

Research Article

Nigerian Postcolonial Comedy, Religious Shamanism and Modernity: Soyinka, Osofisan and Kalejaiye

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Shamanism is an animistic religious practice characterized by belief in a metaphysical world of gods, demons, and ancestral spirits that can only be understood by shamans. This work examines religious shamanism in the face of modernity to provoke laughter through comedy. While provoking laughter, it unmasks truth; rot, deceit, corruption, and megalomania in a postcolonial site. There are three genres of drama well-articulated in Nigerian theatre: tragedy, satire, and comedy; but comedy appears to have received less critical attention than the rest, hence this research. This essay undertakes shamanic practices to interrogate modernity in the plays of Soyinka, Osofisan, and Kalejaiye. It also shows how people can be gullible and deeply entrenched in 'animist consciousness even in the construction of modernity's sanitized, rational, and linear teleology' (Okoye, p. 118) without circumspection and turns it into a "battle" of persuasions. Textual and critical analysis of the selected plays demonstrates how characters in dramatic action, language, and characterization display their gullibility; hidden and controlling motives that are domiciled in corrupt, megalomaniac, and deceitful narratives as unpacked in Nigerian postcolonial comedy.

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Introduction

This essay examines religious shamanism and modernity in Nigerian comedy. It is imperative to find reasons why comedy, especially in Africa, has not been accorded due critical attention, as it is for tragedy. One reason is clear; comedy is seen as an 'unserious play within the human psyche, which transforms into a parable in the theatre, paradoxically serving as a humorous, ridiculing, chastising,

lampooning, caustic, corrosive, corrective, didactic, and dialectical instrument' (Musa, 2007, p. 58). It is obvious that AbdulRasheed Adeoye (formerly Rasheed A. Musa), by his definition, consigns comedy to be a dramatic genre in his essay 'Interpreting Soyinka's Comedies for Theatrical Direction' (p. 58). He considers comedy as a generic dramatic term, without considering its specific identity form which provokes laughter; for satirical comedy laughs at, while other genres of comedy laugh with. Consequently, satire has attracted more critical attention than any other forms of comedy, such as comedy of humour, farcical comedy, slapstick comedy, stand-up comedy, alternative comedy, surrealist comedy, anecdotal comedy, dark comedy, and others, but unlike tragedy. Referenced in this essay is the comedy of manners. This is a genre of comedy that is concerned with the social expectations of a character, either he/she meets a certain social standard. It depicts and satirizes the manners and affectations in a witty way of a contemporary society, individual, or group that is weaved on mistaken identity. No doubt, tragedy, by its nature, from the classical time through the ages to the postmodern time, has occupied a prodigious position in man's psyche and in critical perceptions than any other form of drama. The choice of comedic Nigerian plays brings to focus how religious shamanism confronts modernity and consequently provokes a spur of hilarious laughter in the presence of an actor before the audience. Based on the idea of "laughing with" not "laughing at", I want to draw the dialectical relationship between religious shamanism and modernity, especially in the postcolonial experience in Nigeria.

How do we expatiate on what the postcolonial experience is without being historical? It is not possible in the sense that what sets the agenda of postcoloniality is placed on the burden of history; such an experience cannot be ahistorical. African political history has had a due influence on writers and their works. To African writers, from the point of the European contact with Africa, from the horrendous slavery, through the years of colonisation, nationalist struggle for independence, post-independence, and neo-colonialism, have all left their imprint on modern African literature (Ojaide 2012, p. 18); so that there may be no circumscription on the part of writers to avoid such reflections in their works. Moreover, in the postcolonial experience in Africa, 'the reality of Africans has to be acknowledged and the modernist impulse of Europe has to be part of the historical experience of colonisation which, for better or worse, has given rise to modern African states' (Ojaide 2012, p. 5). It is in this regard that the choice of the playwrights Wole Soyinka, the first African Nobel Prize winner, Femi Osofisan, and Dipo Kalajaiye – as it spans through three generations of writers in Nigeria – is significant. Well, the three playwrights are still very much around. Despite the age of Wole Soyinka, both in his literary and extra-

