



African theater:

between ritual performance and aesthetic presentation

Mzara Jamila*

Ibn Khaldoun University- Tiaret, (algeria)
Laboratory of affiliation: Argumentative
Discourse: Its Origins, References, and
Prospects in Algeria

mezara.djamila@univ-tiaret.dz

Maaziz Boubaker

Ibn Khaldoun University- Tiaret, (Algeria)
Laboratory of affiliation: Argumentative
Discourse: Its Origins, References, and
Prospects in Algeria

maziz_69@yahoo.fr

Abstract ;

African art, particularly theater, is a key force in preserving cultural identity and resisting colonialism. By embodying collective spirit and local traditions in performances that blend religious rituals with folk stories, African theater demonstrates how the arts can serve as a defensive tool against the imposition of foreign cultures.

Historically, African theater has been linked with magical customs and rituals that has contributed to the affirmation of authentic African identity. Moreover, the integration of healing rituals in theater reflects a deep interaction between artistic performance and spiritual practices, as seen in communities like the Azande and Shulu. These communities incorporate traditional rituals into theatrical performances, reinforcing collective memory and providing a rich cultural experience that transcends mere entertainment.

African theater, with its ritualistic elements and portrayal of ritual drama, including models such as war rituals, totemism, rites of passage, and belief rituals, serves as a powerful tool for preserving cultural identity and resisting colonialism. It intertwines with religious practices and spiritual rituals, and incorporates music and dance into performances that reflect popular traditions and cultural values. During the colonial period, theater served as a means of resistance and social critique, helping to affirm cultural identity against colonial dominance.

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* Author corresponding

1. **Introduction**

All arts were an impenetrable bulwark for Africa and its peoples from the consequences of occupation and identity erasure measures. African art has always been unique in that it is a blatant document that protects the heritage of the Africans from the manipulations of the occupier. African art, in its various forms, has always expressed collective spirit and popular resistance. It represented an effective means of defense against colonial attempts to impose an alien culture, and was an essential means of asserting authentic African identity.

At a time when colonial empires sought to impose their cultural and political models, African arts - and theater in particular - were able to preserve the authentic traditions and values of Africans. African theater was not just a means of artistic expression, but also an interactive space that combines magical customs, religious rituals, and folk stories that reflect the history of societies and their aspirations for the future. It is an act of cultural resistance that has embodied the power of collective and intergenerational communication.

Africa is very familiar with the art of theatre. Because of its geography, distinguished by different natural landscapes, a mixture of imagination with reality, and the spiritual with the sensual, has given African theater a special metaphysical dimension.

Historically, theatrical art in Africa dates back to ancient times. Performances relied on their theatrical and lively venues to perform various inherited rituals with

their traditions of magical customs and religious rites on the grounds of nature. In these natural environments, Africans blend arts, drama and ritual into a harmonious framework that represents their daily lives. This unique blend is what distinguishes African theatre, where the legendary mixes elements of popular folklore and legends passed down through generations. This tradition has continued to play key roles in resisting colonialism by reviving collective memory and preserving its identity from loss. Theatrical art here is not presented merely for entertainment; Rather, it is a tool for raising awareness and motivating resistance, And this through music, expressive dances, or through symbolic dialogues that simulate political and social reality.

Finally, we can ask several questions regarding the role that theater plays in Africa today. Are contemporary African playwrights “Africanizing” Western techniques and drama, strengthening African theater’s connection to its roots? Why do African playwrights rely on multiple languages in their texts, and do these languages reflect multicultural identity? How can theater contribute to the political and social development of African countries, while resisting colonialism and its role in reviving popular and traditional elements?

2. **The aesthetics of dramatic rituals: (a theoretical approach)**

The aesthetics of ritual and ritualistic beauty, like the study of healing rituals, is a performative and ideological phenomenon through which a person expresses his relationship with the sacred,

based on the assumptions that both drama and ritual aim to achieve an advanced level of awareness of identity and a research on how to prove it.

The intersection between healing rituals and theatrical performance in the Sudanese context constitutes a unique model for the embodiment and development of cultural identity. Theater here is not limited to being a platform for entertainment or artistic expression, but rather it turns into a lively space that revives traditional practices and gives them a new dimension. This blending of the sacred and the artistic, between the past and the present, creates a rich theatrical experience that transcends the boundaries of traditional performance. When healing rituals—with their drum beats, healing dances, and the diffusion of incense—are incorporated into the theatrical performance, they create a bridge between collective memory and contemporary expression.

