spotlight, silently standing opposite Titubi at the end of the play

These two scenes are typical of Osofisan's plays insofar as they challenge the two bases of society, namely that of religion and rulership. The first challenge is to the religious system: Niniola accuses Moremi of challenging even the gods, of wanting to be Godhead herself. Moremi replies that perhaps "the gods are indifferent to us." She goes on to argue:

Moremi: You talk of beauty and success and glamour! But what is all that to me when, one fine day, in the midst of the most splendid rejoicing, with the choicest meat in my teeth, without warning at all, the Igbos can arrive suddenly, locusts in the air, and eat everything up? That is the life our gods have provided for us after the rituals and sacrifices. No, no! Nini, it is time for us to rise, to stand and square our shoulders by our own courage, and stop leaning on the gods.

...

Moremi: ... Our priests have scraped their throats hoarse on incantations, and their latest ploy is to try and make us accept defeat as fate ... (*Morountodun*, 33-4)

She insists that one must act oneself in order to have success. This is a recurring theme in Osofisan's work. At the end of *Another Raft* the characters realise that the Goddesses or Yemosa upon whom they have depended throughout are simple manifestations of their own minds, and Reore concludes: "There's no goddess but our muscles! The strength of our forces combined! Rowing together, working together!" (1988:85)

The second challenge is to the traditional power of the patriarchal systems embodied in Moremi's husband and king. Moremi's king-husband commands her to stay, to give up the dangerous plan. She defies him:

Oronmiyon: You ... you dare defy me?

Moremi: Face to face we stand together, in the onrushing waters of danger. In my own hands I hold the paddle of my destiny.

...

Oronmiyon: And which husband, be he king and all, will dare walk proud again, who has openly sacrificed his wife to ward off his own death?

Moremi: No! Nobody sacrifices Moremi. Nobody! I have chosen, all by myself. Neither by the god's cajoling, nor by your designing. Moremi chose, and carries the burden upon herself. Please let me go now (*Morountodun*, 38).

Obviously Moremi is challenging the patriarchal basis of power in the society, suggesting that women too can and must determine their won destinies, and even the destinies of their people, for themselves. I shall return to this aspect of the play later in the discussion.

What is of note here is the repetition of the importance of self-determination. Osofisan develops this idea, and its relation to history more explicitly in *Another Raft* where one of the central metaphors of the play set on this large river, where: “the sea is history” (1988:69) upon which all are rowing, trying to navigate a path. At the end the characters’ only hope of survival is rowing together against the current (*Another Raft*, 1988:85). This emphasises the individual’s free will, and the need to take responsibility for one’s own self and destiny and not rely on others or the gods, whose existence Osofisan, unlike many Nigerian writers, seems to doubt. He also shifts the position of the individual in society from helpless, potentially tragic victim to that of an empowered individual with choice and capable of action.

Osofisan uses character very differently to Ngugi, although both are dedicated to using theatre to challenge and conscientise an audience. For example, if one compares Osofisan’s treatment of this rebellion and its use of history with that of the Mau Mau war and Dedan Kimathi. Both the Marshall and Kimathi are in leadership positions in a rebellion situation, both under pressure and threat of betrayal. Three situations highlight the difference in the way these characters are conceived. The first is when the Marshall cautions Mosun against being part of her father’s trial, despite his having abandoned her as a child. He subscribes to a higher law, which objectively insists on a child’s honouring his or her parent. The second example is the way the Marshall treats Titubi. Although he mistrusts her, he patiently waits and watches her. Kimathi, in contrast, executes his friend on the suspicion of disloyalty. Thirdly, although not in agreement, he accepts Baba’s objection to the death sentence for the captives who led the police to their camp. Baba’s reasons are:

Baba: ... It is legitimate to kill in war. We’re jackals then. But executions are a different thing. Especially when the victims are our own kinsmen even when they’ve gone astray. We don’t want our people to lose all respect for human life.

Kokondi: It is a strong point you have there, Baba. But what punishment then will be adequate?

Baba: I propose they lose all the harvest from their farms. And they’ll be retained here as hostages till the war is over. (*Morountodun*, 54)

These decisions suggest a sensitivity and balance not evident in Ngugi's handling of Dedan Kimathi, who reacts much more personally than the Marshall does. Some critics have suggested that it suggest weakness as the last decision leads to the escape of a prisoner and the State's co-option of the farmers. However, it shows that tradition must be part of the negotiation of the present social interactions, which must be negotiated and agreed upon.

The notions of loyalty to kinsmen and the sanctity of life and blood suggest the importance of humanity over a purely ideological cause. These are important issues in African history. For example, in *Another Raft* Gbebe compares Africa to "the black man's graveyard", and he goes on to say: "each of you is the black race, each is a son of a shark, to be eaten by other sharks. Our future is – death" (1988: 69). This is an interesting echo of the Warrior in *A Dance of the Forests* who sees the future in terms of cannibalism. It also challenges the characters in J.P. Clark's *The Raft*, to which this play is reacting. In Clark's play the characters simply float confusedly on the raft going down stream. They are victims unable or unwilling to act, define what their doom means or take responsibility for themselves and their futures. In *Another Raft*, Osofisan extends Clark's workers to include all classes of Nigerian society, political, military, a priest and workers. All are held responsible for their own, and by implication, for Africa's history and future.

Another example of how Osofisan uses character to develop awareness is in the process that Titubi undergoes to achieve an awareness of herself and the issues within her society. This awareness comes gradually, through interaction and shared experiences with these ordinary people rather than didactic lessons. She is shot in a police raid. Through dialogue with the peasant rebels she learns of the conditions and grievances of the farmers. Their the taxes are high, there is no regard for their crops, which are trampled down, when arrested while protesting, the men are stripped and humiliated (*Morountodun*, 45-6). She learns that they attempted to protest about the corruption and injustice through legal channels, but they did not even get a letter of acknowledgement in return (*Morountodun*, 63-4). The government's only response to their protest was to

increase the bribery rates and tax a (*Morountodun*, 64). They protested more violently, until the Governor declared war on them, and they found themselves fighting as guerrillas. The police attack on unarmed women and children is described as “an accident of war” (*Morountodun*, 57). However, it is a particular incident, the poisoning of the stream where a man and his daughter writhe to death, “all because we refuse to pay money we haven’t got” (*Morountodun*, 49), that causes Titubi to shift her perspective and loyalty and start taking active note of the stories. The audience is invited to share Titubi’s journey as she develops a new consciousness. She summarises:

Titubi: That was when I began to ask questions. Questions. I saw myself growing up, knowing no such sufferings as these. With always so much to eat, even servants feed their dogs ... Yet here, farmers cannot eat their own products, for they need the money from the market. They tend the yams but dare not taste. They raise the chickens, but must be content with the wind in their stomach. And then, when they return weary from the market, the tax man is waiting with his bill ... It could not be just ... (*Morountodun*, 66).

The tension between Mosun’s loyalty to the revolution and her filial duty to her father who has been captured as an informant (*Morountodun*, 45-46) counterpoints Moremi’s dilemma regarding her loyalty to her mother and the class to which Titubi has formerly belonged and her new awareness of class issues. It is at this point that Titubi rejects her adopted role as Moremi, defender of her previous life and class:

Titubi: And that was it. I knew at last that I had won. I knew I had to kill the ghost of Moremi in my belly. I am not Moremi! Moremi served the State, *was* the State, and was the spirit of the ruling class. But it is not always true that the State is always right ... (*Morountodun*, 70).

Even in his use of history as a frame, Osofisan is subversive. Titubi rejects her role as advocate of the defender of an old power system. She not only rejects her past privileged position, but she uses it to further subvert the status quo and support the peasant revolution. She infiltrates the police station with the Marshall so that from a position of power they can negotiate the rebel position. She then marries the Marshall and is renamed *Morountodun*, meaning “I have found a sweet thing” because the Marshall celebrates her healing qualities: “For her war is not to kill, but to heal ... Therefore I pluck her name out of the storehouse of beauty and tenderness” (*Morountodun*, 75).

The development of Titubi illustrates how an historic figure may be used to illustrate development and growth and move beyond class stratification. Titubi develops from a spoilt, politically unconscious rich woman in a privileged position, wholly unaware of the realities of the world surrounding her; to a woman who eventually sees these realities, takes responsibility and makes choices for herself in her society. In many ways she becomes more like Moremi in the sense that it is only when she rejects the position of the heroine defending the traditional status quo that she 'becomes' a woman who takes on danger and sacrifices for her beliefs.

Osofisan uses this legendary figure both to recall and challenge the heroes of the past in general, and female heroines in particular. He is one of the few playwrights, along with Ngugi, who acknowledges the strength and contribution of women in Africa's history. There is the song in praise of Moremi in the beginning (*Morountodun*, 31, 40), which becomes the song Titubi teaches the women, *Iyawo nfo so* (*Morountodun*, 66), which is later translated into the song of hope sung before her engagement and at the end of the play: "Be always like this day/ Beside me. Wear hope like a jewel:/ It never fades". (*Morountodun*, 71, 79) Tess Onwueme comments on how Osofisan is determined to change the representation of women as "underdogs" and so he "consistently imbues them with positive, progressive and revolutionary qualities" (1988a:25). She says that Titubi

... distinguishes herself as a fighter for social justice with full commitment arising from sound judgement and social consciousness. In this regard, Titubi is the symbol of Osofisan's "new hero", the new woman who is fully conscious of her social status and the sordid conditions that must be changed.

Osofisan does not, however, idealise all women as revolutionaries. Just as there are two classes of people in society, there are two classes of women ... young and progressive ... old and reactionary. (Onwueme, 1988a:28)

Thus Titubi challenges the status quo, and encourages people, even those in dominant positions in society, to become conscious of and challenge the dominant social and material conditions.

In many ways his use of the historic frame is as complex and multi-layered as his characters. Three historical events are juxtaposed to one another, and thus comment on



each other. The referents in this play go far beyond the Moremi legend, the first frame and obvious frame of the play. The second referent is the time frame indicated by the opening play which overtly refers to the Biafran war. The third referent is to the farmer's rebellion, the Agbekoya uprising in 1968. The intermediate play, which is used to protest the farmer's rebellion, is overtly set in September 1969 and while denying any direct relevance to the civil war in Nigeria at the time the play appeared, nevertheless draws parallels between the three frames.

Director: ... That year, if you remember, the civil war was raging in the east of our country, but this play has nothing to do with that. It deals with another war, the one that was later to be popularly known as the Agbekoya uprising, in which ordinary farmers, in the west of the country, rose up and confronted the state. Maybe you remember it? Illiterate farmers, whom we had all along thought to be docile, peace loving, if not even stupid, suddenly took to arms, and began to fight against the government! Two, three, four ... seven months! And the war was still hot and bitter. Farmers dying, policeman falling, soldiers going and not returning. Were they not all our kinsmen? If we could not speak about the war in the east, because of stiff decrees, would we also be silent about the one in the west? And suppose another should start in the north? Well, we decided not to be silent. We decided to go and rouse people by doing a play on the subject ... We thought we were contributing towards the process of finding a solution. But before we knew it, we had become part of the problem ... (*Morountodun*, 5-6).

Here Osofisan uses a narrator who consciously and overtly interrupts the action and addresses the audience directly. This emphasises the difference in expectations of the action and the historical frames that the audience, director and play characters have. This serves to overtly draw parallels between these different wars and uprisings, particularly in terms of the silence that enshrouds them. It also introduces the notion that history is mediated and interpreted.

The Director clearly draws the audience's attention to the significance of this as a civil war: that all were 'our kinsmen'. Yet, he also immediately alerts the audience to the central focus of the play, that of class difference (the proletariat, represented by the farmers and the wealthy that are supported and protected by the authorities), which has led to such civil conflict. Here he suggests that it is less politics than economics that underpins this war. At the root of all three conflicts, is the struggle between competitive systems for power.

The complexities of these issues and the on-going nature of struggle is most evident in the play's ending. Unlike *Moremi*, *Morountodun* does not end with balance restored, a marriage and happiness for all. The Marshall continues his battle, loses and dies. This ending has caused some comment and confusion. Dupe Olaogun says that what Osofisan here wants to suggest, as an alternative to the status quo is a revolution:

But what we have in *Morountodun* does not go beyond sheer insurrection. First, there are the farmers whose political awareness is, to say the least, rudimentary. When the young men who are the moving forces of the struggle are killed, the struggle too is killed because the peasants have no reserves. *Morountodun* ends, unlike *The Chattering*, and pessimistically too. 'They will not come back'; thus Baba's negative prophecy. Must Baba have the last say? (1988:51)

Yet, when one looks at the play's ending, Baba's words are not the last. The Director returns to confirm that the men are dead, but he goes on to say:

Director: ... The *real* struggle, the real truth, is out there, among you, on the street, in your homes; in your daily living and dying ... We are actors, and whatever we present here is mere artifice, assembled for your entertainment. Tomorrow the play may even be different. It depends. Some of the scenes for instance seems to be ... (*Morountodun*, 79).

The actors silence him and interrupt the action so that Mama Kayode may sing a song of hope.

Osofisan makes a number of challenges in this ending. First, Baba does not have the last word, and yet he, as a voice of tradition, is not entirely dismissed. Perhaps the point here being that tradition also has its place in negotiating a future, yet with more limited power than before. Secondly, Osofisan invites the audience to consider whether perhaps the farmers' defiance is not more important than their defeat. It also suggests the difference between life and the theatre, where one can manufacture a happy ending, where love conquers all and reconciliation is as easily achieved as we see in Ladipo's *Moremi*. Finally, it overtly suggests the close relationship between art, life and history. Osofisan directly addressed this issue in the second scene of the play where he suggests that there is little difference between history and theatre:

Director: And so that's it, Ladies and Gentlemen. We came here to do a play, a simple play. But History - or what some of you may call Chance or Fortune - has taken over the stage. And it will play itself out, whether we like it or not. All we can do is either quicken it or slow down its progress. And let this be a lesson to you; my friends. In the affairs of men, History is often like ... like a ... (*Morountodun*, 16)

Is the phrase Osofisan asks us to complete “history is like a ... play”? if so this draws attention to the mediated, interpreted, even fictional nature of history which may be challenged and changed in the past and future. It encourages a dialectical approach to and view of history.

In the last speeches Osofisan suggests that all are part of a greater play, in life and history and need to act their parts, even change the script. The Marshall insists that the struggle goes on so that “maybe afterwards our own children will have a decent chance to grow up like human beings, not like animals having to scrounge for leftovers in the sewers of history ...” (*Morountodun*, 78). The play ends with Moremi, the representative of the status quo, and initially apparently the hero of the play, facing Titubi, agitator of the masses, on opposing platforms. This image challenges the audience to choose positions for themselves personally and potentially for the nation too.

In terms of form, Ladipo merges the traditional forms of Nigeria story-telling, songs, dances, while keeping a linear narrative. As seen in the analysis of Moremi, this serves to encourage cross-cultural exchange - both in terms of form and in terms of tolerant interaction between people. The total theatre form serves to heighten action and atmosphere. The combination of theme and form, using traditional folk songs and dances and the mission concert party forms on his operas made Ladipo's plays very accessible and popular in Nigeria, and thus he reached many people.

Osofisan, on the other hand, uses Brechtian techniques to distance his audience from identification, inviting them rather to evaluate the characters and the events in terms of their relevance to and bearing on their own lives and choices. Osofisan uses multiple time and historic frames and shifts covertly rather than overtly between these. Olaogun suggests that “Osofisan's adventurousness with time sequence in *Morountodun* - its

complex fusion of myth, history and contemporary reality - is also capable of confusing, even mystifying, the spectator" (1988:52).

Yet, Osofisan believes that these techniques are justified. In the article "Ritual and the Revolutionary Ethos" (1982) Osofisan clearly outlines his position in relation to myth and history as an artist. Within his belief that "art strains to be both a mirror of reality as well as a kinetic function of historical evolution" (1982:72), he argues that "the momentum of history can no longer be sublimated by the old process of traditional rite" which is in danger of becoming "not a compaction of revolutionary momentum, but rather ... a catharsis of acceptance" (as in Ladipo and Okediji, 1982:74). He argues instead that the artist needs to intervene and move beyond simply recasting the ritual form, which remains within the eternal paradigm, and so s/he "invests it (the Archetype on the objective level of historical symbol) with a dialectic, and his personal vision intervenes for a crucial interrogation of history" (1982:77). Thus Osofisan calls for a more active intervention with history. To move myth beyond the eternal and universal to the specific, not only within its own context, but also for that for which it is being used in the creative endeavour. He ends his argument by referring to Duvignaud's 'scheme of freedom' where he argues that art is "a wager on the capacity of human beings to invent new relationships and to experience hitherto unknown emotions ... for we are as much what we have been as what we are able to imagine" (quoted in Osofisan, 1982:78). Thus Osofisan argues "the dialectic between the real and imaginary, between the forces of tradition and the modernist consciousness, is the contribution that the theatre can make to the process of social transformation" (1982:78).

He achieves these ambitious aims primarily through form. The self-conscious theatricality is suggested by the Director who continually breaks out of the fictive mode to address the audience directly. This self-consciousness underlines the artificiality of the frame, and thus the constructed nature of reality too. So Osofisan illustrates that this play, as all else, is an interpretation of reality. Other techniques used include the episodic rather than a linear sequence of narration, conspicuous flashbacks, a play-within-a-play, riddling games, music, songs which all foreground the illusionary nature of the play and

encourage critical engagement with the history. The audience is thus challenged to confront him or herself in the characters and take position with regard to these ideological struggles.

In these two plays one sees a shift in approach to history. From the 1960s and 1970s historians, with the support of many writers, focused on addressing the colonial assertion that Africa had no pre-colonial history. Initially this movement, like much of the Negritude movement, was a binary, counter-discourse, simply aimed at proving the colonials wrong. Thus for example Moremi as a positive historic example which could be applied to contemporary post-colonial Nigeria. The reclamation tended not to be critical of the implicit assumptions underlying such assertions; for example that empire building is necessarily a signal of a progressive, successful civilisation,<sup>79</sup> or that the past was not a solid base for a future society.

Nevertheless, Ladipo's adaptations of form and adjustments to the history allow him to use this legend effectively to comment on post-colonial Nigeria in the context of the Biafran civil war. Particularly his inclusion of dances, songs and performers from diverse ethnic and language groups actively demonstrate the kind of cultural interaction for which this play calls. Moremi's insistence that the Yoruba people negotiate a peaceful settlement with the defeated Igbo, together with the harmonising of various popular performance forms, especially drumming in the final scene, dramatises the call to end the Biafran civil strife raging at the time. Thus one sees an active and critical use of history to address immediate socio-political issues in Ladipo's reinterpretation of Johnson's version of the Moremi story.

Osofisan goes even further in his challenge and use of this history. Initially the Moremi figure seems positive, as it motivates Titubi to defend her life, her status quo. However,

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<sup>79</sup> See Neale's extensive analysis of the role of Empire and empire as proof of progress in rewriting African history, 1985.

quickly the play shifts to challenge the structure of this society, especially the economically based class divisions.. Osofisan says that the play:

... demonstrates a process of class suicide, in which a member of the middle-class is mobilised into an alliance with the peasantry, in order to perform the catalytic role necessary, in our underdeveloped economies, for the drama of social transformation” (Osofisan, 1997:10).

He thus uses history to challenge the past systems and interpretations thereof. He also here uses history to conscientise people to an awareness of the potential role women may play in social transformation, and generally he challenges his audience regarding the need for change in Nigeria’s economic structured. The form chosen also serves to support these thematic aims, particularly in his innovative use of theatrical devices, like the Brechtian Epic Theatre style of dramatisation.

Thus Osofisan effectively appropriates from the past to challenge the history of the present and future. This is an example of a powerful and challenging use of myth and history.

### 3.5 Conclusion

In just these few examples one can trace a development in the uses of history in Nigerian drama, from Ijimere and Soyinka who begin the process of ‘re-writing’ or interpreting the histories, to Rotimi, Sofola, Onwueme, who begin to challenge the bases of power. The women playwrights particularly challenge the patriarchal power structures. These plays all explore the position of a leader who can decide the fate of his or her people. They interrogate thenature of power and authority of the past, perhaps as a means of understanding the processes Nigeria had entered in the post-colonial context.

Soyinka takes many of these same issues, and combines the historical focus and interrogation of corruption and class structure in post-colonial Nigeria with his complex theories on the relation between myth, ritual and history. Both *A Dance of the Forest and Death and the King’s Horseman* offer a profound sense of the role interrogating the

present in the context or frame of the past may have for the future. Soyinka manages with dexterity to write specifically of socio-political conditions while reflecting on metaphysical issues of death and eternity.

However, the comparison between Ladipo and Osofisan makes clear the shift in the later Nigerian writers, particularly those influenced by Marxist thinking. Those who reject Soyinka's approach to myth and history and, like Ngugi, insist on the importance of acknowledging individuals as agents of particular social forces that they can and must challenge. Thus in Ladipo's *Moremi* one sees a very positive reclamation of a past heroine, but Osofisan challenges the actual use of myth and history. These shifts in playwrights to some extent parallel the movement in historiography from reclaiming an African history, to writing more critical versions of these histories in the 1980s.

