

WESTERNISM AND THE SACRED IN AFRICAN DRAMA: AN ANALYSIS OF TSEGAYE GABRE MEDHIN'S *ODA OAK ORACLE* AND KALU UKA'S *IKHAMMA*

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Abstract

The sacred has always been a unifying force in the history of the theatre especially during the classical and medieval theatres and beyond. Within the African region, the sacred is also a stabilizing force in the traditional societies and their theatres before its bastardization in modern and contemporary African societies. However, from pre-historic times to the apex of the Hellenic age, through to the Roman Hegemony to the Middle-Ages, up to the Renaissance, down to the modern and post-modern era; religion, conceptualized in the sacredness and sanctity of some objects and personalities, like gods, God, deities, spirits, ghosts and priests remain a constant in the modus operandi of these societies producing intermittently, possibilities and negativities that condition human activities. Hence, rather than foster peace continually, which is what all religions profess, religion has played negative roles at various times and in different regions of the world. The thrust of this paper, therefore, is to find solution to religious absolutism in Africa. The paper purports to prove that Africa will be rid of her numerous religious based conflicts; if she begins to question imposition of foreign religions and find ways of co-existing with each other in the face of the facetious religions of the West that cause vilification of one another and the use of force as a sacred arm of evangelism. Tsegaye Gabre Medhin's Oda Oak Oracle and Kalu Uka's Ikhamma are selected as case studies for analyzing the problem, using content analysis approach of the qualitative research method.

Introduction

Africa is a race known for deep religious orientation and worship; for most Africans, all natural phenomena and social events have religious connotations. This explains the reluctance in relinquishing African traditional religion during the beginning of the colonial encounter. Hence, the Africanist faith in traditional religion; offers explanations for phenomena and events in ways congruent with age-long beliefs. The Fulani nomad, Shehu Usman dan Fodio, realized this and decided to convert the peoples of Northern Nigeria willy-nilly in early 19th century between 1908-1810; the British also came to grips with this fact and dynamited the great Long Juju of Arochukwu (Ibina Ukpabi shrine at Arochukwu), which at the time was the crux of Igbo traditional religious affiliation. The same fate also befell many native religions of colonized Africa.

Today, Islam and Christianity have triumphed over the pristine religions, relegating them to the background. Whereas the traditional Africans were not organized to effectively defend what they believed in against foreign encroachments (in fact, they left the stage open for everyone to worship his God the way he wished), Islam and Christianity rank among the organized religions of the world, and are, in truth, the largest. This organization, epitomized in strict dogmatization and indoctrination of converts, seems to have no place for the other (Matthew 10:10; Sura 9, 5; Sura 2: 120). They are absolutist, believing that God had revealed Himself to them and to them alone. Out of their love of God and that of their infidel neighbor, whose soul would suffer perdition in Hades if not converted before their death, some of these believers go to the extreme, taking up arms for their faith and are happy to die as martyrs if it comes to that (Sura 4: 74) forcibly proselytizing and converting those whose religious affiliations go contrary to their own.

These extremisms have cost Africa so much in human and material resources; to many governments of African countries they constitute enormous distractions, they are forced to divert money and man-power meant for developmental projects into the management of the insurgences.

God in his wisdom created all peoples and faiths. Faiths were born in human communities in their quest for God, peace of love. It would amount to an abuse of God's gift of religion if, in our attempt to prove ourselves worthy of Him, we trample upon our fellow men. Contemporaneity would be the better choice if juxtaposed with religious totalitarianism in Africa.

Violence under the Cloak of Religion

Going by the scriptures, religious violence is as old as the creation itself. It was manifested first in the murder of Abel, which was occasioned by the failure of the sacrifice of Cain (Gen. 4: 3-8). In Genesis chapter five, God engulfed the world in a flood. The drowning of the Egyptians in the Red Sea by Moses in Exodus 14: 27-28, despite its political motivation, had in it a religious drive; the annexation of Canaan by Israel and the dislocation of the inhabitants in the book of Joshua were justified with religious reasons. Elijah massacred the four hundred prophets of Baal because they worshipped a god Elijah did not approve in 1 Kings 18: 40. David looked at Goliath and called him an uncircumcised philistine, by which he meant an unclean thing, an unbeliever (1 Sam 17:51). This means that Goliath's chief sin was unbelief in the ascendancy of the God of the Israelites.