literary – political engagements, he is still willfully and constantly confounding the socio-political and economic festering climate with his interventional motifs to fight injustices and many other negative practices as in his drama, poetry, and prose. He draws from the wealth of Yoruba myths, traditions, and folk-cultures, not only in his tragic plays but even in his comic plays, especially the Brother Jero plays, such that ‘Wole Soyinka’s Jero plays are based on the motif of the trickster tortoise, the Yoruba *ajakpa*’ (Ojaide 2012, p. 15). For Femi Osofisan, his ideological persuasion based on social class distinction influences his dramaturgy and weaves this to espouse political satirical precision imageries in all his works. Femi Osofisan has a penchant for ordinary people, the oppressed workers and proletariat who are characters in his dramatic actions. However, *Who’s Afraid of Solarin*, a classic comedy of manners, is not ideologically strung on the dialectical class distinctions of the oppressors and the oppressed; but on an enterprise of exposing a political class which is endemically entrenched in the mire of corruption, deceit, and megalomania. Dipo Kalajaiye belongs to the third generation of Nigerian writers. He is a writer of drama, prose, and poetry like Wole Soyinka and Femi Osofisan. The choice of his play, *Father of Secrets*, is not only based on the domestic conundrum but on the objective of this paper to examine religious shamanism and modernity in Nigerian comedy as a motif that runs through Wole Soyinka’s *The Trial of Brother Jero* and Femi Osofisan’s *Who’s Afraid of Solarin*.

Then, how do shamanic practices confront modernity in all three plays? How is shamanism so adaptive to social development, which transforms practices through cultural and socio-economic evolution? Why do people patronize shamans for both physical and spiritual healing in the face of modernity? An attempt to answer these questions is pertinent in this essay and is fundamental for the descriptive analysis of the selected play-texts. Modernity is understood here as the influence of the encumbrances of postcolonialism that generate pitfalls from the myopic aggrandizement, megalomania, and the culture of perpetual corruption that pervades all spheres: social, economic, and political. Modernity is the antithesis of tradition and culture, which erupted from the colonial influence on Africa, especially in this era of postmodernism. No culture can stand in isolation; the world has become a global village, and this is in tandem with what Tanure Ojaide says about the influence of modernist Europe, the Americas, and Asia on Africa, as observed earlier. He posits further that:

“The traditional mode of Africa before colonization can no longer stand in isolation in the face of modernity and globalization. The world is more inter-connected now than ever before because of new means of communication, rapid movements of people, new technologies, and

other 'scapes' that Arjun Appadurai ascribes to globalization, that make the entire world a 'global village'." (Ojaide 2012, p.18).

Apart from the focus on the dialectical relationship between shamanism and modernity in this study, using the selected plays as a paradigm to enunciate and to solve the complicit problems within the dramatic action that seeks healing mentally, physically, and spiritually; humour is highly underscored. Thus, this essay is divided into four parts: the first part is the introduction, while the second part is to draw theoretical grounding of shamanism and modernity in postcolonial Nigerian comedy. The third part is to descriptively analyze the incongruous influence of modernity that generates humour in language, characters, gestures, mimes, and memes within the dramatic actions in the selected plays. Then, the fourth part is the conclusion.

Shamanism, Modernity, and Postcolonialism

Shamanism is an age-long practice that is found in every society – old or modern – and 'exists in most human societies' (Singh 2017, p. 1). The shamans are found in old and established religions, where prophets are intermediaries between members of religious movements and metaphysical manipulations for existential appropriations. In some societies, especially in Africa, they are found amongst medicine-men, priests of religious sects, hunters, especially employing shamanism for therapeutic necessity, just as Soji Cole posits that 'the ancient shamanic healing practices which are still being practised in various aboriginal cultures in North and South America, Africa, Asia and Australia' (Cole 2013, p. 133). A Shaman is a 'practitioner who enters trance to provide services' (Singh 2017, p. 4). For broader definitions (Peters and Price-Williams 1980; Samuel 1990; Wallace 1966; Wright 2009), the reader is referred to (Singh 2017, p. 4). He is an adept who understands and engages in a spiritual journey from the physical realm to the spiritual realm as an agency of change through manipulations of spiritual forces for the benefit of his or her clients. Those benefits could be a way to fan personal ego-boosting in search of wealth, power, love or healing. He is a 'mediator between the natural and supernatural worlds' (Singh 2017, p. 4), who is strongly wired in using the arts of incantations, conjuring elementals, songs, dances and trances from the metaphysical realm to the physical with an air of assurance to effect physical transformation or spiritual satisfaction. Uniquely, a shaman does his practice to the consternation of the neophyte, who is baffled by the manner he 'connects with the universal energy' (Renfrew 2013, p. 28) during the process of communing with the unseen world of gods, demons and the ancestral spirits. The relevance of his position is found in the