This constant reinterpretation of the past in order to understand the present and define a visionary future is one of the most exciting contributions of contemporary African drama, especially the direct interplay between myth, history and literature. This, however, is just one of the foci of Nigerian theatre. As Saint-Andre shows in her article (1984), since 1970 Nigerian theatre has moved steadily towards a more committed theatre. This has meant that many playwrights like Kole Omotoso and Bode Sowande write overtly revolutionary theatre, and as such are as important as the playwrights discussed here. Many of these have also commented directly or indirectly on South Africa in their work. Thus we turn now to see how South African theatre compares in its uses of myth and history for interpreting its own past, present and future.

## CHAPTER 4

### SOUTH AFRICAN: THEATRE, HISTORY AND MYTH

#### THE STORIES WE NOW CAN TELL

*Duke: And what is her history?*

*Viola: A blank my Lord: she never told ...*

*(Shakespeare, Twelfth Night II, V:110-111)*

This, in many ways is both true and untrue of South Africa. Many of the histories in South Africa have not been ‘told’ at all, or when told, only in part in formal histories. Yet, despite this official silence, in theatre many of these stories have been reflected most poignantly. The issues of truth, telling stories and silence are central to this chapter. I look at three approaches to historical subjects in South African drama, moving from official stories (as in histories) to the marginalised, less ‘official’ stories that tell what happened on the fringes. Some notable voices that have told such stories are Gibson Kente, Maishe Maponya, Matsemela Manaka, Fatima Dike, Zakes Mda, Reza de Wet, Pieter Fourie and groups like Workshop ’71 and the Junction Avenue Theatre Company. However, owing to the enormous scope of this study I have chosen to limit this chapter to the consideration of an example of how a particular historic incident and myth has been applied in theatre in the South African context. This has meant that I have not included discussions of a number of other plays and playwrights that have been seminal to South African theatre history. Many of these, for example *Tooth and Nail* (1995), address the issue of the construction of history directly, but as this falls outside the themes discussed here, will not be considered.

I want to pause here and briefly note some crucial differences between South African drama and that of post-1960 Kenya and Nigeria. In South Africa the majority of the published playwrights for the first seventy years of this century were white, with the possible exception of the remarkable Herbert Dhlomo,<sup>80</sup> and they wrote exclusively in Afrikaans and English,

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<sup>80</sup> Many of Dhlomo’s plays are based on historical subjects or events, cf. His first play *The girl who killed to save* (1935), later *Cetswhwayo*, *Dingane*, *Moshoeshoe*, and *Ntsikana*. He lived between 1903 and 1956, though the plays were only really rediscovered and published in the 1980’s.



for two powerful but exclusivist systems (Afrikaans and English) of both publication and performance (See Hauptfleisch and Steadman, 1984, Hauptfleisch 1997 and Kruger, 1999). So, for much of the century, virtually all the writing – including much of the anti-apartheid writing and performance – was formally and overtly driven by a number of prominent white theatre practitioners. This was so, because the theatrical and social system in South Africa was such that for much of the century black people were effectively kept out of professional theatre and certainly out of publishing. There was no formal training or access to performance spaces or publishing. Thus, although much black popular theatre and performance took place in the vernacular as well as English and Afrikaans, little of it was recorded or published, and virtually no critical attention was paid to it. On the other hand, numerous formal western-style plays were written and published in the African languages, however this was not for performance but for prescription in schools. Many of the latter plays in fact deal with historic figures and subjects, so that we find plays about the great Shaka written in Northern Sotho, Tsonga and Venda, as well as plays about Dingaan in Southern Sotho and Tsonga.

In this study I focus on plays from the second half of the century created primarily in English or Afrikaans, by both black *and* white South Africans, either individually or in workshop groups. It is important to note that, as pointed out above, until the advent of the black consciousness movement in the 1970s, much of the resistance writing (as well as the pro-Nationalist writing) in South Africa was undertaken by white English and Afrikaans writers. It was only after 1970 that people like Adam Small, Maishe Maponya, Matsemela Manaka, Mbongeni Ngema, Fatima Dike, and Zakes Mda appeared as strong voices in the theatrical landscape in South Africa. An important factor here was the Apartheid insistence that writers write in and promote their mother tongues, which led many black South African writers to choose to defiantly use the colonial languages to protest the colonial oppression. Simultaneously, the performance and oral forms of the black artists with whom they often collaborated influenced many European writers, altering their perceptions of and practices in theatre.<sup>81</sup> These oral forms, of which history

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<sup>81</sup> See Hauptfleisch on the 'shifting paradigm' and the development of a syncretic form in South Africa, 1992.

was an integral part, informed the development of the more mainstream theatre in South Africa, and opening the gates for theatre artists working outside the traditional western theatrical forms.

I begin with the historical issue of land dispossession in South Africa because it underpinned much of the policy making of Apartheid, and the resultant suffering of, Apartheid. This specific choice of historic event predicated the plays that would be discussed: Fugard's *Boesman and Lena* (1969), Junction Avenue Theatre Company's workshopped production of *Sophiatown* (1986) and David Kramer and Taliep Pietersen's musical *District Six – the Musical* (1987). This choice also seemed to provide a diversity of perception – Fugard as a white liberal, and the mixed perceptions of black, coloured and white English and Afrikaans voices in the two latter plays.

The way the plays set up a counter-memory to the officially endorsed stories justifying the removals, is interesting when compared with the explorations of similar land issues in post-colonial Kenya during the Mau Mau war. In Kenyan theatre the history was used to establish a strong and positive national identity and reinforce the values for which men died, while challenging the post-colonial government's failure to implement land reparation. In South Africa the focus in these stories is resistance and group identity, but they also attempt at least to record the communities and people, so that they may not be forgotten.

I then move on to consider the use of myth in South Africa and have chosen to focus on the Christian Messianic-figure in *Kanna hy kô hystoe*, *Woza Albert*, *Christine* and *Die Teken*. The messianic figure is fundamental to Christianity, which in turn was both a central figure to the ideology of the Apartheid government and a central figure in Liberation Theology. Inevitably it also made its way into resistance theatre, where the figure became an icon appropriated for the subversion of the state by the theatre, and utilised as a powerful and challenging counter-voice. It is interesting to note how myth, which is often seen to be abstract, universal, outside of a specific socio-economic-political context, may be used for these very reasons to question, subvert and even undermine an historically specific dominant ideology.

Finally, I look briefly at contemporary society in South Africa, where theatre has been used as a space for the giving of personal testimony, as a confessional that climaxes in the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC). This Commission is both a major theatrical and a major confessional event, that has profoundly broken the silence in South Africa.

#### **4.1 FORCED REMOVALS AS AN HISTORIC ISSUE IN SOUTH AFRICA**

Understanding the history of South Africa, the development of Afrikaner nationalism and Apartheid depend a great deal on one's sense of the history of and attitude to land and labour in the country. Throughout the nineteenth century descendants of both the English and Dutch fought bloody battles with the Zulu in Natal, with Sotho, Tswana, and Venda in the interior, and the Xhosa people in the eastern Cape over control of land. In 1858 the Transvaal Government took all unallotted land and in 1871 they began to limit the size of farms and issue title deeds.

The colonials were less farmers than plantation owners, who used slaves or cheap migrant labourers to farm for them. After the emancipation of slaves in 1834 new sources of cheap labour were needed. In Natal the *isibalo* system required chiefs to find men to be labourers on public works at relatively low wages. In the eastern Cape farmers relied on pass and vagrancy laws to obtain and control labour. In the Orange Free State there was the 'apprenticing' of children. All provinces also subscribed to the 'squatter' system as a most effective labour system. The white landowners allowed some of the native inhabitants to continue living on the land in return for some tangible benefit: rent, or 90-180 days of labour per year. The Plakkers Wet (Squatters Law) of 1895 was passed in the Transvaal and Orange Free State, aimed at controlling cheap labour by prohibiting more than five families on one farm. This meant that a more lenient or generous farmer could not be 'unfairly' advantaged with labourers. Natal and the Eastern Cape recruited labour:

the Natalian farmers from India and those in the eastern Cape from the eastern frontier, China, Germany, and Ireland.<sup>82</sup>

Historians disagree on the land situation in South Africa in 1899. Some argued that there was still an immense quantity of unoccupied land that was being ineffectively cultivated, while others asserted that by the end of the nineteenth century the interior had been excessively subdivided.<sup>83</sup> Nevertheless, ownership and control of land was a major area of conflict in South Africa.

The discovery of minerals and movement of more people into cities and mining communities exacerbated the land and labour issue. The mineral discoveries culminated in the Anglo-Boer war, which profoundly influenced land legislation. Wilson argues that two problems dominated the thinking of white South Africans in the post Anglo-Boer war period. First was the labour shortage. Second was the fear that the land “gained by conquest should be lost through the market; for ... Africans were buying farms” (Wilson, 1971:127). The solution to both problems was the Land Act of 1913, which abolished farming-on-the-half<sup>84</sup> and squatter locations and made it illegal for an African to buy land from a white person. This Land Act was the first legislation that resulted in forced removals. Its immediate effect was the uprooting of hundreds of black South Africans from white-owned farms who then wandered in search of a new home.<sup>85</sup> Many had to sell their cattle at great loss and move to the cities. Some went to Basutoland (now Lesotho) or Bechuanaland, or into the reserves. To stay on the land they had to become servants and lost all possibility of ownership of produce, cattle, or even their own labour. They had to work for the white farmers on their terms.

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<sup>82</sup> For details see Wilson, 1971, pages 117-120.

<sup>83</sup> See J.P. Fitzpatrick *The Transvaal from Within*, p.50. and De Kiewiet, 1946:191. These arguments are very comparable to those made by white settlers in Kenya over the White Highlands, see Chpt. 2.

<sup>84</sup> Africans who owned their own ploughs and oxen could enter into a partnership with the land-owner and work the land, sow the seed, reap the crop and hand over half of it for the right to cultivate, graze stock and live on the farm.

<sup>85</sup> See Sol Plaatjie's *Native Life in South Africa*. Plaatjie has written extensively on the effects of this legislation in 1913.

The Land Act of 1913 and the Native Land and Trust Act of 1936 provided for a country-wide application of possessory land segregation, but this did not apply in the urban areas. In many towns Africans acquired freehold property. The Urban Areas Act of 1923, which had provided for the compulsory segregation of Africans, was amended to the Natives (Urban Area) Act in 1937. This restricted the rights of Africans to own property in urban areas, like Alexandra township, Sophiatown, Martindale, Newclare, Pageview, where many Africans had owned land for years. In 1943 and 1944 the Johannesburg Municipality, under pressure from ratepayer organisations in the area, like the 'North Eastern District Protection League', resolved to move African inhabitants to the southwest of Johannesburg. One of the major challenges to this resolution was the acute housing shortage. The Smit Committee in 1942 reported that complete segregation would mean the removal and rehousing of one third of the urban African population.

The Group Areas Act in 1950 intensified the pressure exerted on the municipalities as it enforced segregation in urban residential areas. All towns and villages were also zoned for exclusive ownership and residence by particular groups of people. This law meant that certain areas were made exclusive for residence by particular ethnic groups, and disqualified people had to vacate the area within one year of a stipulated date. Failure to do so was a criminal offence.

The 1954 Natives Resettlement Act was the means by which the government pressurised Municipalities to disestablish African freehold areas, like Sophiatown, Martindale, Newclare and Pageview. People from these areas were relocated to Meadowlands and Diepkloof. Even Africans who spoke different languages were forced to live in separate quarters, according to 'ethnic grouping' in urban townships (Wilson, 1971:241).

Later legislation, which enforced and refined forced removal and segregation included Proclamation 190 in 1957 and the Laws Amendment Act in 1963, 1964, 1965 and 1970. Many of these laws and their effects on the respected communities have been investigated by projects particularly sponsored by the Council for Research Development through grants provided for research on Cape Town's history. Uma Shashikant

Mesthrie's article on the Group Areas Act in Cape Town in the 1950s (1994) and Naomi Barnett's article on "The planned destruction of District Six in 1940" (1994) are examples of valuable material on these historic aspects of this issue.

Although forced removals occurred throughout South Africa, two of the most prominently publicised communities struck were those of Sophiatown, a suburb of Johannesburg, and District Six in Cape Town. The sentiment surrounding this act was important in these areas, both which were 'freehold': Black Indian, and Coloured people could own land and live, work and play alongside Whites in these areas. It is these areas upon which I shall primarily focus in the discussion on the representations of the forced removals in South African theatre.

#### 4.1.1 Athol Fugard: *Boesman and Lena* (1969)

I have chosen to begin with this play, which is classical to the South African and International canon of Twentieth Century drama. It is also particularly pertinent here insofar as the two protagonists, Boesman and Lena exemplify how the telling of individual stories can reflect on communities and society as a whole. In a way then, they are representative of the dispossessed in South Africa. Fugard was writing this play for mainly a white, liberal, anti-establishment audience who were probably not part of the group reflected here. He also wrote this play at the beginning of the Black Consciousness Movement, before the strong protest forms that emerged later in the seventies and eighties. This context, both in terms of time and intended audience, informs Fugard's style. It explains his referents to the Theatre of the Absurd, Camus, the broadening of the issues from the particular issues related to the dispossessed in South Africa, to the implications of these stories for every individual who seeks meaning and wants to tell his or her own story. The specific socio-political issues are written parallel to the philosophical in the play. It is on specific socio-political issues I shall concentrate in this

study.<sup>86</sup>

The play opens as a heavily burdened man and woman enters an almost empty stage. They are carrying all their possessions and are looking for a place to rest overnight on the mudflats in the eastern Cape. Their opening dialogue indicates that the policy of forced removals is the reason for their present situation, and has defined the story of their lives. Lena says:

Lena: ... Heavier and heavier. Every step. This afternoon heavier than this morning. This time heavier than last time. And there's other time coming. 'Vat jou goed en trek! (take your things and leave) Whiteman says *Voetsak!*' (Bugger off) *Eina!* (Ow!)  
*[Boesman is watching her with undisguised animosity and disgust.]*  
 Remember the old times? Quick march! Even run ...*[a little laugh]* ... when they chased us. Don't make trouble for us here, Boesman. I can't run anymore.  
 Quiet hey! Let's have a *dop*. (drink)  
*[Lena register Boesman's hard stare. She studies him in return.]*  
 You're the hell-in. Don't look at me, *ou ding*. (old thing) Blame the whiteman. Bulldozer!  
*[Another laugh.]*  
*Ja!* You were happy this morning. 'Push it over, my *baas!*' '*Dankie, baas!*' '*Weg is ons!*' (Thank you, Boss! We go!)  
 It was funny, hey, Boesman! All the *pondoks* (shacks) flat. The poor people running around trying to save their things. You had a good laugh. And now? Just now it's dark, and Boesman's thinking about another *pondok*. The world feels big when you sit like this. Not even a bush to make it your own size. Now's the time to laugh. This is also funny. Look at us! Boesman and Lena with a sky for a roof again (*B&L*, 240-241).

The policy of forced removal defines Boesman and Lena both in personal psychological terms and insofar as it prevents them finding permanent work and domicile. The play explores this one policy, which dehumanises people, while exposing some of the worst consequences of Apartheid – the servility, their drinking to blot out reality, and the cycle of abuse in an abusive system which disempowers Boesman, who in turn abuses and disempowers Lena.

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<sup>86</sup> It is interesting that three of the major South African drama figures come from a formal philosophical background. Athol Fugard majored in philosophy at UCT, Adam Small was professor of philosophy at UWC for many years, and Bartho Smit studied D.Philosophy in Germany, although he never completed his degree.

In August 1968 Fugard wrote that his “life’s work was possibly just to witness as truthfully as [he] could, the nameless and destitute (desperate) of this one little corner of the world” (1983:172). In his *Notebooks* Fugard describes the various couples or individuals to whom he bears witness, as each contributes something to the characters of Boesman and Lena of this play (183:166, 167, 178). Just as Ngugi worked through the community to find as many ‘types’ to represent the community, here Fugard has fused many individual people into these two characters, who then provide a counter-memory to the non-personalised legislative history of South Africa. The difference between these characters, and those of Ngugi, though, is that Boesman and Lena are far less stereotypical and far more fully realised in an individual sense. This is primarily because Ngugi sees people in terms of their functions and roles. For Ngugi people are primarily agents of social forces, as opposed to Fugard who advocates the notion of the individual’s struggle with his or her existence, although always aware of the forces influencing this life.

Fugard creates his play from encounters with individuals and accounts of forced removal in the press. An example of the latter is the report in April 1969: “In this morning’s paper, photograph and story of the demolition of a squatter’s camp at Missionvale. The picture – shacks demolished, a pile of twisted corrugated-iron, packing-case wood etc. etc. and the people ‘standing staring at the pieces’” (Fugard, 1983:182). These encounters, items from the press, and his personal responses to them shape the counter-memory to the official stories of Apartheid and South African history.

One of the central motifs in the play is Lena’s litany of her journey as she moves from place to place throughout her life, and her confusion of the route. This confusion of memory indicates her existential confusion, her inability to understand or formulate the meaning of her life. At the same time, it indicts the Boers who cause her confusion by constantly chasing them off their properties and back onto the road, the reference here being to the legislation against squatters. Again and again she tells of the guns and bulldozers at Redhouse, Swartkop then the bulldozers further on (*B&L*, 1978: 246-248).



She ends the litany with reference to the latest eviction from Korsten that morning (*B&L*, 1978:262).

The horror of their position and the consequent cowering servility of the helpless are ruthlessly parodied by Boesman:

Boesman [*launching into a vulgar parody of Lena, with the appropriate servile postures and gestures.*]

‘Sommer a ou Hotnot, baas. Lena, baas. Van ou Coega, baas. Ja, my baas.’ (Only a Hottentot, boss. Lena, boss. From old Coega, boss. Yes, my boss.)

[*He turns on her.*]

You!

[*He extends the pantomime to a crude imitation of the scene that morning when the Korsten shacks were demolished.*]

[*Peering at something.*] ‘En dit? Nee, moer! Boesman. Hey, Boesman! Daar kom ’n ding die kant. (And that? No, bugger! Boesman. Hey, Boesman! There comes the thing this side) Save our things! [*In and out of the shelter.*] Give us time, my baas. Al weer sulke tyd. (That time again.) Poor old Lena. Just one more load, baas. Arme ou Lena!’

...

The lot of you! Crawling out of your holes. Like worms. *Babalas* (hung-over) as the day you were born. That piece of ground was rotten with *dronkies*. (drunks.) Trying to save their rubbish, falling over each other ...!

‘Run you bastards! White man’s bulldozer is chasing you!’

[*Big laugh.*]

...

The women and children sitting there with their snot and tears. The *pondoks* falling. The men standing, looking, as the yellow *donner* pushed them over and then staring at the pieces when they were the only things left standing. I saw all that! The whiteman stopped the bulldozer and smoked a cigarette. I saw that too. ...

Lena: They made a big pile and burnt everything.

...

Boesman: [*violently.*] Yes! Dankie, baas (Thank-you, boss).

You should have said it too, sitting there with your sad story. Whiteman was doing us a favour. You should have helped him. He wasn't just burning *pondoks*. They alone can't stink like that. Or burn like that.

There was something else in that fire, something rotten. Us! Our sad stories, our smells, our world! And it burned, *boeta*. It burnt. I watched that too.

The end was a pile of ashes. And quiet (*B&L*,1978:273-5).

In contrast to Lena who begs for mercy, Boesman is strangely elated at this forced removal. He feels that in destroying his home, the men burn the garbage that represents his life and thus they make him free for that moment: "It was Freedom!" (*B&L*, 1978:275)

This reference to their lives as 'garbage', combined with Boesman's vision of them as "worms", as "baboons"<sup>87</sup>, as something "rotten" that deserves to be utterly destroyed in fire is an awful vision of people crushed to a sub-human position. The perception of these people as somehow inhuman is reinforced by the impersonal indifference of the whiteman who bulldozes and burns these pathetic homes, and then impassively smokes a cigarette while they cry and gather what they can. This is the dramatic expression of Fugard's notes on his aim with this play. In March 1969 he wrote:

The 'social' content of *Boesman and Lena*. Nagging doubts that I am opting out on this score, that I am not saying enough. At one level their predicament is an indictment of this society, which makes people 'rubbish'. Is this explicit enough? (1983:181)

Earlier in his *Notebooks* Fugard comments on the word 'vrot'.

Vrot - rotten, bad, useless, falling apart. A piece of corrugated iron, a bit of sacking. Another rotten place for rotten people. Rubbish – 'nest of rubbish', 'rubbish nest'. Rubbish – old sacks, rusty iron. Stink. 'Another rubbish nest. And us. Rubbish' (1983: 147).

