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Using Tragedy against its Makers: Some African and Caribbean Instances

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In January, 1995, the Royal Shakespeare Company performed *Macbeth* in Williamsport, Pennsylvania, "with a nearly all-black cast." In a review, S. Ekema Agbaw wrote of the director's and company's strained efforts to emphasize similarities, even identities, of medieval Scotland and contemporary Africa. The director Stephen Raynes told of a Scotland subject to "supernatural forces," "in the grip of tribal and international war, suffering from famine and disease, where extremes of good and bad ('fair and foul') are at play." "Africa today," he wrote,

> is a continent of similar extremes: hope and despair, wealth and poverty, . . . reeling under economic and political instability, with the world's highest birth rates, lowest life expectancy, and half the world's refugees. Africa is riddled with corruption alongside indescribable poverty, creating at the same time extremely wealthy politicians and entire generations dying of malnutrition. It is a place of overcrowded cities and drought-stricken deserts, tribal carnage and international wars. In a world of such physical and spiritual conflict what is moral or immoral? Right or wrong? Fair or foul? (Agbaw 1996: 104)

Ignoring the nasty inability to take sides and the offense of conflating utterly different historical situations – the supposals, notes Agbaw, "that you can still learn all you need to know about Africans by reading Shakespeare," that the ubiquity of "human experiences" makes "medieval Scottish kings and contemporary African leaders . . . interchangeable," and that "Africans are at a point in their social development where Europeans were eight or nine hundred years ago" – and ignoring the production's failure to "capture [the] contemporary African nuances" it claimed to, what are "the historical, political, and cultural implications of presenting a medieval Scottish murderer as a contemporary African dictator" (1996: 102, 108–9)?

What does it mean to claim to grasp *any* African reality, for example, in a wholly familiar European tragedy? How can tragedy be used by non-Europeans to figure their own realities? (The question has been asked by writers like John Pepper

Clark-Bekederemo, 'Zulu Sofola, and Wole Soyinka in the course of using tragedy as a way to render home experiences, issues, and debates.) Does the mere fact of using tragedy in different ways and contexts represent a "speaking-back" to a colonizing Europe of which tragedy has been a principal and unique cultural form?

Tragedy and Its "Others"

I limit this chapter to two arguments. One, the briefer, while imbuing the other, answers the first question (and to a degree the third – which the whole hopes to answer), using bits of a longer argument (Reiss 2002). This shows tragedy to embody, from the Greeks, Western cultures part of whose self-image was of being riven with insuperable divides, scissions evinced as the essence of human life. Humans were split from the divine, other human groups, often each other, surely from the material world.[1] Given as universal, this condition of human actions and their consequences limited human responsibility for them, even as some singular charge could be heroically assumed. Of this, the Oedipus of *Oedipus the King* remains an archetype:

> Apollo, friends, Apollo–
> he ordained my agonies – these my pains on pains!
> But the hand that struck my eyes was mine,
> mine alone – no one else–
> I did it all myself!
>
> (Sophocles 1984: 1329–33)

Oedipus is archetypal because he now grounds a usual Western view of the relation of "self" to, or *against*, divine, social, or some other totality. This is not limited to tragedy, even if it began there. Franz Kafka, in a notorious letter to his father, protested: "My writing was all about you; all I did there, after all, was to bemoan what I could not bemoan upon your breast. It was an intentionally long-drawn-out leave-taking from you, only although it was brought about by force on your part, it did take its course in the direction determined by me" (1954: 177).[2] In Western tragedy, this sensibility is lauded. That the experience was ancient is doubtful, but it is basic to a modern Western sense of "self" as individually facing a greater divine, social, or political whole; indeed, facing-*off* with it in some more or less anguished conflict.

Even as tragedy offers this scythed sense of human life, its aesthetic form in time gave a standard of judgment both within Western culture (as to who and what merited moral respect) and between cultures; a scale of analogy, even a way to possess – naming "tragic" the victims of some impersonally noble "tragedy" of cultural clash, for which, it being a universal state of life, no one was responsible, far less guilty – the "tragic Indian," "tragic mulatto," or anthropological indigene irrevocably doomed to iron night by a golden dawn of civilization's march. Of this standard and scale, the

director's survey of the Royal Shakespeare's 1995 *Macbeth* is near-parody. I shall suggest at the end that a different experience of tragedy produces a different "tragic" reading of life. For, as 'Zulu Sofola writes, for African cultures, all things, including humans, are "endowed with the same Supreme Energy, all creatures are essentially one and the same." If the scissions of tragedy offer a "negative" view of human life, it differs utterly from an "African world view [that], *ab initio*, is positive, [no one] perceiv[ing] himself in essence as a negative force. It is within this cosmic view of life that the African defines the artist and his role in the society" (1994: 4–5).[3]

My second argument, using a few plays by African and Caribbean writers, shows how they have used tragedy, the dramatic form, to reject the cultural implications Agbaw spurns apropos of the *Macbeth* performance and write back against such seizures.[4] Here a caveat: African tragedies are in many languages, many more directly accessible to popular audiences than the English and French of which I write here. Whether some traditional drama is "tragedy" and what split there is between popular and "elite," African- and European-language drama, are 50-year-long debates that this chapter eludes. I perforce refer to few plays; and these target a small elite of European language-speakers. (The African plays do. The Caribbean case differs.) These plays are those most concerned to "turn" *tragedy*, targeting a public knowing the theotetical history and the genre. At issue are uses of what is *called* tragedy in places outside the cultural tradition to which *tragedy* as a genre is historically tied. These uses make tragedy, as a dramatic genre (setting aside the word's spread to wider emotional, ontological, and social feelings, practices, and concepts), so powerful an aesthetic and political tool for developing and renewing embattled cultures.

Colonialism, Racism, and Their Turning

A third into *The Birth of Tragedy from the Spirit of Music*, Friedrich Nietzsche wrote of satyrs, monkeys, and then flute-playing Marsyas, flayed alive by Apollo for daring to vie with the god in music. To represent the cultural transition marked by tragedy, Nietzsche took the satyr, whom the Greeks "did not confound . . . with the monkey. Quite the contrary, the satyr was man's true prototype, an expression of his highest and strongest aspirations": Dionysus *with* Apollo (1956: 52). But the contrast is equivocal. The satyr was intimately bound to music. Many stories tell that Marsyas was the first to play the flute, which he got from Athena when he said that playing it twisted her face. This may be why Nietzsche added his rider about *dem Affen* (apes / monkeys) – the two were not otherwise tied. Playing the flute gave the satyr a fearful mask, like the look associated with the ape, taken as evil, foolish, vain, and lecherous: connotations lasting into the European Middle Ages and Renaissance, to say nothing of later racisms. For Nietzsche, man's satyr prototype, not ape, was apelike. But why, save possibly for the flute, did Nietzsche relate either satyr or ape to tragedy and the transition he took it to signal between Dionysus and Apollo, representing a last moment of union? Was he cued by remarks Aristotle made near the end of the *Poetics*

on corrupt performances of tragedies, and ham actors, like "flute players whirling about" exaggeratedly, or the player Callipides, whom his older contemporary Mynniscus "dubbed an 'ape'" (Aristotle 1995: 1461b30–5)? Was he was cued, more, by a racist sensibility as to what was "outside," different from, the "other" of a European civilization of which tragedy was always a notably sophisticated and sublime evidence? Of the difference between an advanced culture *with* tragedy and others without, the monkey / ape became the very figure.

Aristotle's remarks may have stirred Nietzsche's second remark about a monkey a few pages later, after he writes of "the Heraclean power of music, which reached its highest form in tragedy" (Nietzsche 1956: 68). Accusing Euripides of having killed tragedy, he adds: "you could easily put in its place an imitation that, like Heracles' monkey, would trick itself out in the master's robes" (69). Here, too, ambiguity rules. For Marsyas' face behind his flute was often likened to a player's mask, not so different from the "masked myth" that Nietzsche identified with Heracles' ape. The reference was to Lucian's *Piscator*, whose accuser of false philosophers (but also of "true" ones) remarked to Plato and others that the former were "as if some actor in tragedy... should act the part of Achilles or Theseus, or even Heracles himself... showing off airs and graces in a mask of such dignity." They "made bold... though but apes, to wear heroic masks." He ended by asking: "Have their sort anything to do with you, or have they displayed any similarity or kinship in their mode of life? Aye, 'Heracles and the monkey,' as the proverb has it!" (Lucian of Samosata 1969: 47–9, 55–7).

Later, the ape became for Nietzsche more clearly other than masked imitator, more clearly sign of a passage from a world of wholeness to one of division and abyss. It became the symbol of what was left behind when humans rose to a new stage: "What is the ape to me? A laughing-stock or a painful embarrassment. And just so shall man be to the Super-man: a laughing stock or a painful embarrassment" (1961: 42: "Prologue" §3). This explained why the ape could *only* be a masked imitator of the human. Like tragedy, the ape marked steps in a tragic disjunction of humans from the world. This sense of dissonance, scission, and otherness was already in Plato's *Symposium*, when young Alcibiades arrives at the banquet, heard first as a voice shouting outside. When he does enter the dining area, he is leaning drunkenly on a flute-girl – a Dionysian eruption into reasoned debate. All the others having spoken on love, Alcibiades is asked for a contribution, which, it is finally agreed, will be a praise of Socrates. He starts by likening Socrates to a commonly found small statue of Silenus playing the flute and then to Marsyas, known, we saw, for the ugliness of his face when playing and for having been flayed alive by Apollo for daring to rival him. Adriana Cavarero suggests that this flaying symbolizes rejection of Marsyas' playing as itself figuring pure *phone* (or *voce*) against Apollo's *logos*, body expressive against rational mind. Socrates, speaker and flute-player (Alcibiades recalls), was put to death for maybe analogous reasons. By the end of the written *Symposium*, Platonic *logos* has replaced Socratic *logoi*, his plural voices, the dialogue stressing for its readers that Plato, not vocalic Alcibiades of the suspect Dionysian lifestyle, was Socrates' true heir

(Cavarero 2003: 80–90). Socrates' defense of speech against Thoth's claims and Plato's writing at the end of *Phaedrus* signals the same division. The time of original tragedy, organic representation of the city's cultural, social, political, and religious life has also gone. Femi Osofisan has a like thought in remarking that contemporary African authors have access to a felt reality of corporeal "space," lost to Europeans, because "our continent never produced a Sophocles or an Aeschylus," mediators between voice and *logos* – or not so as to bind the future (2001: 59–60).