The formidable Emperor Nero of Rome, in an attempt to protect his reign and the religious traditions of the empire in A.D. 64 unleashed fire on the early church; pressed to the wall, the oppressed church had to fight back, hence the evolution of the knighthood. It was out of religious fervency that the peasants took up arms in Germany in what became known as then Peasant War in 1524-25 (Bainton, 210). The peasants grew hateful of the traditional Catholic ideas because of the revolutionary theologies of Martin Luther. Following Luther's example, King Henry VII of England broke away from the Universal Church and went on to methodically and forcefully cleanse England of papism (Greene, 304). Later, the Puritan Cromwell had to mobilize his soldiers on the grounds of faith. According to Reynolds in his book, *How Europe Underdeveloped Africa*, European conquest of Africa and the Americas was partly seen as a victory for the church!

Prophet Muhammad received divine mandate to convert all mankind even by the force of arms, if words failed. (Moshay, 64). In the Qu'ran, it is also written:

O ye who believe! Take not the Jews and the Christians as friends. They are but friends to one another. And he amongst you who takes them then surely he is one them. Verily, Allah guides not the unjust people (Sura 2: 120).

The above is a divine command, as seen and understood by the followers of the Prophet from Medina, Muhammad. From Medina to Mecca; from Constantinople to Egypt; from North to West Africa, the Muslim dogma of religious conquest has won Muhammad global veneration!

In 1808, the Fulanis that traded in what is now Northern Nigeria, rose up and revolted against the local kingdoms. By 1810, the Hausas had been conquered and forcibly converted to Islam.

Similarly, the Christian missionaries found that the Igbos were contented with their own mode of worship. In it they felt safe. This was not in the best interest of the imperialist/missionary officials of Britain. They, therefore, sought and discovered the secret of this religious pig-headedness – the long juju of Arochukwu –Ibinukpabi- which they destroyed in 1934 (Ukaegbu, 85). It is not out of place for the Christians because their Bible had told them that “All the gods of the nations are idols” (1 Chronicles 16: 26).

According to Madiebo, part of the means used to prepare the minds of the Hausa Muslims in 1966 against the southerners who were mostly Christians, was a daily running of “serialized articles on the Islamic war of conquest or Jihad” on a government newspaper (Madiebo, 35). When the riots or Jihad began, it was so grievous and catastrophic that a certain sierra-leonean

living in Northern Nigeria at the time wrote home to his people: "The killing of the Igbos has become a state industry in Nigeria," as quoted in Achebe (Achebe, 82).

The Israeli and Philippine border feud has its roots on religious differences. In fact, it was because of this same feud that David slew Goliath!

Consequences of the Impact of Contemporaneity

Contemporaneity of religions implies different religions existing side by side in the same period of time. It is religious co-existence. It has its many advantages. Foremost among them is that it creates an avenue for people to look at the world differently, thereby complementing one another's shortcomings when and where they occur: where one is conservative, another might be progressive, and this ultimately engenders development. To many people of Africa, it is a plausible argument that Christianity single-handedly turned the continent around. This is so because the western religion introduced new ways of looking at our lives: religiously, socially and even politically.

Elsewhere, the argument is still plausible. The Gothic cathedrals of Europe were an offspring of the Church; the monasteries all through the Middle Ages served as the safe havens for scholarly works and many of the monks who, without question, were great thinkers. This was because monasteries were often left alone whenever a city was attacked by enemy soldiers and was destroyed or looted.

The influence of Constantinople, both in learning and commerce were immense in Europe, as reported by Oscar Brocket. It was partly because of this that many Christian monarchs in Europe, including the Hapsburg Emperor Charles V, fought continually to wrench the city away from Islam.

However, contemporaneity has had great negative impact in world history, as has already been said earlier in this write-up. It has fanned the embers of fanaticism, it has engendered political, economic and social upheavals; the place of unity and cohesion in the family is quickly fading away due to the impact of contemporaneity. Indeed, many Christians today detest their family members who are still animists, especially among the Igbo. Some Pentecostal sects think that the orthodox churches are unbelievers, and whenever possible, they are stigmatized by these Protestants.

Thousands of lives have been lost in religious-based riots in Nigeria since 1960. Properties worth billions of Naira equally have been lost due to religious incompatibility of the Nigerian

peoples. Presently, the country is facing one of her most trying political crises in the hands of the organized Islamic sect called Boko Haram. The magnitude of this insurgency, the cost in humans and in property, the revenue expended in the management of the insurrection since its emergence in the country is second only to those encountered in the Nigeria-Biafra war of 1967-1970.

Mali had to call for external aid to flush out the activities of extremists; in Egypt the Isis group is presently making their demands on the government of civil populations of that country. In Somalia, the story is even uglier. Government attention is diverted to where it should not, and the whole of Africa is held to ransom. It seems that the continent has no real answers to these anomalies, and indeed this casts doubt on the future of the continent.

Biography of Tsegaye Gabre Medhin and Synopsis of *Oda Oak Oracle*

Gabre Medhin was an Ethiopian by birth. He was born on 17th August, 1936, and died in February, 2006. He was educated in Addis Ababa, Chicago, London and Paris. He was a popular playwright in Ethiopia, and was nicknamed laureate.

Oda Oak Oracle is about the brave son of the valley region of Ethiopia. As a reward for his many heroic acts, the gods, choose a wife in Ukutee for him, under the condition that his first son shall be sacrificed to the ancestors. In defiance, Shanka refuses to go into his wife.

Shanka has a friend called Goaa, who was once kidnapped and taken aboard a slave ship where he was incidentally converted to Christianity. The ship was wrecked at sea and only Goaa was able to escape death among everybody on board. His Christian ideals earned him the title of "Goaa of the strangers' wisdom" on his return.

Goaa tries to intercede for Shanka but fails. In his mediatory role between Shanka and the *Oda Oak Oracle* he is seduced by the sex-starved wife (Ukutee) and he impregnates her. Nine months later Ukutee is about to give birth but she cannot, despite the desperate efforts of Goaa and herself to obtain pardon from the ancestors. Before she can deliver, the Oracle declares that the sacrilege committed by the duo of Ukutee and Goaa must be propitiated. The sacrifice is a duel between Goaa and Shanka; Shanka kills Goaa and Ukutee gives birth but dies in the process.

Biography of kalu Uka and Synopsis of *Ikhamma*

Kalu Ua was born in 1938 in Akanu-Ohafia in Imo State of Nigeria. He was educated in Ibadan, Nigeria, and Toronto, Canada. He has taught at various universities in England, the United States of America and Nigeria. He has written many plays, including an adaption of Chinua Achebe's *Arrow of God* into the play, *A Harvest of Ants*.

Ikhamma tells the story of Ugomma and Joe Glass. Ugomma is a maid-celibate of the Ibina deity, and is forbidden by custom to sleep with any man. Joe Glass, a repatriate Negro succeeds in wooing her through his cunning. This earns him the hostility of the chief priest of Ibina, who decrees a combat to the death between him and Oriji; Oriji kills him and gets ejected from the land by Attama, the chief priest, for spilling blood before the shrine of Ibina. The people of the community protest the death of Joe Glass, shattering the shrine and forcing Attama into abandoning the shrine in the fear of his life.

Analysing the Two Stories

According to Tsegaye Gabre Medhin, the *Oda Oak Oracle* is a story "told of gods and God, hope and love and of fears and sacrifices" (ii). In other words, it is a religious play. Again, Tsegaye tells us in the introduction, that:

There was also Shanka, the strong son of the tribe, who had a bride by the name of Ukutee, chosen for him by the Oracle of the Africans Oak. But Shanka refused to know the warmth of his bride, since the oracle had interpreted that their first-born should be sacrificed for the satisfaction of the dead ancestors (vi).

From the above, it is clear that the god of the *Oda Oak* is a powerful and fearsome deity. It had total powers and is accepted as such even by "the strong son of the tribe" without question. This god is able to unite Shanka and Ukutee as husband and wife; it is capable of foreseeing that their first issue shall be male; it is even so powerful to decree the sacrificial killing of the baby for the appeasement of the dead ancestors. Neither Shanka, Ukutee, Goaa, the elders nor any other person of the valley are able to question this dire demand. It is simply accepted as the will of god.

Ukutee is chosen by the gods as the bride of the brave son of the tribe because she belongs to them. She is sacred to the worship of the spirit of the *Oda Oak*, and because of this divine ownership, the blood of their first-born son will be required as sacrifice for the progenitors of

the race (who had decreed long ago that people of her caste should not interbreed with the free-born).

This ubiquitous presence of the ancestors is also manifest in Kalu Uka's *Ikhamma*. The author tells us in the preface:

The need to shatter the core of ritual as part of original religious communion grows everyday as we shift from the old ways into newer ways of looking at our life in Nigeria and Africa (vii).

On page xi, Uka writes: "*Ikhamma* is a ritual drama based on the idea of the sanctification of space in an Ohafia fishing festival".

The above quotes indicate poignantly that *Ikhamma* is a dramatization of the sacred in an African community, namely Ohafia. The Ohafia fishing festival is supervised by the omnipotent Ibina deity, whose chief priest, Attama, is seen as all knowing. Hear Nneugo talking about him in a dialogue with Joseph Glass:

That is agreed, then,
Stranger. You shall present
Your case, and we ours
Before the omnipotent voice
Of our fathers, today,
The return day of our hunters (19).

Like Ukutee, Ugomma is a property of the divine, of Ibina. Dedicated as a holy offering to the god in her childhood by her mother, Nneugo she became a kind of bride to Ibina - Osu-Ibina - whose bodily virtue no mortal must enjoy. She reprimands Joe Glass because of his advances:

Take back your words, stranger
The forest of our fathers is full,
Full with trees, fruits, waters
That hear the slightest misplaced word.
I am that which no one may desire (10).

Nevertheless, Glass persists in his bid to win her love, which she pledges and affirms that "we must challenge the dead / To leave us alone (14)." Ugomma rightly believes that it is dangerous for her to love a man unless the power of Ibina over her is severed. She, therefore, promises to help Glass with the secrets of the "udala" of Ibina (the secrets of the shrine) if only he would help her to cut the leash that holds her to the place. She goes on to assist Glass in infiltrating the holy abode. There is no other way one can explain the stranger's knowledge and bold banter with the officials of Ibina, namely Oriji and Altama.

Having won the trust of Attama, Glass is admitted into the service of Ibina, in place of Oriji, who gives his robes to Glass, the stranger. He warns Glass:

Joseph,

You have been robbed.
You have entered the sanctuary of our fathers
It is a cold and demanding crucible.
It holds in secret flow the blood of gods.
One mistake, stranger one step out of tune
In the dance, and restitution can only be
By the hot forbidden lava
Of angry blood which drowns all offenders.
Take care! (33)

Joe Glass thanks Oriji and accepts the challenge. His behavior in scene vi, soon after his ordination, demonstrates clearly that his profession of loyalty to the residual religion is a hoax. He had not believed at all in the rhetoric of Oriji and Attama, nor did he believe Ugomma's initial declaration that she is sacred to Ibina and should not be flirted with. He lures Ugomma, who willingly gives herself, into an adulterous affair. This becomes the height of his sin.

Even though Ugomma admits to Glass, before he lays her, that she fizzles "with a dark cavernous treasure no one must touch, " she is clearly tempted and overcome by the scheming Joe Glass. This is not the case with Ukutee and Goaa.

Goaa admires Ukutee but secretly. Despite his possession of the "strangers' wisdom," he believes it evil to touch Ukutee, who firstly, is sacred to the Oracle of Oda Oak and second, is the exclusive right of her husband, Shanka.

Ukutee, frustrated by her husband's celibate behavior, comes to seduce Goaa, who unable to stand her tempting presence anymore, cries:

Enough said, woman,
Take your pot of water
And away.
Take this warm body away.
Take this figure
Of life and temptation
Away. Take
These soft eyes
Away Ukutee (15).

Aware that her antics are already at work in him, Ukutee persists eventually asking him to dare and steal her against the will of the ancestors and of the oracle. Goaa weighs the probable consequences and agrees to sleep with her (16-17).

Goaa succumbing to the demand of Ukutee is arguably a theatricalisation of a basic human weakness: He reflects that some kind of divine wrath must come; he detests the idea of laying the bride of his great friend, Shanka; but under the heat of passion and desire, carefully fanned by the luscious but forbidden woman, "Goaa of the strangers' wisdom" he loses his head and goes into Ukutee!

Juxtaposing Goaa with Glass, as presented by the respective playwrights, one notices some discrepancies as well as some areas of confluence. For instance, their basic sin is adultery, but they are presented to us differently. While one may empathize with Goaa, who gets consumed in what he had tried to forestall in the family of Shanka, a reactionary might not easily sympathize with Glass, who is created as a scheming revolutionary.

First, Glass comes in disguise as one of the hunters of Ohafia (6). Systematically, he plants himself in the pubertine heart of the nun, Ugomma; cunningly, still he deceives the wise Attama and Oriji and becomes admitted into the mysteries of Ibina. All this he does, hoping to one day overthrow the worship of Ibina and then introduce a new religion –Christianity. He sings to Oriji:

Till my ransomed soul shall
Find grace beyond the river...
On the cross, on the cross,
Be my journey ever,
Till my ransomed soul shall
Find grace beyond the river... (30)

Goaa looks at the issue differently. Learned in the Christian Bible which he has taught Shanka his friend, he has no intention of ever attempting to supplant the deity of the Oda Oak. Thus, he cannot carry out his promise to obtain pardon for Shanka from the Oda Man, for which Shanka reproves him:

What you say,
Is not altogether unwise, Goaa...
Not in the concept
Of our elders and our Oracle...
But it is strange
Coming from you,
Goaa of the strangers' wisdom.

When you fear
To rise and speak
Of your new wisdom
At the abode of our Oracle...
I too fear (4).
Goaa counters promptly:
Face him and what, Shanka?
To face him
With my strange wisdom
Shall be my darkest sin (5).

Conversely, Joe Glass is fearless before Ibina and its priests, despite the dread pronouncements of Attama and Oriji, even of Nneugo. This is probably because he believes the whole myth of Ibina and Attama as false. Without qualms he parries Oriji's witticisms, finally insinuating himself into the shrine. He feels no guilt when he is caught making love to Ugomma in front of the sacred place. Nneugo pleads with Attama to effect a remedy through any sacrifice he would recommend to blot out her daughter's sin. Attama reproves her:

But the offenders themselves, mother,
Look at them. They cling defiantly
Against our own visage in the glut of sin (41).

As if their silent defiance is not enough to register his non-conformist stand, Glass bursts out:

Sin? Oh, fire! My soul burns,
Voice of Ancients, my soul is scalded
Even as I hold this flesh.
I sense her, sweet and real.
Can you spare us to find the meaning
Of this new touch of our bodies? (41)

Attama eventually accepts Nneugo's plea for an atonement rite for the ablation of Ugomma's sacrilege, but the ritual cannot be completed as it is discovered that a figurine of the shrine and the Ibina deity is missing. Frantically, everybody except Glass, searches for this effigy, which is discovered on the tourist Joe Glass by Oriji. The pollution is now complete. Attama's patience is worn out. He decrees a fight to the finish between Oriji and Glass. Glass shows no remorse but engages Oriji who slays him in the duel.

Dying, he says, "looking limply up" weakly holding Ugomma's hand:

Look. Look at my chest. Ugomma.
Oriji. The scar of the Crucifix
Still burns. That was another faith (44).

Thus, we see Uka's notion of contemporaneity. Glass has infiltrated the sacred Ibina shrine, "the protector of the willing" according to Nneugo in scene II page 4, wearing a crucifix, the symbol of Christianity.

Joe Glass, the wandering stranger, is heroified in death. Like Christ whose death became the path to his universal and eternal veneration, Glass' martyrdom, converts the whole people of Ohafia from their native religion, including Nneugo, the mother of the shrine. Attama's attempt to avoid a mob action by ousting oriji ostensibly for shedding blood before the shrine does not persuade the zealots to have a change of mind. First Voice quickly informs him that his "calabash of wisdom is broke." Second Voice tells him that he quibbles while the third accuses him of equivocating. They allege him of various crimes.

In sheer panic, he sneaks off the shrine, abandoning his god, their god -Ibina! The mob demolishes the shrine and declare.

FIRST VOICE:

Good riddance!

SECOND VOICE:

Both of them.

Oriji and that blind

Fool.

Goaa practices his faith differently. He is no zealot, and feels the weight of his guilt once he is overcome and steals Ugomma against the will of the Oracle.

Ukutee cannot give birth when she is due. Despite the furious kicking of the baby to be ushered out through the birth canal into the world, ukutee is helpless. Contrite in heart and spirit, Goaa shoulders her to the temple of the Oda Oak, but lacks the courage to call out to the Oda Man who is the only person that can pardon them, so that the baby might be born. Ukutee desperately beseeches him to call the priest, but he replies her:

...but I shudder.

I fear what should emerge

From this worm-eaten

Body of a trunk

Torn into a living cave

By lightning

We have sinned against the spirits,

I fear.

Against our dead ancestors, woman.

The suckling of your womb
Should not have been of my flesh (18-19).

The Oda Man does not grant pardon, rather he interprets that Goaa, dead, would be excommunicated among their dead, alive, he would be mocked by the women. Sorrow overwhelms Goaa, who, still penitent, renounces his Christian faith. He asks Shanka, against whom he is now angry and is ready to fight to the death as has been pronounced by the Oracle: "How can I not forsake the Word/when they trade in it, Shanka?" (38).

He attacks Shanka who does not want to fight him because of their great friendship and the fact that Goaa has taught him the Word – the wisdom of the strangers –which Goaa had told him is all loving. Goaa only desires to be reclaimed into his origin.

He does not want

The rude tongues of our women
Poke at me!
Or dead
I shall not have
My spirit wander! (40).

Shanka returns his attacks and kills him. His parting words are "...also, Shanka / Never run/To the land of the strangers (41).

Gabriel Medhin employs an opposite device as his statement on contemporaneity from Uka in *Ikhamma*. While Uka feels that "the core of ritual" should be shattered, even by an alien religion, Medhin is saying that to avoid conflicts and blood-shed, people should be allowed to worship God in any way they see fit, once it is acceptable in their own moral-cum-legal codes.

Glass and Goaa: as Agents of Colonialism

Africa has transformed to a complex society that surpass as the idyllic village of Ohafia and the pastoral people of the tribe of the Oda Oak.

Joe Glass is an insincere character, with Machiavellian antics whose only concern is personal aggrandizement. To achieve this aim, Glass schemes and topples the residual religion -a religion as old as the people of Ohafia themselves -without giving a thought to what such an action could mean for the natives. He steals the nun of the shrine and a sacred artifact of Ibina, and dies fighting for his belief -a holy war.

Goaa, when faced with the dilemma of ostracism in the land of the dead and the rude mockery of the women of the valley, becomes furious in an attempt to be reclaimed into the ancestral

fold. He, therefore, takes up arms to fight his great friend, Shanka, even though Shanka is reluctant about the duel.

Africa has to adopt what the writer calls a mid way approach, if we must beat this hydra-headed monster called religious conflict: Inasmuch as everybody is encouraged to hold fast to what he believes, as is allowable by law, we should endeavor to let others decide for themselves how they will worship their God! This may be difficult for learned and pious people, who are convinced of the damnation that awaits those who believe wrongly, given the emotional tendency of the love they bear these false believers. Let us obey the great Prophet Mohammad in this where he says: "Let there be no compulsion in religion" (Sura 2: 256)

It is now evident that Elijah regretted the killing of the prophets of Baal, because 40 days later, on Mount Horeb, he could only see the presence of God in a gentle breeze! (1 Kings 19: 12)

One of the things that Martin Luther got wrong was the presence of love in hacking and slaying, in clubbing and stabbing. It was in the recognition of this error that Abraham had to see a ram held up in the bushes for his sacrifice to God in place of Isaac, his beloved son! (Gen. 22:13).

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