The images of 'rot' and garbage thread through the play. Earlier Boesman describes the shelter he is building for them, saying "it's another vrot ou huisie vir die vrot mens"

(rotten old house for a rotten person. *B&L*, 1978:254). He mocks Lena's resistance: "Sick of it! You want to live in a house? What do you think you are? A white madam?" (*B&L*, 1978:254) The implication of this interchange is that he accepts that they do not deserve the fundamental requirements of life that a white person expects, like a settled home. He denies Lena's humble dream of a real house with real doors. He insists that they are where they belong: in the mud. The reason for this he poignantly articulates:

Boesman: We're whiteman's rubbish. That's why he is so *beneukt* (bloody) with us. He can't get rid of his rubbish. He throws it away, we pick it up. Wear it. Sleep in it. Eat it. We're made of it now. His rubbish is people (*B&L*, 1978: 277).

The laws governing work and domicile, for example the Group Areas Act and the Pass Laws,<sup>88</sup> reduced possibilities for survival so that many people in South Africa were literally forced to live off white people's rubbish. However, metaphorically and historically Black and Coloured people became the embodiment of what many white South Africans considered to be human rubbish. Thus they could be used as labour and discarded or destroyed when no longer useful or needed.

Not only are Boesman and Lena reduced within themselves and for each other, but they are also silenced and marginalised. However, not all is negative in the play. Fugard offers an alternative to Boesman's pessimistic despair. Unlike Boesman who accepts the inhuman treatment meted out to him, blotting as much as he can with drink, and expressing his frustration by beating Lena, Lena refuses to Boesman's version of her self and life. She does not passively watch her home being demolished, but protests. She refuses to enter the shelter which she compares to a coffin, insisting that she lives "on this earth not in it" (*B&L*, 278). She refuses to be bulldozed or destroyed. Even though confused she seeks meaning. She tells the homeless black man Outa, to whom she has shown compassion, that while she may be confused about her route, she has tried to put

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<sup>87</sup> It is interesting to compare this with the Mau Mau plays about Dedan Kimathi which reveal the same sense of dehumanisation as experienced by the soldiers in the bush. They felt that under colonial rule they too were forced to the position of animals. See chapter 2, pp. 54-55.

<sup>88</sup> The Pass Law was an extension of the British colonial *Kipande* system, whereby all African workers had to carry their passport and identity documents in a metal box around their necks. In South Africa this was a Pass Book which limited where a person was allowed to live and work. Contravention of this law meant imprisonment, even hard labour for six months.

memory of herself on the roads (*B&L*, 265). One of the most powerful driving forces of the play is Lena's insistence on 'telling' her story, of being seen and heard, and thus proving her existence. That which defines being human is interaction with other beings, the display of compassion and love. Despite her life, Lena feeds and speaks to a stray dog (*B&L*, 243, 261-2). At times she talks to herself (*B&L*, 245). She extends kindness and mercy to Outa, a stranger whom she does not understand, even though she has so little herself. Boesman in contrast calls Outa 'hond' (dog) and attempts to chase him away (*B&L*, 270).

In exchange for warmth and some food, Outa shall be a witness to Lena's life (*B&L*, 260). She tells him the story of her life, her journey and miscarried children (*B&L*, 265). At the end of the play, although again on the move alone with Boesman she has a new sense of herself and she consoles herself, saying: "Anyway, someone saw a little bit. Dog and a dead man" (*B&L*, 293). This is both positive and awful as one sees how little she must accept and for which she must be grateful.

Although Boesman cannot articulate his story, Fugard allows us to 'see' it. As the play unfolds we understand why he drinks and beats Lena. It is horrifying to realise that the treatment Boesman experiences denies him and his life so completely that the only sense he has of his being is in the marks on Lena's body.

Lena: What have I done Boesman? It's my life. Hit your own.

Boesman [*equally desperate, looking around dumbly*]. Show it to me! Where is it? This thing that happens to me. Where? Is it the *pondok*? Whiteman pushed it over this morning. Wind will do it to this one. The road I walked today? Behind us! Swartkops? Next week its somewhere else. The wine? Bottles are empty. Where is it?!

[*Pause.*]

I look, and I see you. I listen, I hear you.

Lena: And when you hit ...?

Boesman: You. You cry (*B&L*, 282).

He has no direction, roots or meaning because he cannot have a home, settle, and become part of a community.

Outa, though, is the most extreme example of the silenced masses of South Africa. He is a sick old Xhosa man who dies anonymously at their campfire. No-one knows his story. We are left wondering who he is, from where he comes and what his story may be. In this way Fugard suggests that there are many such unheard stories. Outa, like Boesman and Lena, is another victim of Apartheid.

These are stories that one never reads in history books, but are nevertheless the stories of the majority of the land. The play dramatises the consequences of laws and acts that seem impersonal, numbers of Government Gazettes, but which translate into a shocking dehumanisation of people. Fugard explores the depths of individual existential anxiety as his characters question the meaning of their lives, and simultaneously he overtly challenges a system that negates the humanity of individuals by denying them permanent domicile, or even a dignified existence in a make-shift but stable home. Even a shack is denied these people. This reduces them to a position lower than animals, particularly dogs, which are fed and housed by their owners. The indignity of being hustled out of one's home and watching as it is bulldozed and burnt is a powerful and shocking indictment of a ruthless system.

Many comparisons can be made with the Kenyan plays which also deal with abuse and exploitation of people and the depiction of the forced removals and Mau Mau struggle. The way they are reduced to animals grovelling for existence, and also the complete reduction of a life and sense of personal worth make these two situations so comparable.

The stories of Boesman and Lena's struggle and suffering provide a counter-memory to the 'official' history as expressed by people like Joyce Waring, a Nationalist who was a member of the Johannesburg City Council and a member of the Non-European Affairs Committee that sanctioned the forced removal of people in Sophiatown. In a newspaper interview with the *Cape Times* she stated that

... in spite of dramatic posturing of Father Huddleston and the liberals and the feeble cries of outraged United Party councillors and Rand MPs, a Nationalist Party Government with Dr. Verwoerd as Minister of Native Affairs, took action, razed Sophiatown and moved an exulting – Yes, I repeat, exulting – African population to

Meadowland, to decent homes with running water, sewerage, lights, gardens, schools, clinics and churches.

... the move took many years and none was moved until there was good and better accommodation (Waring, 1966).

With reference to Windermere she insisted:

Where has that fairyland gone?

Disappeared, thank God, under the crushing weight of the bulldozer and those former unhappy slum dwellers now live in decent Council houses - ... (Waring, 1966).

Let us pause and look at accounts of life in Sophiatown and District Six in order to compare Fugard's play with the plays dealing with these areas, while evaluating the observations of Joyce Waring.

#### 4.1.2 Junction Avenue Theatre Company: *Sophiatown* (1986)

Junction Avenue Theatre Company<sup>89</sup> and the plays they have produced have a very different history to Fugard and his plays. They were formed during a time of much greater protest in the country, where theatre was overtly used as a subversive counter-voice in the country. The group began with white students based at the University of the Witwatersrand in 1976, the year of the Soweto Protests. They worked on projects, researching and creating productions through workshops and improvisation, which they aimed initially at liberal white university audiences. Their first project was *The Fantastical History of a Useless Man*, which traced South Africa's history from 1652 to 1976. It tried to evaluate the role of a white English-speaking South African post the 1976 Soweto uprisings.

As an all-white group, they were frustrated by their limited perspective, and thus welcomed members of Workshop '71 into the Junction Avenue Theatre Company after Theatre Workshop '71 was dissolved in 1976. The newly constituted company based on a non-racial democracy began exploring many of the labour related issues involving the goldmines, of domestic workers, and unemployment. In 1982 *Marabi* was workshopped

and then produced. It presented the urban removals in Doornfontein in the 1930s and 1940s. After this, in 1985 Malcolm Purkey suggested the company look at the history of Sophiatown as a frame in which to extend their exploration of urban forced removals begun in *Marabi*. Members of the company interviewed various people, who had lived in Sophiatown. They watched films of the fifties and read back issues of *Drum* magazine. All of this research was built into the developing, workshopped play, when the group met three times a week for six months. After this Malcolm Purkey shaped the text of *Sophiatown*. The text, which emerged from this process, constitutes a creative counter-memory to the government's version on the forced removals of this area.

Most references and interviews on Sophiatown concur that it was a vibrant, creative and very violent place. For example, Father Trevor Huddleston, Anglican priest of the area writes:

I think the most important thing about Sophiatown was the tremendously vital community which had to battle for any kind of dignity, so it was very alive. Of course it was a very violent place (Stein & Jacobson, 1986:73).

Don Mattera, leader of the Vultures gang, and journalist spoke with the group at the outset of their workshopping. He said of Sophiatown:

...[O]ne of the things Verwoerd and them were bound to do was to kill Sophiatown; because Sophiatown was the antithesis of what they wanted for the country. Sophiatown had the black people – meaning Coloured, Indian, Blacks of all tribes – and the Whites living together.

So Sophiatown, comrades, then became this boiling pot, this melting pot, of all that was good, of all that was bad, of all people aspiring to become good; people like myself, murderers, killers in the street shooting. Sophiatown opened up new things to us like politics (Stein & Jacobson, 1986: 9).

Other men and women like Nadine Gordimer (novelist), Anthony Sampson (editor of *Drum* for four years, from London), Arthur Maimane (Sports Editor on *Drum*, short story writer, later News Editor for *Post*), Es'kia Mphahlele (novelist and short story writer), Phillip Stein (worked in Vanguard Bookshop in 1950s), and Kort Boy (leader of the American Gang) contributed to the interviews collected by the company as research.

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<sup>89</sup> For reference purposes I may refer to the Company as J.A.T.C.

The play *Sophiatown* is set in Mamarati's freehold house in Sophiatown in the 1950s. The living area is cramped and each character has a corner defined by his or her things. The backdrop consists of painted images from the period: newspapers, magazines, and photographs. The story of Sophiatown emerges through the interactions and stories of the various characters: Jakes is a *Drum* magazine journalist, a "BA-intellectual". He and Mingus, a member of the American Gang, are black. Mamarati is a Shebeen Queen and mother of Mingus and Lulu, who is sixteen and hates school. Princess is Mingus's lover, a good-time girl in her 20s. Charlie is "Mingus's sidekick", a coloured man obsessed with shoes. Ruth is a white woman in her 20s from Yeoville. She responds to Jakes's advert for a Jewess to join their commune as part of a research project.

The multilingual style of the play conveys the multi-cultural diversity of Sophiatown. It is vibrant, alive and challenging. Woven through the announcements and progress toward the impending forced removal are the characters' individual stories which tell of their hopes, dreams, struggles and the effects Apartheid have had on them all.

The African style 'total theatre' utilized is evidenced here in the songs, which punctuate the play. This is very much in the style of Kente's 1970s Township Musical style. It is interesting that while this is very much part of the South African post 1970s theatre tradition, it is also comparable to Brecht's use of song to distance and comment on action and situation. Purkey was a specialist on Brecht. These various influences merge and blend to create theatre that entertains, while critically commenting on socio-political issues. The songs are in Tsotsitaal and English and are usually about resistance to moving. They are very comparable to the songs in *Mother, Sing for me*. In Kenya these songs were used to tap into the popular performance traditions of the community as a means to access people who did not understand Kikuyu. They served to bond people of different communities in the audience, and communicate beyond the actual words. Similarly here the songs cross linguistic and communal barriers as these people sing nostalgically of this place where diverse peoples lived together.



The first song is 'Kofifi Sophia' and is it contextualises Sophiatown for the audience. Jakes's opening speech traces the aspects of the area: the places, people, gangs and the reason why it had to end.

Place of Freedom Square, and the Back of the Moon. Place of Can Themba's House of Truth. Place of the G-men and Father Huddleston's Mission. Place of Balansky's and the Odin Cinema. And let's never forget Kort Boy and Jazz Boy and the Manhattan Brothers and Dolly Radebe singing her heart out here in Sophiatown ...

*(The song momentarily swells.)*

The Americans, the Berliners, the Gestapo, the Vultures – they fought here and the blood ran in the streets of Sophia.

Can Themba, Nat Nakasa, Lewis Nkosi, Bloke Modisane wrote their best, here in Sophiatown. Tambo and Mandela walked here.

Luthuli stood, and a city's people walked past, here in Sophia.

...

Freehold! It was ours! Not mine exactly, but it was ours. And it was too close to the big city – that is why - for we wanted to stay. This! This is what made the Boere mad. I wanted to stay – they wanted me to go. Too much freedom, too much meeting, too much fantasy, too much easy access. White bohemians and black intellectuals - that meant trouble for the Boere's dream of a whites-only world (*Sophiatown*, 1-2).

The opening song highlights the two major problems Sophiatown posed for the South African government. The first was the issue of freehold property, which allowed blacks the right to own property. The second was easy access between races. The proximity between Johannesburg and Sophiatown meant that people from various races and educational backgrounds could interact on a personal level and thus know the rationale upon which the government was propagating Separate Development to be illogical and untrue. They could also easily meet and mobilise against such law more easily. The lists of people that lived and emerged from this community - singers, jazz artists, writers, politicians alongside the gangsters, workers - illustrates this aspect which motivated the policy of forced removals. The play both formulates and 'remembers' these issues.

One of the key sources of tension in the play is the announcements of the relocation of the Sophiatown inhabitants, and the various responses to these announcements. The announcements are used cumulatively to indicate how the tension among the inhabitants and in the play mounts as these laws are past. This provides a microcosm for the country as a whole. In the first scene Fahfee announces Father Huddleston's constitution of "a

Western Areas protest committee” (*Sophiatown*, 7). Later he announces that “Albert Luthuli has been banned. All houses to be sold to the Resettlement Board” (*Sophiatown*, 11).

As resistance to the resettlement grows, so the government steps up their demands. In scene six Fahfee announces: “They’re moving us out! Hulle sê die Native Resettlement Act of 1954 sê die hele families hier in Kofifi pola, hulle moet klerrie. Hulle sê daar’s accommodation in die new location van Meadowlands.”<sup>90</sup> And then he shows the resistance “Congress says we mustn’t move. We must resist, like in the Defiance Campaign. Congress calls for five thousand volunteers. We’ve got a plan” (*Sophiatown*, 35, 49).

The rumours become official when police serve notice on homeowners. Lulu answers the door and reads the notice:

Lulu: ‘You are hereby required in terms of the Native Resettlement Act of 1954 to vacate the premises in which you reside. The date given is February 12<sup>th</sup>. You will be offered accommodation in the new location of Meadowlands’ (*Sophiatown*, 47).

Historically, despite the resistance two thousand policemen arrived earlier than the notice warned and forcibly began moving the people out to Meadowlands. In the play Fahfee says:

They came three days early, like tricksters, conmen. They’re loading people into trucks and nobody’s doing a thing. It’s pitiful – families everywhere. They went for the leaders (*Sophiatown*, 65).

The inhabitants were unable to rouse or sufficiently organise the people of Sophiatown to resist the move and so between 1955 and 1960 the mixed population was moved, and Sophiatown became a middle-class Afrikaans area ironically renamed ‘Triomf’ (Triumph).

Jakes ... We lost and now Sophiatown is rubble. The vision of the mad Boere smashed this hope, turned it to rubble. And out of this dust, like a carefully planned joke,

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<sup>90</sup> (My translation) They say the native Resettlement Act of 1954 says that whole families here in Kofifi (Sophiatown) must move. They say that there’s accommodation in the new location in Meadowlands.

Triomf rises. What triumph is this? Triumph over music? Triumph over meeting? Triumph over the future. Sophiatown was a cancer on a pure white city, moved out at gunpoint by madmen. With its going, the last common ground is gone. The war has been declared, the battle sides are drawn. Yeoville and Meadowlands, and a wasteland inbetween (*Sophiatown*, 73).

Sophiatown had facilitated the association of people of various class and racial groups. They got to know one another as individuals with complex identities and histories. Mingus is a gangster who abuses his lover, but he is also kind and generous to Ruth. Ruth is white and Jewish, but willing to live in Sophiatown and get to know people from other races and classes. She has risked much with her parents to do this. The complexity of all their identities mocks the simplicity of the Apartheid ideology, which suggests that people can be neatly boxed and kept separate, defined into a few neat categories. Throughout the play this aspect, rather than the simple politics, is challenged. Ruth and Jakes most clearly articulate this.

Jakes: “But you’re Jewish, right?”

Ruth: So Nu? What’s Jewish? I don’t know what the hell I am. I’m Jewish on Mondays, I’m white on Tuesdays, I’m South African on Wednesdays, I’m a democrat on Thursdays, and I’m confused on all the other days. Mostly I’m just confused.

Jakes: What the hell am I? The Boere want us in separate locations, but what am I? I speak Zulu, Xhosa, Sotho, English, Afrikaans, and in moments of weakness I even speak Tsotsitaal (*Sophiatown*, 27-8).

Later Jakes asks

These native reserves that Verwoerd wants, what have they got to do with Sophiatown? Here we listen to Bach and Beethoven. We listen to great American jazz. We read great Russian novels. We are a brand-new generation (*Sophiatown*, 52-3).

This great melting-pot of difference is represented positively. In this society you could be whatever you were and contribute to the society.

However, as the tension between characters increases correspondingly with the tension in Sophiatown, especially between Mingus and Ruth. He increasingly perceives her as a representative of the white class from which she comes. When the police move in he accuses her: “it’s your fault! ... it’s your fathers and uncles and brothers doing this to us ... I’ll cut you up. I’ll kill you! I’ll kill you!” (*Sophiatown*, 65-66) This conflict removes

any possibility for people of various racial or class groups getting to know one another as individuals. The disintegration of relations between Mingus and Ruth becomes an ominous microcosm of what was to occur in South Africa. Even with the best will, relationships between people of different races became near impossible and individual people became synonymous with the ethnic group to which they were born.

Sophiatown offered the alternative to this segregation. It became a visible metaphor of what SA could have become in the 1960s had Apartheid not smashed this cosmopolitan interactive society. It was the only “freehold suburb – no fences, no superintendent” (17).

Furthermore, the government did not consider, or perhaps did not care about the social implications of the forced removals. Fahfee asks:

What am I going to do in this Meadowlands? How am I going to put bread in my mouth? What's going to happen to my business with the Chinaman, the Gong? Where's he gonna be when they move Sophia? And the Indians? And the caureds? (sic) Where's the jazz? Where's the life? Where's the situations? Where's the teachers? Where's the life? Where's the Fahfee? Where's the life? It's just dust and blood and dust! (*Sophiatown*, 36-7)

However, despite these images of community, the play does not simply sentimentalise or idealise the people or the life in Sophiatown. Mingus is cruel to his lover, and is reprehensible in his approach to women. Princess is clearly a victim, as a black woman she has few choices and is destined to be at the mercy of men. Her final chance is to ‘try for white’ by taking a white lover. Ruth has much more power and choice because she is white and educated, despite her being uninformed, uneducated, not street-wise in Sophiatown-terms. Another interesting and complex figure is Mamarati. She runs an illegal shebeen, but given the fact that Blacks were forbidden from buying liquor at that time, her operation could be seen as a form of resistance, defiance of an oppressive system. These individual abuses are a natural consequence of, and in many ways reflects, a system that sets out to subjugate and oppress people.

The issue of forced removals is not singular, but is paralleled by Verwoerd's policy of Bantu Education and other policies related to labour exploitation. Lulu and Fahfee formulate some of these issues.

Lulu: I don't want this Bantu education, Mama. It's for the gutter.

Fahfee: Verwoerd's new Bantu Education is for slaves. This is 1955. We want education for freedom. Father Huddleston says, 'Close the church schools rather than teach children rubbish.' (50)

Fahfee: Ag Mama. Freehold is just the beginning. We want decent jobs, decent education, decent food, and decent life for all (*Sophiatown*, 51).

As is the case with Boesman and Lena, it is only within a system, which does not view these people as human, that forced removals are conceivable. If one can move masses of people as cattle, it is not difficult to impose a consciously inferior education system or exploitative labour practices upon these same people.

The irony and cruelty of the situation is most poignantly seen in Charlie who is elated on hearing about the removals and cries: "I'm going to get a house!" (*Sophiatown*, 47) However, the reality is he is forced to live apart from Mingus who cares for him. He lives in a pipe and is stabbed to death and is found over the bath he found for Ruth, in the rubble of Sophiatown (*Sophiatown*, 74). Charlie is 'Coloured', but does not understand how the system works and is unable to fend for himself. He has no sense when Mingus explains the difference to him (*Sophiatown*, 69).

The ultimate indictment of Apartheid is that Jakes and Ruth cannot even think of a more personal relationship with one another:

Ruth: You won't let me reach you. You're like a brick wall. What do you want me to do?

Jakes: There's nothing you can do.

Ruth: If you opened up for a moment, anything could have been possible.

Jakes: It isn't possible, because I've decided that it isn't possible. I'm not letting some white girl put her hands around my heart when she feels like it. You want to ride me over like a bulldozer and leave me here for dust. But I'm not going to allow it. We lost whatever little chance we had.