theory of cultural evolution of shamanism as ‘a set of traditions developed through cultural evolution that adapts to people’s intuitions to convince observers that a practitioner can influence otherwise unpredictable, significant events’ (Singh, 2017, p. 2). I, therefore, define shamanism as a religious practice understood by the practitioner, or a shaman who engages the spiritual world through an altered state of consciousness in evocations, chanting, dance, songs and trance to tap into spiritual energy so as to affect desired purposes. For instance, in Shakespeare’s *Macbeth*, the witches as shamans invoke supernatural forces to influence human affairs which drive him, Macbeth, in a fastidiously murderous rise to power. Their prophecies to Macbeth and Banquo become a fatalistic reality to spur on his dream until there is thematic realization in the play of “fair is foul, and foul is fair”, unveiling paradoxical ambiguity in the dramatic action. Or, just as the robbers accost Alfa in *Once Upon Four Robbers* by Femi Osofisan require his service to be immune and spiritually fortified as they plan to rob wealthy individuals who are using their affluent positions and wealth to oppress the masses in the dramatic action of the play. Playwrights, as we shall soon find out in the selected plays, engage the subject of shamanism ‘in order to match the instigating event or condition, contain startling or provocative formalistic and thematic expression’ (Jeyifo 2004, p. 120) beyond aesthetic values, especially in the face of modernity.

At this juncture, a question comes up: how does shamanism relate to modernity, especially in the postcolonial experience? In Africa, some African religious practices that could be termed shamanic, as elucidated from the foregoing, came into contact with colonialism. By this contact, the nature of things regarding the practice, understanding, and the role it played in society changed with the influence of established religions like Islam and Christianity, wherein African shamanism is regarded as “satanic”. So, in the current state of shamanic practices in the post-colonial African society, especially in Nigeria, how are the ‘practitioners faring in the encounter with Western science and its biomedical approach?’ (see Alberts 2016, p. ii). Talking about shamanism and modernity, it springs up a discourse of time in its dialectical term. This is in the sense of saying there is tradition and modernity. Thomas Karl Alberts, in his deeply analytic book titled *Shamanism, Discourse and Modernity* (2016), the most relevant aspect of shamanic discourse to this essay is his concern with time. In this regard, he considers the temporality of the continued relation between past, present, and future. What does he mean by this notion? The colonial contact came with the mission of enlightenment, not only in Africa but virtually in all the imperial colonial sites. This contact influences the emigration of the

colonized and the migration of the colonizers that create the relational reality between past and present till this age of globalization thus:

“Europeans authored reports about shamans for European audience beginning at the height of the European Enlightenment; the story of shamans’ emigration from Siberia to populate the world and human history that closely shadows the moods and the predilections of European modernity.” (Alberts 2016, p. 3).

Thomas Alberts goes further to explicate what he meant by the discourse of time. His lucid assertion affirms that he is not of the opinion that the people known today as shamans did not exist before the mission of enlightenment that enabled the European observers to testify to its fact. However, the understanding of shamanism and its extension to other places globally and times cannot be separated from the conditions of possibility brought about by modernity. Furthermore, he says that there may have been shamans before the eighteenth century, but without modernity, there is no shamanism. To me, Thomas’ position appears to be antithetical and confounding in a similar way to saying that there has been water before the well, but there is no water without the well. The logic of his statement is found in the Western ontological understanding of European postcolonial theorists in juxtaposing the episteme of self against others. Although Thomas Karl Alberts uses Michel Foucault’s concept of culture to explicate his research on the discourse of shamanism and modernity as the structure of subjectivity marked by a tendency to exalt the present by seeking its limitation within the ambience of what I call “dialectics of particularity in universality” – a binary opposition. It is important to say that Alberts only bothers to understudy the shamanic practices within the boundary of spatial epistemic reality, but with the agency of transnationalism in the ambience of universal epistemology without a cogent paradoxical realization of the “unpastness” of the past in the present as I shall soon extenuate (see Alberts 2016, pp. 4–10).

The ‘predilections of European modernity’, as Alberts says (3), find a common meaning in the colonialists’ grand narratives of “superiority against inferiority”, “powerful against powerless”, “logocentrism against margins”, “metropolis against periphery” or “self against other”, which makes postcolonial discourse ambiguous in its linearity in Africa. This identity problematic was born out of people’s ‘frustrations, their direct, personal and cultural clashes with the conquering culture, and their fears, hopes, and dreams about the future and their own identities’ (www.nku.edu). In postcolonial understanding, politically as well as culturally, the Self and the Other are represented as the colonizer and the colonized, respectively (Al-Said, 1), which is borne on the theory mainly based

on what Said considers the false image of the Orient fabricated by Western thinkers as the primitive “other” in contrast with the civilized West (Hamadi, 1). Therefore, postcolonial discourse is based on the ambivalence of “self” and “other” that makes the boundaries of colonial positionality—the division of self\other and the question of colonial power—the differentiation of colonizer\colonized—different from both the Hegelian master-slave dialectic and the phenomenological projection of ‘otherness’.

So, in the matrix of binary opposition, Africa’s postcolonial experience with its ruptured ‘identity mind-set’ (Afolayan 2014, p. 5) emanating from the twisted long history of colonialism, creates an inability to put in place decolonizing structures for developmental indices within the global trends and ultimately a lack of visionary leadership ‘which can harness the necessary instrument for progress’ (5); this makes modernity a discursive ambiguity in Africa. In this realization of the spurious ambivalence between tradition and colonial modernity, which impedes the coming to terms with its decolonizing project, because ‘colonialism was the historical form through which modernity became a real social project on the African continent’ (Macano 2014, p. 8). However, ironically, the European pillars of enlightenment mission were erected to create impediments on the path of progress of modernity in Africa, such that ‘this ambivalence created a kind of traumatic hiatus which mediates Africa’s evolution as a modern construct’ (Afolayan 2014, p. 5). The motive of the colonizers is not impervious to the reality of time with a singular mind to dominate as the superior agency of civilization. This is the imperativeness of European modernism—a domineering mission to privilege a linear subjectivity of ‘progression from one negative order to a positive one—from the ancient to the modern, the animist to the rational, the primitive to the civilized’ (Okoye 2014, p. 119). Yet, the past—that is, the pre-colonial and colonial in resurgent order—props up constantly in an octopoid format ideologically in Africa to ‘travel into the distant past (in postcolonial spaces; pre-colonial past) as a reclaiming force of sign and value for the interrogation of man’s modernity and the edification of the present’ (see Awosanmi, 2007, pp. 31–36). Through the resurgent dialectics of the time past in the time present, shamanism in various forms in the global spaces becomes a medium to find alternative interest in alternative medicines, religions, social, political, and economic solutions to man’s desires against the orthodoxy of modern epistemology, so that ‘Western Europe itself has provoked very strong counter-currents against the civilizing myth of European modernism’ (Okoye 2014, p. 119). My thesis seeks to explicate the ambivalence of shamanism and modernity in the conterminous cross-current face of postcolonial experience and how the past is demurred in the present, while characters

in the selected plays of Wole Soyinka, Femi Osofisan, and Dipo Kalajaiye are spurned pugnaciously to create humour, mockery, and humiliation so as to crack the ribs of the audience and to solve the complicit problems within the dramatic action that seeks therapeutic healings mentally, physically, and spiritually or for socio-economic and material well-being.

Religious Shamanism in the Comic Plays of Soyinka, Osofisan, and Kalajaiye

“Perched on church steeple, minaret, cupola

Smug as mercies, gleeful as gargoyles

On gables of piety, the vampire acolyte

Waits to leap from private hell

To all four compass points, – but will not voyage alone. His variant on doctored coin reads:

“Come with me or – Go to... hell!” (Soyinka 2002, p. 43).

“O Oya, we invoke you!

Yeye Osun, watermelon of fecund seeds! And Iwapele, wife of my father, favourite of the Father

of secretes! We have woken and washed our eyes and at the hour when fishes turn to pearls, we

have come neither for stillness nor the flash of the axe – Sango Olukoso but only for love and

for healing let our words not falter...” (Lanko (Osofisan) 1993, p. 15)

Wole Soyinka’s *The Trials of Brother Jero* is depicted in Christian shamanism. This is a comedy that flusters the character of Prophet Jeroboam, whose experience as a charlatan preacher is burdened, in just one day, by the cross daughters of Eve in shamanic Christian superstition for his own salvation. Prophet Jeroboam is a poignant deceiver and charlatan in his professional calling, who claims to be a prophet. In his personal narrative at the exposition of the play, he sets out to tell the audience about his experiences within twenty-four hours in the hands of women and his clients or congregants, especially Chume. In his schema, he dislodges his Old Master, who imparted to him the art of prophecy at the beach. However, he had earlier been instrumental in acquiring his own portion of land against stiff competition from other denominations. Consequently, the Old Prophet places a retributive injunction on him by cursing him that he would be a victim of the Daughters of Discord. Early in the morning, Chume takes his cantankerous wife to the house of her debtor, but ironically, not knowing that it is Brother Jero’s house. Prophet Jeroboam, having seen Amope by peeping through the window, finds an escape route to the beach. Chume has a peculiar problem to be solved; that is, to settle domestic squabbles with his ever-nagging wife by beating her at least once, but Brother Jero prevents

him from doing so. This prevention is done, not out of moral rectitude from the Christian syllogism based on doctrinal edification, but for personal aggrandizement. Chume eventually finds out that his wife's debtor is Brother Jero, who in turn also discovers that Amope, his creditor, is Chume's wife; he swiftly and cunningly approves of beating her. If Brother Jero is able to prevent the temptation of a lady that passes by his house every morning half-nude to swim, he cannot escape being manhandled by another daughter of discord who chases the drummer boy, or Chume, who believes there is more to tell between his wife and Brother Jero than the issue of debt. He suspects there is a consensual relationship between them, so he must deal with and settle the score with his now estranged Prophet Jeroboam. Unfortunately, Brother Jero puts him 'in a straitjacket', by ensuring that he is bound by the security agent.

Prophet Jeroboam is a shaman, although a charlatan, yet he hides under the cloak of a Christian shamanic medium to intercede for his congregants, or like a shrewd businessman whose clients gloat in their yearnings and expectations by always putting them on the verge of wants. Jero's monologue at the opening scene is telling about all kinds of religious shamanic characters to the audience as he blows his own ego. He engages in the sharp mechanics of his calling as a seer, a prophet who communes with unseen forces and symbols, conjures, and feigns control of the forces of outer space by deluding and deceiving his clients. For his trade to thrive, his appearance must be in consonance with the eco-spiritual reality of diadems and symbols, gestures, the carriage of his personality, and the place of worship. The image of his presence before the audience, Prophet Jeroboam carries himself with 'suave' and "dignity" in the epaulet of his cassock, long dreadlocks and thick hair, heavy beards, a canvas pouch, and a divine rod. These images embellish his "spiritual aura" with a carriage that goes with brisk moves and eloquent diction; he has a perfect presence of exerted influence on his congregants; it is in his bid to have a professionally nuanced appearance—to distinguish him from the scum—that he is in debt to Amope, Chume's wife. His words are lucid with a pinch of assertion that flows into the psyche of his clients without prejudice of intent; he is a master conman who presents himself as an ascetic, but is not. He says, 'You have probably seen many of us on the streets, many with own churches, many inland, many on the coast, many leading processions, many looking for processions to lead, many curing the deaf, many raising the dead' (Soyinka 1992, p. 9), who dominate the beach for rendering their professional conduct to their clients, mostly with fraudulent intent.

Beach becomes a wide open space for all kinds of healings and services done by prophets to struggle for their clients because of the dwindling patronage as a result of modern incursions that lure willing

clients away. It is an age when people prefer modern renditions of 'High Life' music to 'celestial hymns', while 'television too is keeping our wealthier patrons at home' (10); this circumstance reduces the struggles among the prophets to a slush of 'territorial warfare' that demands political intervention. It is equally important to note that the choice of the beach is one of the ancient symbols like mountains, seas, deep forests or "igbodu" or "igbale" (grove); such phenomena are imbued with sacred power which offers an oriel perspicuity for shamanic practices. Jesus Christ is tempted with the offer of the bread of life on the mountain after fasting for forty days and nights by Satan; it is on the mountain that he performs the miracle of feeding five thousand people with five loaves of bread and two fish; it is also in the Garden of Gethsemane that Jesus knew the night before he was crucified, when he prayed: 'Oh my Father, if it be possible, let this cup pass from me: nevertheless not as I will, but as Thou wilt' (Matthew 26:39). Wole Soyinka uses *igbale* in his play *Dance of the Forest*, as an archetypal spatial connection between humans, forest dwellers, and the dead for existential reality to meet with metaphysical reality symbolically, as Tunde Awosanmi says that 'Soyinka's philo-creative universe is an archetypal space: an existential sign in his meta-aesthetic symbology' (Awosanmi, 36).

Brother Jero chooses the beach for the shamanic religious practices that he indulges in by interacting with the spirit world, but he does so in a shammed and pretentious manner to hoodwink his congregants. He masters his art through the physically altered state of consciousness, by "dragging" many of his followers into the realm of ecstasy, not only in language but more in gestures, movements, clapping, and dance that culminate in trance, or demonstrate the power of invincibility; just as Soyinka says in the epigraph to this segment, 'Come with me, or-/ Go to... hell'. To Chume, the veil of his deceit falls when he discovers that he had been holding him on through the period of abstinence from beating his wife; as he goes through the period of trials with her, Amope, whose conterminous hurting nature becomes a cross of debacle that only physical beating could subdue, for his own convenience. Before this moment, Jero's shammed prophecies in various instances to his congregants; Chume, Minister and others are to lead them by their nose and raise their false hopes by claiming to have seen and communed with the image of the son of God, Jesus Christ, like 'Grail communion' (Renfrew 2013, p. 5). He also claims that he receives shamanic symbols in a translucent robe and burning sword with words of "assurance" for all, and for himself with promotion as the 'Immaculate Jero, Articulate Hero of Christ's Crusade' (Soyinka 1992, p. 32). He does all this to overcome his one-day travails and to keep his shamanic trade. In this process, the shamanic communion ceremony for all sorts of healing practices becomes an imperative professional ploy as

water, especially sea water, which is infused with energies in a similar way water and grain (bread) are infused with Grail symbolic energies (3).

Who's Afraid of Solarin? is a classic comedy of manners by Femi Osofisan. It is a play that is based on the original text titled *The Government Inspector* by the Russian playwright, Nikolai Gogol. Osofisan's play, *Who's Afraid of Solarin?*, is a classic comedy not only by considering the nature of classic comedy of manners popularized by the French playwright, Molière, but because it is woven around the motifs of corruption, megalomania, and aggrandizing individuals that remain undying in a postcolonial state, Nigeria, as depicted both in the public and private spheres of the dramatic action. Moreover, the play celebrates the personality of Dr. Tai Solarin, an educationist and social critic who was at one time a no-nonsense, but serendipitous radical Public Complaint Commissioner in Nigeria.

The corrupt officials of the Local Government Council get wind that Solarin is on his way to visit the council and the town in an unscheduled manner. This information puts the Chairman, Chief James Dada Gbonmiayelobiojo, popularly called JDG—this acronym shall be used to denote him in this essay—and his council officials: Chief Magistrate Ayokanmi Olaitan, Chief Medical Officer Dr. Bodunrin, Councillor for Education and Works Chief Fowolu, Price Control Officer Mrs. Mailo, and Councillor for Cooperatives Miss Animasaun, into confusion, and all are very confounded. They are in this perplexed situation knowing that all have skeletons in their cupboards for having used their public offices to enrich themselves and their cronies with impunity. However, to ensure they are not found wanting, an oath must be taken, suggested and fostered by JDG, by inviting an Ifa Priest, an African shaman, Baba Fawomi. Of course, like the rest of the characters, he is a fake shaman, who pretends to see into the recondite world of spirits through Ifa divination and promises them to ensure Solarin does not come. For him to perform better, he demands a bottle of liquor, gin, but instead, Polycarp, a clumsy house boy, brings a bottle containing carboxylic acid—literally a deicide—taken as poison by Fawomi. This sparks off another round of sacrifices to these gods apart from demands of gifts of materials and money by Fawomi for the corrupt officials to be redeemed from the impending wrath of Solarin. To heighten the fussy moment, two beggars, Lamidi and Lemomu, saunter in with information that Solarin has been in town already for about five days and is resident in the vicarage of Pastor Ifagbemi (a client of Fawomi) whose daughter, Cecilia, falls in love with Sola Oriebora, whose identity is mistaken for Solarin. Sola Oriebora, of course, a Lagos scoundrel, who runs away from being apprehended by the law, finds fertility in a festering condition to swindle everyone, including Cecilia,

her love. It is in this confounding moment that the original Solarin comes around to everybody's dismay and doom.

The play opens in the living room of the Chairman, JDG, during a game of ayo—a traditional seed game that reflects the reality of the ludicrous atmosphere of satiric jests, clownish and gibberish innuendos, but sometimes with a sense of truth, associated with the manners of the players. The action foretells a symbolic game played by corrupt public officials who have endemically turned the socio-political and economic life of their society to self-aggrandizement. It is a hilarious moment at the beginning that suddenly turns into a confounded and ludicrous slur as soon as the news of the impending arrival of Solarin, the Public Complaint Commissioner, is broken by JDG to his subordinates. Each becomes, by this news, jittery and doomed by the fact that they all know they cannot escape the hand of justice as corrupt individuals, in this foretelling arrival of Solarin, who is renowned for coming incognito. Action must be taken to curtail this; hence, JDG asks Polycap, his houseboy, to summon Baba Ifawomi, a traditional shaman. However, this does not make sense to Mrs. Mailo, the Price Control Officer, who is the daughter of the popular Reverend Durosimi. She would not be susceptible to traditional oath-taking as she says, 'I am a staunch Christian. I belong to the First Pentecostal Movement of the Lagos Bar Beach' (Osofisan 2004, p. 10). Her testament of contrition is evident in the scorn of modernity against tradition for preference for the Bible, but unfortunately, when weighing the potency of the totems of oath, every insincere or corrupt mind makes preference for the Bible or Koran, instead of iron. The Chief Magistrate, in his corrupt and funny mien, says: 'In my court, I place their hands on the Bible or the Koran and then I whisper quietly to them that there's piece of iron in the book. You can't imagine what wonderful results I get' (Osofisan 2004, p. 8); it shows that tradition becomes the undying reality in the face of modernity. Today, you find in many African literatures depicting the 'embrace of traditional religion and practices and Pentecostal Christianity, which emphasizes defeating demons and principalities rather than preparing to go to heaven as regular Western Christianity does' (Ojaide 2012, p. 110); as each shaman has his/her motive as demonstrated by Brother Jero, Reverend Ifagbemi, and Baba Ifawomi to fan their interests or that of their clients/congregants.

Ifawomi is a sardonic shaman whose overture with Reverend Nebuchadnezzar Ifagbemi reveals the continuous colluding relationship between tradition and modernity. