

POLITICO-PHILOSOPHICAL REFLECTIONS ON DYSTOPIA IN THE 21ST CENTURY AFRICA: THE SIGNIFICANCE OF WOLE SOYINKA'S *A DANCE OF THE FORESTS*

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ABSTRACT Studies by many literary and theatre scholars have demonstrated the relevance of Wole Soyinka's plays to Africa's sociopolitical realities. Nonetheless, sufficient critical attention has not been given to the relevance of Soyinka's *A Dance of the Forests* (1973a) to the current sociopolitical situation in Africa. This study analyzes various themes of dystopia in Soyinka's *A Dance of the Forests* and shows their relevance to the troubled condition of life in contemporary Africa. The study is premised on the idea that the significance of literary works, especially in Africa, goes beyond the period in which they are produced. Using postcolonial insights of Frantz Fanon and Homi Bhabha as a theoretical paradigm, the study contends that, although *A Dance of the Forests* is set against the background of Nigerian independence in 1960, the play's representations of crises of governance are relevant to the socio-political upheavals in the 21st century Africa. While the play acknowledges the Western colonial factor, it demonstrates that political tyranny, social injustice, dehumanization, and other indices of dystopia prevalent in the continent predate as well as transcend Western colonialism. It shows that the state of dystopia in Africa has a link with the long-established culture of tyranny in the continent. The study shows that Soyinka's *A Dance of the Forests* reveals that various African rulers (before and during colonialism, and after independence), together with their collaborators, within and outside the continent, support and implement dystopian policies which undermine the collective happiness of the ordinary people. By demonstrating that diverse elements of dystopia in Africa are not only generated by external factors but also deeply rooted in some aspects of Africa's precolonial and post-independence leadership cultures, the playwright summons both African leaders and the led for critical self-examinations. The paper concludes that, rather than solutions from outsiders, Africans themselves should address the pervasive corruption and tyranny assailing their continent, and institute justice and equity in order to resolve its dystopian condition.

KEYWORDS: Dystopia; Politico-Philosophical reflections; Precolonial Africa; The 21st century Africa; Wole Soyinka.

INTRODUCTION

Despite the fact that many countries in Africa are endowed with abundant human and material resources, socio-political conditions in the continent reveal a disordered state of life. Poverty, human rights violation, and repressive governments, among others, are features of many parts of Africa. Ayittey (2005: 2) notes that conditions of life in Africa "have deteriorated alarmingly, which should not have been the case given the continent's immense development potential and untapped mineral wealth". Ayittey observes that,

“as an old continent, it (Africa) is the source of strategic minerals, such as tantalite, vanadium, palladium, uranium, and chromium. It has the bulk of the world’s gold, cobalt, diamonds, and manganese” (Ayittey 2005: 2). Moyo (2009: 14) observes that “there are, sadly, common ties that bind sub-Saharan African countries together. Well-publicised are the degree of poverty, the extent of corruption, the incidence of disease, the dearth of infrastructure, the erratic (but mainly poor) economic showing, political instability and the historical propensity for violent unrest and even civil war”. Moyo asserts that “with over half of the 700 million Africans living on less than a dollar a day, sub-Sahara Africa has the highest proportion of poor people in the world—some 50 percent of the world’s poor” (2009: 14). She explains further that “between 1981 and 2002, the number of people in the living in poverty nearly doubled, leaving the average African poorer [...] than just two decades ago” (Moyo 2009: 14). Similarly, Abbink (2005: 1) explains that “the exponential population increase and the fierce competition for resources within the contexts of malfunctioning or failing states have led to a relative decline in the well-being and social advancement of young people in Africa”. Abbink remarks that the youth in Africa “are growing up in conditions of mass unemployment and are facing exclusion, health problems, crisis within the family due to poverty and the AIDS pandemic, and a lack of education and skills” (2005: 1).

Some pan-Africanist intellectuals such as Frantz Fanon (1963), Kwame Nkrumah (1965), Chinweizu (1975), Valentin-Yves Mudimbe (1988) and Walter Rodney (2009) have traced, in various ways, the socio-political disorder, economic dysfunction, and cultural confusion prevalent on the continent to Western colonialism and its disruptive effects. The remit of the current study is to examine the themes of dystopia in Soyinka’s *A Dance of the Forests* (1973a) and their relevance to the socio-political condition in the 21st century Africa. Much like other philosophical writings, African literary drama (and African literature in general) is capable of offering alternative insights into the interpretation of African predicaments, including dystopia. Through various literary forms and ideological persuasions, African creative writers (including playwrights), like other intellectuals, have been reflecting on the socio-political condition on the continent. This suggests that the challenges of governance and development in contemporary Africa can also be analyzed through the binoculars of literary representations. Okolo (2007: 1) underscores this point that “the quest for a dialogue between philosophy and literature is timely, given the political crisis confronting African societies and the consequent need to re-establish the basis of order in these societies”. Okolo’s view is corroborated by Wale Adebani (2014: 409) that “modern African writers remain some of the continent’s finest social thinkers”. Adebani maintains that “the works of African writers constitute potential sources for the analysis of social thought and for constructing social theory in the continent” (2014: 405).

Soyinka’s literary works have been studied by many literary critics and theatre scholars (see Ogunba 1975; Moore 1978; Gibbs 1986; Adedeji 1987; Haney 1990; Harding 1991; Iji 1991; Maduakor 1991; Folorunso 1994; Ibitokun 1995; Obafemi 1996; Egharevba 2004; Ejiofor 2004; Jeyifo 2004; Ilori 2017).

Despite this extant research, representations of dystopia in *A Dance of the Forests* (Soyinka 1973a) have not been given sufficient scholarly attention to unravel their relevance to the debilitating condition in present-day Africa. The study intends to analyze how the playwright’s depictions of dystopia in *A Dance of the Forests* deepen the audience’s perspective of the current socio-political contradictions in Africa. Although *A Dance of the Forests* was written in the 20th century and set against the background of Nigerian independence in 1960, its themes of dystopia are relevance to the current socio-politics in Africa. This is underscored by the fact that literary works lend themselves

to new interpretations and their meanings are not always limited to the period in which they are produced. As evidence from the portrayals of dystopia in *A Dance of the Forests*, Soyinka's keen perceptions of the African past expose the foundation of the political tyranny, injustice, and violence on the continent in the contemporary time.

THE NOTION OF DYSTOPIA AND ITS REPRESENTATIONS IN LITERARY ARTS

The concept of dystopia is commonly considered as an antonym of utopia—a term which was coined by Thomas More in 1516 (More 2002) to describe a place of perfection and complete orderliness devoid of any form of anguish. Long before Thomas More used utopia as a title of his book in 1516, Plato had tacitly alluded to the concept. For example, Plato's notion of ideal society in *The Republic* (375 BC) exemplifies his repudiation of dystopia, a condition of utter dehumanization, pains, and disorder (Plato 2000). According to Claeys (2017: 4), the word dystopia “is derived from two Greek words, *dus* and *topos*, meaning a diseased, bad, faulty, or unfavourable place”. Claeys notes that “the adjective dystopian implies fearful futures where chaos and ruin prevail” (2017: 5). Claeys explains further that “most commonly, from both literary and historical viewpoints, dystopia is identified with the ‘failed utopia’ of twentieth-century totalitarianism. Here it typically means a regime defined by extreme coercion, inequality, imprisonment, and slavery” (2017: 5).

Despite the apparent difference between dystopia and utopia, there is a link between both concepts because dystopia is often, paradoxically, produced by utopian imaginary. The quest for an ideal society, utopia, is always characterized by an attempt to establish a homogenous community with principles of collectivism where individual differences are considered as aberrations. Because the utopian vision negates difference, it is often grafted on the suppression of the *other*. With the (illusory) hope for a perfect society, the utopian vision always revolves around an authoritarian individual with a small group of unalloyed patriots/loyalists who, quite often, use coercive methods to enforce collective obedience to the utopian principle. In the pursuit of utopia, “people become more alike in appearance, opinion, and outlook than they often have been. Unity, order, and homogeneity thus prevail at the cost of individuality and diversity” (Claeys 2017: 7). Claeys explains that “utopia remains an imperial power. When overpopulated, it sends out colonies, seizing the uncultivated land of indigenous peoples, and driving out ‘any who resist them’” (2017: 6). In the perspectives of Gordin et al. (2010: 1), “a true opposite of utopia would be a society that is either completely unplanned or is planned to be deliberately terrifying and awful”. They posit further that “dystopia, typically invoked, is neither of these things; rather, it is a utopia that has gone wrong, or a utopia that functions only for a particular segment of society” (Gordin et al. 2010: 1). The foregoing perspectives imply that utopia's promise of a perfect society is illusive.

However, Gordin et al. (2010: 3) distinguish between the two concepts when they explain that “whereas utopia takes us into a future and serves to indict the present, dystopia places us directly in a dark and depressing reality, conjuring up a terrifying future if we do not recognize and treat its symptoms in the here and now”. While this study acknowledges that the concept of dystopia can be used in different perspectives, it is used in this study as literary representations of human conditions that are characterized by anguish, dehumanization, authoritarianism, and widespread corruption. In this kind of literary representations, human freedom is often depicted as ropey, their aspirations destroyed, and dreams broken. Violence, despotism, fraud, mayhem, chaos, and war are recurring features of a dystopian milieu. Thus, in dystopian literatures, apocalyptic human

conditions are often captured.

In Western literatures, tropes of dystopia are evident in Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World* which was published 1932 (Huxley 2000), Karin Boye's *Kallocain* initially published in 1940 (Boye 2019) and George Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four* which was first published 1949 (Orwell 1949). Apart from Wole Soyinka's *A Dance of the Forests* (1973a), which is the focus of this study, Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* (1958), Ayi Kwei Armah's *The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born* (1968), Yambo Ouologuem's *Bound to Violence* (1971), Soyinka's *Season of Anomy* (1973b), Femi Osofisan's *Once Upon Four Robbers* (1980), Ngugi wa Thiong'o's *Devil on the Cross* (1982), Adebayo Williams' *The Remains of the Last Emperor* (1994), Chimeka Garrick's *Tomorrow Died Yesterday* (2010), and Ahmed Yerima's *Little Drops* (2011) are among the literary works that engage the issues of dystopia in contemporary African literature.

In this study, dystopia in the 21st century Africa is defined as a state of widespread chaos, violence, corruption, political strife, dehumanization, environmental destruction, and war that characterize contemporary Africa. These features of dystopia suggest a collapse of communal harmony where the survival-of-the fittest principle prevails. The foundation of the dystopic condition of Africa can be traced to precolonial African societies. This will be shown in our analysis of the themes of dystopia in Soyinka's *A Dance of the Forests* (1973a).

REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

Some extant postcolonial theoretical perspectives are quite relevant to this study. Postcolonialism encapsulates a wide range of issues such as colonialism, neocolonialism, decolonization, race, gender, geography, nationalism, identity, ethnicity, and class. It is a theoretical practice of decentering the dominant ways of interpreting the world and representing reality in ways which do not replicate hegemonic, univocal, or colonialist values. Thus, postcolonialism rejects all kinds of grand-narratives that characterize colonialist and neocolonialist discourses. The postcolonial insights relevant to this study are Frantz Fanon's idea of colonial violence and Homi Bhabha's concept of hybridity.

In his essay entitled "Concerning Violence" (1963), Frantz Fanon contends that Western colonialists employ violence to dominate and subjugate the colonized people. He argues that colonialism, in every ramification, is an engagement in violence which is meant to suppress as well as dehumanize the colonized subjects. He adds that the colonialists' use of violence inflicts socio-psychological and cultural injuries on the colonized people. In short, Fanon sees the state of dystopia in the (formerly) colonized countries as a consequence of colonialism and colonial violence. He also holds as suspects the emerging African elite for promoting colonialist cultures. Thus, Fanon prescribes violence as a means of dislodging colonialism and its oppressive machines. He sees violence as a practicable tool for liberating the colonized people from the shackles of the colonialist hegemony.

Similarly, Walter Rodney, in *How Europe Underdeveloped Africa* (2009), shows the ways in which development of Europe is inexorably tied to the export of slaves from Africa to many European countries during the Transatlantic Slave Trade which, he claims, reached its height in the 18th and the early 19th centuries. Although Rodney makes passing references to internal contradictions in Africa which contributed to the slave trade, he essentially holds European powers responsible for trading in slaves in Africa with a view to achieving their imperialist agenda.

Although the perspectives of Fanon (1963) and Rodney (2009) contain some validity,

especially in the context of Western ‘civilizing mission’ and its macabre effects on African people, the acts of using violence for the purpose of domination is not limited to European colonialists. Both Fanon (1963) and Rodney (2009) fail to account for varying dimensions of political brutality, injustice, oppression, and other indices of dystopia that had been in existence in African societies before Western colonialism. If colonialism is interpreted as politics of humans dominating other humans on the assumed stereotype of superior/inferior polarity to gain social, economic, cultural, and political advantages, violence and other oppressive acts, which are used to achieve and sustain this domination precede and transcend the mere Western and non-Western binarity. This view is underscored by Bhabha (1994: 2) that nation and culture must be understood as narrative constructions that emerge from hybrid interactions and cultural constituencies. It is “the emergence of the interstices—the overlap and displacement of domains of difference—that the intersubjective and collective experiences of nationness, community, or cultural value are negotiated. Terms of cultural engagement, whether antagonistic or affiliative, are produced performatively” (Bhabha 1994: 2). Groups of people, Bhabha argues, should not be hastily classified based on ‘organic’, ontological ethnic trait established on the fixed notion of traditions. Instead, differences should be located ‘in-between’ time and space spanning different cultures. According to Bhabha (1994), people’s characteristics are not restricted to a single or monolithic heritage, but they are subjected to modifications or changes through experience and interaction with other cultures. Problematizing the subject of identity, Bhabha coins the concept of hybridity (1994: 2) to decentre the supposedly fixed binary opposition between the colonizer and the colonized and Western powers and Africans. Thus, Bhabha’s concept of hybridity implies that the colonizers and the colonized, and European powers and African rulers are not independent of each other. Bhabha (1994: 37) explains that hybridity is “a third space which constitutes the discursive conditions of enunciation that ensure that the meaning and symbols of culture have no primordial unity or fixity; that even the same signs can be appropriated, translated, rehistoricized and read anew”. Bhabha’s view negates any form of univocal interpretations of postcolonial crises. Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths, and Helen Tiffin (1989: 40) validate Bhabha’s perspective when they note that “the conditions of post-colonial experience encouraged the dismantling of notions of essence and authenticity”.

It is from Bhabha’s idea of hybridity (Bhabha 1994) that our interpretation of dystopia in Soyinka’s *A Dance of the Forests* (1973a) and its significance to contemporary Africa’s sociopolitical crises derive its relevance. Soyinka repudiates any essentialist view as well as rejects the notion of absolute purity of indigenous African culture, which has been over-romanticized by some Negritude and nativist African scholars such as Senghor, Chinweizu, Jemie, and Madubuike. He calls for an end to “the myth of irrational nobility, of racial essence” (Soyinka 1968: 20). To Soyinka, the dystopic condition of Africa is not only caused by Western colonialism, but it can also be linked with pre-colonial African sociopolitical system, which was rooted in violence, inequality, and oppression. He believes that indigenous African cultures do not exist in isolation from other non-African cultures. He supports this view by noting that “the African world, like any other ‘world’, is unique. It, however, possesses in common with other cultures, the virtues of complementarity” (Soyinka 1976: xii).

Born on July 13, 1934, in Ake in Abeokuta, Ogun State of Nigeria, Wole Soyinka is Black Africa’s foremost playwright and one of the most controversial and distinguished writers in Africa. He was educated at the University College, Ibadan, Nigeria, and Leeds University, England, where he earned a degree in English. Soyinka was “part of the literary harvest in Ibadan of the 1950s and early 1960s and his considerable literary and dramatic

potential was remarked upon while he was in Leeds” (Senanu & Vincent 2001: 180). At different times, Soyinka established his own theatre company known as “1960 Masks”, lectured at the Universities of Ibadan, Lagos and Ife where he started a guerrilla theatre, which was used to raise the consciousness of the people. He was also a Fellow of Churchill College, University of Cambridge, Head of the Department of English, University of Lagos, Head of Department of Theatre Arts, University of Ibadan, and Professor of Comparative Literature, University of Ife. In 1986, he won Nobel Prize for Literature. He was the first African to have won the award.

In terms of the function of the artist, Soyinka believes that “the artist has always functioned in African society as the record of mores and experience of his society *and* as the voice of vision in his own time” (Soyinka 1968: 12). His dramaturgy is grounded in African animist realism. As a major element of African total theatre technique, African animist realism recognizes the interactions among the deities, the dead, the living and the unborn. In the notion of African animist realism, the relationship between the deities, the dead, the living, and the unborn is symbiotic. The living could also determine or have impacts on the affairs of deities. Although his art is not without Western theatrical influences, the playwright specifically draws his artistic materials from the Yoruba mythology. Rooted in the Yoruba cultural matrix, Soyinka uses mythopoeisis to dissect and trace abuse of power and man’s inhumanity to fellow man, especially in Africa, to some archetypes which must be challenged and changed for humanity to progress. He sees power abuses as ‘givens’. Rather than valorizing the givens, he, through his mythopoeisis and his patron-god, Ogun (the Yoruba patron god of carver and war), uses them as ‘templates’ to depict the dystopian conditions in the African continent. He believes that history is cyclical and that there is continuity in human activities. Soyinka believes that, for African people to resolve the perennial problems of misgovernance that assail the continent, they must consciously interrogate their past and dispassionately engage in repairing the past and the present for a hopeful future. As a versatile playwright, Soyinka is not constrained by ideological orthodoxies. His works such as *The Trials of Brother Jero* (1964), *The Road* (1965), *Kongi’s Harvest* (1967), *Madmen and Specialists* (1971), *A Dance of the Forests* (1973a), *Death and the King’s Horseman* (1975), *A Play of Giants* (1984), and *Alapata Apata* (2011) expose as well as condemn tyranny, dehumanization, injustice, and other acts of dystopia during the past and in the contemporary era.

AN OVERVIEW OF CRITICAL PERSPECTIVES OF DYSTOPIA IN SOYINKA’S *A DANCE OF THE FORESTS*

On the issue of dystopia in Soyinka’s *A Dance of the Forests* (1973a), Azumurana (2014: 75) contends that the message of the play is universal. He notes that “more than being a work of post-independence disillusionment, Soyinka’s *A Dance of Forests* enacts a dystopian vision of humanity in general and the African in particular” (Azumurana 2014: 75). Azumurana remarks that “the structure of the play in which Soyinka traces the past to the present to forecast a dystopian future” (2014: 72) is quite significant to its depiction of dystopia. He explains that Soyinka’s engagement with dystopia in the play is inexorably borne out of the playwright’s “quest for a future that is utopian” (Azumurana 2014: 71). He, therefore, concludes that, “within the aesthetic trajectory of Soyinka, the boundary between dystopian and utopian visions is not clear-cut: they are one and the same” (Azumurana 2014: 71).

Azumurana’s reading of *A Dance of the Forests* is quite relevant because it underscores

the link between dystopian and utopian visions. In *A Dance of the Forests*, Soyinka's portrayal of dystopia is not only intertwined with the utopian vision, it is also a self-reflexive critique of African socio-politics in the past, present and future. Also, the critic's view of universalizing the dystopian motif in the play is insightful. This further supports Oyin Ogunba's (1975: 98) submission that in attempting to represent nearly "all levels of life in the cast of the play, it is as if Soyinka were trying to present the whole human history as well as making a projection for the future". However, the playwright's attempt at representing all levels of life in *A Dance of the Forests*, Ogunba observes, "is only of limited success" (Ogunba 1975: 98). As it will be demonstrated in this study, the depiction of dystopia in *A Dance of the Forests* is relevant to the chaotic condition in Africa, not only in the past, but also in the contemporary time. By recreating the African troubled past, Soyinka destabilizes the essentialist notion that the unrelieved bedlams on the continent are engendered by external forces. Through various atrocities depicted in the play, Africans, Soyinka shows, have contributed and continued to contribute to the gory history of humanity. Rather than being essentially victims of dystopia occasioned by externally-induced slavery, colonialism, and neocolonialism, the African people, like other human races, have always participated in the cruel use of power.

Moreover, Azumurana's privileging of the play's structure as the most significant element tends to undervalue several other devices that are combined with the structure to depict the theme of dystopia in the play. While the study recognizes the relevance of the play's tripartite structure, it will show that characters, setting, dance, and other total theatre techniques are equally significant to the depictions of dystopia in the play. The play's tripartite structure, especially in relation to the plot, characters, and temporal and spatial settings, is premised on Yoruba philosophies of the continuity of human existence through a connection between the past, the present, and the future, and the mutual struggle of humans, the unborn and the deities to understand and break the barrier between each other. For instance, the temporal setting covers the past, the present and the future while the spatial setting is in three spaces: the Forests, the Town, and the Court of Mata Kharibu. Conflicts in the play navigate through these three spaces and times through the characters of The Dead Man and his wife who traverse the three worlds.

According to Cook (2005: 94), "*A Dance of the Forests* is in fact a 'difficult' play for an elitist audience, trying to piece together its symbolism and interpret its messages". Cook's view is underscored by Anyokwu (2012: 38) when he notes that "even when we try to piece together the sophisticated 'plotless plot' of the play, we still come up against a formidable phalanx of the play's opacity, its linguistic obscurantism which makes the inference of the play's overall meaning difficult". Cook (2005) and Anyokwu's (2012) perspective that *A Dance of the Forests* is a complex or difficult play is valid. This, however, needs some qualifications. In a way, the aesthetic complexity of the play tends to reflect and underscore the enormity and difficulty of the dystopian condition in the African continent. Thus, the complexity of the play signifies Soyinka's refutation of the simplistic interpretation that (often) essentializes Africa/Africans as victims of Western colonialism. It is on the basis of the confounding dystopian condition depicted in *A Dance of the Forests* that Jeyifo (2004: 120) considers the play as not only belonging to the category of Soyinka's "most ambitious and most memorable dramas, but also the most pessimistic drama in his dramatic corpus".

How does Soyinka, in *A Dance of the Forests*, deploy dramatic and literary elements to capture the state of dystopia in Africa? How significant are the themes of dystopia in the play to the socio-political condition in contemporary Africa? Through the playwright's representations of dystopia in the play, what alternative view does he offer on the recurring crises of governance on the continent?

SPECIFIC INSTANCES OF DYSTOPIA IN WOLE SOYINKA'S *A DANCE OF THE FORESTS* AND THEIR RELEVANCE TO THE 21ST CENTURY CONDITION IN AFRICA

A Dance of the Forests is set against the background of Nigeria's independence which took place on October 1, 1960. The play captures the incessant dystopian conditions that attend African precolonial, colonial, and post-independence eras. A complex confrontation between the living and the dead, humans and gods, history and reality, and the past, the present, and the future, the play depicts recurring leadership crises and political brutality confronting Africa. It dramatizes the celebration of the 'Gathering of the Tribes' which is a striking metaphor for Nigeria's 1960 independence celebration. A synopsis of the play is presented below.

In their attempt to have a memorable celebration and in their recognition of indissoluble relationships between the human community and their ancestors, the leaders of the human community who are the celebrators have requested the Forest Head to send them illustrious sons/daughters among their forebears who would be their guests on the occasion of "The Gathering of the Tribes". However, Aroni, acting on the permission of the Forest Head, sends to the celebrators as guests "two spirits of the restless dead". Choosing the two restless dead, 'The Dead Man' (formally Warrior) and 'The Dead Woman' (formally Warrior's pregnant wife), is not accidental, for, in their previous lives, they are "linked in violence and blood with four of the living generation" (Soyinka 1973a: 5)—Demoke, Rola, Adenebi, and Agboreko—who are also parts of the celebration. Ironically, when the invited guests emerge from the bowels of the earth, they are rejected by members of the human community represented by Demoke (formerly Court Poet, but now a Carver), Rola (formerly Madame Tortoise, but now Courtesan), Adenebi (formerly Historian, but now Council Orator), and Agboreko (previously Soothsayer, now Elder of Sealed Lips). Later in the play, the audience, through the use of flashback, is taken to the palace of Mata Kharibu, an African warlord and tyrannical King, whose reign, several centuries earlier, was characterized by social injustice, pains, and brutality against his own subjects. Mata Kharibu not only condemns his Warrior for refusing to wage an unjust war (the war is declared by the King to retrieve the King's wife's trousseau from her former husband), he also sells him, his pregnant wife, and his sixty soldiers into slavery. The King's repressive acts are also supported by his cabinet members such as Madame Tortoise (Mata Kharibu's wife), Historian, Physician, and Soothsayer.

The celebration of 'the Gathering of the Tribe' eventually turns out gruesome dances of vengeance, hostility, and death. The Dead Woman's Half-Child is tossed around in an *ampe* game by Eshuoro, the Jester and the Triplets. Demoke's frantic effort to rescue the child fails. He is eventually consumed by the forest. Similarly, Eshuoro, in his pursuit of vengeance, sets the totem ablaze. Demoke also falls from the tree (the totem), but for Ogun's intervention, he would have lost his life.

As evident from the play's synopsis above, the play's tripartite structure suggests that its spatial and temporal settings, conflicts, and characters are in three distinct, but interconnected levels. For instance, the temporal setting traverses the past, present, and the future while the spatial setting covers three spaces: the Forests occupied by the Forest Dwellers (Aroni, Ogun, Eshuoro, Obaneji, and others); the Town inhabited by the Town Dwellers (Demoke, Rola, Agboreko, Old Man, etc); and the Court of Mata Kharibu occupied by Mata Kharibu, the ancient African King, and his courtiers. Conflicts in the play navigate through these three spaces and times through the characters of The Dead Man and his wife who traverse the three worlds. This tripartite structure is based on two elements in Yoruba cosmology, and these are: "the belief in the continuity of existence through a link

between the past, the present and the future and the belief in the mutual struggle of man and the divinities to understand and thus remove the barrier between each other” (Obafemi 1996: 124). Olu Obafemi notes that these “two principal elements in Yoruba metaphysics form the background to Soyinka’s social vision” (1996: 124). In Yoruba metaphysical beliefs, neither the deities nor humans are superior to each other because both of them depend on each other for mutual assistance and collaboration. Similarly, Yoruba deities, unlike the Christian god, are not conceived as perfect gods. Their role and continued relevance largely depend on human beings. This idea is encapsulated in the Yoruba saying thus: *Bio sieniyán, imonle o si* (meaning ‘without human beings, there are not deities’). Therefore, the living could also determine or have impacts on the affairs of the deities. In *A Dance of the Forests*, such character deities like Ogun and Eshuoro exhibit some tyrannical acts just like the humans who worship them.

TYRANNY IN PRE-COLONIAL AFRICA

For the purpose of this study, dystopia in the 21st century Africa is a condition of widespread chaos, violence, corruption, political strife, dehumanization, and war that characterize contemporary Africa. The indices of dystopia evident in *A Dance of the Forests* are leadership tyranny, war, and slavery. As indicated in the play, the culture of leadership tyranny in Africa predates Western incursion on the continent. This is captured through the character of an African King, Mata Kharibu, who had lived several centuries earlier before the contemporary time. Through the technique of flashback, it is revealed that Kharibu is an emperor and warlord who revels in maintaining his dominance through wars and other forms of violence. His order that his Warrior should go to war in order to retrieve Madame Tortoise’s wardrobe from her former husband serves to illustrate Kharibu as a vile ruler who uses war as a means of sustaining his power and expanding his empire. Apart from taking Madame Tortoise from her former husband, who is also a King, Kharibu is determined to destroy the helpless King and his people.

Contrary to the views of Fanon (1963) and Rodney (2009), Soyinka (1973a), in *A Dance of the Forests*, shows that African societies have always actively participated in slave trade. The rulers of the continent are not just victims of slave trade; they are also perpetrators of the inhuman commercial engagement. For example, for turning down Mata Kharibu’s war order, Warrior, alongside his pregnant wife and sixty soldiers, is sold into slavery by Mata Kharibu. For Warrior to have discovered and exercised his inalienable right to think and rejects Mata Kharibu’s war order, he is labelled ‘slave’, ‘traitor’, and ‘rebel’ by Kharibu and his cohorts. Warrior is, therefore, considered as a *persona non grata* in the empire:

[From the opposite side, a warrior is pushed in, feet chained together. Mata Kharibu leaps up at once. The warrior is the Dead Man. He is still in his warrior garb, only it is bright and new.]

MATA KHARIBU *[advancing slowly on him.]*: It was you, slave! You it was you who dared to think.

WARRIOR: I plead guilty to the possession of thought. I did not know that it was in me to exercise it, until your Majesty’s inhuman commands. *[Mata Kharibu slaps him across the face.]*

MATA KHARIBU: You have not even begun to repent of your madness.

WARRIOR: Madness your Majesty?

MATA KHARIBU: Madness! Treachery! Frothing insanity traitor! Do you dare to

question my words?

WARRIOR: No, terrible one. Only your commands. [*Mata Kharibu whips out his sword. Raises it. The soldier bows his head.*] (Soyinka 1973a: 48).

In the above excerpt, the audience observes that Mata Kharibu inflicts both verbal and physical violence on Warrior for rejecting his tyrannical and inhuman order. Warrior is oppressed and dehumanized for rejecting war. Mata Kharibu's authoritarian and inhuman attitudes are not only characteristics of the ancient African royalty; they are also recurring features of contemporary African rulers (both military and civilian). Robert Guest alludes to this fact that "since independence, Africa's governments have failed their people. Few allow ordinary citizens the freedom to seek their own fortunes without official harassment. Few uphold the rule of law, enforce contracts, or safeguard property rights. Many are blatantly predatory, serving as the means by which a small elite extracts rents from everyone else" (Guest 2004: 20). Guest remarks that "predatory governments usually make their countries poorer, as in Nigeria and the Central African Republic. Worse, when power confers riches, people sometimes fight for it, as in Congo and Liberia" (2004: 20). Guest's view underscores the unending dimensions of leadership tyranny, abuse of power, and internal slavery in different parts of Africa. Also, Mata Kharibu's act of selling Warrior, his pregnant wife and sixty soldiers to Slave-Dealer from Europe signifies that some ancient African Kings cannot be exculpated from the Trans-Atlantic slave trade that ravaged the continent. Mata Kharibu's act of selling his own people into slavery is also relevant to the neocolonial situation in contemporary Africa. Apart from silencing alternative views through incarceration and wars, many contemporary African rulers, just like Mata Kharibu, often collaborate with external forces to undermine the peace and development of the continent.

AFRICAN COURTIERS AS ENABLERS OF TYRANNY, SLAVERY AND WAR

In *A Dance of the Forests*, Soyinka demonstrates that African courtiers are enablers of dystopian situations in Africa. Madame Tortoise, for instance, uses her sexuality to rule and misrule men in Kharibu's Kingdom and outside it. For causing a feud between her former husband and Kharibu, Madam Tortoise's character bears some semblance with Lady Macbeth in William Shakespeare's *Macbeth* (1997). Lady Macbeth conspires with her husband, Macbeth, to murder King Duncan so that her husband can become the King of Scotland. The Macbeths' actions result in war which claims many lives, including theirs. However, unlike Lady Macbeth who owes her allegiance to her husband, Macbeth, Madame Tortoise is not committed to any man. Rather, she regards men as exploitable tools to satisfy her personal ends. Indeed, Madame Tortoise's character supports Bhabha's view that a group of people should not be hastily classified based on 'organic', ontological ethnic trait established on the fixed notion of traditions. Instead, differences should be located 'in-between' time and space spanning different cultures. Thus, Madame Tortoise's oppressive attitude shows that not all African women are victims of patriarchal hegemony in Africa. In fact, as seen from the oppressive character of Madame Tortoise, some African women are enablers of tyranny, war, and oppression that are recurrent on the continent. For instance, Madame Tortoise arrogantly tells Warrior:

MADAME TORTOISE: What are you? Men have killed for me. Men have died for me. Have you flints in your eye? Fool, have you never lived? (Soyinka

1973a: 57)

As evident from the foregoing excerpt, Madame Tortoise exerts some influence on some men, including Kharibu. However, Madame Tortoise lacks the real power because she is not the paramount ruler of the Kingdom. In some African traditions, especially among the Yoruba speaking people of the Western part of Nigeria, the King, who is usually a male, is known as *Alase ikeji orisa* (meaning an authority who is the second in command to the deities). What this title signifies is that, apart from the gods, the King is the one who has the absolute power to determine the destiny of everyone in his Kingdom. This point suggests further that the real power does not reside with Madame Tortoise, but with Kharibu. Thus, Madame Tortoise's influence is quite limited and inconsequential compared to Kharibu's power. The inconsequential nature of women's power in politics and social life has been captured as follows:

Some people will say, 'Oh, but women have the real power: bottom power.' (This is a Nigerian expression for a woman who uses her sexuality to get things from men.) But bottom power is not power at all, because the woman with bottom power is actually not powerful; she just has a good route to tap another person's power. And then what happens if the man is in a bad mood or sick or temporarily impotent? (Adichie 2014: 44-45)

Similarly, Physician, Soothsayer, and Historian endorse Kharibu's despotism and war-mongering attitude. Physician, for instance, justifies Kharibu's war order when he asserts that: "It is no longer the war of the queen's wardrobe. The war is now an affair of honour" (Soyinka 1973a: 48). Soothsayer, a religious zealot, legitimises Kharibu's calls for war, endorses the selling of Warrior into slavery and offers Kharibu assurance that the future of humanity would be under the firm control of cruel rulers like him. Historian equally glorifies and justifies Kharibu's war order and condemns Warrior's repudiation of the war order. Historian declares that "War is the only consistency that the past ages afford us. It is the legacy which the new nations seek to perpetuate" (Soyinka 1973a: 51). He further describes Warrior as "a traitor" who "must be in the enemy's pay" (1973a: 51). 'The new nations', in Historian's assertion, represent African countries that are often considered victims of Western imperialism/colonialism. Because 'the new nations' are founded on dystopian principles, there is no way peace would be given a free rein. 'The new nations', like the old ones, are new theatres of survival of the fittest where brutality, disorder, and death remain the only legacies. Thus, Physician, Soothsayer, and Historian's statements reveal the reality of wars that have continued to ravage some parts of Africa such as Democratic Republic of the Congo, South Sudan, the Central African Republic, Libya, Somalia, Mali, and Nigeria. While it is true that some of these wars have some degrees of external influence, they are largely driven by internal factors, especially the prospects of political power. Because it is considered as politics by other means, war is usually waged, especially by powerful groups, to decimate and dominate other less powerful ones so as to boost the former's pride. Mata Kharibu and his courtiers consider the destruction of lives and property, illegal occupation of other people's territory, looting and maiming as acts of maintaining, affirming, and extending the empire's 'honour'. Just as the colonialists invaded the colonies, Mata Kharibu declares war on his hapless fellow King whose wife he has taken because he considers himself superior to his rival. He regards his rival King as a lesser human being who deserves to be taught some lessons through violence.

That Warrior, his wife and sixty soldiers are sold into slavery also demonstrates that repressive agents of the ruling class are also victims of violent crime sponsored by the

ruling class. What this implies is that there is no limit to the consequences and victims of legitimized violent crime on the continent. However, Warrior's insistence that he will not drag his men who place their trust in him into war also suggests that he places higher value on human lives and peace than on warfare and its booties. For upholding as sacred the trust reposed in him by his soldiers, Warrior, though a military man, represents a courageous leader who cherishes and abides by democratic principles. What Warrior's action further signifies is that democratic principles are not only meant for civilian populace, they are also meant to be respected by the military. The rhetorical question, "Is this the action of a ruler who values the peace of his subjects?" (Soyinka 1973a: 49) is an incisive condemnation of Kharibu's war order and similar wars that are initiated by contemporary (African) rulers to promote their interests. His rhetorical question is a subtle, but effective tactic of placing the autocratic ruler and his callous actions in the court of the people (the audience) where the ultimate judgement lies.

LEGITIMIZATION OF VIOLENT CRIME

In *A Dance of the Forests*, Soyinka reveals that the legitimization of violent criminal acts in African historical phases—the past, the present and the future—is a feature of dystopia on the continent (1973a). In this context, we describe the legitimization of violent crime as a situation whereby due punishments are not served to individuals who commit violent crimes because they either belong to the ruling class or have a strong affiliation with it. Thus, violent crime is normalized as a method of retaining or maintaining power. Fanon has argued that Western colonizers are violent people and that they deploy different kinds of violent criminal methods to perpetuate colonialist interests in Africa. However, Soyinka (1973a), in *A Dance of the Forests*, shows that violent crime has been part of African society from the time immemorial to the contemporary time. The play demonstrates that murder is an unresolved violent crime that is recurring in African society. As captured in the play, in the ancient African Kingdom, specifically in the palace of Mata Kharibu, Court Poet, who is in the service of Madame Tortoise and Mata Kharibu, murders his pupil, Court Novice, because he is afraid that his pupil would supplant him. Although Court Poet's violent crime is known to Madame Tortoise, he is not served any punishment. Rather, he remains in the palace, offering his services to Madame Tortoise and Mata Kharibu.

Likewise, in the present time, one of the most important personalities among the town dwellers, Demoke, a carver and reincarnate of Court Poet, murders his apprentice, Oremole. Demoke kills Oremole because he (Oremole) demonstrates artistic ingenuity, diligence, and objectivity in the carving of the totem meant for the Gathering of Tribes. Demoke's murder of Oremole is also borne out of envy that Oremole would surpass him in the carving profession. Just as Court Poet escapes justice, Demoke is equally not served any justice for his criminal act. Thus, the criminal acts of Court Poet and Demoke—two agents of the governments—without due punishment represent the legitimization of violent crime, which is evident in various contemporary Africa. The legitimization of violent crime, a manifestation of dystopia, is an element of the survival-of-the fittest principle that characterizes African politics, both in the past and the present time. In contemporary Africa as it was in the past, a person's access to State power often confers on him or her arbitrariness and absolutism to the extent that he/she can inflict injuries or even death on their opponents without any consequence. Underscoring the culture of legitimization of violent crime that defines politics in Africa, Adeoti (2015b: 5) avers: "in attempts to come to terms with the predicament of politics in Africa before colonialism, during colonialism

and after independence [...] I have come to realize that politics in Africa is one intriguing arena where a few people with the razor blade of power have been shaving the heads of the majority in their absence". In Adeoti's foregoing assertion, "few people with the razor blade of power" refer to the members of the ruling class or their agents such as Demoke, Court Poet, Historian, Physician, and Soothsayer. Their habit of "shaving the heads of the majority in their absence" signifies the use of arbitrary means, including murder, to undermine all alternative voices. In an uncompromising tone, Warrior also tells Physician that African's criminal past will continue to haunt its future generations:

WARRIOR: Unborn generations will be cannibals most worshipful Physician. Unborn generations will, as we have done, eat up one another. 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 the power to command my life abuse my trust in them. (Soyinka 1973a: 49)

The bleak future that Warrior foresees in the above excerpt is quite relevant to the socio-political realities in contemporary Africa. It is instructive to note that many countries in Africa attained their independence from European colonial masters in the 1950s and the early 1960s, which was around the time Soyinka wrote *A Dance of the Forests* (1973a). However, more than six decades down the line, the conditions of life in many of the African countries have degenerated into an appalling state of penury, violence, and anarchy, forcing many African citizens, especially youths, to embark on irregular migration to the countries of the global North. It is, therefore, not out of place to describe Soyinka as a visionary playwright because his prediction, as encapsulated in Warrior's prophecy above, is now a sad reality not only in Nigeria, but also in many African countries.

THE CANCER OF CORRUPTION

Another case of dystopia captured in *A Dance of the Forests* is corruption with its destructive consequences. The play shows that, both in the past and the present times, bribery and corruption remains a festering disease that continues to undermine the progress of the African continent. Going back to the African past, the play reveals that the Trans-Atlantic slave in Africa was enabled by the pervasive corruption of ancient African rulers. This is evident in the character of Court Historian. Apart from using his knowledge of history to corruptly justify Mata Kharibu's war-mongering policies, he also collects a bribe from Slave-Dealer to falsify the capacity of Slave-Dealer's boat. This is evident in a dialogue between Court Physician, Slave-Dealer, and Court Historian:

PHYSICIAN: You shifty, miserable flesh merchant, how dare you suggest that you have the space in that finger-bowl to transport sixty full-grown men?

SLAVE-DEALER: Honourable Physician to the court of Mata Kharibu, why this concern for the health of traitors condemned to a fate worse than death?

PHYSICIAN: Mata Kharibu is not so devoid of humanity as to ...

SLAVE-DEALER: I have no wish to argue that point. Mr. Physician, I assure you most sincerely that you are mistaken. My new vessel is capable of transporting the whole of Kharibu's court to hell-when that time does come. The Honourable Historian here can testify to it. I took him aboard . . . [*Behind his back, he passes a bag of money to the Historian, who takes it, feels it and pockets it.*] . . . only this afternoon, and showed

him every plank and rope . . . ask him yourself.

HISTORIAN: That is a fact. Mata Kharibu and all his ancestors would be proud to ride in such a boat. (Soyinka 1973a: 54)

In the above excerpt, the shameless manner in which Court Historian collects a bribe from Slave-Dealer to falsify his vessel's capacity to accommodate the 60 men sold into slavery by Kharibu recalls the brazen manner in which some African aristocrats collected various 'gifts', including mirror and perfume, from European slave dealers to sell their fellow Africans into slavery. This instance challenges further the views of Fanon (1963) and Rodney (2009) that European imperialists are essentially responsible for slavery and slave trade in Africa. Even in contemporary Africa, many African rulers continue to collaborate with external forces to undermine the progress of the continent. For example, "Sudanese President, Omar al-Bashir faces accusation of siphoning up to \$9 billion of his country's funds and placing them in foreign account" (Igwe 2012: 93). Indeed, cases of corruption continue unabated in other African countries such as Nigeria, Kenya, Cameroon, and Congo. In fact, "a 2011 report commissioned by the United Nations Development Fund estimated that between 1990 and 2008 \$34 billion was stolen from Angola's public coffers (Igwe 2012: 93). In the particular case of Nigeria, more than \$450 billion oil revenue generated between 1970 and 2004 were said to have been stolen by various Nigerian rulers and stashed away in foreign banks in Europe and America. (Igwe 2012: 93).

However, in Africa, the manner of promoting dystopia through bribery and corruption is not limited to the members of political elite. It is a routine culture among public servants and ordinary people. With regard to bribery and corruption, Soyinka (1973a), in *A Dance of the Forests*, shows that the town dwellers who live in the present time are replicas of their forebears. A case in point is the lorry owner who, in a conspiratorial alliance with a council worker (Old Man), changes the capacity of his lorry for pecuniary interests. Obaneji (Forest Head) offers an account of the history of the lorry, the corrupt character of its owner and the council worker:

OBANEJI: Before I tell you, I must let you know the history of the lorry. When it was built, someone looked at it, and decided that it would only take forty men. But the owner took it to the council...now, my friend, this is something for you to investigate. One of your office workers took a bribe. A real substantial bribe. And he changed the capacity to seventy.

DEMOKE: Seventy!

OBANEJI: Yes. Seventy. From forty.

ROLA: That's nearly twice.

OBANEJI: You said it—nearly twice. Now what do you think would happen if such a trap suddenly caught fire?

DEMOKE: When?

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

OBANEJI: Yesterday. That is why they have called it the Incinerator since yesterday. Of the seventy people in it, five escaped. It overturned [...], and the body was built of wood...Dry and brittle in the Harmattan season too. They were on their way here—to the gathering of the tribes. (Soyinka 1973a: 18)

In the above excerpt, the destructive consequences of bribery and corruption are quite palpable. The fraudulent acts of the lorry owner and the council worker result in the death of innocent lives. The lorry owner, in his own right, symbolizes an African leader, and the lorry with the passengers metaphorizes a contemporary African nation. However, for his

acquisitive predilection, the lorry owner shirks his responsibility of protecting his lorry and the passengers. Consequently, 65 out of the 70 passengers lose their lives when the lorry catches fire.

Similarly, the council officer's action illustrates recurring corrupt practices by government officials in contemporary Africa, which often result in social disorder and destruction of lives and property. His act of receiving a bribe from the lorry owner to falsify the capacity of the lorry is a negation of the statutory responsibility of his office. The council worker and his conspirator, the lorry owner, constitute major encumbrances to effective functioning and development of various government institutions in the continent. In as much as characters like the council worker and the lorry owner exist in various institutions and the larger society in the continent, various indices of dystopia will linger in African societies.

VICTIMIZED CHILDHOOD

Another indication of dystopia captured in *A Dance of the Forests* is victimized childhood. In the context of this study, victimized childhood is defined as a condition where a child or children are subjected to various forms of victimization, dehumanization and oppression by the socio-political system and its managers. In *A Dance of the Forests*, Soyinka uses the Yoruba myth of *abiku* named the Half-Child in the context of the play to capture victimized childhood in Africa. In Yoruba culture, *abiku* is regarded as a spirit-child who is born to die several times. However, the concept of *abiku* is not limited to the Yoruba culture. It is called different names in different parts of Africa. For example, it is regarded as *ogbanje* among the Igbo. Apart from Soyinka, other African writers such as John Pepper Clark (2001) and Ben Okri (1992) have explored the concept of *abiku* in their writings to portray the myriad of crises confronting Africa. According to Eldred Jones (cited in Maduakor 1991: 180), the Half-Child symbolizes a humanity's future which is that of violence and destruction. Similarly, Maduakor (1991: 180) contends:

The Half-Child can be viewed as a symbol of the newly independent Nigeria or, in generalized sense, the symbol of the newborn states of Africa. In either sense, the new nation is prematurely born if it is only a "Half-Child" and he is doomed to death.

In the perspective of Adekoya (2010: 27), "all institutions, phenomena and processes in post-independence Nigeria, like *abiku*, in a magic circle and go through giddy motions". In addition to the interpretations offered by the scholars, this study interprets the Half-Child as a metaphor for victimized childhood in Africa. The suffering of the Half-Child takes cyclical patterns and various forms. The Half-Child has spent more years in his mother's womb than necessary. The Dead Woman, the child's mother, carries the pregnancy of the Half-Child for several centuries, especially from the ancient time of Mata Kharibu to this present time. In the Yoruba cosmology, it is believed that, "through some evil or magical force, a pregnancy can be tempered with and the foetus kept in particular state of development for many years" (Ogunba 1975: 87). Together with her husband, Warrior, the Dead Woman, the Half-Child's mother, is also sentenced to slavery and death by Mata Kharibu and his courtiers. So, right from his conception, the child, just like his parents, is faced with victimization owing to the dystopian culture in his homeland. Also, in the present time when the child is born through a divine intervention by Forest Head, he is a deformed human being, thus the label Half-Child.

Apart from the Half-Child's physical deformity, he is also inflicted with violence by

various contending forces in the present time. For instance, the Figure in Red, a symbol of violence and death in the context of the play, has courted the Half-Child and begun to play a game of *sesan* with him. Just like golf, the game of *sesan* involves “getting some ball-like objects into certain holes. It is a game of survival” (Ogunba 1975: 87). This is captured in the stage direction as follows:

[A Figure in Red appears, and begins to walk deliberately in his (the Half-Child's) footprints. The Half-Child crosses to the opposite side, digs a little hole in the ground, and begins to play a game of 'sesan'. He has no sooner flicked the first seed than the Figure in Red squats behind him and leans over to join in the game. The Half-Child immediately gets up, the Figure in Red following. The Half-Child seems to appeal for help mutely from those around him, but they stand silent. The Figure in Red keeps close behind. Downcast, the Half-Child returns to his game, speaking as he goes.] (Soyinka 1973a: 64).

As indicated in the stage direction, the Half-Child resorts to a game of *sesan* to ‘escape’ from the grisly events around him. Not even his parents, the Dead Woman and the Dead Man, could help him because they are also incapable of helping themselves. The life of the Half-Child, like that of the contemporary African child, is characterized by violence, and abandonment. He engages in the game of *sesan* to deal with his estrangement. Yet, he does not find peace for the Figure in Red would not let him be. The sad, muffled manner in which the Half-Child appeals for help without any response from people around him shows that he is an abandoned subaltern. The indifferent attitude of people towards the Half-Child also implies a kind of conspiracy of silence against him and his travails. Therefore, it is not surprising that the Half-Child returns to the game of *sesan* as the only available means of coping with socio-political chaos confronting him. By abandoning the Half-Child with violence and death, represented by the Figure in Red, the Half-Child is an endangered person. This is similar to the condition of many children in contemporary Africa where children are victimized and abandoned by their parents and governments.

Moreover, the beating of the Half-Child by Eshuoro (an aggressive god who often loses all sense of caution when he is offended) and his acolytes, the Triplets, in the *ampe* dance is another outstanding metaphor for the perennial victimization of the African child by the members of the ruling elite and their collaborators. In the Yoruba culture, the word *ampe* means “do as I do dance, we are the same”, and the *ampe* dance is “a children’s dance in which two children face each other, jump and make the same hand and foot movements uttering in unison the sound *pe pepepepeshampe!* and stretching corresponding feet to indicate perfect agreement” (Ogunba 1975: 92). That the Half-Child is mercilessly beaten, tossed around in the dance and eventually ‘consumed’ by the forest show further that the Half-Child is a victim of sociopolitical dystopia. His present condition is hopeless and his future is bleak. This is why Aroni describes the Half-Child as “a doomed thing” (Soyinka 1973a: 71).

THE AFRICAN ELITE’S VINDICTIVENESS, HOSTILITY, AND VICIOUS CIRCLE OF CHAOS

In *A Dance of the Forests*, Soyinka emphasizes the concept of hybridity by demonstrating that the members of the African ruling elite are not totally different from the Western colonial masters, especially on the culture of using violence to create unending disorder on the continent (1973a). Also, the playwright shows that African people, with their

habituation to vendetta, violence, and chaos, are replicas of the African gods. This, according to Soyinka, partly accounts for the recurring dystopia on the continent. In the play, both the African gods and their various worshippers/acolytes are vindictive and hostile, and they are presented as promoters of various forms of disorder in the forests and in the town. This is evident in the characters of Ogun (the Yoruba patron god of carver and war), Demoke (Ogun's protégé) and Eshuoro (an aggressive god who often loses all sense of caution when he is offended). It is pertinent to note that Soyinka uses the Yoruba gods and other supernatural elements in *A Dance of the Forests* as metaphors for interrogating sociopolitical realities in Africa. Ogunba underscores this point by noting that, Soyinka's deployment of Yoruba cultural material "is never merely nostalgic; rather, he re-interprets his material, giving it his own deliberate twists" (Ogunba 1975: 1). Therefore, the forest dwellers, including Ogun and Eshuoro, represent the ruling class on the continent. In spite of this, the gods and the humans depend on each other. As depicted in *A Dance of the Forests*, both the gods and humans are enablers of dystopia through their vindictive and hostile acts. For instance, apart from Demoke's fear of being supplanted by Oremole in the carving profession, Demoke's murder of Oremole can be traced to the influence of Ogun because he confesses that he works through Demoke's hands to kill Oremole. By instigating Demoke to engage in murder, Ogun's violent attitude signifies how some members of the ruling elite in contemporary Africa promote disorder in the continent. Likewise, Old Man, Demoke's father, endorses Demoke's homicidal act. As a Council Elder, Demoke's father is expected to be an advocate of peace and social justice. The cruel actions of Ogun and that of Old Man show how the gods (the ruling elite) and humans (their followers) collaborate to foment violence and create chaos in African societies. Similarly, Old Man's frantic effort at getting rid of the invited guests, 'The Dead Man' and 'The Dead Woman', also illustrates that he is guilty of crime against the dead. By ordering the fumigation of the forest through the Chimney of Ereko, Old Man is also guilty of environmental degradation. In his dialogue with Murete, Eshuoro, the disgruntled god, bemoans the violence visited on the environment by humans:

ESHUORO: [...]. Have you not seen how they celebrate the gathering of the tribes? In our own destruction. Today they even dared to chase out the forest spirits by poisoning the air with petrol fumes. Have you seen how much of the forest has been torn down for their petty decorations? (Soyinka 1973a: 41)

In the foregoing excerpt, Soyinka, through Eshuoro, is raising critical issues on environmental safety. The members of the new gathering of the tribes are not only aggressors against their fellow humans and their ancestors; they are also cruel to nature. For example, in the Niger Delta region of Nigeria, there has been a continued destruction of the environment through crude oil exploration in the region by various contending forces. This has often resulted in environmental degradation, destruction of lives and property in the region.

In the same vein, Eshuoro's vindictive attitude to avenge the murder of Oremole by Demoke and the desecration of the forest by Demoke's father result in a violent confrontation between him and Ogun. This leads to a state of chaos in the forest and in the town. For example, Eshuoro sets the totem ablaze. He also pulls Demoke down from the tree. The feud between Ogun and Eshuoro is a struggle for power and dominance. Their struggle illustrates the recurring self-destructive struggles among the members of the ruling class in many African societies. In contemporary Africa, these members of political elite are not only found in the military, they are seen among the civilian politicians.

COLLECTIVE HUMAN CRUELTY

Although Soyinka's portrayals of dystopia in *A Dance of the Forests* serve as a criticism of the chaotic sociopolitical situation in Africa, the playwright recognizes that the political crises on the continent are not totally devoid of negative external influences. He, therefore, universalizes corruption, tyranny, and violence. This is evident in the character of Slave-Dealer. Slave-Dealer is an agent of Western imperialism as well as Mata Kharibu's ally in violent crime and corruption. By giving a bribe to Historian in order to take possession of Warrior, his Wife and 60 soldiers condemned by Mata Kharibu, Slave-Dealer is complicit in Mata Kharibu's atrocities.

Soyinka uses the character of Slave-Dealer to illustrate the way in which some Western powers promote abuse of power, disorder, and violence in Africa for their imperialistic interests. In a way, Slave-Dealer's character further lends credence to the views of scholars like Rodney and Fanon who regard Western powers and their capitalist incursion in Africa as constituting encumbrances to the continent's socio-political, economic, and cultural development. Slave-Dealer's new vessel, which he describes as "a true palace worthy of renegade soldiers" (Soyinka 1973a: 52), is a metaphor for Western expansionism. Also, the involvement of Slave-Dealer in Mata Kharibu's violence suggests the universality of violence and other human atrocities. This further underscores Bhabha's argument that groups of people should not be hastily classified based on 'organic', ontological ethnic trait established on the fixed notion of traditions. Instead, differences should be located 'in-between' time and space spanning different cultures (1994: 2). Both Slave-Dealer and Mata Kharibu demonstrate violent criminal attitudes towards their fellow humans in their selfish pursuit of material wealth and political power. Soothsayer also underscores the self-seeking human nature which causes violence, corruption, and tyranny when he declares: "It is in the nature of men to seek power over the lives of others" (Soyinka 1973a: 54). There is equally the use of historical allusion to emphasize the universality of violence, war and corruption caused by human greed and the predatory quest power. This is evident in Historian's allusion to the Trojan War:

HISTORIAN: Be quiet Soldier! I have here the whole history of Troy. If you were not the swillage of pigs and could read the writing of wiser men, I would show you the magnificence of the destruction of a beautiful city. I would reveal to you the attainments of men which lifted mankind to the ranks of gods and demi-gods. (Soyinka 1973a: 51)

Historian's allusion to the history of Troy reinforces the collective human cruelty for the love and lure of power. According to Greek mythology, the Trojan War was waged against the city of Troy by the Achaeans after Paris of Troy took Helen from her husband, Menelaus, who was the King of Sparta. The reference to the Trojan War indicates that every society has its fair share of violence, tyranny and other atrocities, and these phenomena are not essentially limited to African society.

PANACEAS FOR DYSTOPIA IN CONTEMPORARY AFRICA

In *A Dance of the Forests*, Soyinka's depictions of dystopia in Africa are not for art for art's sake. Because in Africa "literature provides the broad canvass through which...authors interrogate Africa's past", present "and speculate about the possibilities that lie ahead in the future (Adeoti 2015a: 2), the audience can, therefore, deduce from the events in the play

some possible panaceas for socio-political problems in 21st century Africa. Soyinka largely holds Africans—the leaders and the led—responsible for the continent’s predicaments. Thus, as implied by the playwright, one way of resolving Africa’s dystopian condition is that Africans themselves must accept the responsibility of addressing their problems instead of expecting solutions from outsiders. This point is underscored by Thabo Mbeki, former South Africa’s President, who has predicted an ‘African renaissance’ but insists that such renaissance will only be made possible “if its aims and objectives are defined by the Africans themselves, if its programmes are designed by ourselves (Africans) and if we (Africans) take responsibility for the success or failure of our policies (cited in Robert Guest 2004: n.p.). The idea of Africans taking responsibility for their actions means that the recurring tyrannical attitudes, corruption, and other crimes demonstrated by African rulers like Mata Kharibu, Ogun, Council Elder, and their sycophantic supporters must be jettisoned. Thus, Soyinka shows that people-oriented, transformational leadership and responsible followership are central to resolving the myriad of crises on the continent.

The playwright also foregrounds justice and equity as means of bringing the continent out of its sociopolitical doldrums. Warrior (Dead Man), his Wife (Dead Woman), their child (the Half-Child), and the Court Novice (Oremole) are victims of institutionalized injustice and crime. Warrior (Dead Man) and his Wife (Dead Woman) ‘reincarnate’ in the time present and haunt those who unjustly condemn them to slavery and death in their former lives. Soyinka uses the ‘reincarnation’ of the victims of institutionalized injustice and crime, Warrior (Dead Man) and his Wife (Dead Woman), to call attention of African people (both the leaders and the led), and humanity in general to the urgent necessity to address the issues of injustice and crime by bringing to book those individuals who have violated the sanctity of human life and humanity for their private gains. For Soyinka, one major way of securing peace for sociopolitical development is justice, which is why Warrior rejects Mata Kharibu’s war order. The dialogue between Physician and Warrior clearly underscores this point:

PHYSICIAN: Liar! Is Mata Kharibu not your general!

WARRIOR: Mata Kharibu is leader, not merely of soldiers but of men. Let him turn the unnatural pattern of men always eating up one another. I am suddenly weary of this soldiering where men must find new squabbles for their cruelty. Must I tell the widowed that their men died for another’s trousseau? (Soyinka 1973a: 50)

In the above excerpt, Warrior’s statement repudiates all wars that are created and fought to serve the selfish interests of political leaders not just in Africa, but in the world in general. His statement is a tacit call for justice and equity as prerequisites for peace and development. His statement shows that leaders must seek alternative means to settle their differences instead of going into needless wars which lead to wanton destruction of innocent lives.

CONCLUSION

Thus far, through the analyses of various dramatic elements such as characters, conflict, setting, action, and dance, this study has explored various dimensions of dystopia depicted in Soyinka’s *A Dance of the Forests*. The study has established that Soyinka’s dramaturgy is rooted in Yoruba mythopoetic paradigm. In spite of this, Soyinka neither engages in the romanticization of indigenous African culture nor offers a simplistic interpretation

of precolonial, colonial, and post-independence experiences. Rather, in *A Dance of the Forests*, he deploys Yoruba mythopoetic paradigm to show how the dystopian condition in contemporary Africa signifies a replica of African precolonial leadership cultures. Unlike Fanon and Rodney who largely trace Africa's post-independence chaos to the Western colonial incursion on the continent, Soyinka demonstrates that various indices of dystopia such as war, slavery, crime, corruption, and tyranny of the elite have always been parts of African society from the time immemorial to the contemporary time. Soyinka reveals that to understand the contemporary chaos in Africa, one needs to look back, not just to Western colonialism, but also to the precolonial African society where indigenous African rulers deployed power to oppress their subjects and undermine the peace and progress of their Kingdoms. Therefore, the dystopian condition in contemporary, as captured by Soyinka in *A Dance of the Forests*, is a reproduction of African past. The analysis of the themes of dystopia in the play has equally revealed that Africans, rather being victims of external forces, have always been involved in promoting dystopian cultures. The playwright shows that various manifestations of dystopia on the continent are not only generated by Western colonialism, but also ingrained in some aspects of Africa's ancient leadership traditions. Hence, Soyinka challenges the binary opposition between Western colonialists and African rulers, past and present, and the difference between precolonial, colonial, and post-independence Africa. Rather than seeking solutions from outsiders, Soyinka suggests that Africans should look within themselves and their culture to solve their sociopolitical problems. Consequently, he advocates good governance—accountable leadership, responsible followership, justice, and equity—by Africans as pragmatic means of addressing the dystopian condition in the continent.

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