Ruth: We never took it.

Jakes: Well, let's just say we failed. We let the Boere drive a wedge between us. Who gives a damn whether a black journalist and a white storyteller can or can't meet?

When the war comes, as it will,, it will be fought in the barren ground between us, and it will be so large as to make us invisible.

Ruth: I'm not talking about a war. I'm talking about us.

Jakes: We can't begin to talk about us – not until this war has been fought and won. (*Sophiatown*, 70).

This interaction is as awful as Lena's life being reduced to being witnessed by a dog and a dead Xhosa man. These are the very personal and practical consequences of South Africa's separate development legislation. Not only does it force people and communities apart, but it also draws battle lines between individuals who otherwise may have had lives together. No-one can escape the war, and no compromise seems possible.

Theatre here acts as a powerful commentator on the complexities of the issues, on the interactions of the individuals involved and as a commemoration, to record people, places and sacrifices. In the introduction to *Sophiatown*, the Company quote Maggie Resha, ANC supporter and former resident, on the significance of such a project. She says:

For us, who were former residents of Sophiatown, it is important that we write the story of the township, so that coming generations should not be given distorted history about the resistance of their people ... We want the younger generations to know of the sacrifices and sufferings of men, women, and children who woke up one morning to find the place looking like a place under siege (*Sophiatown*, vi).

Jakes puts this more eloquently in his last speech when he says: "Memory is a weapon. Only a long rain will clean away these tears" (*Sophiatown*, 74). And indeed, like Boesman and Lena, Sophiatown has reached back to counter the narratives justifying Sophiatown's forced removals and the establishment of the ironically and cruelly named Triomf, a white Afrikaner suburb in its place.

#### 4.1.3 David Kramer & Taliep Petersen: *District Six* (1987)

Like Sophiatown, District Six was a community that was vibrant, violent and forcibly destroyed, ostensibly to establish a white residential area. It lay at the foot of Table Mountain, near the city centre and harbour. It was a cosmopolitan area where priests, teachers, gangsters, prostitutes, fishermen, artisans, and merchants lived near one another.

They came from all over the world and different parts of South Africa and thus created a rich mix of different cultures. Like Sophiatown, this bred a consciousness that was political, rich in ideas and activities.

In 1867 Cape Town was divided into six districts and Kanaldorp officially became known as District Six. In 1901 Bubonic Plague broke out and District Six experienced its first forced removals. Thousands of African people were forced out and two thousand homes were demolished and rebuilt.

Like Sophiatown, as the city and population grew, the interest in the area by the landlords and municipality deteriorated. There was inadequate water and refuse facilities, the roads deteriorated. The government used this neglect to refer to the area as a slum, and so justify the proposed removals. In 1950 with the Group Areas Act it became illegal for people of different races to live in the same area. Thus, when District Six was declared a 'whites only' area in 1966, the mixed race inhabitants were forced to move.

Between 1966 and 1980, 60 000 people who had lived in District Six were forced to move and their homes and shops were bulldozed to the ground. The area was renamed Zonnebloem (Sunflower). Only a few buildings, churches and mosques, are left of the original suburb. Families and friends were separated according to race and moved to the Cape Flats and thus a sense of community and extended family was lost. The government added to the insult by naming the streets and blocks of flats by the old street names of District Six. So one sees Hanover Park, Tyne Court, Lavender Hill all over the Flats.

Much of this information comes from the District Six Museum, which was established as a project in 1989 to commemorate the area and honour the people who lost their homes and community in the forced removals.<sup>91</sup> On 10 December 1994 the District Museum opened with its first exhibition: "Streets – Retracing the Past". The museum is an interactive space that invites people to interact actively. The following invitation hangs on a flag in the museum:

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<sup>91</sup> Information on location and various projects and exhibitions available at: [d6museum@global.co.za](mailto:d6museum@global.co.za)

This exhibition is part of the project “District Six and beyond” in which former residents from displaced communities in the Peninsula are invited to fill gaps in the story told in the District Six Museum by bringing their memories, stories, photographs and memorabilia and marking relevant spots in the museum spaces.

More personal accounts of living in the area have also been published recently. Linda Fortune’s *The house in Tyne Street: Childhood memories of District Six* (1996) is a good example.

The play *District Six* draws heavily on Richard Rive’s novel *Buckingham Palace: District Six*. The play is in an American musical format. David Kramer and Taliep Petersen created *District Six – the Musical* in the mid-1980s. David Kramer is a Jewish man who is a cult Afrikaans musician. Taliep Petersen is a Coloured musician and writer from the Cape Flats. This combination of cultural backgrounds has produced a series of ‘Cape’ works over the years. They began with *District Six* and moved on to create *Fairyland* and the popular *Kat and the King*, which has recently received awards in Britain. These productions present diverse and popular perspectives on Cape Town and its communities. They write for the white and coloured liberal audiences of Cape Town and abroad. This has influenced both the form and the content of their musical theatre. It is interesting that although the play was written when resistance was at its height and South Africa was formally in a State of Emergency, this play is not overtly aggressive or biting as *Sophiatown* is, especially through Jakes and Mingus.

The focus in the play is much less the reports of the coming forced removals, which initially only the old blind Damaka seems to notice, than on the shared lives, loves, dreams, social interaction and relationships of the people. It is far more nostalgic than *Sophiatown*. The company opens by overtly declaring their intention to “tell you [their] story tonight”. They describe the common encounters with the Group Areas Act, what “Reserved for whites” really meant: the humiliation of being excluded from public toilets, the post office, the beach, and the bus. Ironically though, they end the stories about ‘whites only’ exclusivity with the coloured man being excused from ‘hell’, which the devil declares ‘is reserved for whites only’ (*District Six*, 3). This is about as harsh as



the play ever is in its opposition. Perhaps the musical format does not allow for the criticism a straight drama can present. What it does do, though, is show the consequences of the removals for the individuals in these communities.

In the tradition of the musical, the story focuses around an individual, Cassiem, a talented young singer. He wins a competition, and is manipulated by a Jewish businessman, who wishes to manage, control and exploit this young talent. There is the inevitable love story, between Cassiem and his childhood love, Mary. This becomes complicated when Sandy, a young white journalist comes to ‘write’ their story. Like Ruth in *Sophtown*, she is an outsider and must learn about and from this diverse community. Sandy is different from Ruth insofar as she comes to District Six with a superior sense of herself, and she has not processed her own prejudices or preconceptions. It is through this character that the play offers its most direct commentary on the results of apartheid. Even Sandy, who believes herself to be liberal and non-racial has been defined by the legislation and thinking of apartheid.

Cassiem: ... Don't you see that your attitude is all wrong. And that the way you see things will influence your pictures.

Sandy: I don't have any kind of attitude.

Cassiem: But you did call the little boy a skollie. (criminal; *District Six*, 39.)

The child to whom Cassiem refers is one of the many street children of South Africa, another aspect of the fall-out of Apartheid. This boy, who snatched Sandy's camera, is nine years old and living on the street, from dustbins to survive.

It is then that Cassiem offers to show Sandy, and the wider South African audience, “Fairyland”,<sup>92</sup> the real District Six:

Cassiem: I hope to show you  
 Things that I don't think you understand  
 Lets explore these streets  
 Where life is bittersweet  
 Maybe I can change your view  
 Prejudice and lies  
 Are words I despise

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<sup>92</sup> This was the seed for Kramer-Petersen's next successful play, *Fairyland*, starring the “Sexy Boys”.

Let the people talk to you (*District Six*, 45).

Sandy does learn, and so does the audience. The play demonstrates how normal interpersonal relationships were complicated by Apartheid in South Africa. Greed and law conspired. Goldman arranges for a gangster to stab a policeman and frame Cassiem for the stabbing. Cassiem is forced to flee. Sandy is interrogated about what the police suspect may be her “immoral” relationship with Cassiem, as it is across the colour bar. Later she writes to Cassiem who is overseas:

You opened up my eyes to your world  
Helped me to see through  
The cruelty and lies I grew up  
Clinging to  
What you have done for me  
Has made me clearly see  
The evil in this land (*District Six*, 68).

As this is a musical, the inevitable love triangle is resolved and Cassiem and Mary are reunited. Although the situation between Cassiem and Sandy is similar to that of Ruth and Jakes in *Sophiatown*, it lacks the depth and realism of their interactions and experiences where they cannot even fully trust one another. Nevertheless, both of these plays explore an important consequence of the separate development ideology, which legally prevented people loving one another because of laws limiting relationships between people of different races.

Like *Sophiatown*, *District Six* presents the community and its memories through the men and women who lived there: the flower and vegetable sellers, the barber and the men who gossip in his shop (*Sophiatown*, 63). Henry and Hester neatly overturn the stereotype of the strong abusive man and abused woman. Here it is Hester who harasses Henry to sell vegetables and beats him after he has gambled a great deal of their money. This is an interesting challenge to gender stereotypes, although it is without any real depth.

One of the most important ways the members of District Six had of expressing themselves and their community was through music and singing, which were fundamental to and respected by everyone, both young and old, in this community. One

of the most characteristic times in Cape Town is the Coon Carnival at the Second New Year (2 January). Many groups compete at Green Point, and sing and dance through the streets of Cape Town. Interestingly this was originally a form in which the slaves protested their position in the Cape, dating back to the slave festivities of the late seventeenth century (*District Six*, 54-5).<sup>93</sup> Its importance lies in the fact that by the 1960s it had become the one cultural form in which the Cape Coloured people most clearly expressed their sense of themselves and their communities. The form continues to be reshaped to express new memories and form new identities.

Old Pang formulates the consequences of the forced removals on these forms, customs, and cultural traditions. He predicts that with the forced removals these traditions will die, because they shall no longer be a community and such music and tradition depends on community:

Everything will go. We will lose these nice times. No more choir practice, no more competitions, no more picnics to Houhoek or Pniel. Say goodbye to this tradition. Goodbye to the dances in the Drill Hall. It will all disappear. Gone and forgotten like a moffie voorlooper” (gay pioneer; *District Six*, 33).

The council house will be far away from the city and the people from one another, thus the ‘happy mix’ will be lost, forgotten (*District Six*, 35, 36).

The incorporation of music in the theme serves as another reminder of what was lost in the moves and thus resists the danger of the community and its people being ‘forgotten’. The problem with this musical, though, from a syncretic point of view is the kind of music they have chosen to use. It does not really tap into the roots of the traditional music, but too often opts for facile American forms and styles, rather than truly indigenous Cape music. In this way, it sadly underlines what was lost in community and cannot easily be reclaimed. However, it also suggests that theatre may formulate memory, if only in a mythic sense, of a place and its people.

These two plays also celebrate the diversity of people who lived together as a community. Aspects of this diversity include various religious beliefs, languages, and

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<sup>93</sup> See August Staub on the social uses festival, in *SATJ* 6.1, May 1992, 25-32.

other sub-groupings within the larger society. The religious tolerance is indicated by the Muezzin in the mosque, the preacher on the corner, and the Salvation Army all calling people to worship in District Six (*District Six*, 9). In the microcosmic world of the commune of Sophiatown, Ruth introduces a discussion on religion and their individual understandings of God by explaining to her housemates about the Jewish ceremony on Friday nights (*Sophiatown*, 40-44). The interchange is characterised by extraordinary tolerance as they each explain what they understand by ‘God’ and worship. This exchange sharply contrasts to the intolerance of the Dutch Reformed Church’s theology that underpinned Apartheid.

The religious diversity in these communities is echoed in their linguistic diversity. Sophiatown and District Six were multilingual societies. The plays reflect this in the polyglot, code and language switching in both plays. The opening song of *Sophiatown* is sung in English, Afrikaans and Tsotsitaal (a hybrid dialect of urban Johannesburg), which often includes American slang picked up from gangster films. Jakes switches easily between the languages. He says: “I speak Zulu, Xhosa, Sotho, English, Afrikaans, and in moments of weakness I even speak Tsotsitaal” (*Sophiatown*, 28). His first speech signals the diversity as he gives the various names for Sophiatown: “Sophiatown, Softown, Kofifi, Kasbah, Sophia ...” (*Sophiatown*, 1). The things Ruth must learn to ‘survive’ in Sophiatown, are the local dialects and accepted ways of interaction, especially between the sexes (*Sophiatown*, 24-29). The diversity makes interaction complicated and marks outsiders. But the way the various cultures and languages have come together and created a hybrid, new society and language marks the potential and power of this community.

Although *District Six* tends to be less diverse in its linguistic referents than Sophiatown, there is extensive use of Afrikaans, particularly the dialect of Afrikaans spoken by the Coloured people of Cape Town. Often the characters miss languages, shifting from English to Afrikaans and back within a single sentence. For example Nines says that if Cassiem does not arrive at the competition: “Dan is die first prize vir my guaranteed” (Then the first prize is guaranteed mine; *District Six*, 7).

This switching of language and register suggests the real people that lived and worked there, shifting theatre away from standard English to reflect the individual people of communities. It also signals diversity and the additional complexities of communicating in a multi-cultural world,

Language may also signal a sub-culture in a community. One of the strongest sub-cultures in both District Six and Sophiatown was the world of the gangs. District Six's nightclub, Sophia's Blue Moon (*District Six*, 20) echoes Sophiatown's Back of the Moon where people met, talked, sung, and danced. In *District Six* it is also where the gangsters interact socially and where Nines and the Sexy Boys sing. Both *Sophiatown* and *District Six* trace the influence of American film on these groups. The cinemas include the British, the Avalon and the Star cinemas. Reference is made to James Bond, Tony Curtis and the cowboy film, *The Alamo* with John Wayne (*District Six*, 43, 61, 57). After seeing Richard Widmark as Styles in "Street With No Name", Mingus insists: "From now on, I plan all my robberies with a map. Nothing but the best for Mingus. I rob from the rich and sell to the poor" (*Sophiatown*, 34). The bioscope, or movie-house, is the cultural centre of these communities, and so it is fitting that the music competitions take place at the Star Bioscope (*District Six*, 6, 12, 18-22). The chorus is the Sexy Boys and Girls, whose dress, speech, behaviour, and aspirations reflect the impact American film has had on the black urban society in South Africa, especially the American *film noir* of the 1940s.<sup>94</sup>

The fascination with the gangster form is significant in the socio-political consciousness of South Africa's black youth. Although the gangsters emerged from the slums, initially these films focused on exploring the place of the individual in a new democratic urban environment where there was no longer a frontier to conquer. The socio-economic issues were completely marginalised. The central focus was the meaning of masculine power, desire and sexual allure in a politically, socially and economically oppressive urban environment. There was no real interest in social conditions or reintegrating the gangster into society. Colin McArthur argues that at least the mid-1930s "the explicit attitude of

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<sup>94</sup> See articles by Tomaselli (1991) and Marx (1996) for an extended exploration of this.

the gangster film to the criminal had been a simple one. Criminals were born not made: they are incapable of reform and can only be stopped by being destroyed” (Colin McArthur, 1972:39).

Only in 1937 did society begin to explore the social causes of crime. By the 1950s the idea of moral reform and social engagement emerged. Don Mattera, journalist and poet, leader of The Vultures, a well-known Sophiatown gang and football player for the African Morning Stars suggests “rehabilitation through politics” (1987:128). He pointed out that the film world was so central to their lives that they could all quote from various films. Sophiatown’s major gangs were named The Americans, Russians, and the Berliners. This ironically dramatised how these youths had internalised the Cold War representations from the media into their own conflicts and lives. It was only through the exposure to politics and social issues at meetings in the cinemas that many gangsters like Mattera became socio-politically conscious individuals.

The gangster genre has been appropriated in South Africa both because of its ongoing fascination with all things American, and because of the possibilities as a genre for social criticism.<sup>95</sup> One of the reasons for this is the film or play’s ambiguous relationship to the social world it presents. While bringing to the centre those marginalised, abused, and exploited within the capitalist system, these same characters aspire to the system they attack. They too want wealth, political power and sexual control. This paradoxical relationship shows how complex the systems are and how social oppression and resistance does not easily allow for simple corresponding oppositional counter-responses.

Gangsterism thus has become romanticised. It is a legitimatisation of crime. In the face of a corrupt and oppressive system that steals from the people, the gangsters steal back. Mingus says “I’m an honest gangster. I only go for the town centre – I don’t touch Sophia” (*Sophiatown*, 5, 7). In *District Six Nines*, leader of the Sexy Boys, says: “Ons is mobsters” (We are gangsters; *District Six*, 11). Later Nines and his group sing what it is

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<sup>95</sup> See Breitinger, 1994, 154-155 on the *tsotsi* hero during the Drum era and the debate regarding the validity of the rejection of the law as a valid form of resistance, as opposed to valid resistance being contained within a clear-cut framework of exclusively rejecting and resisting political legislation.

to be a gangster in District Six. They have tattoos, have been in jail, gamble, are unemployed, love to jive and sing. Their clothes and style give them their identity and characterise their belonging to the group:

Dice: We are born jollers

From our turned up collars

Down to our bright pink socks

Ougat: I got chalk stripes

On my stove pipes

Ja the gangster look's my style (*District Six*, 21).

Nines is the key to understanding the gangs. One the one hand, he is ruthless. In the employ of the corrupt Goldman, he betrays Cassiem and Sandy to the police, because under the Immorality Act they may not be dating. He then stabs the policeman, frames Cassiem for the murder, and later attempts to steal Mary. At the end he tries to stab Cassiem. Yet, on the other hand, he dies as a 'brother'. It is he who romantically defends the Seven Steps, a perceived symbol of District Six. These steps represent the community and its memory (*District Six*, 5, 65). As he dies he insists:

Nines: I know people think I'm just a gangster, a sleg skollie (rotten scoundrel), but I also have feelings. I love this place. This is my home, our home. How can they do this to us? Cassiem, verstaan jy? (do you understand?) Because if they do it to you once, they can do it again my broer. Sê vir die mense, vir die kinders, for the children. Tell them so they don't forget what happened here (*District Six*, 82).

It becomes clear that the plays support the general romanticising of these gangsters into semi-heroic legendary Robin Hood figures, rather than present them as corrupt criminals. Thus not only is counter-memory, but myth created. It is in the wake of such myth that South Africa now struggles with crime that has grown out of control and groups like PAGAD have emerged to control drugs and gangs, outside of the law.

This introduces the opposition – the police are placed against these gangsters. Yet, ironically, instead of being protectors in the community, they are depicted abusing their power. Swanepoel harasses a vendor, wanting to know why he is not wearing his regulation coat, demanding his badge and then taking five pounds of grapes without paying, threatening to “confiscate all this stuff” (*District Six*, 28-9). His perception of the

people of District Six explains his behaviour. He sees District Six as “A crime ridden slum. The worst kind of people live around here jong. Crooks, prostitutes, skollies and drug addicts” (*District Six*, 30). The corruption of the police and powerlessness of the people contextualise and relativise the thieving of Nines and his gang here, and of Mingus in *Sophtown*.

Not only are the police depicted as corrupt and abusive, but also cowards within the system. The individual is interrogated in relation to the state legislation of forced removals. When Inspector Vosloo comes to fill out forms regarding the Group Areas Act, the attitude, which informs the legislation evicting these people from their homes, is clear. He refers to the old man Damaka as ‘boy’. When Damaka explains that he cannot fill out the forms because he is blind, Vosloo replies:

Vosloo: Ag I know you people man. Always full of stories. Nobody in this whole blerrie District can give me a straight answer. If you’re so blind how do you know that I am a white man?

Damaka: By the tone of your voice (*District Six*, 70-71).

The relative positions and attitudes of these men to one another are made clear in this brief exchange. The white policeman has all the power and no respect for this aged man. Vosloo’s own sense of superiority is based on his race. This exchange highlights the role racial stereotyping and prejudices have played in dividing people and power.

When challenged about the human consequences of moving an old blind man away from all he knows to “dump him somewhere faraway”, where “everyone is a stranger and every street’s the same”, Vosloo denies personal responsibility. He insists that “it’s not me that wants this information. It’s the Board. I’m just doing my job”. Nines harshly points out that every man, even the bulldozer drivers, is each “just doing their job. The same job you’re doing” (*District Six*, 71). This interaction exposes the process and the cowardice. It also insists on individual responsibility. Every white person one encounters in the play refuses responsibility for this forced removal, but ultimately the play makes everyone in the audience examine their position in relations to these forced removals.



There were many criticisms of this play, which is structurally weak and sentimental. However, it does record memories of a dynamic, vibrant society where people were happy. The last songs insist that they not be forgotten. In this sense, despite its weaknesses, this play epitomises the joy and vibrancy of District Six. The music and dance both records and is itself a form that satirises the society.<sup>96</sup> As counter memory it refuses to allow the place or people to be forgotten, or the issues to be reduced to mere legislation. The area itself has been boycotted since the forced removals, and despite numerous attempts to get people to move in and back, the area has long since been a scar against the mountain. The boycott of the Nico Malan theatre was part of the same Cape-based protest of racial segregation and acts like the forced removals of the people of District Six in the 1960s.