This convergence enriches the theatrical scene with profound spiritual and cultural dimensions, and gives viewers the opportunity to rediscover their identity and heritage in a new context. This approach also opens new horizons for creativity, as directors and actors can explore innovative ways to present local stories and experiences in a manner that combines authenticity and modernity. Thus, theater becomes not only a mirror of society, but also a catalyst for critical

thinking about identity and heritage, and a means of strengthening social and cultural cohesion in the face of the challenges of the modern era.

In this reading, we aspire to answer many questions such as: How do healing rituals enrich the theatrical performance? Is theater a place to practice identity? How can memory as a cognitive experience find aesthetic alternatives to activate the dynamism of images?

Magic and divination are universal human phenomena that have always been present in various societies throughout the historical and cultural eras. No society has been devoid of these practices, as they are part of men's diverse experiences in their quest to understand the hidden forces that surround him and try to interact with them. These phenomena have been linked to the deep desire of human consciousness to search for means to deepen its relationships with what goes beyond tangible reality, seeking to employ unseen powers to serve various needs in life. Divination, as one such practice, has played a pivotal role in societies, such as those of Sudan, to communicate with unseen worlds and spirits with the aim of benefiting from them. Despite their connection to Sudanese heritage, they reflect broader human experiences that are evident in various cultures, as these practices were a means of understanding and interacting with the invisible. Magic and divination are also inseparable from

social contexts, as they are considered means of dealing with daily challenges and maintaining the balance between the forces of life and death, luck and misfortune, making them an integral part of a person's spiritual and material life.

In this study, we will shed light on the role of magic and divination in the Azande and Shulu society, while avoiding delving deeply into the history of these societies and their cultural and social details. We will focus on the roles played by magic and divination in these societies, as drawn to our attention by anthropologists, taking into account the influence of these practices in shaping social and spiritual structures.

Regarding magic in Azande society, we will draw on the famous story of the kajure, who is considered a prominent symbolic figure, not only as a spiritual father, but also as a mediator between the material and spiritual worlds. The Kajurs make sacrifices on behalf of the tribesmen to ancestral spirits and the tribe's god, a role that demonstrates the extent to which spiritual rituals are connected to Azande daily life. The Kajur rituals are not limited only to offering sacrifices, but extend to influencing the daily lives of the tribe members, as the Kajur is the one who determines the dates of events and celebrations that connect the living with the spirits of the ancestors.

The Kajur enjoys a high social status, and is not just a religious figure.

Rather, he is responsible for a special farm that the tribe's residents cultivate for him, which highlights the close relationship between spiritual and economic authority in traditional societies. This status also reinforces the concept of "totemism" in Azando society, where the kajur and his plant or animal companion are considered sacred elements that may not be profaned, whether by harming, killing, or even eating. This totem highlights the belonging and mutual respect between tribal members and the Kajurs, and reflects its significant influence on the traditions and values that govern their lives. (Freud, 1983)

The totem, which is often associated with a specific animal or plant, is a symbol that has a sacred status among members of the tribe. The concept of totemism brings to mind the deep ties between man and nature in traditional societies, where animals or plants are not viewed merely as natural resources, but as active agents in the spiritual system linking man and the universe, according to Sigmund Freud's theories. A part of the Azande's cultural and spiritual heritage is their deep fear of wild cats. These cats, which they call "Neck and Father," are considered metaphysical beings with magical powers, and are a symbol of fears that transcend the conventional senses. This fear reflects the complex relationship between humans and nature, which is

manifested in the belief that these beings have uncontrollable power.

The Azande also have classifications of types of magic related to other metaphysical phenomena. The first is "tar", which is a type of magic associated with the "handle" or bad eye, which is a symbol of extreme fear. If someone is accused of this type of witchcraft, they are banished or excluded from society, because their presence threatens the safety of others. The second is the "Ambisimian spirit," which reflects the totemic spirit of the Azando man, and is an integral part of his spiritual and tribal life. This type of spirit maintains the balance of society, and represents the spiritual connection with ancestors and guardian spirits. The third is the "adandala" (wild cat), which is a source of great terror. The Azande belief that this wild cat is born from a human mother, often in the form of twins, makes it a symbol of an evil force that can affect society. This metaphysical fear reflects long-held Azande beliefs about the interpenetration of human and non-human worlds, and emphasizes the profound influence of myths in organizing daily life and perception of the unseen world. The fourth is "Alcansia" (water spring), which is considered a type of harmful magic found in the sources of small rivers. Those areas, where dense trees are clustered and places become mysterious and filled with magical energy, represent sites of danger. The Azandwe warn against frequenting

these places, especially at dusk, as it is considered an appropriate time for the emergence of magic or evil forces that may cause sudden memory loss or mysterious diseases, especially among the fishermen who frequent these isolated places. The fifth is the magical use of medicinal plants in purification rituals. Azande communities used certain herbs for their magical value, as they were believed to have the ability to cleanse a person or the environment of evil spirits or spiritual illnesses. These herbs were not just part of traditional medicine, but rather were part of the magical doctrine that governed spiritual and healing relationships in society.

Finally, the "kajur benzi" or doctor who uses dances and drum rhythms as a therapeutic tool. This person has extensive knowledge of herbs and folk healing requirements, and combines traditional magical and scientific knowledge. Through dance and drum rhythms, he can communicate with the spiritual world and influence the patient's state, reflecting the importance of music and movement as means of communicating with spiritual forces in the Azande tradition.

Witchcraft treatment and divination in the Cholos community is an ancient tradition dating back to times before the founding of the kingdom, and is believed to date back to the period of passage from the mother region in Kenya. According to historical accounts, the first beginnings of

magic in this society are linked to the founding father, spiritual and political leader “Nikangu”, who used his magical powers when he realized the small number of his followers and men, so he transformed hippos and some animals into followers. This event is a symbol of Nykango's ability to use magic and divination to strengthen his spiritual and political power and unite his community. In Shulu society, magic and divination played a pivotal role in various aspects of life, from spiritual rituals to daily life. One researcher developed a questionnaire about dystocia to clarify the true origins of the child, in reference to the important role that magic plays in explaining biological and spiritual phenomena in this society. The role of magic was not limited to individuals only, but extended to collective practices such as hunting trips, where divination played a decisive role in directing hunters to the best places for hunting. It was also used in war rituals and invasions launched by shulu fighters.

In the face of incurable diseases, tribe members would resort to magic and divination to determine the causes of illness and seek treatment. This was usually done through medicinal herbs that were considered to have magical powers and were used in the treatment process. In addition, there were other occasions when magic was used through folk rituals and sacred dances, as these were believed to contribute to restoring balance between

the material and spiritual worlds, and to help get rid of diseases or evil spirits. These practices show the extent to which magic and divination are intertwined with every detail of Shulu's life, from health and childbirth to war and religious rituals.

The role of the soothsayer and kajur in Shulu society was to establish a connection between man and divine powers, as these priests and diviners were believed to have the ability to invoke and channel divine power to serve humanity. These rituals are performed in specific sacred places with special spiritual significance. According to one of the common beliefs in this community, the “sanctuary” is among the most important and revered sacred places, as Navyibong pointed out, as these places are used to perform rituals and communicate with the spiritual worlds. (Navibong,)

As noted, the Shulus believe in the existence of two types of kajur, the first is known as the good kajur, which is represented by “kujur juk”, a person who practices magic and divination based on the will of the Creator Juk, which reflects the spiritual philosophy underpinning these practices. In this context, individuals do not self-select to become kajur, but are chosen according to the will of divine or spiritual forces. This reflects traditions in many African tribes, where the role of kajur is believed to be a response to a higher will, rather than simply a personal choice. (Deng, Shen and Qin and their

connection to individual behavior in Shilluk society, January 1996) God created man and provided him with one of the three spirits of the first shulus kings (Ningo, Dak, Buk). The second kajur is the evil kajur, who causes fear and anxiety in the Shulus community, and uses black magic to harm others. Next comes the curse of Shen, which is a curse related to the power of Shen, which represents divine punishment and revenge against humans. A person is punished based on his actions, and divine punishments vary according to the type of sin, and a person is considered responsible for his actions in his life and after his death according to the divine will (Deng, Beliefs, Curse of Shen, 2011)

In conclusion, in examining this section related to treatment and healing rituals, we find that dance represents a common and pivotal element in the ritual practices of the Azande and shulu tribes. This similarity in the use of dance as a means of treatment highlights the importance of physical movement in the healing rituals of these societies. It is worth noting that the practice of these rituals does not occur randomly, but rather is subject to a complex and interwoven set of ceremonies and procedures. These actions are in turn translated into a set of verbal and motor codes specific to each cultural group. Through these symbols, two basic goals are targeted: the first is to achieve effective communication between

members of society, and the second is to satisfy the basic symbolic needs needed by the individual and society alike.

Ritual behavior is characterized by a set of traits that distinguish it from other collective practices. One of the most prominent of these characteristics is its precise organization according to specific provisions and controls. These controls are not secondary, but rather basic and necessary to complete the process of symbolic exchange between participants in the ritual. Without them, communication loses its symbolic content and deep meaning, and thus the ritual loses its effectiveness and ability to achieve its healing and spiritual goals.

It should be noted that each of these rituals unfolds according to specific dramatic scenarios. These scenarios are often recurring, giving them an air of consistency and continuity. However, these scenarios are not completely static, but rather vary depending on several factors, the most important of which are the different interaction situations between the participants, as well as the diverse cultural systems to which each group belongs. This diversity of ritual practices, while maintaining their essential essence, reflects the ability of these communities to adapt to changing circumstances, while at the same time preserving their deep cultural and spiritual heritage.

There are controversial questions that we would like to answer that require

another extensive article, questions such as: Isn't ritual action linked to all social actions? Are they ritualistic celebration occasions to mobilize collective consciousness with energies of meaning in rapidly changing societies? Are these societies experiencing an existential crisis? Don't ritual practices perform other crucial social functions, meeting needs inherent in the lives of communities and participating in their material and symbolic exchanges? Aren't ritual practices used as a symbolic means of establishing authority and social positions and legitimizing the powers and forms of discrimination that exist between individuals and groups? Aren't these practices part of individual efforts to improve the ownership of symbolic wealth in the market of honor and respect...?

It would not be an exaggeration to say that the huge sporting celebrations that take place today in major stadiums and arenas fall within the ritual practices that glorify their sanctity and symbolism. Today, football stadiums have become places for ritual celebrations in the fullest sense of the word, where the sports match is essentially a dramatic summary of a symbolic conflict. Fans in these stadiums live a unique "creative" experience, as they explain and interpret the events of the match through their chants and comments. This creative experience manifests itself in states of collective excitement and emotional frenzy, which may reach

degrees of temporary "madness." This state is not limited only to moments of victory or defeat, but extends to the entire period of the match, driven by the state of collective ecstasy that prevails on the field.

In this context, the bodies of players and fans turn into living texts decorated with symbols. We see the distinctive colors of the teams, the shapes and drawings that fans draw on their faces and bodies, the tattoos bearing the club logos, and the encouragement songs specific to each team. Special types of clothing and hairstyles also play a role in this integrated symbolic scene, as each element becomes part of a physical and symbolic language rich in connotations.

It is noted that there is a great similarity between these sports celebrations and their rituals and traditional religious celebrations. Just as clerics carry their incense and move around during religious rituals, we see referees in sports matches carrying their whistles and moving around the field, in a movement very similar to religious ritual movements.

At the end of the match, we witness a scene that is almost a copy of a religious ritual, as the winners exchange congratulations and take turns raising the cup, just as celebrants in religious rituals take turns drinking sacred wine from a single cup. This similarity in movements and practices reinforces the idea that

modern sports, especially football, have taken on in contemporary societies a role very similar to the role played by religious rituals in traditional societies. Christian Brombargi presented an important study that showed the great similarity between a sports celebration and a religious celebration. He explained how the strong feelings and emotions that prevail in sports stadiums lead to the creation of a kind of organized collective celebration. This celebration takes place in a space that closely resembles a religious temple, where the public gathers in a way reminiscent of the gathering of believers in houses of worship. Interestingly, Brombargi noted that the distribution of fans in the stadium is very similar to the distribution of believers in holy places. Just as crowds of worshipers are divided into different categories inside houses of worship, we find that sports fans are distributed in a similar way in the stands, which confirms the idea of similarity between sports and religious rituals. (Al-Mahwashi, 2010)

It can be said that Durkheim was a visionary when he addressed the future of collective ceremonial practices in modern societies. He predicted the coming of times when these societies would witness periods of intense creative activity, where innovative ideas would emerge and new concepts would be formed. He pointed out that with the passage of time, specific formulas and forms of these practices will

crystallize to become a guide for humanity in its journey. This perception highlights the vital role that enthusiastic collective moments play in shaping societal awareness and directing its future path.

3. The African theatrical model: (applied procedure)

(A) How do contemporary African playwrights “Africanize” Western dramatic techniques? Why do they use multiple languages in one text? How can African theater contribute to the political and social development of countries, and its role in resisting colonialism, given the degree of prominence of popular and traditional elements in its artistic space?

An analysis of the structure of contemporary African theater must be based on performing arts whose texts are derived from the African oral heritage and inspired by the oral language, which is the primary source of African theatrical arts and their classification; African theater has evolved from traditional ritual drama to contemporary theatre, through popular theatre.

Within the framework of this development, African theater becomes more than just a means of entertainment; It plays a vital role in documenting oral history and passing on the rich cultural heritage to future generations. By relying on popular and traditional elements in the traditional space, African theater reflects a deep cultural and social vision that contributes to reviving African heritage in

new ways that are compatible with contemporary challenges. The use of multiple languages in texts reflects cultural and linguistic pluralism in Africa, and emphasizes the importance of celebrating diversity as a tool to unite peoples and deliver theatrical messages to the largest possible number of audiences.

In addition, the role of African theater in resisting colonialism cannot be overlooked, as it stands out as a tool for the struggle against colonial powers by highlighting political and social issues, and using theatrical arts to challenge colonial concepts and affirm cultural and political liberation. This dynamism makes African theater a multidimensional space, combining pleasure and entertainment on the one hand, and resistance and social change on the other.

In order to answer questions about how these theatrical arts were borrowed and adapted to the context of theater, we must study and analyze the structure of works belonging to the four different parts of the continent, from Ghana and Nigeria to the west, Sudan and Egypt to the north, and Kenya and Uganda to the east, as well as South Africa, and those works should be Written in the post-colonial era, the period in which the performing arts became not only a means of resisting colonial control over authentic African culture, but also an ideological option available to African audiences and playwrights.

The performances and plays included in the reading should reflect elements of traditional performing arts that continue to interest contemporary African playwrights; The first relates to religious issues, as religion was the main concern of the playwrights there, and the second relates to political issues. The two elements dealt with methods of religious exploitation by politicians and leaders to justify corruption and exploitation, and at the same time they addressed the possibility of using religion to serve the interests of the people.

In addition, contemporary African theater is characterized by its use of popular and mythological elements, reviving oral tales and proverbs in a modern dramatic form. This employment is not limited only to the cultural aspect, but rather serves as a means of contemplating contemporary issues such as liberation and independence, making of African theater an effective tool in building collective awareness and affirming the spirit of resistance and change.

Some African theatrical works dealt with important political issues, including the play "Albert Reiss," performed at the Market Theater in Johannesburg, South Africa, in 1980. This play belongs to the "protest theatre" movement, which aims to confront the policies of white colonialists and the injustice they practice against African people and country. This work is a

living testimony to the era of racial discrimination that prevailed in the second half of the twentieth century, when theater was used as a tool to expose these oppressive practices and promote political awareness.

African theater draws its techniques and elements from African performing arts traditions, such as folk storytelling. In some works, the show begins with a narrator directly addressing the audience, indicating that they are about to hear a story. Among the works that use this method, there are performances that begin with a special preparation that attracts the attention of the audience to the fact that they are about to witness a narrative event, which sometimes includes songs of praise or scenes inspired by the Hilalyan legend, or even symbolic messages presented through the dances performed by the actors, as they appear to the audience. As narrators of events.

A distinctive feature of African theater is the dual role played by the narrator; He not only tells the story, but sometimes turns into an theatrical character. This transition between narrative and character is part of the ingenuity of African narrative, as this dramatic trick is employed to make the story more lively and interactive.

Moreover, some works were based on the use of narrative style more broadly, with some authors relying on folk tales and mythological epics as part of their

theatrical texts, adding historical and spiritual dimensions to the theatrical work.

Some authors relied on traditional African rituals to enrich the themes of their works, drawing inspiration from ritual elements such as resurrection rituals derived from Christian beliefs and sacrifices, Nubian marriage ceremonies, and ancient Coptic and Egyptian prayers, in addition to traditional circumcision and lineage, veneration, dance, and rituals inspired by traditional activities such as hunting and warfare. . Mediations with ancestral spirits, and funeral rituals were also included in the performances.

In African theatre, satire is used as a means of acting in popular theatrical performances, and playwrights make use of the art of mime as one of the forms of acting in popular theater and African performances, whether religious or fictional. The traditional gaps between audience and performance area have disappeared in some African performances, which also relied on empty spaces. Writers used the performing arts as resistance against colonial domination, rejecting racial discrimination that placed whites, their culture and arts in a higher position than those of black people.

(B) Rust is ripeness, rust.
And the wilted corn-plume.

Pollen is mating-time when swallows weave a dance.

Of feathered arrows
Thread corn-stalks in winged

Streaks of light. And we loved to hear
Spliced phrases of the wind, to hear
Rasps in the field, where corn-leaves
pierce like bamboo slivers.

Now, garnerers we,
Awaiting rust on tassels, draw
Long shadows from the dusk, wreath
The thatch in wood-smoke. Laden stalks
Ride the germ's decay-we await
The promise of the rust.

With these and other verses, Wole Soyinka combines the depth of his roots in Yoruba culture with his openness to the prospects of the modern world. This unique blend of tradition and modernity is evident in both his works and translations. Although he grew up in Yoruba culture, his academic education and diverse life experiences enriched his vision and deepened his understanding of the world.

Soyinka's interest in his cultural heritage goes beyond mere emotional affiliation; He delves into the depths of this heritage with the eye of a careful researcher. This is evident in his extreme attention to language and its precise details, which we see clearly in his distinguished translation of the book "Fagnoh", one of the most important literary works in Yoruba culture, which he translated into English under the title "Forest of A Thousand Daemons"

In the introduction to his translation, Soyinka reveals his meticulous approach, explaining the linguistic and cultural challenges he faced. He strives to preserve

the spirit and cultural specificity of the original text, while ensuring that the realism of the characters and the vividness of the events are conveyed to the reader.

This delicate balance between faithfulness to the original and the ability to communicate its essence to a culturally different audience reflects Soyinka's versatility as a bridge between cultures.

Soyinka delves into the rich and diverse world of Yoruba mythology, devoting his attention to all the mythical creatures that inhabit the forests of this ancient culture. We see him carefully and meticulously examining a wide range of supernatural entities, from the mighty rock spirits, to the cunning little earth goblins, to tree demons. He also pays special attention to the various fairies who are descendants and followers of the Great Forest God, and who live and thrive within his wide sphere of authority.

This deep dive into the worlds of Yoruba mythology is not limited to mere narration or description, but extends to include a deep intellectual and philosophical analysis. This is clearly demonstrated in his pioneering essay "The Fourth Theatre," where Soyinka presents a sophisticated and innovative vision of the concept of tragedy in Yoruba culture. In this article, Soyinka delves into the core ideas that shape the Yoruba people's worldview, carefully examining the philosophical and spiritual perceptions that underlie their understanding of

existence, life, and death. In particular, he focuses on the Yoruba theological background that shaped his consciousness and culture.

Through this in-depth analysis, Soyinka presents a coherent theoretical framework linking mythology, philosophy, and theater in Yoruba culture. He uses concepts such as “ritual space,” “circular time,” and “divine embodiment” to explain how the Yoruba cosmovision is reflected in its traditional and contemporary theatrical forms. This unique blend of anthropological study, literary analysis, and existential philosophy makes Soyinka's work an intellectual bridge between ancient African heritage and contemporary global thought, offering a new and integrated vision for understanding Yoruba culture and its influence on world literature and art.

The profound influence of Yoruba culture is evident in Soyinka's work, from which he draws many of his creative ideas and visions. The Yoruba people are one of the most prominent ethnic groups on the African continent, as their culture is distinguished by its richness and unique ability to spread and adapt to regions far from its original homeland. The influence of Yoruba culture has extended to various regions around the world, and is rooted in Brazil and other parts of South America, in addition to the Caribbean and Sierra Leone. This wide spread is largely due to

the diaspora movement resulting from the slave trade over the centuries.

Despite this global spread, the original homeland of Yoruba culture remains in western Nigeria. Leading scholar Afo Labi Ojo has identified six major regions in western Nigeria as the original homeland of this culture in its authentic form, highlighting Abeokuta as one of the most notable. This unique combination of local tradition and the global reach of Yoruba culture provided Soyinka with a rich source of inspiration, enabling him to produce works that combined African authenticity with a contemporary global vision.

Wole Soyinka was born in Abeokuta, an area that still maintains a large concentration of Yoruba speakers, more than 90 percent according to Ojo. Religion is a central aspect of traditional tribal life, as the Yoruba people are surrounded by a wide array of deities and spirits with whom they interact in their daily lives. According to tradition, the Yoruba people attribute to themselves about four hundred gods, which is a symbolic number that expresses polytheism, as the actual number is difficult to estimate due to the differences in local deities in each region. However, Soyinka prefers to use a more symbolic expression, which is “one thousand and one,” to refer to the many gods and the impossibility of counting them.

Besides local deities worshiped in particular areas, there is a group of major deities recognized throughout Yoruba society. The most prominent of these gods is Olodumare, who is considered the supreme god and creator, and is known for his attributes such as wisdom, knowledge, justice, and holiness. Olodumare is not worshiped through statues or shrines, but rather his name is invoked in oaths and testimony. The Yoruba people follow a strict tradition of not incarnating this god in any physical form, out of respect for his supreme status, as an invisible god who does not appear physically.

In Soyinka's novel *The Interpreters*, Kola the artist does not depict Olodumare in his drawing of the Yoruba pantheon, in keeping with this tradition. However, Olodumare appears in the play "The Forest Dance" as a symbol of the forest chief, reflecting his central role in the cosmic order.

In Kula's oil painting, appears Orisha Nala, the main goddess second only to Olodumare. Some other well-known deities also appear, such as Isu, the spirit responsible for chaos, disorder and change, Shango, the god of lightning. Each of these deities play pivotal roles in the mythology and traditional beliefs of the Yoruba people.

The god with whom Soyinka most identifies is Ogun, who is characterized by his dual nature as a creative and destructive spirit at the same time. This

contradiction in Ogun's nature makes him an ambiguous symbol in Soyinka's creative and critical works. In Soyinka's eyes, Ogun's ability to create and destroy reflects human nature itself, embodying the conflict between construction and annihilation.

In his essay "The Fourth Theater," Soyinka discusses the character of Ogun in more depth, noting that this god can be better understood by comparing his values with Hellenic ones, such as a combination of Dionysius, Apollo, and Prometheus. This combination reflects the different aspects of Ogun, as he is not just a violent or terrorizing god as some myths depict him, but a protector of orphans and a refuge for the homeless. Ogun is depicted in traditional poetry as a great figure who represents justice and uprightness, highlighting his moral and spiritual dimension.

Soyinka goes further in portraying Ogun as a symbol of the supreme human being, who always seeks to restore balance and justice despite chaos and turmoil. In this context, Ogun is considered a symbol of man who combines the powers of creation and destruction, and the ability to transcend the limits of himself to reach higher levels of justice and humanity.

Wole Soyinka uses the idea of a possessed jinn in his plays "A Dance of the Forests" and "The Road," which are two of his most prominent plays. In

another context, he skillfully used masks in his play "Death and the King's Horseman", where he presents a distorted depiction of the ruler of the region and his wife, dancing wearing disguises taken from the symbols and the medals of kings, which gives the scene sarcasm and mockery that carries a tragic character.

The art of carving masks and figures is part of the tribal culture of his people, and this had a great influence on his theatrical style. Soyinka joined the Royal Theater Company, which is considered one of the most prominent English theater institutions, where he worked as a reader of theatrical scripts and presented some of his early works there. In November 1959, the troupe devoted a program to his short play "The Invention," in addition to other excerpts from his works.

This experience with the Royal Theater contributed to expanding his theatrical horizons, as it gave him the opportunity to communicate with avant-garde playwrights in Europe alongside traditional writers. Since then, Soyinka has traveled many parts of the world, and a sensitive personality like him could not help but be affected by what he saw and heard on his travels.

Wole Soyinka's life is closely linked to his literary creativity; Most of his works derive their strength from his deep concern for his community. This interest appears in his poems, plays, and articles, but it does not stop at the borders of

literature. He often contributes to the Nigerian press by publishing articles aimed either at mobilizing popular support or arousing strong opposition against particular issues. This intense interest and ability to quickly transform his ideas into action is what puts him in constant confrontation with institutions and governments. Notable examples of these confrontations include his dramatic resignation of his university post, his famous radio speech, and his arrest during the Nigerian Civil War. All of these positions reflect his insistence on adhering to his principles.

However, Soyinka consistently insists that he does not consider himself a "committed writer". In magazine interview, he explained that he is not committed to any ideology. Few writers have a deep faith in freedom, and few are willing to sacrifice as much as he does. Soyinka argues that human society always needs to be saved from itself, and that this salvation can only come through the vision and dedication of individuals, who continue to follow their vision despite the opposition of the society they are trying to save.

The salvation of society, in Soyinka's view, depends on the individual's ability to freely exercise his will. He embodied this concept in his poem "Idanre", in which he celebrates individuals and gods who represent free will. He believes that individual will is the primary driver of

change in people's lives, and therefore individuals must be given sufficient space to freely exercise their will. Any form of political repression is considered a direct threat to this individual will, as he sees its suppression as tantamount to suppressing the forces of life itself.

This theme is clearly portrayed in his play Kongi's Harvest, which highlights the importance of individual will and the moments it is politically oppressed. Soyinka's works clearly show that he does not separate his art from his life, as he addresses in his writings not only local issues in Nigeria, but also global issues related to oppression and destruction caused by wars and oppressive political practices.

Wole Soyinka finds Yoruba mythology a constant source of inspiration, as it provides him with powerful and comprehensive images. The god Ogun, who can become temporarily insane when he gets drunk and kills indiscriminately between friend and foe, represents for him the embodiment of the idea of the insane destruction of war. For Soyinka, the Nigerian Civil War was a horrific national catastrophe, foretold in his play A Dance of the Forests, where he depicted war as a terrible and unjustified destruction, the negation of life itself.

Soyinka sees literature as a direct reflection of life, and his personal experience in prison embodies the suffering that occurs when life is

destroyed by conflicts and wars, a well-known aspect of his life. For this reason, Soyinka prefers the character "Ogun", who embodies the spirit of challenge and constant confrontation with life's difficulties. (Shalash, 1993)

4.Conclusion:

First: The development of theater art in Africa is a relatively recent phenomenon in its contemporary form, but its roots are deeply rooted in the social and cultural fabric of the continent. Although the emergence of theater in its modern sense was late, African societies were able to absorb and develop it with remarkable speed. This rapid development can be explained by ritual and social practices embedded in the daily lives of Africans. Traditional African life, with its tribal, religious and social rituals, constitutes in itself a daily theater rich in dramatic elements. These practices, which range from religious ceremonies to social events, provide a solid foundation for the development of theatrical art. These theatrical traditions initially arose within the family and tribal framework, and then spread across various African peoples.

It is noted that this popular theatrical heritage has been passed down through generations, contributing to maintaining continuity and development. These theatrical practices are characterized by the participation of all members of society, regardless of age or gender. We find men and women, old and young, participating

creatively in these aesthetic rituals, displaying unique artistic prowess in expressing their culture and traditions during various occasions and holidays.

Second: Wole Soyinka stands out as a prominent example of the creative interaction between African heritage and Western influences in contemporary African theatrical literature. With his rich cultural background and diverse education, Soyinka skillfully blends elements of authentic Yoruba heritage with European literary traditions in his theatrical works. This unique blend reflects Soyinka's openness to outside influences, while at the same time retaining his cultural roots. He was not a writer isolated from his local heritage, but rather sought to expand his intellectual and artistic horizons to include the entire world, while maintaining a close connection with his own environment.

As a result of this holistic approach, Soyinka used all the tools at his disposal, whether local or foreign, to express his artistic and intellectual message. This creative style enabled him to create theatrical works that combine the depth of African heritage with modern Western dramatic techniques, leading him to produce unique artistic works that reflect the complexities of contemporary African identity.

Third: The importance of this study lies in its ambition to shed light on important aspects of African theatrical

culture and art, while providing a systematic analysis of these phenomena. A variety of research approaches were used, including inductive, sociological, analytical and descriptive approaches, allowing for a deeper and more comprehensive understanding of the topic.

This research is a contribution to fill in an important gap in academic studies related to African societies, especially in the field of performing arts. However, the absence of reference to some key theorists in the field of anthropology and cultural studies represents an opportunity for further expansion and depth of research in the future. Including the works of scholars such as Claude Lévi-Strauss, Emile Durkheim, Pierre Bourdieu, and others can enrich the analysis and provide a deeper theoretical framework. Benefiting from the studies of researchers in the field of religious symbols, such as Marcia Eliade and James Fraser, may open new horizons for understanding the spiritual and symbolic dimensions in African theatre.

In conclusion, this study opens the door wide for more in-depth and comprehensive future research in the field of African performing arts, which contributes to documenting and better understanding the rich cultural heritage of the African continent.

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