Her gloss on the *Symposium* is part of Cavarero's historical study of how *logos* replaced *voice* (vital mark of living body's presence). Socrates as Dionysian flute-player was an image that escaped Nietzsche, for whom, also, Marsyas and apes figured a stage inferior to tragedy, already a falling-off from its voice and music. This figuring especially reveals how tragedy, in its origins and long history, represents the *logos* of a European culture which has seen, and sees, itself essentially in terms of autonomies, disjunctions, and ruptures: human from divine, reason from unreason (or emotion), beauty from ugliness, tame from savage, written from spoken, culture from barbarism, us from others (Reiss 2002). In other cultures, ape figures directly oppose Nietzsche's vision. He, like most Western commentators, saw tragedy as showing Europeans "keenly aware of the terrors and horrors of existence" (1956: 29). Tragedy controlled terror via Aristotelian "pity and fear," casting horror into Form. The ape and flayed Marsyas figured unreason and misrule.

Elsewhere, however, in almost all non-Western cultures, the ape is, or is companion of, trickster gods – Chinese Sun Wu K'ong, Indian Hanuman, sub-Saharan Esu Elegbara, Egyptian Thoth – who mark unions between human and divine, life and death, here and elsewhere, born and unborn, individual and community. They are an imagining of the world as rooted not so much

> in the coincidence of opposites or in the mere passage between structure and antistructure as it is in a perception of life as a rounded wholeness whose faces both mask and disclose each other. These faces are simultaneously present, but this is a simultaneity of process, a turning by which one face not only succeeds but is transformed into the other. (Pelton [1980] 1989: 104)

Even myths of taboo or awful acts have no "aura of tragedy." They are "*overcome*" to ground a "conviction that reality is always moving in a spiral of growth drawing even rebellion, incestuous desire, paternal rage, murderous jealousy, and death into the service of life" (214). This worldview has no place for a tragic sense of "discrepancy" (270).

Derek Walcott writes that the 1950s–1960s Caribbean stage had to catch "not only nostalgia for innocence, but the enactment of remorse for the genocides of civilization, a search for the wellspring of tragic joy in ritual . . . gropings for the outline of pure tragedy, rituals of washing in the first darkness." For actor and director, says this reader of Nietzsche, the "darkness which yawns before them is terrifying. It is the journey back from man to ape" (Walcott 1970: 5–6). Osofisan echoes the sense of a

"space filled with dramatic terror when, according to the Yoruba myth, gods invaded the earth and drama was born" (2001: 55). They also forged ties that only later inflictions broke. Contrariwise, the Caribbean, for Walcott and others, had *always* lived a vast series of dislocations, figured in forms like the "tragic bulk" of Christophe's Haitian citadel, as tragic as the man, who "believed then that the moral of tragedy could only be Christian" and lived in a "tragic anguish" that was the harvest of "divisions" imposed by Europe (Walcott 1970: 12). The return from tragic scission to the ape's prior time would begin delivery "from servitude" by making "a language that went beyond mimicry" (17). The Caliban-like ape would make a new "revelatory" language. If Western culture, in late centuries, has used tragedy to grasp different cultures and control some of their aspects and practices (Reiss 2002: 141–8), Walcott urges uses of tragedy to invert that grasp, Caliban turning, turning on, Prospero and his books.

Tragedy and Wholeness

That is why Soyinka calls his *The Bacchae of Euripides* "a communion rite" and wants it played "as a communal feast, a tumultuous celebration of life" ("Production Note"). It certainly exhibits (among other things) fraught agonies of decolonization, conflicts between "collaborators" and "refusers," marked especially by the now added Slave Leader, enabling a harder probing of specific historical context. But that probing also joyfully reaffirms a culture that unites death and life, divine and secular, social and natural worlds. The disaster and exile that end Euripides' *Bacchae* are upturned. In Soyinka's play a kind of Hegelian *Aufhebung* is performed, whereby dissension and dissonance, conflicts of slavery and rule, belief and disbelief, freedom and force, are overridden, transformed, and conjoined in a "communal feast." The final tearing apart of Pentheus and removal of what Agave saw as his lion "mask" repeat the flaying of Marsyas, enabling the deforming mask to bring new life, as red jets spurt "from every orifice of the impaled head": "What is it, Kadmos, what is it?" asks Tiresias. "Again blood, Tiresias, nothing but blood." "No," says Tiresias, nearing the jets: "It's wine." So Agave, too, steps to the mask to share the liquid, the curtain falling as the "light contracts to a final glow around the heads of Pentheus and Agave" (97): Eucharist aped to meld a deeper union of culture, history, and place, absorbing scraps of another Western tradition to new ends (cannibalizing it, as Maryse Condé has said). For mission Christianity was a potent instrument of European colonial empires. To impose it, they tried to erase local beliefs, to the ruin of culture and language. In Soyinka's *Bacchae*, a chief scrap of that Christianity is taken from its destructive use and transfigured, like tragedy, the play having drawn us to know a dialectic of slavery and racism, religious creed and secular order, metropolitan dominion and colonial underdevelopment – with an optimism (in 1973, three years after the Biafran War) that Soyinka's and others' works would not show for much longer, as political conditions across sub-Saharan Africa fast decayed.

For the theater in Africa, like much artwork in the underdeveloped/"developing" world, is rooted in the sociopolitical – *making*, not allegorizing it. Here – and given this reading of Soyinka's *Bacchae*, what Biodun Jeyifo says of tragedy in Africa is material (despite its contrary take on Soyinka) – Aristotle on tragedy typifies alienated Western *logos*: "a spirit and a vision sublimated from life into an 'organic' form which is eternally 'true' and indifferent to the unfolding of 'life' in history" (1985: 23). Hegel and Marx/Engels disalienated this. For Hegel, tragedy "distilled the *necessary* collisions which the World Historical Spirit, in every age and in its manifestations in racial or national communities, must go through in its self-actualization in history." So opposing forces are "themselves and *more* than themselves . . . , reflect[ing] the contradictions which must be 'annulled', must be negated for spirit to realize itself in an age or epoch." To *this* abstraction, Marx/Engels added an idea of "tragedy based on historical events – reflect[ing] the socio-historical roots of the tragic issue," tragedy waged between social classes or forces (24–5).

I want to show that African writers, directors, and actors who use tragedy annul such a distinction. Yet it is a useful one, just because Western aesthetics after Aristotle *has* taken tragedy to give a universal view of humans' condition and their action. The context and aesthetic choices of African writers seem to deter this view. But if Jeyifo does not comment here on the *Bacchae*, he sees an Aristotelian spirit as a basic temptation of Soyinka's *Death and the King's Horseman* (1975). Soyinka does say in an "Author's Note" that the "Colonial Factor is . . . a catalytic incident merely" for seeing a "metaphysical" conflict "contained in the human vehicle which is Elesin [the King's horseman] and the universe of the Yoruba mind." This conflict can be "fully realised only through an evocation of music from the abyss of transition" between "the living, the dead and the unborn" (2003: 3). For Jeyifo, the play's deviations from historical fact only ratify the Aristotelian "Author's Note" (1985: 27–8). The play is a straightforward, alienated "European" tragedy.

Based on an event that occurred in colonial Nigeria in 1946, the play opens to Elesin Oba gaily entering the marketplace with his followers. During an exchange with his Praise-Singer we learn that he is to commit suicide, following the custom that the King's Horseman joins his dead king, the Alafin, to travel to the ancestral world. The Alafin had died a month earlier; his funeral is now. Their passage to the other world confirms the jointure between the worlds of the dead, the living, and the unborn. Elesin now insists on taking as bride a lovely young woman who walks by. Their issue, he claims, will further tighten the world's bonds. Although she is betrothed to the son of Iyaloja, "mother" of the marketplace, the latter feels bound to reply to the market-women's objections: "The voice I hear is already touched by the waiting fingers of our departed. I dare not refuse" (2003: 16). These first scenes figure a deeper breach. Benedict Ibitokun writes that life's "market phase (in-between birth and death) is notorious for its transitoriness and contingency for which the Yorùbá man provides the ethic of industry, combativity and heroism as its most efficient panacea" (1995: ix). Elesin has grievously destabilized communal bonds.

Forcing himself on mother and daughter, Elesin already betrays the personal, familial, and racial honor that he sees verified by his willing death, vital aspect of their family's ancestral role:

> Life has an end. A life that will outlive
> Fame and friendship begs another name.
> What elder takes his tongue to his plate,
> Licks it clean of every crumb? He will encounter
> Silence when he calls on children to fulfill
> The smallest errand! Life is honour.
> It ends when honour ends.
>
> (2003: 11)

Later, he admits that forcing himself on his bride was a failing, "a weight of longing on my earth-held limbs" (53), one "tainted with the curses of the world," that Iyaloja angrily confirms (55). Elesin's worldly failing actually showed right after the longer passage above, when he threatened, only partly as a joke, that the market-women had not given him a new set of clothes (11–12).

Soon, the white District Officer Pilkings and his wife learn from the local policeman and their house servant of Elesin's planned suicide. We first see them dancing in the confiscated attire of the Oyo ancestral masquerade of death, *egungun*, which they are to wear to a fancy-dress ball that night. We see their blithe racism – surrounded as they are by "pagans" believing in "barbaric customs" (19, 22, 25) – Pilkings' arrogance, bragging of taking Elesin's son Olunde to send him to England to become a doctor (over his father's fury, since an eldest son has to take his father's place if the Horseman's death precedes the Alafin's: 22–3), and their further arrogance in aiming to stop the suicide willy-nilly. And they do, after the wedding, after the successful start of the death rite, after the ball, and after we find that Olunde has returned in time to tell Pilkings how glad he is that he had not prevented his father's death; for to have done so "would have been a terrible calamity... for the entire people" (47). Right away, Elesin is brought in in chains, struggling: "Give me back the name you have taken away from me you ghost from the land of the nameless!" to see and face Olunde: "O son, don't let the sight of your father turn you blind!" Olunde, struck motionless at hearing his father's voice, now turns, picking up on his father's much earlier proud statement to the market-women: "I have no father, eater of left-overs" (49–50).

In jail, Elesin tells Pilkings: "You have shattered the peace of the world forever... If I wished you well, I would pray that you do not stay long enough on our land to see the disaster you have btought upon us." Pilkings has prevented Elesin "from fulfilling my destiny": "Did you think it all out before, this plan to push our world from its course and sever the cord that links us to the great origin? ... The world is set adrift and its inhabitants are lost. Around them there is nothing but emptiness" (50–1). Eventually Iyaloja is let in, along with women bearing the body of Olunde, whose

own suicide has saved "the honour of your household and of our race" (61). Prevented by Pilkings from leaving his cell to recite words of passage to his dead son, Elesin strangles himself with his chains. Iyaloja condemns Pilkings and all he represents:

> you who play with strangers' lives, who even usurp the vestments of our dead, yet believe that the stain of death will not cling to you. The gods demanded only the old expired plantain but you cut down the sap-laden shoot to feed your pride. There is your board, filled to overflowing. Feast on it." But even as she says this, she calls on the Bride properly to close Elesin's eyes and to rebuild bonds: "Now forget the dead, forget even the living. Turn your mind only to the unborn. (62–3)

Jeyifo sees the play as showing "the conflict between a traditional African, organic vision of life and an alien system of discrete laws and social polity, with tragic results for the indigenous system. In other words, it is a confrontation at the level of categorical superstructures wrested from their economic and social foundations" (1985: 34). Elesin's honor marks a patriarchal class distinction whose ready acceptance by the women and others signals its repression. Yet he shows how the policeman Amusa – to say nothing of the Pilkings' house servant Joseph and the market-women – introduces enough of "the real, objective differences between conflicting groups and classes" (35) as to be seen to be depicting them. Nor is the "traditional" vision pure. Jeyifo thinks Soyinka was trying to show the colonized world as one of fragmentation and bewilderment (31). Elesin's failings suggest as much. More gravely, Jeyifo ignores the play's end, seeing as final a prior scene where Iyaloja and the Praise-Singer lament Elesin's and his people's lost honor and his having let the world "plunge over the edge of the bitter precipice" (2003: 62; Jeyifo 1985: 30). Agreeing, Osofisan asserts that "the possibility of tragedy crumbles. Deprived of his status as communal scapegoat, Elesin goes to his death all alone, in a private tragedy which no longer involves the larger human community or our collective destiny" (2001: 81). *His* tragedy *is* that privacy and exile, but the play's *actual* end is Iyaloja's scornful fury at Pilkings and her telling the Bride to care now for the unborn. Also, given Elesin's behavior toward Iyaloja and the Bride, it matters that this exchange is between the two women, and that the women bearing Olunde's body back them as chorus. Consciousness of gender – as well as of race – forces in history is clearly a major ground of the play's conflicts.[5]

The play is more complex than a simple Aristotelian versus Marxist analysis allows. Some things could be analyzed through an Aristotelian grille: Elesin as flawed tragic hero overcome by preordained fate – save that that fate was a communal one he welcomed. Not preordained was the intervention of a colonial world. *That* world made his weakness fatal (as the successful start of the death rite shows). *His* fate was one confirming a community across life and death that the play shows in its insistence on a temporality that makes present, past, and future one whole, and on a spatiality figured by the market, with its community of women, its constant process of exchange, its song and dance. There was no supposal of scission between worlds. That supposal came from outside, as Olunde finds, knowing what he "took" with him

to England and what the colonizers had "over there" (2003: 44): here and there marking not just lack of understanding but, on the colonizers' part, lack of *wanting* to do so. Also, as the plot progresses, the forces of oppression, the fact of internal weakness, and the play of gender and racial forces *together* forge the possibility not just of rejecting the colonizing interloper whom Iyaloja accuses of inability *ever* to understand, but of letting the Bride turn her "mind only to the unborn." *Death and the King's Horseman* may lack the *Bacchae*'s optimism. It establishes the source of disjunction and offers more than a hope of rejoining produced from the play of social and political forces.[6]

That most African and Caribbean tragedies probe sociopolitical realities is a critical cliché. While clearly not limited to African and Caribbean cases, this probing is key to their experience of tragedy. Looking at some of these tragedies, we start to see how cultural contexts shape those realities and attitudes toward them, leading to a perhaps new idea of tragedy. The probing and its centrality are easily explicable: "my theatre," said Aimé Césaire in 1966, "is above all a political theatre because the major problems of Africa are political problems. I would like to reactualize black culture to ensure its permanence, so that it becomes a culture contributing to the building of a new order, a revolutionary order where the African personality can bloom" (cited by Brichaux-Houyoux 1993: 12). Even to its architectural metaphor, the remark rests on and stresses the originally affirmative end of Césaire's *Une saison au Congo* (A season in the Congo, 1966), implying possible achievement of new community and tying the political sphere to a wider jointure, buttressed by culturally embedded spiritual and aesthetic values and media mostly unfamiliar to – or now merely exotic in – European tragedy.

Narratives of Wholeness and Ambiguity

Political probings tend to be focused via four narratives, always overlapping. One involves colonization and its horrors; a second, conflicts that weakened cultures before colonial onslaught; a third, present struggles of cultural values, often involving failures of combative will or action; a fourth, neocolonialism and crimes and corruptions of its elites. All mean to raise awareness and enable political action. Ola Rotimi's *Ovonramwen Nogbaisi* typifies the first (Rotimi saying it also did the fourth; Alston 1989: 95), exploring the ruin of the Empire of Benin by an English army: death of a culture, end of an era, loss of values.[7] Ama Ata Aidoo's *Anowa* tells this first narrative otherwise, showing how Kofi Ako's collusion with the colonizers in the 1870s makes him wealthy but destroys him, his wife Anowa, and traditions. Rotimi's *Kurunmi* epitomizes the second, telling of a precolonial war to uphold traditional values against new deforming ones. Sofola's *Old Wines Are Tasty* illustrates the third, with strife between traditional and neocolonial values baldly direct – ending in the death of the latter's misguided delegate. Césaire's *Saison* exemplifies the fourth – notably in its final version (1973), which ends not with its sanza player's optimistic banter and

opening to a new future (we shall see), but with the tyrant Mokutu publicly "rehabilitating" the Lumumba he has murdered but, fast enraged by the crowd's enthusiasm, calling on his guards to shoot, killing many, including the sanza player (3.8.117). Another such is Rotimi's *If* (1979), bitterly showing the poverty, abusive oppression of the people, "the tragedy of the ruled," and ferociously damning the corrupt wealth and misused power of the neocolonial elites.

A particularly well-known instance of the first narrative is the Swahili playwright Ebrahim Hussein's *Kinjeketile*, which tells the story of the 1906 Maji Maji Uprising against German colonizers in southern Tanganyika. Its first act tells of growing oppression – reaching its peak in the rape of Kitunda's daughter and the whipping of him and his wife. The people fail to rally against the Germans because the tribes continually quarrel. Kitunda advises against war, as this will lead only to myriad deaths, while "the few who will survive will get the same treatment, or worse, as before" (Hussein 1970: 8). Kinjeketile, meanwhile, withdraws into prayer and ritual. As the second act starts we find that "Kitunda is now the leader of the people" and see Kinjeketile come from his house in a trance, do a violent dance around the compound, and finally writhe, possessed (by the spirit Hongo) into the river, where he disappears (12). A day later, he reappears, announcing the tribes' uniting in a new community:

> We will unite and we will be one body
> And as it is in a human body
> when a toe gets hurt,
> the whole body feels the pain.
> When a Mmatumbi gets whipped,
> it is the Mzaramo who will feel the pain.
> When a Mrufiji gets tortured,
> it is the Mngoni who will cry out.
> When we reach this stage, then we will be united,
> We will be one people.
>
> (16)

He says that he has been given water (Swahili *maji*) that will stop bullets from harming its drinker. Together, water and unity will enable them to win. Ritualistically, Kinjeketile blesses messengers who will spread the word and with the water anoints Kitunda as military leader: "Partake of this water and believe. / Believe in the power of the water. / Believe in the water of life" (19).

The next scene shows a different Kinjeketile. When Kitunda asks him worriedly who is the Seyyid Said whose "children" Kinjeketile had said in his post-river trance they would be once they freed themselves (16), the latter replies: "the Sultan of Zanzibar." But he is an Arab, says Kitunda. Kinjeketile is shocked at learning he had said this: "I've been cheated! They have killed me – no, I have killed myself! . . . No, no, no, no! I have been cheated! No! (*He gives a terrible cry and falls down*)" (21): one oppression would be swapped for another. But everyone is gathering, eager for war.

Kinjeketile is unsure whether Hongo is deceiving them and urges "patience." Kitunda insists that all are ready for war and accuses Kinjeketile of crossing the people, who came "because they believe in you" (27). The latter says they will fight, but "must not depend on the water." "You brought the water," Kitunda replies. "You brought these people together. You made them believe in you." Kinjeketile is a liar, and he will tell the people so. "Go tell them," says the other, "And by tomorrow there won't be a single soul out there. And you will be under the white man's rule for ever" (28–9). That's a reason not to wait, says Kitunda, "the people have been made strong by the water, and they want to start the war as soon as possible." Says Kinjeketile: "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" (30). War fervor wins and as all rush off, Kinjeketile is left to say a third time: "The word . . . man breeds a word . . . and it knocks down its creator, destroying him" (39).

Carried away by faith in the water, despite many deaths, the armies ignore Kitunda's plans. Thousands are killed, others are prisoners in the fort they had been attacking. There, they find an unconscious Kinjeketile, terribly beaten by the Germans to force him to say "that the water was a lie." "He has refused" (51). Finally, he is told that if he admits it everyone else will be freed. Alone with Kinjeketile, Kitunda tries to get him to save the people. Kinjeketile cannot:

> Do you know what they will say tomorrow? The officer will say 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 word has been born. Our great-grandchildren will hear of it. One day the word will cease to be a dream, it will be a reality! (53)

He goes to his death. The insuperable contradictions – the people's unity needs belief in the magic water, that very belief ruins them – may be overcome. Kinjeketile now knows that what matters is the people's belief that unity is possible (shown by the war itself) and that, properly mobilized and ordered, it can liberate. He and Kitunda finally know the military and political realities that need ordering. If they do, so will others. To achieve this collective knowledge and action, Kinjeketile's refusal and death are as necessary as the process leading to them. They may create new cultural and political realities (cf. Jeyifo 1985: 35–40; Etherton 1982: 155–65).

One may say the same of Ngugi wa Thiong'o and Micere Mugo's *The Trial of Dedan Kimathi*, where the young finally know why Kimathi also refuses words and thoughts the British and neocolonial Africans seek to impose; or of Maryse Condé's *Mort d'Oluwémi d'Ajumako* (Death of Oluwémi d'Ajumako), where, after trying to evade the fruits of his craven flight from customary death, King Oluwémi realizes that the real act of resistance is to return, appropriating his death and reasserting the force of a

threatened culture. These plays join commentary on colonization to one on present conditions. So, too, does Condé's *Dieu nous l'a donné* (God gave him to us), a tragedy epitomizing the third kind of sociopolitical play: that of failed will or action. Dieudonné, having trained in the colonial capital as a doctor, returns to a small Caribbean town resolved to start a revolt against corrupt rule. Like Kinjeketile, he uses ritual and magic to bring people to him. Unlike Kinjeketile, he is undone by friends' failings and enemies' tricks, and finally killed out of mere sexual jealousy: no hopeful apotheosis here. Divisions are incurably forlorn. So, too, in Rotimi's *If*, where, faced with boundless corruption, "community" is class conflict, union of the poor against the elites, the police, the military: "The day our solidarity dissolves is the day our humanity ends, and our worthlessness begins" (1983: 16). But the same speaker finally knows that these are already the divisions of "individual self-preservation," giving power to those with guns and money. His resolute cry: "We must survive: *together*," yields to the groan of the community's old moral leader: "It is finished" (82–3).

Sylvain Bemba's *Noces posthumes de Santigone* (Posthumous wedding of Santigone, 1988) differs. A tragedy of neocolonial corruption, "inspired" by Sophocles' *Antigone*, it "turns" that play against its tradition, damning division and the violence and agony it fosters and depends on. The actress Melissa Yadé, fiancée, then wife, of her nation's slain leader, is famed worldwide for her performances in England of *Antigone*. *Noces*' action resonates with that play: "We must link up. The audience must feel something real's going on on stage. Has Antigone heard my call to come halfway on the path separating her from me?" ([1988] 1995: 44). Melissa's "halfway" denies familiar individualist readings of *Antigone*, offers reworkings, even as it adopts it. She *knows* that her "inexplicable fear" is due "to what will happen" to her beloved Titus Saint-Just Bund (45). Polynices, she says, will die twice on the night of his assassination (56), once as Titus, once on stage, for her to bury both deniers of colonial and neocolonial power, Saint-Just echoing Lumumba (57). After his killing (recalling that of Burkina Faso's Thomas Sankara in 1987 [10]), she is, like Antigone over Polynices, "watchful" guardian over the "wounded memory of her heroic husband" (62–3).[8] Her African nation, Amandla, slides into violent neocolonialism under the rule of the new "strongman"/Creon, who equates and forbids the old colonial power and Saint-Just's once-hopeful new utopia (70–1) – inspired by Thomas More (30), conservative chancellor made revolutionary. Melissa/Antigone returns home, popular symbol of the good lost by the strongman's coup. She will not be silent on his corruption and butchery, she finally tells him, but not now cause more bloodshed. Leaving to fly back to England, she takes with her as a relic More's book soaked with Titus's blood (88): utopia departing for now. Her plane is destroyed. The Griot has the last word: "Melissa–Antigone blazes from the depths of the ocean-necropolis like a supernova that bursts with all its fires into the vexed dreams of our orphan nights. No superman diver to bring to the surface our memories scattered into twisted starfish. But I tell you, the people's memory will one day spring up again" (93). Like *Kinjeketile* and many others, *unlike Antigone*, the tragedy ends on a note of collective hope.

Soyinka writes of the "tragedy" of "man . . . grieved by a consciousness of the loss of the eternal essence of his being" that traditional Yoruba drama shows: a "severance, . . . fragmentation of essence from self." Simultaneously this drama performs "symbolic transactions to recover his totality of being" (1976: 144–5). That totality alters what the West calls "tragedy." The play takes its protagonist "through areas of terror and blind energies into a ritual empathy with the gods, the eternal presence, who once preceded him in parallel awareness of their own incompletion" (146). Performance conjoins – no finally blasted Pentheus or lasting blind Oedipus here:

> Morality for the Yoruba is that which creates harmony in the universe, and reparation for disjunction within the individual psyche cannot be seen as compensation for the individual accident to that psyche. Thus good and evil are not measured in terms of offenses against the individual or even the physical community, for there is knowledge from within the corpus of Ifa oracular wisdoms that a rupture is often simply one aspect of the destructive-creative unity, thar offenses even against nature may be part of the exaction by deeper nature from humanity of acts which alone can open up the deeper springs of man and bring about a constant rejuvenation of the human spirit. Nature in turn benefits by such broken taboos, just as the cosmos does by demands made upon its will by man's cosmic affronts. Such acrs of hubris compel the cosmos to delve deeper into its essence to meet the human challenge. Penance and retribution are not therefore aspects of punishment for crime but the first acts of a resumed awareness, an invocation of the principle of cosmic adjustment. (1976: 156)

This helps us read Rotimi's redoing of Sophocles' *Oedipus the King*. *The Gods Are Not to Blame* (1968) opens at Ogun's shrine, where Baba Fakunle, "oldest and most knowing / of all Ifa priests" is to divine "the future that this boy / has brought / with him" (1971a: 2), telling King Adetusa and Queen Ojuola "what it is that the boy has brought / as mission from the gods / to carry out on earth" (3). Told he will kill his father and wed his mother, they choose to avert this "bad future," giving the child as "sacrifice / to the gods who have sent / boy down to this Earth" (3). Next we learn that 32 years have passed and that 11 years before, Adetusa was killed and his kingdom of Kutuje instantly attacked by its neighbors, killing, pillaging, and enslaving. The farmer Odewale, hearing of this calamity "in the course of my countless wanderings / from land to land, town to town, village to village," came to Kutuje and gathered its people to defeat those of Ikolu. The Kutuje people elected him king and he took "for wife, / as custom wishes, / Ojuola, the motherly Queen," with whom he has four children. But now sickness has broken out (4–8).

In light of Soyinka's remarks, this opening gives a different frame from that of Sophocles' play. Odewale has a specific future, not unlike Oedipus, but bears it as a "mission from the gods." This mission will open deeper springs of humanity and renew the spirit. Breaking "taboos," it may "compel the cosmos to delve deeper into its essence," to echo Soyinka's phrase. The unborn has knelt before Olodumare, father of the gods, to choose this mission (Etherton 1982: 124; Rotimi 1984: 3–4). Chosen in a divine place of nothing but the good, the choice to defend his people has to be

executed in a world where bad and good mix and matter and emotion are in play (Rotimi 1984: 4–6). Yet equivocal as things are in life, the fact is that the unborn Odewale's choice is still a mission approved by Olodumare. Except for a general sense of dissymmetry between gods and humans (a Gloucester-like sense of "Like flies are we to the gods, they kill us for their sport"), little explains Oedipus' fate. But Odewale is still conjoined to the gods, whose mission he bears – whether or not humans understand it. If Laius and Jocasta cannot hope to stop what Apollo has ordained, they do no wrong in trying to. Adetusa and Ojuola directly counter their son's mission and his divinely ratified free choice. Toward the play's end, the priest of Ogun says: "It is the custom: when the gods command, we men must obey!" (68).[9] They have not. Whatever might have happened (in some unimagined alternative), objectively their acts cause the later calamities.

That his mission binds Odewale to Ogun is marked not just by the Prologue's shrine, but by his "wanderings from land to land, town to town, village to village." Ogun is god of the road, maker of the road over which he led the other gods to earth. "From the earthwomb, Ogún sighted and dug an iron ore which he later forged into a cutlass and, at the head of the other deities, used this artefact to cut a path and throw up a bridge of transition and fraternization between men and deities" (Ibitokun 1995:23). As he led "the procession [that] braved disjunctive chaos and linked man with god, his 'weapon' was not language significantly, but the iron artifact of his forge" (Osofisan 2001: 57). Odewale again echoes Ogun, god of iron and war, always using language to second his use of objects. References throughout the play to his use of iron tools, hoe as farmer, machete and sword as warrior and king (on which he often orders his courtiers to swear), further the association – and hint that by killing Adetusa with a hoe he was effecting part of his mission. Doing so, he indeed called on Ogun; before, for help that the god gives; after, from fear at what he has done: "Ogun . . . Ogun . . . I have used your weapon, and I have killed a man. Ogun . . . !" (49). Adetusa was arrogantly misusing his power and attendants to take the land Odewale had bought, gratuitously insulting and assaulting Odewale (the farmer, too, plowing and reshaping the land, echoes Ogun's primal gesture). The horror that Odewale feels at having killed a man and breached the living community signals the mix of good and bad, matter and emotion that define this world. Rotimi speaks of the "tragic flaw" of Odewale's temper (1984: 5), but this "temper" marks that difference and shows why the *human* agent of renewal suffers even as the community is healed.

Odewale's leadership made him king. Unlike Oedipus' lone defeat of a predatory Sphinx, he attained Kutuje's relief by forging a community for mutual good (1.1 shows the same effort to defeat the epidemic by not just human community but firm bond with land and gods: Odewale is also a healer; 12–13). It is in community, too, that he leaves Kutuje. After Ojuola's death and his self-blinding, their four children run out to greet him, taking his hand, quarreling as if all were normal. As they leave to resume roaming, they pass "through a mass of Kutuje townspeople who kneel or crouch in final deference to the man whose tragedy is also their tragedy" (72). Michael Etherton sees this as a fraud: "what is seen at the end of the play is the tragedy of one

man, not of Kuruje or of the Yoruba kingdom" (1982: 127) – a note bred in part by what he sees as Rotimi's failed melding of ancient Greek and Yoruba cosmologies, in part by the playwright's claim that a major aspect of the play was its gloss on the Biafran War (e.g., Rotimi 1984: 1–2). As to the first, I am saying that Rotimi is melding nothing. He is *turning* the Greek story, making it one joining realms of being and experience, not marking their division – Odewale's is fundamentally, as Sofola says more generally of tragedy, "a life-saving action" (1994: 11). As to the second (where the gods not being blamed were superpowers whom many blamed for the outbreak and continuance of war), however such a gloss may be analyzed in detail, it is inescapably an aspect of the play. Grievous as Odewale's departure is, it does achieve an apotheosis – more *Oedipus at Colonus* than *Oedipus the King*. His leaving heals Kutuje, and him. He is returning to the road, following again Ogun's path to "anywhere," as he answers one of his children: "wherever we get tired, there we rest to continue again" – a life-journey in the company of children, offspring of a broken taboo whose breaching has led to a deeper sense of a community of humans, the world, and the gods.[10]

Efua Sutherland's reworking of *Alcestis* in *Edufa* (1967), out of Akan tradition, shows an analogous reshaping, but now one that stresses the irrevocable harm of breaching necessary bonds between levels of being – no demigod can bring back Ampoma as Heracles does Alcestis. But nor is *Edufa*'s emphasis on divine intervention or virtue and its redemptive value, as it is in *Alcestis*. The change of titular protagonist matters. In *Edufa* emphasis falls on the husband Edufa's belief that he can defeat ties of past, present, and future world(s), here and there, gods and humans. It falls on his belief that he can do so by manipulating them as he has his townspeople, buying his way into a postcolonial present whose very existence would mark the passage of a traditional world of beliefs into a dustbin of time hammered from a History supplied by another's narrative. He thinks that if he replaces traditional history with a new present and future, its forces lose their power. Admetos at last knows that he must die his own death, sacrificing another's life strips his of value (198, 895–9, 940, 1082). With the *voluntariness* of Alcestis' sacrifice, this knowledge may justify her recovery. Edufa finds that to play with life and death is to play not with powers whose divinity sets them somehow "elsewhere" but with powers of the human heart and soul. It is they that embody and forge ties with the worlds of the gods, the ancestors, and the unborn. It is they that make the path between them irrevocable.

The plays differ in tone, structure, and plotting. By moderns, *Alcestis* may be set among Greek tragedies. This was less clear in antiquity. A Hellenistic grammarian says that it was fourth in a tetralogy. *Alcestis*, while not a satyr play, held the position of one, and the grammarian adds that, like *Orestes*, it was "rejected from tragic poetry in that they begin with disaster and end in joy and delight, which belong rather to comedy" (Euripides 1988: 63). This was partly to differ with Aristotle, who held that a happy end to a tale of catastrophe was often best, and did not by itself make a play not a tragedy (e.g., *Poetics* 1545a4–9). *Alcestis*' form is that of all tragedy. From the start, catastrophe impends. It does so via *hamartia*, which may be what Pheres,

Admetos' father, calls his cowardice, but which may, as so often, be ignorance: of the reality of death, of his need for Alcestis, of the fact that the greater hurt may be to live – with loss, ignobility, weakness, of people's bonds. It does so, too, by direct divine intervention. Alcestis knowingly agrees to die for Admetos, once Apollo had tricked the Fates into letting another die for him, in return for his generous care of the god, doomed by Zeus to a year's slavery for having killed the Cyclops (*Alcestis* 10–18).[11] We know this at the start, and the play is both a dirge and Admetos' gradual learning of his own character, and that to live without Alcestis is not to live at all.

An equivalent to Apollo's elucidative prologue has no place in *Edufa*. Rather than serving as an explanation, Edufa's sister's opening presence is elegiac. Abena's lament evokes a feeling of being embedded in place, even as it elicits a mysterious sense of other, not quite this-worldly places:

> Dreamlike views of mist rising
> Above too much water everywhere.
> I heard tonight,
> And stretched thin through the mist, calling.
> Heard in that calling, the quiver of Ampoma's voice.
> Thought I saw suddenly in the restless white waters,
> The laterite red of an ant-hill jutting
> And rocking.
> A misty figure on its topmost tip,
> Flicking her fingers like one despairing.
> I panicked, and came to this door, listening,
> But all was silence–
>
> (Sutherland [1975] 1987: 97)

The wealthy Edufa, benevolent, generous, and popular throughout the town, has abruptly changed his lifestyle. His doors are no longer open; he is no longer welcoming or laughing. "True that Ampoma, his wife, is unwell; but . . . she is not mortally ill," so better to keep doors open and laughter alive (98–9). Now, the place is shut, people excluded, the communal ideal of hospitality shut down. The audience no more knows the sense of this than does Abena that of her brother's change. Later, we find that Ampona, too (unlike Alcestis), did not know the seriousness of her oath to die for Edufa, since it was elicited during what he passed off as a joke.

As in *The Gods Are Not to Blame* (which is not to elide Akan and Yoruba beliefs), *people* make or break ties. Just as society needs their maintenance and an equitably balanced exchange of obligations, duties, and mutual recognitions, so do relations across times, places, and worlds. Gods are no more responsible than people, people no less so than gods and spirits. That is why, in most African traditions, people "believe that they can plead, question and dialogue with the forces that govern and control their lives" (Chinyowa 2001: 8). People's bonds in time, place, life and death are stressed in *Edufa*'s first scene as a chorus of women go by, singing a dirge for a woman who has died earlier, reminding Edufa and Seguwa ("a matronly member of the

household," 95) that "the bridge we are now crossing is between the bands of life and the banks of death" (102). Only little by little do we come to understand that something is off kilter in the matter of Ampoma's illness:

> Yet, how good that I should not be the one to live beyond your days. I could not live where you are not. I could not live without you, my husband. (104)
> Let me talk with you a little longer in the sun before I step into the dark where you cannot see me. Soon, my pledge will be honoured. (104)
> Over me, the sun is getting dark . . . My husband! Watch the death that you should have died . . . Stay over there in the sun. Children! My children! If I could cross this water I would pluck you back from the mountain side. Children! Hold my hand! (105)

By scene 3, through Seguwa, we begin to see more clearly:

> I wish I could break this lock on my lips.
> Let those who would gamble with lives,
> Stake their own.
> None I know of flesh and blood,
> Has right to stake another's life
> For his own.
>
> (106)

The next scene explains fully, doing so via Edufa's father, Kankam, in a major departure from *Alcestis*. There, Pheres' and Admetos' fight is one of acrid mutual accusation that ends with Pheres indicting Admetos for his cowardice and Admetos disowning his father for not dying in his place, old and decrepit as he is. In *Edufa*, we learn that Kankam had disowned his son three years earlier, because, aching "to be emancipated," Edufa sought wealth, power over others, a name for philanthropy (self-centered lie as this was), and capitalistic *possession* – a sense of self and practice drawn from that imperial History named earlier as oppressive of traditional, local histories. This is quite unlike Admetos, whose generosity and hospitality signaled just rule, whether shown to Apollo, Heracles, or veiled Alcestis at the end. Kankam's first words to Edufa accuse him of the opposite: "Don't let us fail, however, on the sacredness of courtesy. Had I entered the house of a total stranger, he would have given me water to drink, seeing I'm a traveller" (108). Even Pheres accused Admetos of nothing such. But Kankam says of Edufa: "He grew greedy and insensitive; insane for gain; frantic for the fluff of flattery" (113), uneasy of his "reputation" (114), and fearful now that Kankam "might have turned tongues against me" (108). Without parallel in *Alcestis* is our learning of Edufa's fears and his savage trick on Ampoma. Kankam wants Edufa to accept the responsibility essential to being a human, in all the bonds that that means: "What do I want, you say? . . . I want the courage that makes responsible men. I want truthfulness. Decency. Feeling for your fellow men. These are the things I've always wanted. Have you got them to give?" (108). Above all, he adds, he wants: "The life of your wife Ampoma, from you" (109).

In Euripides, Heracles plays the savior. Here, Kankam might have done the same, thereby reaffirming natural human ties. He tells his son that he knows Edufa visited a diviner who forecast his death, knows the diviner gave him a charm to enable another to die in his stead if they swore an oath to do so, recalls the evening when Edufa joked about the request to know who would die for him. Kankam adds that he knows that Edufa later told Ampoma of her peril, only to elicit greater resolve, even after showing her the charm (112). Edufa angrily denies all this. How could one "educated . . . to another plane of living" believe such things (109)? He desperately accuses his father of speaking "drivel," lying, and then says: "Father, are you mad?" Silence reigns. Kankam cries: "[*Shocked*] *Nyame* above! To say father and call me mad! My *ntoro* within you shivers with the shock of it!" (111). Edufa has broken another taboo. In Akan belief, says Kwasi Wiredu, a human being is four joined elements: *ōkra*, a bit like Greek *psuchē*, life force, part of *Onyame*, the supreme being, and whose leaving is death; *sunsum*, character, the specific person you are; *ntoro*, received from your father, site of inherited traits; *mogya*, received from your mother, fixing clan identity (1980: 47). This joining means that "a human creature is not a human person except as a member of a community" – communit*ies* (1996: 19). Edufa has broken the joining. He is thus obsessed with false speech, while Kankam stresses the power of oath-swearing and truth of diviners, saying that if needed he can "broadcast my [true] story in the market place" (110) – whose significance we saw. Edufa's sham on the fatal evening is a "treacherous" misuse of language (111). To Edufa's offer to swear that all Kankam's facts are false, he just asks how his son can confuse oath-swearing and lying (112).

Finally, he asserts that the only way to defeat a true oath is with even stronger and truer language. "An oath once sworn will always ride its swearer. But there might still be a chance to save her." Edufa suggests paying for a Western-style doctor. He has the money to "pay their fees." The only way, his father pleads, is to "confess and denounce your wrong," publicly destroy the charm, and then "raise the prayer of our souls together." It is now that Edufa offers to swear that the whole affair is false. "If you must lie," says Kankam, "don't swear about it in a house in which death is skirmishing, and the ancestral spirits stand expectantly by. A man may curse himself from his own lips. Do not curse the house in which your children have to grow" (112–13). Edufa again replies: "I hope you haven't talked like this to anyone. You could do so much harm. Unjustly" (114). Kankam leaves in scorn, while Edufa regrets that his "emancipation" will not let him wholly deny the reality of charm and oath. The scene is crucial. The breach with his father, the breach in himself, the role of true language and balanced ties between humans, spirits, and the world are the play's core. More, it is the breach that takes effort, the "market" exchange is normal, natural, and wholesome: as the chorus soon says: "While we mourn another's death, it's our own death we also mourn" (117), or: "Crying the death day of another / Is crying your own death day" (120).

Breaking taboos in the name of "emancipation," these are the ties Edufa ruptures. Once split, they cannot easily be repaired. That is why Heracles' counterpart, Senchi, may be appealing, in a nomadic beachcomber kind of way, but his strengths are those

of raising a smile and a song. It is why Ampoma, not believing Edufa's earlier vow that he will not remarry, enacts an elaborate and "embarrassingly" public ceremony to shame him into keeping it (146–7). It is why her several falls on the sign of the sun drawn on the house's steps take on such sinister meaning. Says Seguwa: "Bad signs. They would pose no menace if no oath had been sworn, and we were free to read in her present condition normal disabilities for which remedy is possible. As it is, the reality of that oath makes Edufa for all time guilty, no matter how or when she meets her end" (149). Once "the oath [is] sworn" on the "evil charm," it cannot be undone: "We cannot reason without it now" (151). That is why Ampoma cannot return from death. If the chorus can hope to begin repairing the breach by calling on tears to "make a river of sorrow," the same river with which the play began, and for someone to "go and tell her mother" (153–4), tying back to the earlier funeral chant, Edufa cannot. In his false emancipation, he is, as Seguwa said, guilty for all time.

So it is little wonder if, in *his* final madness – for where Kankam's continuing beliefs and behavior were *not* mad, Edufa's are – he turns into a crazed version of Euripides' *Heracles*:

> Where is my leopard skin? I'll teach Death to steal my wives. . . . Death, I will lie closely at the grave again, and when you come gloating with your spoil, I'll grab you, unlock her from your grip and bring her safely home to my bed. And until then, no woman's hand shall touch me.

"She is dead," the Chorus says with finality, while Senchi holds Edufa. But he "wrenches free":

> The last laugh will be mine when I bring her home again. I will bring Ampoma back. Forward, to the grave. [*He moves in strength towards the back courtyard, roaring.*] I will do it. I am conqueror! [*His last word, however, comes as a great questioning lament.*] Conqueror . . . ? (153)

This parodies Heracles: "Once I've run out from my place of ambush and seized [Death] and encircled him in these strong arms of mine, there's no one alive who will ever drag him thence, his lungs bursting for breath, till he has yielded the woman up to me" (*Alcestis* 846–9). He does just that (1141–2). Not so Edufa. If his leopard-skin parodies Heracles' traditional lion-skin, it also picks up on Kankam's earlier remark about Edufa's demanding abnormal sacrifices: "Beasts are normal sacrifices, but surely you know they are without speech. Beasts swear no oath to die for others, Edufa" (110). Nor did Edufa, who now misuses language, even more so in his final madness. His is a beast's roaring. Having split, and split from, community, he is no longer human.

There may be no need to point out the play's other dimension, to which Rotimi refers, in writing of *The Gods Are Not to Blame*, as the "secular." At the end of *Alcestis*, Admetos declares that life will now be better. Lessons have been learned and he knows what real happiness can and should be (1157–8) – although over the end of the play

hangs the possibility that if Alcestis has not died for him, then Admetos must now die his own death. *Edufa* ends with the madness brought on by the hope and results of a false emancipation. Traditional bonds are shattered. "Blank," says Senchi, Heracles' counterpart:

> I have ended up blank once again. All that is left, the laughter of the flowers in her lifeless arms, and the lingering smell of incense. [*He descends*]
> And over me, the taur extension of the sky – to which I raise my song.
> Will someone go and tell her mother? [*He sings*]
> And if I find you
> I'll have to worship you
> I must adore you
> Nne
> Nne nne
> O mother.
>
> (154)

Edufa was written when early hopes of cultural recovery and political sovereignty in Ghana were fading, when hopes for mutual enriching of cultures were being devoured by realities that looked more like a ruin of values. If Sutherland's "comedy," *The Marriage of Anansewa*, seemed to hold that these hopes might be realized, Ananse's daughter's "modern" values joining traditional ones of "Chief-of-chiefs," *Edufa* implies that a ruined culture may be irrecoverable – at least for its Edufas.[12] Yet not all may be lost; a flicker of ongoing cycles stays. The split world that Edufa has made is neither good nor real. It is blank. People may or may not "find" and "worship" this broken world. As its potential loss points to colonial causes, its very blankness points to a still alive wholeness. One recalls again Dionysus' companion Silenus in Nietzsche's *Birth of Tragedy*: "What would be best for you is quite beyond your reach: not to have been born, not to *be*, to be *nothing*" (29). Out of this nothing art is born, out of this blank life can come, and social renewal: "not only does the bond between man and man come to be forged once more . . . , but nature itself, long alienated [, hostile], or subjugated, rises again to celebrate the reconciliation with her prodigal son, man" (23). "Our joy," echoes the Slave Leader in Soyinka's *The Bacchae of Euripides*, "Is the great joy of union with mother earth / And the end of separation between man and man":

> Said Bromius,
> I am the gentle comb of breezes on the slope of vines
> The autumn flush on clustered joy of grapes
> I am the autumn sacrament, the bond, word, pledge
> The blood rejuvenated from a dying world
> I am the life that's trodden by the dance of joy
> My flesh, my death, my re-birth is the song
> That rises from men's lips, they know not how.
>
> (38)

Spiritual and social, material and political, moral and epistemological intertwine, and the very intertwining signals not just the possibility, but the actuality of cultural wholeness. The ones are not "allegories," "symbols," or "representations" of the others (as some have suggested of art and culture, with respect to the political). Together they provide a mutual *poiesis*, to use another old Greek word, an organic *making*, a *forging* of lived actuality and its understanding. Such tragedies in their context approach something like the original meaning of *mimesis*, which Aristotle held the capacity – necessity – that most made humans *human*: not *re*production but production, a making that was the same as that of the gods. One sees why, speaking of no wholly different context, Nietzsche asserted, in the first foreword to *The Birth of Tragedy*, "that art is the highest human task, the true metaphysical activity" (1956: 17). These reworkings of tragedy give meanings to the intertwinings of social life in the world. They bring people, we shall see Ato Quayson argue, into engagement with their history. Doing so, they are an organic part of the making of that history.

A like figuring of ruptured bonds and potential wholeness, and yet their final bringing-together, is in 'Zulu Sofola's *Wedlock of the Gods*. Two lovers, Ogwoma and Uloko, have been forbidden to marry by Ogwoma's father. Wanting a high bride-price to buy a cure for Ogwoma's sick brother, Ogwoma's father forced her to wed the hated Adigwu, who, three years later, has died. Ignoring the three-month mourning period at the end of which she must marry Adigwu's brother, the widowed Ogwoma has urged Uloko to visit: she is pregnant with their child. Odibei, Ogwoma's spying mother-in-law, catches them together. She thinks that her unfounded and untrue suspicions that Adigwu was murdered are confirmed. From then on Odibei plans to kill Ogwoma. Taboos and bonds have been broken, families shamed, but nothing allows Odibei to judge – especially as she is seeking "vengeance" on Ogwoma from the first, when she has no cause to believe in murder – save only that she knows, as did Ibekwe and Nneka, Ogwoma's parents, that she hated Adigwu. They had forced her to marry him despite this, for which the family later upbraid Ibekwe, causing further breaches. They insist that he had resources other than unjustly forcing Ogwoma into a hostile marriage. He accuses them of hypocrisy, since they had not helped at other times.

What we see, again, are results of familial, social, and spiritual ruptures in the destruction of lives. Odibei finally manages to poison Ogwoma, Uloko kills Odibei and poisons himself with the drug Ogwoma drank, falling next to her, singing over her body a song of hope:

> Your love will now come with you.
> Ours is the wedlock of the gods.
> Together we shall forever be lightning
> and thunder – inseparable . . .
> (1972: 55–6)

Here, too, a breach was initially made by a demand for wealth that blasted the lives of two others. No balance can be set by destroying vital bonds, and a first disequilibrium

leads to a rushing spiral of disaster. The final breach of the taboo on mourning and a widow's marrying her dead husband's brother confirms the ruptures of ties between families, between gods, spirits, and humans, present, past, and future. Of the violence ending *Wedlock*, Sofola noted that what matters are not so-called "age-old traditions," not even, in a simple way, immoral behavior, but that "those violent deaths are going to affect the families because of reincarnation." Disrupting life instantly, they more importantly unbalance the long-term course of community and persons (James 1990: 148–9).

Something not dissimilar is found in Sofola's *King Emene I*, where the king of the title is on the throne because his mother, Agrippina-like, has murdered his half-brother. Emene is ignorant of this, but takes from the start a kind of Neronian stance, insisting on hectoring and bullying everyone. Yet his authority is visibly in doubt. He rejects the oracle that repeatedly tells of something rotten in the state and of an evildoer in the heart of the royal family. He takes this, rather, Oedipus- or Odewale-like, as proof that ministers and council are plotting against him. Exiling the oracle's interpreter, he becomes increasingly paranoid, more and more insistent on holding the ceremonial week of peace, even as his people tell him he cannot do so until the oracle says that state and palace have been "cleansed." The result is rebellion, effort to overcome ever-widening gaps and oppositions. In the end, Emene finds that his mother Nneobi is indeed guilty. The fact makes him more guilty: it had been in his power to discover and atone for the murder. At first, his response is to rage and threaten his mother with a dagger, but as he does so, "it thunders violently, lightning barely misses the King; he stops abruptly, turns away and walks steadily and deliberately to the inner palace." As "those on stage stare at him not knowing what to make of the sudden change," it thunders again. Going after him, they discover that he has used the knife on himself (Sofola 1974: 45).

Emene knows the thunder and lightning are divine signs of *his* responsibility. This is not Oedipus saying that while Apollo ordained his actions, he has finally taken responsibility for them on himself. Nothing in Thebes is healed, save briefly. The disasters of the House of Thebes continue down the years: we know what will happen to Antigone, Ismene, Eteocles, and Polynices. The world's divisions continue, ordained by gods, accepted by humans. In *Emene*, the world had been whole. And while Emene may not at first be liable for the growing disjunction (Nneobi is), his behavior affirms it. In the end, the gods let him know that only he can ravel up the world's soul again. He does so, remaking jointure. Here, the *fact* of violence has a contrary role to that in *Wedlock*. There, it ratified the breach, here it hopes to heal it. The final violence is on him who upheld and prevented atonement for the first. Only thus is there hope of healing ruptured bonds; here, by destroying their advocate. That was Soyinka's and Rotimi's point: these experiences involve lived bonds with past, present, and future worlds which are all part of a person, however much they must often be read in "secular," sociopolitical terms – though I think that risky in the case of these two Sofola plays.

Debate on Tragedy and Its Utility

Emene, like *The Gods Are Not to Blame*, *The Bacchae of Euripides*, and *Noces posthumes de Santigone*, is also a commentary on and manifestation of the uses of tragedy; more exactly, perhaps, on how tragedy can be turned to the needs of new contexts, demands, and desperations. Likewise, John Pepper Clark-Bekederemo turns to many of these matters in his dramatic duo, *Song of a Goat* and *The Masquerade*. These interrogate forms, meanings, and uses of tragedy, adapting a very Greek tone of divine implacability to the story of a family suffering under a curse which has made an elder son, Zifa, unable to conceive more children (he who as "a dutiful son" had "brought back home among his people" for proper burial his dead father, outcast by his village for "the white taint," – leprosy: 1961: 9). We are not told why Zifa must suffer personally from impotence or communally from constant fear of personal attack – save perhaps that he has put family honor before village safety. As *Song* opens, the Masseur (a Tiresias-like character) tells Ebiere, Zifa's wife, whom Zifa has sent to consult him, that the "ways of our land" say that she should no longer have just one child, but lie with her husband's younger brother – enabling "a retying / Of knots" (5). As she indignantly runs off, Zifa arrives, uttering vague hints that he has been cast out by the village and will be more so if it learns his impotence. "All this is folly, Zifa," says the Masseur. "No / Man ever built a house or cleared / A piece of ground all by himself" (6). Singular hardships are always solved communally. In the springtime of her life (a constant theme evoking Greek tragedy's performance at the Spring Dionysia), Ebiere, says the Masseur, should not be forced to "Wait still when all the world is astir / With seed and heavy from flow of sap" (7). The Masseur's efforts stir an Oedipal outbreak on Zifa's part: "You lame thing, you crawling piece / Of withered flesh with the soul of a serpent" (10). Along with clear commentary on the genre of tragedy, at stake are the situations of person and family in the community and cycles of time and place.

Finding later that his brother Tonye has indeed had sex with his wife, Zifa first humiliates him in a scene heavy with symbolism by forcing him to break a cooking pot by stuffing into it the head of a ritually slaughtered goat, then chases him with a cutlass, only for Tonye to hang himself first, so, Zifa cries, "again perform[ing his, the elder son's] part" (32). Zifa drowns himself in the ocean. *Masquerade* continues this Oedipal story, with Tufa, son of Tonye and Ebiere (but not knowing his incestuous origins), going to another village and courting Titi. His past is revealed just before they are to marry, but Titi refuses to give Tufa up, saying that he is not responsible for or to this ancestry. Her furious father shoots Titi dead and, during a later fight, Tufa as well.

Besides Greek-like elements of the story itself, both plays' titles refer to that tradition. The word "tragedy" derives from *trágos*, "goat." Tragedians always played in mask. Both plays have choruses. They stress, as do most of these plays, what critics see common to African drama, no matter what its origin: "Song and dirge, drum and dance, color and costuming, poetry and pageantry, all commingle" (Osofisan 2001: 65). "Some of the characteristics of an African Theatre," Rotimi adds,

> should be those that can be easily identified with African culture itself. Music is one, dance is another. Again, there is the use of crowds. Most African celebrations involve some amount of communal participation, and the use of crowds in a play is one way of establishing some definition of an African Theatre. (Alston 1989: 83)

What Mineke Schipper says of Wale Ogunyemi's "music-drama," *Obalúayé*, applies widely: "Music, dancing, drama, décor and light effects unite towards a multi-faceted performance" (1982: 55). "Rather than rely on the written word *per se*," says Kennedy Chinyowa, "the African's histrionic sensibility... derive[s] its context from ritual celebration and its meaning from symbolic enactment, direct audience participation and stylised artistic forms such as mime, song, dance, movement, music, poetic rhythm, costume, gesture, dialogue and role-playing" (2001: 4). The presence of these media varies; massive in the Rotimi and Soyinka plays mentioned and in Sofola's *King Emene*, more muted in *Wedlock* or in Clark-Bekederemo's two plays, if not in his *Ozidi*, which not only uses all these media but, as so often in these plays, various practices (not least a "Storyteller") to draw in the "so-called" audience, made "an integral part of that arena of conflict; it contributes spiritual strength to the protagonist through its choric reality which must first be conjured up and established" (Soyinka 1976: 39).

Such media, with ancient Greek equivalents but few in later European traditions, extend the staged community to Soyinka's "so-called" audience. This is what makes these plays secular commentary as well as communal rite. Writing of *Ozidi*, Lokangaka Losambe thus remarks:

> As in several other African plays, such as Ngugi wa Thiong'o and Ngugi wa Mirii's *I Will Marry When I Want* (1982) and Sonny Labou Tansi's *Parentheses of Blood* (1986), in *Ozidi* the main tragic "hero" is a community. The main tragic flaw of Ozidi and that of his son cannot be separated from the communal tragic flaw of the whole Orua community, whose eccentric power and material lust has led them to ravage neighbouring communities and enslave many people. (2001: 83–4)

To this end, too, *Ozidi* appropriates

> the English language, making it carry the baggage of the expressive culture of the Ijo people [the author's father was Ijo]. Clark-Bekederemo's use in this play of what he calls "indirection," punctuated by Ijo riddles, songs, ritualistic incantation and invocation, gives a sense of conviction to characters' actions and enhances the tragic effect of the play. (Losambe 2001: 91)

This appropriation is usual. Suzanne Brichaux-Houyoux notes that the Martinican Aimé Césaire used African terms in *Une saison au Congo* "to make the theatre into an authentic cultural instrument," using not just local languages to achieve "an African tonality," but "calling on Bantu symbolism and modes of thought and expression by using in particular many proverbs and animal stories to reinforce" it (1993: 15). That

this itself marks collective investment is seen by Ngugi's experience while working on *Ngaahika Ndeenda* (I will marry when I want):

> when it came to song, dance and ceremony, the peasants, who of course knew all about it, were particular about the accuracy of detail..., *they were also particular about language.... They were concerned that the various characters, depending on age and occupation, be given the appropriate language.* 'An old man cannot speak like that', they would say. 'If you want him to have dignity, he has to use this or that kind of proverb'. Levels of language and language-use and the nuances of words and phrases were discussed heatedly. (Ngugi 1986: 54, emphasis in original)

The language used in these plays and performance itself creates *local* space.

This is why a play like *Ozidi*, written in 1966, the year before the Biafran War erupted, as tensions in Nigeria neared breaking pitch, can be read as forceful comment on events. *Song of a Goat* (1961) and *The Masquerade* (1964), it is true, have been seen to "omit... any deep sense of communal engagement across time or place." Gerald Moore adds that if most African traditions "offer means by which contamination can be explained or cleansed," and if these "may involve the death or expulsion of a single person," these two plays expiate nothing, while *Masquerade* ends by predicting more disaster, "full of danger / And portent for all of us" (1991: 69; Moore [1969] 1970: 149). Moore recalls a creation myth of the Ijo that tells how the unborn make an irrescindable choice of attributes to be carried through life, but with no suggestion "that the consequences of choice endure beyond the life-span of the person making it" ([1969] 1970: 150). Written as political conditions were already showing grave signs of falling apart, one could hold that *Masquerade* was saying exactly that: its tragedy, too, was to be a communal one. But Zifa's case is already so, for his values are indeed set against the community's welfare. Ebiere's first reaction to the Masseur is not continued; Zifa's is, and it is his acts that bring disaster. One might also hold that Clark used the very form, tragedy, to show how colonial impositions had broken traditional ties, set individualist against communal values. *Song of a Goat* in particular is a play *about* the genre, tragedy. Tragedy itself, then, guides the spectator to how that history and its deformations are to be seen, Western *ratio* setting its grip on a different culture. Ezenwa-Ohaeto has been concerned to argue that disaster ensues when "the individual refuses to accept the dictates of his society" (1982: 9), when he splits from community. Here, tragedy would show the onset of deep scission in community and its long consequences. In this context, tragedy may end by drawing these out, as in *King Emene* or *Edufa*; by leaving them as a peril hanging over some hopeful reconnection, as in *The Gods Are Not to Blame*, *Wedlock of the Gods*, or *Noces posthumes de Santigone*, or it may offer a healing like the dance ending *Ozidi*, rejoining actors and audience, or the "Eucharistic" ceremony that ends *The Bacchae of Euripides*.

Césaire attains such a transfiguration in his *Tragédie du roi Christophe*, whose protagonist also walks narrowly between using Western history and fighting it. Ex-slaves above all (especially in the diaspora of a Middle Passage whose perpetrators purposely destroyed their victims' cultures) have no choice but to use their oppressors'

tools to dismantle their power and their victims' alienation. His Christophe thus exclaims:

> All humans have the same rights. I agree. But among common peoples some have more duties than others. There is the inequality. An inequality of obligations, you understand? Whom will you have believe that all humans, all I say, without exception, without particular reason, have gone through deportation, slave trade, slavery, collective reduction to bestiality, total violation, utter insult, that all have received, spattered on body and face, all-denying sputum! Only us, madame, do you hear? only us niggers! ([1966] 1970: 59)

That is why one has to "succeed in the impossible" in fighting "against History," while using tools from that History (62), just as, I suggested, Clark-Bekederemo was *using* tragedy. Here, the oppressors have disjoined colonized Haiti, remade it in their own disjunctive image:

> Stone, I'm looking for stone!
> Cement! I'm looking for cement!
> Everything is disjoined, oh! to get all that upright!
> Upright and in the world's face, and solid!
> ([1966] 1970: 45)

His citadel becomes the image of this demand and duty. Like Pentheus, Christophe dies in the trap forged by this disjointed history.

In this sense, Christophe is a familiar tragic figure, "walking to death through the solitude that progressively settles around him, and the distance that gradually settles between him and his people" (Césaire, in Auclaire-Tamaroff and Auclaire-Tamaroff 1986: 124). But as his last followers bear his body through the mountains toward the citadel, it is ever more "weighty." They set him down, stand him "upright," "facing south," to make his own journey, his own "stature," remaking Africa in, and bringing Shango to, Haiti; "upright King" standing in newly affirmed liberty (Césaire [1966] 1970: 150–1). For "Christophe is the incarnation of Shango, violent, brutal, tyrannical god, but also beneficent, god of destructive thunder and, at the same time, of fertilizing rain." In the play, he is attended and softened by Hugonin: "As Christophe is Shango," says Césaire, "Hugonin is Esu," the Yoruba trickster god. "Alongside inflexible Shango, Hugonin, Protean character, forming an inseparable pair. Alongside power weighing with all its weight, fluidity and change. That is why the moment of revolution, which is Time's operative moment, is Hugonin's" (in Auclaire-Tamaroff and Auclaire-Tamaroff 1986: 124). When his followers leave Christophe/Shango's body erect, in the open, he (re)joins those mountains and forests of Haiti whose praises he had sung as the symbol of liberty (Césaire [1966] 1970: 23), asserting a history in, specific to, his Caribbean geography. Not unlike Kinjeketile, a word makes bond: for those bearing his ever more "weighty" body to the mountains, "his weight is his word" (Césaire [1966] 1970: 150), word that will bear a new community into its future.

This differs wholly from Walcott's earlier *Henri Christophe* (1949), which tells of Haiti's revolt, whose leaders, Dessalines, Christophe, Pétion, Sylla, Brelle, and Vastey, brawl in a swirl of self-interest, marking not community but venalities of power. At the end, Pétion arrives offstage, killing a shrieking Vastey: the cycle of bloodshed and corruption continues. The curtain falls on Christophe raising a pistol to his head (Walcott 2002: 107). The disparity marks the import of historical context. Walcott wrote not just as Haiti was falling into the further horrors of the Duvalier regime but when the rest of the Caribbean was still colonial. By the 1960s, much of the Caribbean and Africa was, was soon to be – or thought it might be – politically sovereign. This counts, too, in Césaire's next tragedy, *Une saison au Congo*, whose 1973 ending has Mokutu killing the once-hopeful sanza player. In 1966, this play enacted *Tragédie*'s hopes. Lumumba, "victim and hero," was also "conqueror. Breaking himself against the bars of the cage, but also making a breach in them. Through this man . . . the whole history of a continent and of a people is played out in an exemplary and symbolic manner."[13] The sanza player ends the play by reviving a metaphor used earlier by Lumumba. Knowing he is likely soon to die, Lumumba had recalled the architectural terms Descartes used in the *Discours de la méthode* (1637) to name his new edifice of knowledge, history, identity, and the *polis*. Lumumba speaks of creating a new state *from* a postcolonial zero point and he speaks *to* colonial power: "I regret nothing, Mpolo. Doesn't the architect go directly to the goal, projecting the whole house at once? When the sky was black and the horizon blocked, it was my job to set out the sweeping path with one magic stroke" (Césaire 1973: 3.1.87). One thinks of Kinjeketile's word-made future or Christophe's heavy word. The sanza player ends the play by recalling this, speaking of "growing straight," "rising from the ground," "standing on feet of your own," concluding with the droll banter of his own chatter (3.8.103–4). It is not scission and lasting divide that are at issue, but community, jointure, and remaking. These turn tragedy on its head. Sociopolitical critique joins with what Soyinka calls the "sacred," others the spiritual, and yet others the metaphysical. History and cultural traditions alter tragedy's effect and meaning.

In all these regards, the Swahili dramatist Penina Muhando suggestively remarks:

> There is still much more to be done with the African tradition. To give this simple example, I have noticed the way the African audience laughs, even when the play is tragic. The point is that Africans are not callous people, it doesn't mean they enjoy seeing people murdered, it means they have a different perception. Maybe they are laughing at the perfection of the acting, seeing that the actor has managed to imitate the action so well. I don't know, but these are things that need to be researched. (James 1990: 88)

Osofisan reports K. A. B. Jones-Quartey's comments on the same phenomenon:

> The typical African audience giggles, guffaws, eventually roars in laughter at what was meant – or at least hoped – to evoke from them the reactions of horror, pity, tears . . . Medea, towering in the grandeur of her utter prostration before the Fares;

> Hamlet battling with the blood splashed terror of eternal night; Orukorere [Zifa's Cassandra-like aunt in *Song of a Goat*], half-crazed in her fate-filled obsession with the fate-loaded song of the goat – the whole gamut, from ancient Greece through Shakespeare's Europe to renascent Africa itself: any representation at all of human tragedy in dramatic form, from anywhere, evokes from a typically African audience, in "the bush" or in the city, laughter, not tears.

Glossing this, Osofisan sees the answer as a matter of technique (2001: 84 n. 4). Everything implies, rather, people laughing at acts that falsify life's ultimate jointure. This nears Clark-Bekederemo's *Song* and *Masquerade*, the second uttering decisive ignorance and breach: "Who / The gods love they visit with calamity" (1991: 69). "History," Walcott's Christophe, echoes Shakespeare's Gloucester: "Kills us like flies, wings torn, held up to light" (106).

Soyinka's communion rite and Sofola's thought that *Wedlock of the Gods* marks not death and scission differ from such an idea of tragedy. They insist on continuities and interlockings which the breach of taboos suspends but which tragedies like *Wedlock* or *The Bacchae of Euripides* depict as always existing. Ato Quayson shows that this sense of tragedy gives another way to set "real-life events . . . in the emotionally and philosophically charged discourse of literary tragedy" (2003: 58). He argues that seeing Sani Abacha's murder of Ken Saro-Wiwa (who wrote of his Ogoni people's genocide as a "tragedy") in *this* tragic prism "arouse[s] a silent people into an engagement with their history" (74). It translates the solidarity of Rotimi's *If* into wider mutual (here global) need. A worldview antagonistic to this sense of wholeness and community may well provoke laughter – circling us back to Nietzschean gaiety, yet rejoicing in a renewed idea of tragedy as a celebration of jointure.

Notes

1 Through antiquity into late sixteenth-century Europe, no one *really* had this sense of self. Maybe it uttered Nietzsche's "terrors and horrors" (1956: 29). It needs interpreting with care not to presume modern understandings (Reiss 2003).

2 I thank Stanley Corngold for this passage.

3 It proved incredibly hard to obtain Sofola's 1994 inaugural lecture. I thank Michael J. Hannon and his bombarded staff for their multiple Interlibrary Loan efforts, Ato Quayson for successful pointers, and most of all Nasrin Qader, who exceeded bounds of collegiality in getting me a copy.

4 I do not look at Shakespeare, whose tragedies have much been used against their grain. Besides a play like South African Murray Carlin's *Not Now, Sweet Desdemona* (written and performed in 1968 when he was teaching at Uganda's Makerere College), Tayib Salih's 1969 novel *Season of Migration to the North* (*Othello*), or Akira Kurosawa's 1957 film, *Throne of Blood* (*Macbeth*) – elements in a transcultural phenomenon of vast proportions – one need but think of Lemuel Johnson's work on *Shakespeare in Africa* (1998), and others' on Shakespeare in India, where adaptations to local contexts and conventions, and rewritings in local languages show divers "turnings" (see Sisson 1926; Shankar 1999a, 1999b).

5 Jeyifo, then grounded in a fairly straight Marx–Engels line, shared their blind spots on

race and gender as *historical* forces. Soyinka answeted him and others (not on these grounds) in "Who's Afraid of Elesin Oba?" (1993: 62–81).

6 Unlike Duro Ladipo's telling of the same story as the result of Olori Elesin's belief "in a new time: in a new law" brought by the "white man," which ends with the chorus of women lamenting: "As yet we cannot tell / How much of our world you have destroyed" (Ladipo 1964: *Oba Waja* 71–2).

7 This rejects Michael Etherton's view that Rotimi's Ovonramwen yields to a "fatalistic bias" (1982: 155), taking the war's outcome as foreordained (164). Whatever his doubts on *how* to resist, Ovonramwen does *not* give up. Captured, he escapes so "that the fight with the Whiteman begins afresh" (Rotimi 1974: 64). That those he most trusts betray him as "a wisp of cotton wool, fiercely yanked off its stalk by the wind in harmattan and cast into space . . . at the mercy of airy whims far beyond its control" (71) does not mean he accepts what has happened, especially not when he plans to restart the fight. Nor does his final defiant sarcasm about Queen Victoria addressed to the crudely overbearing English Captain Roupell imply willing yielding (78).

8 Titus is Melissa's "fiancée" alive, her "husband" dead, in a sense Polynices *and* Hemon, both slain by the power "Creon" reptesents. In *Noces*, the strongman is also directly responsible for the death of her "young brother" (80–2), Eteocles, if Titus is Polynices. Neocolonial power is all-destructive and has no companions among its own people. *Noces* is not a version of *Antigone*; it plays off it.

9 It has been suggested that the priest of Ogun orders Odewale's death. But while he does the rituals, he *orders* nothing. He could never deny the boy's divinely approved mission.

10 Two "taboos" may be in contradiction. None knows that Ojuola is Odewale's mother; all know that "custom" dictates that the new king wed the widowed queen. This Gordian knot again signals the ambiguous ethical condition of the human wotld.

11 The Cyclops forged the thunderbolts with which Zeus slew Apollo's son Asclepios (whose temple was seen by the audience just to the west of the theatre of Dionysus where *Alcestis* was perfotmed), for having brought a dead man back to life, thus interfering with the prerogative of the Fates. In *Alcestis*, Death accuses Apollo of doing the same, taking Admetos from the Fates by a "wrestler's trick" (30–4: in the myth, he got them drunk). Heracles also wrestles Alcestis from Death (846–50, 1140–2), after being drunk. Does the play mock the Fates and gods? or wonder what they have in immediate store for Admetos, now that Alcestis has *not* died for him?

12 So may *Marriage*, satirizing corrupt consumerism of a false vision of cultural and social fusion: Anansewa sold to the highest bidder, induced into the object of her and his desire, "completing" whatever she thought herself to be. "Chief of Chiefs" is then romanticized negritude, not even the "other" of colonial capitalist values, since their union absorbs "traditional" (financial) competition.

13 These comments are from Césaire's *Postface* to the 1966 edition of *Une saison au Congo* (Brichaux-Houyoux 1993: 14), which I have been unable to get. They were repeated in the program of the November 1967 Théâtre de l'Est Parisien production – for a copy of which I thank A. James Arnold. Césaire cut the matter from the 1973 Seuil edition (although the back cover gives the last sentence). The English is from the back of the Grove translation of the 1966 edition.

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