These three plays suggest how a dramatic response to an actual historic event can challenge the way a historic period or event is perceived. It suggests complexities that are usually absent in official narratives. It also tells the stories of the ordinary, often marginalised people who are affected by these historic events, but do not belong to the dominant group and thus have no voice or representation. The plays also set up counter-memories to these dominant narratives, which later challenge and reclaim histories of marginalised people.<sup>97</sup>

Myth, though, in contrast to history, is often criticised for being universal, non-specific and therefore in no way engaging with the particular socio-political context in which events occur. I want to question the validity of this position.

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<sup>96</sup> Breitinger expands and explores in detail how mime and dance, and pantomime especially, are forms that arise from the distinctness of the contrast, the opposition to the 'other'. Breitinger suggests how these forms both tell stories of life and emotion, while providing political and social comment by juxtaposition (1994).

<sup>97</sup> It is interesting to note how various archives and museums are being established or made more accessible as interest in reconstructing memory and identity in South Africa grows. See for example the archives at Amanzimyama, Tongaat which houses a vast collection on the Maidstone Mill and the history of indentured Indian labourers in Natal. Also the Robben Island museum and the growing Mayibuye Centre for History and Culture in South Africa, based at the University of the Western Cape.

## 4.2 THE USE OF MYTH IN SA THEATRE: THE MESSIANIC FIGURE

Christianity has been a central factor in the history and psyche of South Africa from the arrival of the first missionaries. The Dutch communities were particularly influenced by the very Calvinist Christianity brought by individuals such as the Scottish missionary Andrew Murray, and later the British Anglican and Catholic missionaries and the German missionaries who were also very active in Southern Africa. When the Voortrekkers immigrated north in order to move beyond the control of the British in the Cape, they took these beliefs with them, and became increasingly isolated from the outside world. Francis Wilson writes “isolated with their Bibles, many of the Voortrekkers identified themselves with the people of Israel” (1971:109). He goes on to quote Mackenzie as saying:

No-one who has freely and for years mingled with these people can doubt that they have persuaded themselves by some powerful mental process that they are God’s chosen people, and that the blacks are the wicked and condemned Canaanites over whose heads the divine anger lowers continually. Accordingly in their war with the natives, the question of religion is at once brought into continual and prominent mention (1871:51, in Wilson, 1971:109).

It was this kind of thinking that later became central in justifying Apartheid.

However, the use of Christianity as an ideological tool has not been exclusive to supporters of Apartheid. Resistance movements have appropriated the religious discourse for their own purposes, particularly within a mythic frame. Just as Imbuga uses mythic dictatorial figures in a mythic context to challenge corruption, fascism and neo-colonialism in East Africa, so South African playwrights, workshop groups and artists have used various mythic figures, particularly Christ-like or Christian figures, to criticise their societies. One may ask why black South Africans have chosen a white Christian mythic figure rather than their own myths, as evidenced in post-colonial Kenyan or Nigerian drama? (Of course this is not as clear cut as all that: there are black South African writers who have used African mythic and historic figures like Dhlomo’s *The girl who killed to save*, and *Shaka, Dingane*, or *Cetshwayo*; while there are some early Nigerian writers like Duro Ladipo who used Christian stories as frames for their early

plays.) The fact is that the influence of Christianity in South Africa has been profound. Most of the African writers attended mission schools, which were not state controlled. Many of the traditional African rituals have been incorporated into the rituals and Christian frames in the plays. Then too I have chosen this to see how Afrikaans South African writers use myth subversively to criticise their socio-political frame.<sup>98</sup> Kannemeyer, in his history of Afrikaans literature, suggests that the reference to Biblical themes and characters has been diverse and extensive. Often the messianic or religious cultural referent has been used subversively, rather than in support of the status quo. For example, Kannemeyer cites examples of the use of Biblical figures in the theatrical work of Gerhard Beukes (1983:45), Chris Barnard (1983:420), and Bartho Smit (1983:430-438). These figures also appear in English writing, as we shall see.

One of the most powerful examples of how the Messianic figure has been used as a subversive political image whose power lies in its mythic resonance can be seen in the painting *The Black Christ* by Ronald Harrison which was completed in 1962.<sup>99</sup> Harrison depicts Chief Albert Luthuli, the then president of the banned African National Congress and recipient of the 1960 Nobel peace Prize, as the crucified, dying Christ and Dr. H.F. Verwoerd, Prime Minister at the time, and Mr B.J. Vorster, the then Minister of Justice, as the Roman centurions near him. The painting was banned.

I have chosen to explore the use of the messianic figure by looking at Small's *Kanna hy Kô Hystoe* (Kanna comes home), Mtwa, Ngema and Simon's *Woza Albert*, Smit's *Christine*, and Opperman's *Die Teken* (The Sign). While these plays use Messianic figures overtly, other plays, like *Gangsters* by Maponya do so more indirectly. Maponya uses a crucified figure to signify the role of the artist in his society

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<sup>98</sup> Reza de Wet does this particularly well in all of her plays. Again because I have chosen to focus on the messianic figure I do not discuss her plays here.

<sup>99</sup> The National Gallery in Cape Town bought the painting in 1988 for its SANG collection.

#### 4.2.1 Adam Small: *Kanna hy kê hystoe (Kanna comes home, 1965)*<sup>100</sup>

The messianic reference in this first play is to Moses, the Biblical liberator of the Israelites from slavery in Egypt.

Adam Small was born in the eastern Cape in 1936. He is a creative writer and academic scholar who writes primarily for educated, literary audiences in white and coloured Cape Town. His first collection of poetry was published in 1955 in the newspapers, *Naweekpos* and *Standpunte*, later he published in *Contrast* and *Kol*. His short stories appeared in *New Nation* and *Sestiger*. His poetry and short stories have focused on the conflict between men and God and between men themselves. In this work Small argues that the key to resolving all problems, even those caused by racial difference, is love. His three poetry anthologies, *Kitaar my kruis* (Guitar my cross, 1961), *Sê sjibbolet* (Say shibboleth, 1963) and *Oos wes tuis bes Distrik Ses* (East west home is best District Six, 1973) deal with the Coloured people's relationship with God and society and the problems caused by Apartheid. He uses as central motif the Biblical history of salvation from Egyptian, and references to Roman slavery. Small sees the poet's role as being to lead his nation with his guitar, so that they emerge free, singing. The 'cross' the artist bears is his art. Kannemeyer argues that Small's use of poetry and drama, in both form and content, places him within the tradition of "obsessional literature: the lamentations of the Israelite nation during their Babylonish exile, the Netherland's resistance songs of the 16 and 17<sup>th</sup> centuries, the Negro spirituals, and the protest poetry of poets like Vachel Lindsay" (1983:293).<sup>101</sup> He goes on to say that Small creates a Biblical 'klopslied' (a coon song, a Cape Coloured popular form) with his refrains, singing rhythms, mixing of languages, the transposition of the Israelite situation onto the South African situation, and the constant integration of Biblical law and imagery (Kannemeyer, 1983:293). This combination of Biblical referents and Cape Coloured popular cultural performance form results in

<sup>100</sup> Where I quote from Small's original Afrikaans text, I have translated these references into English, which I give in brackets when short, or as a footnote when longer.

<sup>101</sup> The original reference by Kannemeyer reads: "... sluit Small aan by die tradisie van die obsessieliteratuur: die klaagpsalms van die Israelitiese volk tydens die Babiloniese ballingskap, die Nederlandse strydsange (in die besonder die Geuseliedere) van die sestiende en sewentiende eeue en veral die 'Negro-spirituals' en die protespoësie van skrywers soos Vachel Lindsay."

humour, mockery, pathos, and irony which powerfully dramatises and criticises the position of these people in South African society, creating powerful counter-memory from a mythic base.

The short story “Klein Kytie” (Little Katie, 1964) and the poem “Kanna, kô hystoe” (Kanna, comes home, 1965) preceded the drama *Kanna hy kô Hystoe*. The religious frame of the play, with references to slavery and oppression are signalled in the opening scene with the song “Wáár is Moses” (where is Moses). Throughout the text he writes detailed notes on the music. He insists that only guitars be used in accompaniment. In this way Small combines the popular musical traditions of his community with the Biblical forms of the Israelites singing lamentations while in captivity.

The play opens with Jakop, a lay preacher and member of Kanna’s family, singing ‘where is Moses?’, a song which tells of the major events in Moses’ life. These include three significant acts performed by Moses. First, his leading the Israelites out of Egypt; then his breaking of the tablets upon which the ten commandments were written because the nation had built a golden calf in his absence; and finally his saving them from poisonous snakes by means of the copper snake. Each of these accounts suggests power, authority, and effortlessness in confronting situations of enormous conflict. However, the chorus undermines this image of Moses as all-powerful and in control. Moses is referred to as the “Hakkelaar”, “stamelaar”, “moordenaar” (stutterer, falterer, murderer; *Kanna*, 7). Paradoxically, despite these faults the refrain ends with the statement “maar God was in sy elke aar” (but God was in his every vein, *Kanna*, 7).

Traditionally Moses is thought of as the saviour of his people. Nevertheless, these accusations are true. Moses did stutter and falter, or hesitate. He argues with God as to his ability to challenge Pharaoh and lead the Israelites from captivity (Exodus 3:11, 13, 4:1). In Exodus 4:10 he argues that he is “not a fluent speaker, ...I am slow of mouth and slow of tongue”. Thus Aaron, his brother, is sent as spokesperson with Moses.

The third accusation is that of murder. Moses did murder an Egyptian who unfairly beat an Israelite (Exodus 2:11-15). This murder forces Moses to flee into the wilderness and become a shepherd for 40 years until he is sent back to liberate Israel. It is not common to focus on these aspects of his life. Rather, he is remembered as a brave and powerful man who defied and defeated Pharaoh, and then led more than three million men with women, children and cattle out of Egypt to the Promised Land. This opening sets the tone for Small's play. The chorus also refers to the nation as "dwars" or obstinate, recalcitrant (*Kanna*, 8). This signals that Small's approach to this Biblical history shall be neither romantic nor idealised, but rather that he intends to use this frame critically.

The opening song is the most direct reference to Moses. The rest of the story focuses on Kanna and his family. By implication the audience are invited to compare Kanna to Moses. Only Jakop later refers to the account of Moses' life in his lay sermons (*Kanna*, 33). Kanna is fostered and educated by his foster parents, as Moses was educated in his adoptive home in the courts of Pharaoh. However, unlike the original tale, Kanna's foster parents are not members of the ruling class, but are of his own humble race. They must sacrifice much to raise him as their own child. Kanna admits that he studied on Makiet's "wasgeldjies", the money she made washing people's clothes (*Kanna*, 62). Also, unlike Moses, Kanna never returns to repay his debt. Instead he remains abroad, raising his own family. He does not liberate or aid his people in any way.

As Small says in his note in the forward, the play is not chronological, the characters speak to one another across distance, years, dreams and even from the dead (*Kanna*, 5). It thus becomes a play of memory and reconstruction.<sup>102</sup> I am going to use the opening song as a frame to analyse Small's *Kanna* within the mythic messianic frame.

First, I want to compare Moses' ability to do remarkable things effortlessly to Kanna who seems incapable of reacting to simple requests for aid. From childhood his foster parents recognise that Kanna is special and so send him away to be educated, first to his Aunt

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<sup>102</sup> Structurally it is often compared to Miller's *After the fall*, another play about memory, reconstruction, guilt and survival.

Rosalyn and then 'abroad'. At the end we hear that he is an engineer. Within the context of South Africa at the time this is indeed an achievement.

The focus of the play though is the hopes pinned upon him and his failure to return and realise his community's dreams. The question: "Where is Moses?", is repeated throughout, with particular reference to Kanna's return. Just as Moses struggled to speak, so too throughout the play Kanna's friends and family repeatedly appeal to him to acknowledge them. Kanna, though, remains distant and silent. In the fourth scene his foster mother, Makiet begs: "Kanna!" he does not answer and she goes on: "Kanna, hy antwoord nie. He bly nou ver weg, ja. Ky kom nie weer trug nie." (Kanna, he doesn't answer. He lives far away now. He will not come back, *Kanna*, 24). He is silent and later simply quotes the Bible's statement that "there will always be poor among us" (*Kanna*, 25). When the family arrived in Cape Town and waved at him, he did not respond. Neither here, nor later in the play when this scene is remembered, can he explain why he does not respond.

Kanna [*Gefrustreerd, bitter*.]: Kanna het nie gewaai nie omdat ... omdat ... Sê enigiets, sê wat julle wil. Maar julle kan nie sê Kanna het nie gewaai omdat Kanna hulle nie liefgehad het nie, julle kán dit nie sê nie! (*Kanna*, 30, 62)<sup>103</sup>

The issue is never made clearer than this. Throughout Kanna mediates the stories, provoking and adding in where the characters falter in their telling. He, however, cannot explain his own hesitation and failure to return beyond the cynical references to a system that cannot change as poverty and oppression will always be with mankind. Small seems to be problematising the position and problems facing an artist: Where he may place himself in society, whether he can speak for them or only himself, how to find the words and the responsibilities these bring with them.

The third accusation, that of murder, is more complex. While Kanna never actually murders anyone, perhaps the stories of the various characters that all die accuse him of not preventing their early deaths. In their first interaction Makiet says to Kanna, "Alles

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<sup>103</sup> Kanna [*frustrated, bitter*]: Kanna did not wave because ... because.... Say anything, say what you like. But you cannot say that Kanna did not wave because he did not love you, you cannot say that!

waai hier doot, Kanna” (Everything is blown to death here, Kanna; *Kanna*, 11). The wind in Cape Town does kill much of the plant life, but here Makiet overtly introduces the notion of their deaths. She goes on to remind Kanna of her children, Diekie and Kietie, who are both dead. Her two husbands, Paans and Pang are also dead. This is a liturgy of memory as Kanna learns what happened to the characters after he left. At the end of the play we realise that this all takes place at Kanna’s foster mother, Makiet’s own funeral.

Makiet frames these stories, saying, that the dead do not answer, “Net hulle stories bly ...” (only their stories remain; *Kanna*, 12). The whole play is about hearing and seeing stories that usually remain hidden and the people silenced. The repetitions of phrases and fragments of stories build to create a collage of a moving, sad tale of a family and a community. Makiet was Kanna’s foster mother. She had two husbands, Paans and Pang. When Paans died the family was forced to move off the farm where Paans had been a worker (*Kanna*, 48). They go to the city where Makiet meets and marries Pang who has a shop. They have two children, Kietie and Diekie, and have adopted Kanna. They send Kanna to school; he boards with his Aunt Rosalyn. Later he is sent ‘abroad’ to study. Those that remain behind live in the difficult conditions of oppressive Apartheid South Africa. In Cape Town Kietie is gang raped when she is seven years old, and again as a teenager. The first rape dislocates her hip and leaves her crippled. Her uncle Jakop, a lay preacher refused to interfere in the first rape of the child, saying that unless the men could be converted to Christianity, it would be useless. However, he cannot reconcile himself to the second rape, he attempts to prevent it, fails and commits suicide (*Kanna*, 50). Kietie has a child as a result of the rape, and she goes mad. Later Kietie marries a ‘rubbish’ (vylgoed) Poena who makes her work as a prostitute to support his drinking and marijuana habits. Makiet and Diekie do nothing to prevent this because they fear Poena, and Kietie supports them financially a little (*Kanna*, 52). Kietie becomes pregnant again and her mother pleads with Poena that she can no longer work. Under the influence of marijuana Poena kills Kietie, slashing her stomach with an axe and hitting her over the head. Diekie sees this and kills Poena. Diekie is sentenced to hang for murder. Throughout the trial Kanna tries to plead extenuating circumstances with the judge, to no avail. Makiet has another heart attack and dies. Kanna then returns home for the funeral,



having missed the funerals of Pang, Jakop, Kietie and Diekie. He has avoided taking any part in any of their lives. The comparison with Moses as murderer or saviour seems to imply that Kanna bears some responsibility for the fates of his family through his silence and inaction. Again, by implication Small seems to suggest the impossibility of remaining passive or neutral, whether one shares the community's views or not.

The manner of, and his response to his homecoming underlines Kanna's strangeness. His cousins who believe that he shall not find his way home as they have been moved fetch him in a donkey-cart. The two men who had been vegetable hawkers (twee groentesmouse, twee hawkerkinners) (*Kanna*, 64) are now working in a factory and an office, respectively (*Kanna*, 67). They now all live in "councilhyse" (council houses) which all look the same (*Kanna*, 67), and barbed wire surrounds the power station where many of the community now work. Gone is the community Kanna once knew. His own position divides Kanna from his family – he is an engineer in a similar power plant to the one near their residence. He is no longer a worker, but an overseer of projects (*Kanna*, 68).

Kanna's refusal to return is framed very much within the religious frame of the play, and is mediated by the attempts of some to change the community. Jakop is a God fearing man who prays for salvation. He believed that he is the 'orikil van God' (oracle of God, *Kanna*, 33, 37), but he gets no answer and commits suicide after Kietie's second rape. This is ironic within the Biblical frame as the nation of Israel also prayed for relief, for a messiah, or saviour. Moses was the sent saviour. Here the question seems to be whether Kanna is in fact the one sent, or whether is he simply the misguided hope of his people. Kanna seems to view things differently and place himself outside not only of the society itself, but also their belief system.

An important factor in understanding Kanna's failure to return and attempt to free his people, is the perception of God in this society. Throughout the play the various characters refer to God's mercy. In the beginning Makiet says, "Die Here Sy genade is hard" (God's mercy is hard; *Kanna*, 12, 14, 35). Throughout the play the people seem to

accept suffering because of their faith in the eventual mercy and love of God. Kanna though is not a believer. He rejects their view of patient belief in and reliance on God and His mercy.

Kanna consistently refuses to return home and live with his people in their sad and humble lives. At the end even Makiet gives up hoping for his return. Commenting on the peacefulness of Makiet's death, Skoen says, "sy't even nie gevra vir Kanna ..." (she didn't even ask for Kanna; *Kanna*, 70).

Ysie: Is darem goed Kanna het hystoe gekom. Ons is darem bly Kanna is weer by die hys.

Jiena: How lank gaan Kanna bly, Kanna?

[*'n Ongemaklike stilte.*]

Kanna: Ek ... Ek kry weer môre se vliegtuig huis toe; ek moet ... môre weer huis toe! ... (*Kanna*, 70).

The 'home' that Kanna leaves we see mainly through his extended family, but Small also introduces children, other voices, the guitar players and the flower seller. Throughout the scene where the characters tell their various stories, the flower seller calls: "Carnations!/ Red carnations!/ White carnations!/ Carnations" (*Kanna*, 41, 42, 44, 46, 58). The coloured people are the flower sellers of the Cape.<sup>104</sup> Yet here, as it intrudes on Kanna's conflict between his own life and the struggles of his community, the call seems to me to echo the flower sellers at the end of Lorca's *Donna Rosita* and Williams *A Streetcar named desire*. Both Donna Rosita, as the faded rose, and Blanche as the aging *femme fatale*, are horrified when confronted by these flower sellers who are selling flowers for the dead. For them these flowers symbolise the passing of their lives and death's approach. This play traces how Kanna's life and the lives of his family have passed, and how little they know about one another. This is one of the consequences of Kanna's having left his community in order to have his own life at the expense of his community.

<sup>104</sup> Ismail Mahomed's play *Cheaper than Roses* (1999) the central image is of a Coloured man obsessed with carnations. He always wears a white carnation in his buttonhole on Sundays and his wife had to prepare a bouquet of white carnations for the altar of the church each week (58). The girl leaves the town when she is reclassified as 'white'. She finds that she belongs nowhere, especially in the 'New South Africa'. As the play progresses one sees that the carnations are symbolic of this community and its identity. Bettie's rejection at the end signals her decision to move on, but is also a value judgement: "carnations are cheaper than roses" (64).

He rejects the role of Messiah. Small seems to imply that the role may be hard, even thankless, but cannot be avoided or rejected if a talented person is to live a meaningful life. The ghosts and stories of his/her past will always be there and will haunt the individual wherever they are.

#### 4.2.2 Percy Mtwa, Mbongeni Ngema and Barney Simon: *Woza Albert* (1980)<sup>105</sup>

*Woza Albert!* was workshopped by Percy Mtwa and Mbongeni Ngema in 1979, and then polished and directed by Barney Simon in 1980. This piece was created with a mixed, liberal/struggle theatre audience as well as a black audience in mind. It premiered at the Market Theatre in Johannesburg.

Mtwa and Ngema had been involved in Gibson Kente's popular township musical theatre before *Woza Albert!* The township musical developed from the success of the American-style Jazz musical *King Kong* (1959).<sup>106</sup> However, the form and focus of this genre changed dramatically as the times changed. Gibson Kente was one of the people primarily responsible for shaping and popularising the township musical. Although he was primarily a writer of melodrama, his plays began to reflect some of the social, political and economic pressures facing the average black South African.<sup>107</sup> However, it was the next generation of writers, Maponya, Manaka, Mda, Ngema and Mtwa, who gave this theatrical form its sharp political content and thrust.

One of the most significant contributions Kente made to South African theatre was his development of the township musical as a popular travelling theatre form. In many ways it is comparable to Herbert Ogunde's and Duro Ladipo's development of the popular Yoruba Travelling Theatre groups in Nigeria, and the influence the Ghanaian Concert

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<sup>105</sup> I shall indicate quotation references to the play with the abbreviation *WA*.

<sup>106</sup> This musical launched the careers of artists like Miriam Makeba, Stephen Maloi and Ken Gampu.

<sup>107</sup> See Orkin on the banning of *Too Late* and Kente's being detained by the police while filming *How Long* during the 1976-77 Uprising, 1991:151).

Party had on these travelling theatres. To some extent all of these popular forms fused the western theatrical form, learnt in schools and churches, with the traditional popular performance tradition, where story-telling, music, song and dance are intrinsic to the total theatrical experience.<sup>108</sup> These artists moved from the European form towards a new, syncretic form through which they could explore the colonial/ Apartheid situation more critically. Mda traces how these popular travelling theatres have been used in Lesotho as Theatre for Conscientisation, where theatre is used as a forum to define and resolve community problems (Mda, 1994).

✓ *Woza Albert!*, though developed from the township musical form to become a seminal moment in South African theatre as it was one of the plays to usher in protest theatre. In 1979, while touring one of Kente's plays, members of the company, including Mbongeni Ngema and Percy Mtwa, speculated as to what would happen if Jesus were to return in the Second Coming and find himself in South Africa. Ngema, the lead singer, and Mtwa, a dancer, used the issues raised by this discussion as an idea for a play. These two performers resigned from Kente's group and went to the Transkei where a group of businessmen had promised financial support for the staging of the idea. Although the Transkei had nominal independence from the South African government, the actors were arrested after three months rehearsal and released after thirty days in solitary confinement. Upon their release they returned to Soweto where Vusi Magudulela, a businessman, paid them thirty rands a week so that they could continue rehearsals. After a year they invited a group of black and white directors to watch a run through. It is then that Barney Simon joined the production as director and the Market Theatre provided a venue and financial support to complete the project. The play was first performed in Johannesburg in 1980. It toured Europe and America and won more than twenty awards, including the Edinburgh Fringe Award in 1982.

✓ The play is significant in South Africa theatre history both in form and content. It is constructed in a recognisably African episodic mode, which is suggestive rather than

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<sup>108</sup> For Ogunde's account of the merging of his background of masquerade in the Yoruba tradition with the writing of folk opera for the church, see Adedeji, 1981. Amankulor (1993) and Etherton (1982) trace the history and influences on the Nigerian Travelling Theatre Companies.

realistic. This reduces the necessity of a specific theatrical space, elaborate props or sets. The presentation is evocative rather than realistic as the two performers present many recognisable figures of South African Apartheid society. The distinction between the real and the fictional, that which is constructed, is blurred. Breitinger points out that

... each of the individual scenes is based on an actual character, whom they interviewed, whom they studied and observed in his/her gestures, his, her speech habits, facial expression etc. They aimed at the accuracy of the documentary and paired it with that fantastic proposition of confronting township folk in their daily routine and in their township environment with Jesus (1994:141).

Breitinger uses the term “emotional documentation” to describe this method of collating actual events and transforming them into theatrical material (1994:151). This suggests the blurring of the line between history and personal experience, between the event and the ‘story’. In many ways it exemplifies how theatre may operate from a very conscious documentary position and create fictional work to interface with socio-political realities. One of the most obvious examples of this in the play is that the actors play themselves, and their communities, thus putting reality before the audience.

This blurring between the documentary (based on actual events and people) with the purely fictional is paralleled in the blurring of the tragic and comic, which at times become so intertwined that it is difficult to distinguish between them. The song, dance, and mime are integrated into the performance, often bridging scenes. The performers’ bodies and voices are instruments not only of performance, but also of music, as they improvise jazz: a double bass, saxophone, flute, drums, bongos, a trumpet etc. Linguistically the play shifts between English and Zulu, with comments and parts of songs translated into English. Accent, sentence construction, and the performer’s wearing of red clown noses signal the representation of white South Africans. All of these performative aspects work to create a vibrant dramatic presentation while simultaneously the performers become visual icons, abstractions of the actual socio-political realities that underpin this play.

The tension in the play builds through the thematic irony of the religious subject of the Second Coming of Christ to South Africa. Liberation theology impacted on South Africa

from 1976 onwards. The relationship between the black consciousness movement and the influence of theologians like Manas Buthelezi, a Lutheran theologian, Allan Boesak, and Reverend Frank Chikane was great and is well documented by Orkin (1991: 221-230).

This play adopts the position of these theologians and attacks the iniquities of Apartheid from within the religious paradigm that was used to justify the Apartheid system. At the same time, it also reflects the shortcomings of the oppressed that betrayed one another and themselves in their struggle for better living conditions and recognition. Many of these stories are forerunners of the later tales told at the Truth and Reconciliation Commission. This play attempts to initiate breaking the silences on some of the taboos, despite its also taking as particular a position as many of the 'politically correct' plays of the Performing Arts Councils of the same period. The play does convey a sense of the complex reality of life in South Africa in the 1980s.

*Woza Albert!* Offers a liberation theological argument that Christianity need not simply be a European imposition, but that it can be something that the black population in South Africa may own for itself. It argues for the appropriation and reinterpretation of the benevolent dying Christ figure into a militant figure that would challenge the dominant system, and improve the lives of the majority in South Africa.

If one looks at the Christ figure, there are three characteristics of Jesus life that are used here. Firstly, that he interacted with humble individuals sympathetically. Secondly, that he was persecuted by the rulers of his day; and thirdly, that he offered the hope of liberation to the people.

In *Woza Albert!* the coming of the Saviour, Morena, binds the episodic scenes of disparate people, places, situations and attitudes. The responses to interviews prior to his arrival gives a sense of the problems facing average South Africans and their requests of him, which are simple. They want work, sufficient food and education (*WA*, 26). The Pass system and the difficulties involved in finding work within a system that formalised job reservation are exposed. When Morena arrives, he listens carefully, asks questions, as Jesus does in the gospels. The play subtly and subversively moves the interpretation of

the arrival of Morena in South Africa from an apparently supportive to a critical and challenging position. Despite the attempts made to blind him with an exotic VIP tour, Morena challenges the implications of Apartheid (*WA*, 42-44). The Biblical call for Jesus' disciples to leave their secular work and follow him is paralleled here by Morena's call for them to burn their passes and follow him, by implication in resistance to this system (*WA*, 20, 24-5). The parallels which this play draws between the religious and revolutionary suggests how the majority can take what may be perceived as a European system of oppression and control and subvert it for their own purposes, using the very language and stories of the ruling power. In this way this play appropriates the symbol of the saviour for its own very specific political aims.

Zuluboy provides a thread of narrative through these diverse scenes. He works at the Coronation Brick Company and wishes that Morena will make from one brick a million bricks, like manna from heaven. However, later he requests that Morena not do this, but join their strike because the bricks that they slave to produce are used to build big houses for privileged whites (*WA*, 36). *Woza Albert!* His story binds many of the disparate threads, and it is he who finally stands with Morena in the graveyard at the end. Once again, the reference is Biblical, again creating parallels between the Biblical stories and contemporary South Africa. Here the reference is to the slavery of the Israelites by the Egyptians. Each day the Israelites were forced to make more bricks for Pharaoh. They called to God for a saviour, and Moses finally led them from slavery. Here Morena is the contemporary saviour. This Biblical reference simultaneously compares the rulers of South Africa (many of whom believed themselves to be God's Chosen people) with the oppressive, pagan Egyptians, and gave hope to the silenced suffering masses. Both the oppressive employee and oppressed employer would recognise this reference. Morena thus is used as a symbolic mythic figure that gives hope to the majority while challenging the powerful ruling class within their own ideological frame.

Secondly, Jesus was resisted, hunted and finally murdered by those in power in the Jewish system, with the co-operation of the Roman government. In the play the ruling class in South Africa initially welcome Morena enthusiastically, claiming his arrival in

South Africa as divine signal of approval for Apartheid (*WA*, 11). However, as he becomes more critical, their response becomes more resistant and aggressive, until they arrest him and finally murder him. The ruling class's shifting reactions to Morena's visit provide the frame for parodic dramatisations of the typical propagandist rhetoric heard on radio and television in South Africa in the 1980s. Morena is denounced as an imposter, a "communist" and an "agitator" who cannot understand Afrikaans (*WA*, 37). Later, when Morena is escaping there is the "total onslaught" speech, which is a direct reference to a key national speech taken up by P.W. Botha during the height of the struggle that culminated in the State of Emergency in the early 1980s. The horror that this kind of rhetoric and the corresponding arrests, imprisonment and deportments, which were typical of the government of the time, are relativised by the apparently ridiculous with the supernatural events that follow.

The angel Gabriel helps Morena to escape from John Vorster Square, a nightmare place of imprisonment and interrogation (*WA*, 42). Morena is rearrested and deported to Robben island, the infamous prison for political dissidents (*WA*, 45). When he again escapes by walking on water, nuclear missiles are used to shoot him down. This completely destroys Cape Town and Table Mountain (*WA*, 49). These referents to Biblical miracles highlight the obsessive and ridiculous response of the South African government, reducing them and their military bullying to farce. It challenges their professed faith in Christ, making them comparable to the Pharisees of Jesus' day, who murdered him, despite the miracles they and others saw him perform. It also parodies the media propaganda and the extent to which those in power will go to maintain their power.

One cannot ignore the deliberate comparison implied between Morena and Mandela in scene twenty-two where Mbongeni, as a prisoner, calls Morena in "Cell number six" (*WA*, 63). This was a way of getting around the legal prohibition against any public reference to Mandela. It also points to his having been the hope of salvation by many in South Africa at the time. This highlights how the play may use a symbolic or mythic figure to circumvent censorship.



This last detail introduces the third use to which the Biblical figure of Jesus is put in this play. Theologically, Jesus offers the hope of liberation from bondage to sin and death. Impressed by his miracles, many Jews had expected him to liberate them physically from the oppression of the Romans in the first century. This same expectation of liberation is transposed from the religious frame to the socio-political here. The final scene of resurrection, both of Morena, and others, becomes a metaphor for recovery. It implicitly functions on a ritualistic level as the various heroes, heroines and martyrs of the liberation movements are summoned to 'rise', beginning with the original ANC leader, Albert Luthuli, "Father of our Nation!" (51). Orkin argues that the final image of the resurrection entails "a desire for a millennium", which is seen as the moment of liberation and the desire for "the resurrection of the body of South African social order, in the spirit of the Christ in whom it believes." (1991:226) Mandela would also be included in this list of heroes summoned to lead South Africa in the future.

This use of the messianic figure powerfully attacks one of the fundamental principles underpinning South Africa, which professed to be a Christian country. Many white South Africans believed themselves to be the Chosen People of God, in terms of the Old Testament style fundamentalism of the Dutch reformed Church. This play attacks this cultural myth at its core, using the dominant hegemony's own terminology and imagery, while translating the imposed religious system into an oppositional form, useful to the majority of South Africa.

I now want to shift and compare this play to the use of the messianic figure in two Afrikaans plays, the first in the early 1970s and the later in the mid-1980s.

#### 4.2.3 Bartho Smit: *Christine* (1971)<sup>109</sup>

Bartho Smit has written a number of plays with historic and mythic references. These include *Moeder Hanna* (1959), *Don Juan onder die Boere* (Don Juan among the Farmers

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<sup>109</sup> All quotations come from the English translation by Michael Rice in Hauptfleisch/ Steadman 1983.

- 1960), *Die Verminktes* (The Maimed - 1960), *Bacchus in die Boland* (1974) and *Die Keiser* (The Emperor - 1977). *Christine* was commissioned for performance as the inaugural play for the Nico Malan Theatre, Cape Town for 16 June 1971; but was cancelled before opening night.<sup>110</sup> Smit was writing for a white, Calvinist, Nationalist audience, who in many ways felt more connected with Europe culturally than they did with Africa. He uses many of these European connections to critically question and explore the Afrikaans psyche in the Apartheid South African context.

This play illustrates both the use of myth and the confessional form in South African drama. The action centres on Paul Harmse and Christine, his wife. The Biblical referents are signalled from the outset by their names. The Biblical Paul refused to believe in Christ and persecuted his followers until miraculously he was forced to a conversion. Christine is a feminine representation of the Christ who sacrifices herself for the love of a man.

I want to read this play both in terms of the specific history, which underpins events and mental consciousness in South Africa, and in terms of broader mythic archetypes. I believe that Smit juxtaposes these two ways of looking at South Africa to one another in order to explore Christianity critically within the context of Apartheid South Africa in 1971.

Paul Harmse is an Afrikaner artist who worked in Nazi propaganda in Germany during World War II (*Christine*, 24). He explains to an invisible Judge why he has repeatedly tried to kill his wife. Christine is a Jewess whose family died during the Holocaust. Her mother committed suicide after her brother and sister was shot before her. Her father left Christine in a convent, disguised as a nun, before he was arrested. While there, she meets Paul, falls in love with him and they elope. Paul is unaware that she is Jewish. Their friend Günther, who is a S.S. officer, discovers her secret, arrests her and Christine is sent to Dachau concentration camp. After the war she repeatedly searches for and finds Paul, and he repeatedly flees from her. Finally, he sees her death as the only way he can escape

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<sup>110</sup> It was first performed on 27 March 1973.

her. The continual Biblical references, and Paul's addressing the Judge as "my Lord" extends the Judge's power beyond the obvious judicial power to imply the judgement of God. It is to this unseen presence that Paul stands trial and confesses through this play.

The play's shifts from the present to past, and at times simultaneous presentation of different events together with the repetition of various lines and scenes, moderate Paul's narrative and focalisation. The voices of the contemporary Christine, and the young Christine, and the juxtaposition of events create a surreal effect. It undermines the reliability of Paul's testimony and his reasoning. This in turn makes the audience re-evaluate the validity of his reasoning on Christianity, with love as its primary doctrine.

First I want to look at this play from a purely historical perspective and then move on to the more psychological abstract level of the play. One of the objections to the play was the comparison between the South African Apartheid system and Nazism. Within this frame Christine, as a Jewess persecuted by the Nazis, parallels the oppressed black masses of South Africa that are sacrificed to a power-hungry, white minority. Like Christine, these people are innocent, endlessly persecuted and in a way, crucified to an ideology. One of the reasons proposed for Paul's behaviour is his fear of change and his desire for stasis and timelessness. With time, the changes in South Africa were inevitable. The old system would of necessity die, and the ruling elite would loose power.

As Foucault has pointed out, power and sexuality are closely linked. With this I want to shift the focus of the reading of this play to a more psychological level. I believe Smit uses Paul and Christine as representations of the masculine and feminine principles of behaviour in society. He uses these to challenge the ideology that underpins Apartheid SA.

Once again I must return to the particular form of Christianity that underpinned much of the ideology of Apartheid. As I have mentioned before, it is a dour fundamentalist form of Calvinism. It emphasised faith, guilt, punishment and redemption through the forgiveness and sacrifice of Christ. There is none of the gentle feminine mediation

through Mary or confession, as in Catholicism. It is a masculine faith based on strict creeds, which are not negotiable.

Within South Africa, the male must provide protection and care to ensure the survival of his family. The care though is not nurturing, but has traditionally tended to be hard, aggressive and often violent. The feminine position, in contrast, is that of gentle nurturing. Acceptable roles for women traditionally have been that of mother, teacher and nurse. Often these forces have conflicted, and then women have been physically abused, raped or murdered, as in this play.<sup>111</sup>

These extreme polar roles are ironic if one thinks of Apartheid society being underpinned by Christianity, whose central creeds are love, mercy and forgiveness. In this play Christine becomes the physical embodiment of these characteristics, a feminine Christ-figure who Paul both loves and hates. He hates what he perceives as her suffocating care, her clinging to him, which he believes is killing him and his creativity. At the same time he wishes to possess and control Christine. I believe that this becomes a complex metaphoric exploration of Apartheid South Africa's relationship with Christ and Christianity. The conflict arises between the tenants Christ taught and the Dutch Reformed Church's interpretation of God as the Old Testament figure of judgement and fear, like Eugene O'Neill's God in *Desire under the Elms*, He is hard.

Smit explores the complexities of the love, hate and fears of these two characters and all they represent primarily through their responses to time and change. Paul wants to control everything. He fears age and death above all else. Christine has no fear of life or death and thus she lives, and loves.

Paul wants to hold onto his life at all costs. He attempts to arrest time in his paintings, as he most wishes to make things "eternal" (*Christine*, 30). Ironically the result is that he does not live. He describes his life as a "suspended sentence" (*Christine*, 76). The complexities of his response to time and change is dramatised in the simultaneous scene

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<sup>111</sup> See for example Bark Behr's *The Smell of Apples* or Marlene van Niekerk's *Triomf*.

between Paul and Christine as she is dying from his first murder attempt, and Paul and the young Christine who is questioning him about his painting of trees:

Christine: How long does it take - before you die?

Paul: In a certain light these branches are bare - its winter. But in another light they become covered with leaves. (*To Christine*) I don't know. Fifteen minutes, half an hour. (*To the girl.*) It's the wonder of nature. Each year the tree is reborn.

Girl: Like Christ who was crucified and rose from the dead?

Paul: Yes.

Christine: I feel - sleepy - already.

Paul: (*to Christine*) You mustn't resist. Then it's easy. (*To the girl*) That's how I want to live. To become new and young every year. Never grow old. Never remain bare (*Christine, 45*).

Ironically, as he articulates his dread of death and desire for eternity, encapsulated in the image of the trees that regenerate themselves endlessly, he tells Christine "You mustn't resist. Then it's easy". Throughout his life Paul resists age and death and so does not live at all. It is the youth and innocence of Christine, and later Magda, which attracts him to these women. He says to the young Christine: "everything you touch is eternal" (*Christine, 52*), "you have eternity in you" (*Christine, 55*). Ironically when she is afraid that she shall grow old and ugly, and he denies this possibility. However, when she returns to him later, his constant objection to her is that she is "old age and death" (*Christine, 41, 55*). He denies his own age, and will not celebrate his Birthday, he only drinks to his birth (*Christine, 49*).

In *A Streetcar Named Desire* Tennessee Williams argues that the opposite of death is desire. The fear of death is often accompanied by an accompanying lust for life, which is expressed in terms of sexuality and procreation. The SS officer Günther tells Paul and Christine that the major discovered with a Jewish wife was castrated as punishment. This challenges his identity as a man and removes the possibility of procreation. Thus both the man and his family line shall end with his death. The associative psychological response to death and sexuality is illustrated by Paul's horror at Christine when she from the concentration camps, which he associates with age and death, and his contrasting ecstasy with his young lover Magda who is pregnant with his child. He says: "Her youth gave me

back everything I had lost by then: my masculinity, my work, my future - everything” (*Christine*, 26).

But Smit does not stop at this exploration of the normal human fear of death and desire for life, which is most powerfully expressed sexually. He conflates the sexual with the spiritual with the image of the crucifixion, with its association of salvation and the hope of eternal life. Paul speaks of his first night with Christine in terms of ‘crucifixion’. Paul wants to paint Christine on a cross as his ‘eternal bride’ (*Christine*, 46, 74) and then she asks him to ‘crucify’ her, and he promises to do so “Every night. Into eternity” (*Christine*, 48, 77).

However, the sexual crucifixions become actual murder. Paul attempts to murder Christine four times. The first is by poison, then by pushing her out of the window, thirdly by inserting a needle into her arm in the hope that it will eventually reach her heart and kill her, and finally by actual crucifixion on his easel. In all of these attempts there are references to Christ. With the first attempt Christine interrupts his explanation to the young Christine on the meaning of his tree paintings which renew themselves each year, with the question: “Like Christ who was crucified and rose from the dead?” (*Christine*, 45), as she herself is dying and will ‘rise’ again. Christ too was offered drugged wine to ease the pain of his dying. The second attempt is more overt in its reference. The directions indicate that he pushes Christine from the window frame and as she slips, she “catches hold of the two open window frames and hangs crucified against the lights of the city in the background” (*Christine*, 57). Paul wants to paint her in this moment, as he finds this image of her “so beautiful ... In spite of all I’ve said to you. I’ve never loved you as much as I do now. And I can see that you love me. Your face is ablaze with love. Crucified love. Just like the painting you told me about” (*Christine*, 58).

There is a terrible desire for him to arrest her in the ultimate moment of love and sacrifice. She must be fixed static in time. It is as if her love is only acceptable if there is pain with it. His ideal seems to be “crucified love”.

The fourth attempt is the most disturbing. After a six months imprisonment for his third murder attempt, Paul is home and has completed a life-size painting of Christine, crucified (*Christine*, 61). Again he compares her to Christ in that she keeps coming back and surviving no matter what he does to her. Yet she is not a whole, perfect Christ-figure. Christine now has an artificial leg. Paul again introduces the sexual dimension when he accuses her of being a “whore” with the German and Russian soldiers. This painting depicts her hanging on a cross, with a wooden leg, a result of her fall. This Paul suggests would be a fitting theme for a Goya painting (*Christine*, 62-3). Goya painted the horrific realities of war in Europe. This image, with its particular referent being Christine, embodies an eternally suffering and broken Christ who pays more than a life for sinful mankind.

Finally, though, Paul goes further than this image by making Christine the actual physical embodiment of his painting when he knocks her out and nails her to his easel. He says to the Judge “I have now crucified the Jew who crucified my life” (*Christine*, 76). This accusation suggests that Christine’s mercy and love are punishing him. It is her, and by implication the Christ-like, forgiveness that he cannot end or escape.

Smit makes this scene even more complex by undercutting it with Christine’s entrance. The audience then realises that this last attempt is fictive. Throughout we have assumed that the action has been real. Suddenly this shifts the play into a surreal exploration of Paul’s tortured psyche, with potentially little or no reference to actual reality.

Salvation and forgiveness are tied up with guilt, especially within the Calvinist Christianity dominant in South Africa. Thus understanding the basis for Paul’s rejection of Christine’s forgiveness explains the reason for his guilt. The answer lies in Christine’s arrest and the role he played in her suffering in an inhuman system.

Paul gives three versions of Christine’s arrest. In the first one he is the victim, a man who cannot protect his wife because he is knocked out resisting Günther (*Christine*, 54-5). In the second account he is a coward who avoids conflict by encouraging her to just go and

sign some papers (*Christine*, 68). In the final account Paul is violent. He grabs Christine and accuses her of betrayal. Günther is kinder to her than Paul is. In this account the focus is on his pain, as he accuses her of betraying him by her silence (*Christine*, 71). One is not sure which account to believe. Perhaps Smit's point is that there is some truth in all accounts - that Paul is both victim and aggressor. However, this explains why he continues to flee from Christine. He says that as she stood on the street, naked and afraid with the other Jews, he knew that he could not look her in the eye again. She is the ultimate image of a victim betrayed. His guilt condemns him, and thus he wishes to be free of her. The only way he can do so is to murder her (*Christine*, 72). Perhaps here again Smit uses Paul to explore the psyche of a people who allowed an inhuman situation to go on because they could face the reality and implications of their own complicity in an inhuman system.

Love is the key to understanding Christine's role in this play. She leaves the safety of the convent because she loves Paul. She identifies love with Christ from the outset. Her favourite painting in the convent is of Christ who is dead but "if you look at His face, you can see that even in death He loved us" (*Christine*, 58). She loves Paul in the same way. No matter what he does to her, she takes his guilt upon herself and continues to believe in him and to love him. For example, after attempting to kill her with a needle Paul asks the Judge whether Christine told him about the experiments in Dachau, "so that I could help her get out of my life? Did she decide to take my sin upon herself before I committed it?" (*Christine*, 69) Christine consistently takes the guilt for Paul's actions upon herself, as a scapegoat, as Christ took the sins of mankind upon himself, thus freeing them from sin and death.

In an attempt to communicate what love means to her, Christine relates the tale of an old Russian woman who dances naked on a table for German soldiers in an attempt to save her husband. Christine says: "... she was a queen. She was the most beautiful woman I have ever seen. Because, you see - I understood: she danced for her love - which was a thousand times more worthwhile than her life..." (*Christine*, 68). This suggests that while



control and stasis are the most important things for Paul, love is the most important thing for Christine.

Another image used in relation to Christine is that of a dove which flies free (*Christine*, 44; 51). Again, this is a Christian image, the dove being the physical manifestation of God's spirit, which descended from heaven to anoint Jesus as the Christ at his baptism. The dove becomes a symbol of peace and salvation. It also represents innocence. No matter what she experiences Christine does not lose this innocence or love. In this sense 'Love covers all'.

In his sentence of Paul the Judge quotes a large section from 1 Corinthians 13 on love, ending with the final verses: "Love never ends. So faith, hope, love abide, these three; but the greatest of these is love. Therefore this court finds you guilty." (*Christine*, 72) Paul's crime is attempting to destroy this love which is eternal and indestructible. Smit ironically parallels this judgement with Paul and Christine's wedding ceremony "[b]efore Almighty God and in the presence of these Christian witnesses" Paul agrees to marry Christine "as long as [they] both shall live" (*Christine*, 73-4).

Christine represents unconditional love and forgiveness, which are seen as a means of salvation, but simultaneously they need to be possessed, potentially violently, or even destroyed by the male principles embodied at their most extreme in Paul and the Nazi movement. Paul is most happy in the two physical crucifixions of Christine, where she hangs from the window and when he nails her to his easel. He says that she has never looked so beautiful, and that he has never loved her as much as in these moments. This is a harsh indictment of a society in which power by domination is paramount. Paradoxically, on his wedding day Paul wants to take Christine home, to South Africa, where there is "room for love of all" (*Christine*, 74). This is clearly not true, as it was from this point (after World War II) in South Africa's history that Apartheid was legalised and enforced. Smit is questioning whether there is in fact room for Christine's love. The way Paul determinedly flees from Christine after the war, and finally attempts to destroy her, suggests that there is not.

The only time Christine stops loving and forgiving Paul, and “comes as close to expressing hate as she is capable” is when Paul throws her to the ground, after finding her ‘falsies’ while dancing. As she lies on the floor she begins “half-screaming, half-singing the opening song of Jenny, Macheath’s lover, from *Die Dreigroschenoper* by Brecht and Weill over the music of *La Paloma*”:

Christine: Und der Haifisch, der hat Zähne	And the shark, he has teeth and
Und die trägt er im Gesicht	You can see them in his face
Und Macheath, der hat ein Messer	And Macheath, he has a knife
Doch das Messer sieht man nicht.	But the knife one does not see

*(Christine, 69)*

This is the first and only protest Christine makes at Paul’s treatment of her. Even while being crucified she pleads rather than accuses. Her objection here is not to physical torture or pain, but to the emotional power he holds over her because of her love for him. His is an invisible, emotional knife with which he does damage to her psyche. Christine remains a victim who cannot or will not defend herself and stop this cruelty. This suggests something unhealthy about the female principle in South African society that remains passive and allows extreme brutalization, even destruction. .

In the final scene of the play Paul agrees that she has him in her safekeeping “for the rest of [his] life”, and they lie beside one another in bed. Then Bartho Smit offers two alternative endings. Both options are references to earlier sections in the play. The first reference is from Act Two when Magda leaves and Paul is reduced to an old frail man who needs a nurse to care for him. Sitting on the bedpan he says, “You are never finished with this sort of thing, Nurse. It’s life that’s passing through you. Even when I’m finished, it will still go through you” (*Christine, 41*). In the first final scene Paul asks for the pot and after sitting on it in silence for a while, says:

Paul: So this is what life is. Everything in one end and out the other. Like an earthworm. Or is life the earthworm and we pass through it? (Pause.) I wonder - if you could gather all the shit into one heap - the whole sixty years’ worth - how big would it be? As big as a house? Or a mine dump? It must be as big as a mountain. To think that your shit will be so much more than you. (Pause) I can see us all in your eternity. Everyone sitting on top of the mountain of shit that’s his life. Like the Ark on top of

Ararat. And all around - the waters: Being or nothingness? (*Pause. His face is twisted in terror*) Christine!

Christine: Paul, what's wrong?

Paul (*like the cry of someone dying*): Oh my God! Everything's pouring out of me (*Christine, 77-78*).

This ending is reminiscent of the Theatre of Absurd, which argues that no matter what we do, there is no meaning in the end. The purpose of life is unknowable and possibly 'nothingness' is what faces one at the end. Thus whether he accepts her, his history or not, makes no difference. Both 'being' and 'nothingness' are equally meaningless and frightening.

The second ending is suggested as occurring between Christine going to get the hotwater bottle and getting into bed with Paul. The Doctor (as Man) enters and tells Paul:

Man: I saw her in court. She told me to tell you she won't be coming back - and you must look after yourself.

...

Man: She said nothing else. (*Paul is completely overcome with dismay.*) What's wrong with you now? I thought this is what you've always wanted. You've been trying to escape from her all these years.

Paul: That was different.

Man: What do you mean, different?

Paul: I always knew she would find me - that she'd come back - no matter what I did. But now - she won't look for me anymore.

Man: No

Paul: And I won't know where to look for her. I don't even know how to look for someone. Where do you begin? (*Christine, 78-9*)

This refers back to where Christine refuses to leave, saying:

Christine: I won't leave you until I know that you'll come to *me*.

Paul: Me, come to *you*!?

Christine: Yes, when eventually you forgive yourself and stop running away from death (*Christine, 37*).

This ending is more positive in the sense of engaging with the issues. It acknowledges the core of Paul's fear of Christine: she represents his guilt and fear, and this acknowledgement initiates the process of forgiveness. Christine rightly says that he has to forgive himself rather than her. She is suggesting that salvation does not lie with any external Christ figure, but within oneself. In this Smit proposes that Paul and Christine represent aspects of South African society that are perhaps present within any individual simultaneously. Paul's confusion as to how to begin suggests the complexities of the process of dealing with fear, guilt, and their relationship to love of self and others and forgiveness. To me this is a more realistic and positive ending than the first alternative.

Bartho Smit's purpose with the Christ-figure in *Christine* is very different from that of Mtwa, Ngema and Simon in *Woza Albert!*. Much of the difference lies in their intended audiences and purposes. *Christine* explores how certain aspects and applications of Christianity in South Africa created a fear of change, while apparently appreciating the value and 'beauty' of the feminine principles of love and forgiveness embodied in Christine and Christ. In a society based on domination defined by racial superiority, appreciation of these principles becomes an aesthetic with no real practical application or value. Smit calls for a reevaluation of this psyche. Like *Woza Albert!* much of the power of this play lies in Bartho Smit's use of the belief in Christ, which has been fundamental to South Africa as a Christian state. He challenges the very principles upon which this society was built, and the effects this hegemonic system has had upon individuals within the society.

While Smit challenges Christianity in South Africa on socio-psychological level, Opperman attacks the way he perceives the Dutch Reformed Church to operate in society far more directly. While Smit makes the feminine persona in *Christine* the embodiment of the Christ-like, Opperman directly challenges the power base of the church through his female characters. He simultaneously exposes the vulnerable position of women in this society.

#### 4.2.4 Opperman's *Die Teken (The Sign, 1984)*<sup>112</sup>

Opperman wrote this play in the mid-1980s, a period of extreme tension as South Africa was plunged into a State of Emergency which culminated in negotiations for a transitional government and democracy in South Africa. Like Smit, Opperman is writing for the white Afrikaans, Calvinist, Nationalist audience. I find it fascinating that he chose to set this play in a small Afrikaans Calvinist Dutch Reformed community in South Africa in about the mid-1950s, when the ideologies that would grip the country were being formally formulated and implemented.

This play is a deeply disturbing exploration of fundamentalist religious practice. There are only four characters: the family head, Diederick, his wife Hendrianna, their daughter Anna-Marie, and the Dominee (minister). The play is framed by two epigraphs, by Milton and Voltaire:

Doubt is an unpleasant condition.  
Certainty is an absurd one. (Voltaire)

... my Sect thou seest, now learn too late  
How few sometimes may know, when thousands err. (Milton)

It is between these two positions that the battle in the play rages: between doubt and certainty, between the individual and the majority view represented by the community. There is no Christ-figure in the play. Anna-Marie is a fifteen-year-old girl who is a neo-Mary, a prophetic figure who precipitates the religious crisis in the play. This she does by announcing another coming of Christ in church. This embarrasses her father, who is an elder; and confuses the minister who quietly assures her that they believe in the prophecies regarding the Second Coming of Christ. She insists that it is not this prophesied coming to which she refers, but another Coming, for which there shall be a particular sign. This sign is her apparently miraculous pregnancy and the birth of a son. The crisis that ensues surrounds faith, interpretation of scripture and access to divine

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<sup>112</sup> Where I refer to Opperman's original text I have translated the references into English, which I give in brackets when short, or as a footnote when longer.

knowledge. There is also a strong critical exploration of the woman's position in this extremely patriarchal society.

Each of these characters, except Anna-Marie, presents a perspective on this society. Diederik and Hendrianna find themselves in strongly confrontational positions, with the Dominee attempting to mediate between these positions.

Diederik represents the position of the conservative patriarch, the men in power in South Africa. His first objection reflects his concern for the stability of this society and his position therein. He is less concerned about his child than with how her behaviour may reflect on his position as a respected member of the community and elder in the church. Important concepts for him are "Respek. Eerbied" (respect, honour; *Die Teken*, 33) in the church and family. He says, "As een pilaar begin verkrummel, is dit nie lank voor alles ineenstort nie" (If one pillar begins to crumble, it is not long before all collapses; *Die Teken*, 33). He cannot allow anything to challenge the apparent stability of his home or the church, which is the centre of the community.

Opperman uses this scenario to dramatise the basis of power and control in this society. The crisis exposes the hypocrisies and weaknesses of the social structure. This rigidity of a faith that has established leadership and a creed beyond question or addition gives men like Diederik great power. He is not able or willing to contemplate anything else. When Hendrianna suggests that such revelations have been made in other churches, he refuses to contemplate any alternative to what he knows. He is determined that the only explanation for Anna-Marie's behaviour is that she is demon possessed.

By contrast, the Dominee is uncertain, and unable or unwilling to take sides. Although he doubts Anna-Marie as a messenger of God, he refuses to pronounce her demonic. He acknowledges the courage such outspokenness would have required from a shy, dreamy child like Anna-Marie (*Die Teken*, 44). He finds an acceptable explanation for her extreme behaviour within their strict religious code, saying that her behaviour is a manifestation of her strong identification with Maria (*Die Teken*, 53). Yet, he is never

completely certain, he acknowledges that humans have 'partial knowledge', according to 1 Corinthians 13 (*Die Teken*, 56). He suggests that perhaps Anna-Marie's innocence is the sign, which Diederik so desperately wants (*Die Teken*, 60, 62). The Dominee challenges the motivation for Diederik's vehement opposition, questioning whether it is based on his faith, or because of the shame this pregnancy shall bring upon his family. He insists that they have to be convinced that all things are possible with God (*Die Teken*, 61). In this way the Dominee represents an ambivalent position of one in power but not entirely clear on the interpretation of the scriptures or the situation. This suggests much about the position of the many Christian religions in South Africa in the 1980s. There was much ambivalence and uncertainty in the face of the State of Emergency, growing doubts about the justification for Apartheid, even among party members and general turmoil in the country, with many taking absolute and radical positions.

The real battle rages between Diederik and Hendrianna as they wield scripture against one another through the longest first scene. The subject of their debate hinges on whether one can pronounce on the Christ or not (*Die Teken*, 35-6). Both of these characters display an impressive knowledge of the scriptures. However, the underlying sense that Anna-Marie's survival is at stake moves it from an intellectual debate to a more emotional and important humanist debate.

What emerges strongly and clearly is the inconsistency of interpretation. Hendrianna shows how both Diederik and the Dominee have used inconsistent counter-arguments to those that they use at present, in other circumstances.

Diederik: As dit waar was, sou daar tekens wees. Behoorlike tekens. Nie drome of fantasieë nie.

Hendrianna: Ons leer vir die kind dat 'n gelowige nie tekens vra nie en nou vra jy self daarvoor (*Die Teken*, 37).<sup>113</sup>

She shows the inconsistency of his teaching and actions. Faith must be enough for others, but he wants an indisputable sign when he is uncertain.

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<sup>113</sup> Diederik: If this were true, there would be signs. Proper signs. Not dreams or fantasies.

Hendrianna: We have taught our child that a believer does not ask for signs and now you are asking for signs.

Another inconsistency seems to be what these men define as the knowable or unknowable. When her sons died, the Dominee told Hendrianna that God's ways are unknown. Yet here he seems definite about what can and cannot be known. This prophecy of Anna-Marie is as incomprehensible to Hendrianna as the loss of her sons, but her husband and the Dominee are certain that it is not the 'way of God'. This implies that they believe that they can and do know His ways, which contradicts what she had been told earlier.

The key to Hendrianna's conflict is the role of the 'church'. Diederik insists that it is to keep the congregation on the right track. He defines it as a "'n gemeenskap gelowiges" (a community of believers), but she insists they are still imperfect, "sondaars" (sinners, *Die Teken*, 40). She perceives what he requires in terms of faith as blind belief. He sees it as the required scriptural childlike faith. Hendrianna cannot believe in concepts beyond God, Christ, and the Holy Spirit. The rest she sees as the requirements of a blind society ("die voorskrifte van 'n blinde gemeenskap", *Die Teken*, 40). She cannot see how or who has created the creed to which they are all required to acquiesce silently and blindly. She here formulates what she perceives as the difference between belief in God; that is personal spirituality, and organised religion. She seems to have deep faith in the former and profound mistrust in the latter.

For Hendrianna the profound difference between these two lies in the source of the doctrines of organised religion and the motivation behind them. Hendrianna argues that the creed in which she finds herself maims, it clips the wings of the spirit with "thou shalt nots". The result is a soul that cannot fly. It is crushed into a pathetic heap of guilt: "om nooit weer te vlieg nie; 'n vermorselde siel; 'n patetiese hopie skuld" (never to fly again; a crushed soul, a pathetic heap of guilt, *Die Teken*, 41). The reality of such a "pathetic heap of guilt" is dramatised in Hendrianna when she feels she has to fight for her child, despite her uncertainty. Yet, at the same time, to challenge her husband is "to deny [her] responsibility as a woman" and the result is cyclically, "guilt". This, she argues, is the ultimate "power of the church".



Hendrianna: Omdat ek nie seker was nie. Ek is nog steeds nie seker nie. Een deel van my sê ek is reg, en 'n ander deel sê ek is verkeerd, dat ek my plig as vrou verwaarloos. En dan die skuld. Die mag van die kerk.

Diederik: Maak vrede met jou God en sy wil, my vrou. Bid vir leiding (*Die Teken*, 39-40).<sup>114</sup>

This crisis frames not only the issues surrounding a faith or religion, but also questions the position of women in a strongly patriarchal society. Diederik's response to her challenge of his power to silence even the Holy Spirit is to accuse her of being possessed too. This is a standard response to women of many societies who break silence and challenge the dominant male position. Any deviation must be demon inspired. This logic then justifies the harsh treatment and silencing of such questioners. She responds:

Hendrianna: Nee, nie besete nie, Diederik, net moeg. Moeg van stilte. Vir nooit teëpraat nie. Vir altyd saamstem, al stem ek nie saam nie. Moeg vir vrou-wees. Dis al. Nie besete nie (*Die Teken*, 39).<sup>115</sup>

In her long monologue with Anna-Marie, Hendrianna explores how she has adapted so much to her husband's will and desires that she has ceased to be an individual herself. The consequence of such a system is that soon no more questions are asked, and the woman reconciles herself to the 'raw place of dissatisfaction' which screams out as part of one's lot, for one has been taught to do so from childhood.

'n Mens lewe jare lank met 'n ander saam, jy leer hulle so goed ken; totdat jy op 'n dag besef dat die een mens wat jy nooit leer ken het nie, jouself is. Jy lewe voort in 'n proses van iemand-anders-leer-ken, jy lewe vir iemand anders, omdat jy van kleins af geleer is dat dít is hoe dit moet wees. Geen vrae. Daardie rou plekkie van ontevredenheid wat aanhoudend om aandag skreeu, aanvaar jy maar as deel van jou lot, as iets wat verdra moet word (*Die Teken*, 49).<sup>116</sup>

<sup>114</sup> Hendrianna: because I was not sure. I am still not sure. One part of me says I am right, another part that I am wrong, that I am neglecting my duty as a wife. And then the guilt. The power of the church.

Diederik: Make peace with God and his will, my wife. Pray for guidance.

<sup>115</sup> Hendrianna: No, not possessed, Diederik, only tired. Tired of silence. Of never speaking back. Of always agreeing, even when I do not agree. Tired of being a woman. That's all. Not possession.

<sup>116</sup> A person lives for years with someone else, you learn to know them so well, until one day you realise that the one person you never got to know was yourself. You go on in a process of getting-to-know-someone-else, you live for someone else because you were taught from childhood that that is how it must be. No questions. That raw place of dissatisfaction that continually screams for attention, you accept as part of your lot, as something that must be endured.

Not only has Hendrianna had to accept silence and personal effacement, but the inexplicable loss of two little boys. Again, a religious platitude was all she had to fill these gaps, the comfort that ‘God’s ways are unknown to man’. However, now in the face of her one living child’s fate, Hendrianna will challenge the power base of this society. When the Dominee insists that her choice is between her child and the Bible, between being Christian or not, she refuses to accept that God could be so limited, and reminds the Dominee that God’s ways are not known to man. She refuses to be intimidated.

Hendrianna’s strength lies in her understanding of what is happening. She tells Anna-Marie that her father is not angry with her, but with the uncertainty: “hy’s kwaad vir die onsekerheid, vir die vrees wat onsekerheid bring. ... Die mens vernietig eerder as verander” (he’s angry at the uncertainty, at the fear that uncertainty brings ... Humans destroy rather than change, *Die Teken*, 50) This last statement, together with the later comment on the death of Christ is an incredible indictment of mankind.

Hendrianna: ... Ek verstaan nou vir die eerste keer in ‘n leeftyd van Christen-wees waarom hulle Jesus gekruisig het. Dit is nie die godsdiens wat ‘n lewe eis nie, dis die mens. (*Die Teken*, 53)<sup>117</sup>

Here she suggests that man kills not necessarily as part of a religious obligation, but for stability, to maintain power. Religion is then used as the justification for the murder of anyone who challenges this power.

The Dominee asks Hendrik whether he is prepared to sacrifice his child on the altar of his faith (*Die Teken*, 59). This is precisely what he does, he destroys the son that is born, which he condemns as “The Antichrist” (*Die Teken*, 63), and he also loses his daughter who dies thereafter. Diederik is left alone, praying the Lord’s prayer.

The power of this play lies in the shocking effect of the absolutely unnegotiable position of Diederik. Yet he suffers, questions and uses the Bible as his defence and basis for choosing his position and losing his wife, child and grandchild. It is this same fervour and

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<sup>117</sup> Now for the first time in my life of being a Christian I understand why Jesus was crucified. It’s not religion that demands a life, it’s people.

interpretation of a faith that created a system that not only oppressed women and children, but also supported the oppression of the majority of South Africa. Although this is never directly addressed in the play, the implication of the unbending subscription to a creed that creates such pain is ever present, particularly when one remembers that this play was written in the mid-1980s when South Africa was politically most challenged and unstable. This play has found a mythic frame to explore one of the fundamental ideologies that underpinned and sustained Apartheid. In this context the exploration of Diederik's unbending resolution and the lengths he will go to maintain the status quo is a shocking indictment of the social and political system in South Africa at the time this play was written. It also conveys the pain and confusion of the individuals in the society at the time.

Like *Christine*, it also relates on a more abstract level to the male and female principles of being. It moves into the nebulous space between the certain and uncertain, knowing and not knowing, of nurturing or destroying, of adapting or dying.

This section has suggested how a mythic figure can be used to critically assess and explore the state and psyche of a nation. It suggests how all the playwrights have chosen the messianic figure because it so fundamentally underpinned the hegemony of Apartheid South Africa. However, it suggests counter-narratives, counter-voices that challenge the centre from within the religious frame. In many ways the use of the mythic frame makes these oppositional voices and the complexities of the situation much clearer, both psychologically and spiritually, than a direct attack or even historic narrative may do.

### 4.3 CONCLUSION - CONFESSIONAL PLAYS

The last two plays are particularly good examples of the use of the confessional as a form in South African drama. In *Kanna hy kô hystoe* and *Woza Albert!* the story of the individual provides the frame for the stories of the community to which the individual belongs. In *Christine* Paul speaks directly to an invisible Judge who may be either a

secular law enforcer or God. In *Die Teken* Hendrianna formulates her anger at being silenced most openly to Anna-Marie, who does not judge her or pronounce on her decisions or actions. The situation itself forces her into challenging the patriarchal system that oppresses her.

The history plays I have chosen also tell the stories of individuals who experience forced removals, rather than the story of the phenomenon itself. The human consequences rather than the event is thus highlighted.

Although personal suffering was often subordinated to the project of mass liberation, the decades of resistance theatre have still told the stories of the individual. Fugard and J.M. Coetzee particularly have looked at presentations of silence and testimony in their works. One of the main foci of Fugard's plays is that of silence, confession, and testimony.<sup>118</sup> Lena in *Boesman and Lena* overtly voices the importance of 'bearing witness' to her life, her story. *Master Harold and the Boys* (1982) is Fugard's own confessional, and *Playland* (1992) is considered one of the first plays belonging to what Mda terms the Theatre of Reconciliation, where an average white man seeks to confess and gain absolution from a black security man at a fun-fair (Mda, 1996:214). Fugard conceptualised South Africa as a Playland in which "the whites are trapped in the Happiness Machine" in 1966 (*Notebooks*, 1983:145). *Valley Song* tells the stories of young South African from various racial backgrounds.

The anthology of plays about black South African women edited by Kathy Perkins (1998) emphasises how important personal stories have become. One of the plays in this collection is Gcina Mhlope's collaborative play *Have you seen Zandile?*. It tells the story of a young Zulu girl and her relationship with her mother and grandmother. The whole collection looks at how women and their voices, their stories have been marginalised or silenced.

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<sup>118</sup> See Walder, 1992, 1997, 1999 and Hauptfleisch, 1997, section III: the playwright as witness.

These fictional confessional stories of individuals met the history of the nation in the national theatre of healing in South Africa's Truth and Reconciliation Commission.<sup>119</sup> From 1996 - 1998 South Africa heard individual testimony of grief and loss through the Truth and Reconciliation commission. It has been largely responsible for the restructuring of a national memory and provided some sort of forum for mourning. Antje Krog's *Country of my Skull* (1998), relates much of the history and many of the stories that emerged from the Truth and Reconciliation Commission. She formulates why this has been an important aspect of reclaiming South Africa's past:

If its (the commission's) interest is linked only to amnesty and compensation, then it will have chosen not truth, but justice. If it sees truth as the widest possible compilation of people's perceptions, stories, myths and experiences, it will have chosen to restore memory and foster a new humanity, and perhaps that is justice in its deepest sense (1998:16).

The relation between this process and theatre (history) is made clearer when later Krog says: "Truth does not bring back the dead, but releases them from silence. ... Identity is memory" (1998:24). And one of the most profound forums for breaking these silences is in theatre. As Jakes argues at the end of *Sophiatown*, theatre is powerful and challenging because through theatre and the stories which they tell, events and people are remembered and "[m]emory is a weapon".<sup>120</sup> A powerful part of this weaponry is theatre as counter-memory.

A number of plays relating to the Truth and Reconciliation Commission have appeared since 1996, Paul Herzberg's *The Dead Wait*, the Khulumani Support Group's *The Story I'm about to Tell* and The Handspring Puppet Company's *Ubu and the Truth Commission*. These plays have not uncritically supported the TRC, but challenged both the processes and outcomes of the program. However, despite the negative criticisms and

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<sup>119</sup> A complete transcription of the hearings are available in seven volumes, and extracts from the final report were also published in five supplements by seven newspapers and the Institute for democracy in South Africa.

<sup>120</sup> Much research has been done on the significance of the TRC in psychological and sociological terms. See Brian Currin, director of Lawyers for Human Rights (1994), the clinical director of the Trauma Centre for Victims of Torture in Cape Town, Bea Abrahams (1994:20-21), Alex Boraine (1995), the research of Danieli (1992), Miller (1991); Scott & Stradling, (1993), Coetzee (1994), and Hamber (1995). Mamphele Ramphela uses the metaphor of "incision and cleansing" an abscess in order to heal (1995:34). See photo essay and text, Jillian Edelstein, 1999.

reservations people have had about the TRC,<sup>121</sup> much of which is valid and needs to be seriously considered, it has extended the formal breaking of the silences begun earlier in theatre, so that South Africa could hear the voices of its people. The histories and myths have been challenged. At least some people have been forced to face their actions and take the consequences for them.

I am not sure how long this process of reflection shall take, or how many TRC plays shall emerge in the next few years, or even what happens after that. But theatre has provided a clear counter-memory to history and used myth to challenge dominant narratives, even if outside a specific sociological or historical context. Largely because of literature, South Africa's history is not a blank, and more and more stories *are* being told.

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<sup>121</sup> See for example the complexities as outlined in Krog (1998), the review of her book by Christopher Hope (1999), and the article "To forgive and not forget" by Andre O'Hagan (1998). Much was also written in the international press, assessing the process and how effective the commission has been. See Anthea Jeffrey's *The Truth about the Truth Commission* (1999) regarding critical analyses of the process.

## Conclusion:

### Breaking the silences, writing alternate histories

Throughout the analysis of these various plays and various contexts, I have aimed to explore the way in which history and myth have been used to comment on contemporary aspects of different societies by playwrights. I also sought to determine the extent to which theatre sets up a counter-memory to history, and to what extent it paralleled the post-colonial historians' aim to reclaim history and identity. Of course there can be no single answer to these questions, as they depend on each playwright and his or her particular context. I think it is fair to say that at times playwrights have both supported the reclamation of history and challenged and subverted these histories. One of the most important things I have discovered in this study of a selection of plays in these three countries, is that theatre certainly seems to provide the nomadic, plurality of histories that Said calls for in *Culture and Imperialism* (1994:xv).

The Kenyan plays in particular illustrate how an historical frame may be used to reclaim an historical figure and period. Both Watene and Ngugi and Mugo's plays about Dedan Kimathi challenge colonial versions of the Mau Mau conflict. They also indirectly criticise the post-colonial government's failure to implement the objectives Kenya set herself in her fight for independence. This is particularly pointed with regard to the issues of land reclamation and economic corruption. Hussein's play *Kinjeketile* provides an example of how an historic figure may be used to explore contemporary issues as well as support a nationalist movement. In the context of a growing Tanzanian nationalism, Hussein reminds the nation of a hero that help national unity and solidarity above all else, including his life, while at the same time warning of some of the dangers and complexities that could be detrimental to this movement. The play also demonstrates how thin the line between history and legend may be.

In contrast to Watene and Ngugi *et al*, who use recognisable historic incidents or figures to comment on and evaluate contemporary Kenya, Francis Imbuga has created a mythic

context and characters for many of his plays. This is true of both *Betrayal in the city* and *Man of Kafira*. This mythic setting allows Imbuga the safety of distance to explore issues of neo-colonial corruption in Kenya and wider areas in Africa critically, without the same risk of incurring the wrath of the government. Imbuga is particularly interesting as a playwright because he overtly addresses the role of art in the struggle against corruption and oppression in Africa, as well as effectively it can be used as a tool for change.

Like the Kenyan plays, the early post-colonial plays in Nigeria do reclaim histories that perhaps have been forgotten. The Nigerian playwrights also remind their audiences of past heroes or heroines. However, rather than the heroes of resistance movements, they seem to focus on various rulers of nineteenth century Nigeria who face civic conflict. This is significant because they were written just prior to or during the Biafran conflict (1967-1970) in post-colonial Nigeria. The historic play thus comments on the civil war in the contemporary context. Ijimere, Rotimi, Sofola and Onwueme challenge the rigidity of tradition, while arguing for the need to maintain some sense of the past in negotiating a future. Nevertheless, these plays are still strongly focused on the ruler, the Kabiyesi, without interrogating the assumptions that underpin these older more feudal systems of rulership.

Soyinka's work, while falling into the group of those dealing with the power of the elite, is more complex than these earlier plays. Soyinka combines the sociological and political with the metaphysical in his conception of the uses of theatre. This is particularly evident in the way he defines the relationship of history and myth in African drama. In *A Dance of the Forests*, Soyinka looks at how ritual and history meet in order for a people, as individuals and a society, to face the truths of a past and choose a future. However, at the same time that he asks for the critical engagement with history, he also calls for a mystic engagement with ritual and the entry into the 'fourth stage' of being, of being unmade in order to be remade. In some ways, perhaps, this signals how complex the reclamation of the past and different aspects of a community can be. It also shows how this communal heritage can be remade into a powerful and challenging new form in theatre. In *Death and the King's Horseman*, Soyinka engages critically with the legacies of colonialism



and suggests how history may be used to understand the present, and how it should be used with a sense of its power for the future. Once again, though, the emphasis on Elesin holding the nation's future in his hands is disturbing. I think this play can only be seen as progressive insofar as one accepts the girl with the unborn child as being the real future of this society.

It is with the work of later playwrights like Osofisan that one sees how the use of history or myth tells us more about the context of the writer than it does about the past. His use of history is complex. He argues that history is only useful insofar as it may be subverted to challenge the past dialectically and so change the present and future of a society. He shifts the power to make decisions for and change a community into the hands of the ordinary individual in society. He also challenges the clear boundaries of class, and suggests that the individual can become conscientised and make a personal choice for change, no matter what their historic or traditional position may be. For Osofisan history must be negotiated dialectically, dynamically, for change. In this sense he is much closer to Ngugi than he is to Soyinka or the earlier Nigerian playwrights. However, he uses stereotypes far less and addresses neo-colonial issues in more complex and subtle ways than Ngugi does.

It is important to note that many of the Nigerian plays discussed here, as well as the Kenyan (with the exception perhaps of some of Ngugi's work), are literary rather than popular plays, which were written or created in English. However, as Kole Omotoso has pointed out, it is important to indicate that there was a strong relationship between these plays and the popular travelling theatre companies and translations of these plays into African languages for performance. Examples of such work include Yoruba playwrights like Akin Isola, Adebayo Faleti, Baba Sala, Dejo Okediji, Adegoke, for example. Also, Soyinka's *Death and the King's Horseman* has been translated and performed in Yoruba.

The South African plays are vastly different in theme and style to those of Kenya and Nigeria. This is not surprising when one remembers that while South Africa was no

longer a European colony in the period examined, but an African industrial military giant, it was also not a democracy.

Very early in her theatre history, South African artists recognised that history records more than events, it also narrates stories. Every story assumes and communicates a particular understanding of, belief about or construction of the world. Because the formal histories being taught during Apartheid were so underpinned by the dominant apartheid ideology, the artists needed to access and challenge these, to set up and articulate counter-memories of the people. Thus, for example, the Junction Avenue Theatre Company, who were very consciously involved in this process, refer to the need to “develop a People’s History” (1995:12). During the Apartheid era the theatre was a means to both challenge the dominant centre, and to keep alive the stories of marginalised communities and people. Thus the ‘stories’ of the individuals who experienced forced removals are examples of how an aspect of apartheid was used as a means of recording stories and protesting a system, of establishing multiple communal counter-memories. Good examples of this are *Boesman and Lena*, *Sophiatown* and *District Six*, plays that record the experiences of individuals and communities who experienced forced removal in South Africa.

Unlike Kenya and Nigeria who could draw on the past as a reasonably neutral frame for the present, South African artists often used histories that were still subversive and controversial. Thus the historic referent did not provide the same distance that, using a colonial frame to explore the neo-colonial context, Ngugi and the Kamiriithu Community Group achieves in *Mother, Sing for me*. Until 1990, and perhaps even later, the use of history in South African theatre was far more confrontational than it was in the immediate post-colonial Kenyan or Nigerian context. In fact, much of the post 1970s theatre in South Africa was overtly oriented towards protest against and the conscientisation of those in power.

As in Nigeria, the South African use of the mythic is still very closely bound to the historic. In the use of the messianic figure, for instance, it is significant to note how an

icon central to the ideological base of apartheid was appropriated to challenge the underpinning of apartheid ideology, with very specific referents to contemporary historic figures. For example, *Woza Albert!* includes a list of people whom the playwrights want commemorated as martyrs fighting against apartheid. In this way this play both challenges the system and commemorates the past, in the way formal history does, so creating a counter-memory, a Peoples' history. At the same time as these plays were subversive, they also offered hope to the masses that there would be liberation and change.

As in the case of Kenya and Nigeria, I have concentrated on published plays. The fact is that in South Africa much of the popular theatre was not recorded or even known beyond the immediate community in which it is created and performed, although it is also true that the workshop process has grown in South Africa since the 1970s, and has tended to narrow the gap between so-called literary and popular plays. However, a great deal of work still needs to be done, both methodologically and in terms of data collation, about non-literary oral performances in all of these countries. This would allow us to explore these issues more completely.

Another interesting factor that has influenced theatre in South Africa has been the extent to which reactions to or against Apartheid have created a particular focus in South African theatre up to the 1990s. However, it seems that in the post-apartheid era there seems to be a growing pluralisation of focus in South Africa (see commentaries of the Grahamstown Festival of 1999 in the *Mail & Guardian*, July 9-15 1999). In many ways this is healthy insofar as there are more and diverse stories being told. This pluralisation of focus is an interesting area for future research in theatre in South Africa as the country and its people grapple with the past as Kenya and Nigeria have done since 1960.

Finally, though, I want to argue that a further and important study would be a detailed analysis of South Africa's histories, both the past and those replacing them in the present, to evaluate how we have seen ourselves and been seen. Also, how South Africa is redefining itself for the future. Again, it is important that these histories be placed against

the counter-memories provided by the plays. I believe that the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, and the plays created in response to this Commission, provide a beginning to this extensive process. The commission has provoked powerful but widely divergent responses which I refer to in chapter four.

The geographies of segregation have been in place for a long time in South Africa and will require time to be redefined and eliminated. Many people in the country have been separated physically from one another by colonialist and Apartheid policies (see for example the legislation which created segregation by the Group Areas Act and the Immorality Act). Also, in terms of theatre South Africans have been separated and the majority had limited access to formal theatre spaces. This limited their sharing their memories in theatre. In a sense this is why the Truth and Reconciliation Commission has been so powerful. It has challenged what we perceive as forums for narration and confession. Traditionally these have been the law court, the church and the theatre. Each of these forums has had very clear rules, conventions and functions. The court hears the evidence, and then judges and passes sentence, based on constitutional statutes. The church is a place of confession and reconciliation with God and fellow man. The theatre seems to be the most open and public forum. It functions to make public what is private, it tells the unspeakable story in a safe space. The Truth and Reconciliation Commission has taken these three forums and amalgamated them into one large space consisting of law court, confessional and a national theatre for healing. It has extended the notion of bearing witness to its ultimate potential. It has destroyed the notion of reserved voices in specific places telling stories according to specific rules, although this forum too has created its rules and frames, particularly that of Christianity. There are people who have had reservations about the Commission on the basis that it could potentially provide a frame for witch-hunts. It has also been accused of skewing the national picture of history by foregrounding Nationalist atrocities and backgrounding stories of resistance fighters as perpetrators of violence (see Jeffrey, 1999, for a detailed analysis of the commission and its achievements). However the process is perceived, individual and diverse stories have been told in all corners of the land in various languages and forms of performance. It has produced plural, nomadic histories. It has not set out to address the past in the sense of

justice or recompense, but by utilizing subjective stories it seeks to acknowledge alternate truths. Everyone in the country has been invited to speak and hear these stories. This is another area that needs expanded research and analysis in terms of the effect that it has had on defining the emergent nation's sense of itself, its past and its future. One may also ask how this will impact on how theatre develops in South Africa?

In this thesis I have argued that one of the most important contributions that theatre has made in South Africa particularly, but also in Kenya and Nigeria, has been to provide the counter-memories to the dominant histories of the past. Largely because of these counter-memories, history is not a blank, and more and more stories *are* being rediscovered and told.

Moving this debate back to the wider perspective of Africa, I want to refer to Osofisan who argues that silences, national and personal amnesia, are general, and not limited to a specific country. Thus he calls for the consideration and use of history in drama and literature “not just as a static, nostalgic monument, but rather, as a dynamic process, hybrid and sometimes, even self-contradicting” (1997:11). We cannot lock ourselves into any one position, but as artists and critics, we need to adapt ourselves to the circumstances, keeping ever before ourselves the need for a counter-memory, and nomadic, plural histories that need not be consistent.

Many of these histories are not comfortable. On the contrary, they are disturbing, turbulent and violent. Thus I find myself, echoing Chinua Achebe's question from *Anthills of the Savannah*, a novel that looks at post-colonial African corruption and political instability: “What must a people do to appease an embittered history?”

Achebe provides his answer to this question in one of the final moments of the novel, where he insists that peace of sorts comes with facing truth, and there are various truths imbedded in individual and communal stories, which are told in theatre. When Beatrice Okoh (friend of Chris Oriko and Ikem Osodi, who challenge the corrupt system) is told of how Chris died at the end, she says:

Truth is beauty, isn't it? It must be, you know, to make someone dying in that pain, to make him ... smile. He sees it and it is - how can I say it? - It is unbearable, yes, unbearably, beautiful (1987:233).

The artist's role, then, is to shape memory so that a people can see it, speak it, tell the stories and see the stories and characters of their own history in their multiple and complex contexts. The truths of these people and their histories lie in the collage of the stories and their multiple telling. The truth is complex, sometimes beautiful and often unbearable. If these stories are told the individual and society has alternatives with which he or she can evaluate his or her past and so transform, grow and change. Thus each person need not be irresistibly propelled into the future backwards, while the pile of debris from the past grows skyward, like Benjamin's angel of history. Rather we can move more confidently into the future, facing it with a sense of the past and a sense of how our memories and identities have been and are constructed for an informed future.

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This copy from Jay Winter, 1995:226.

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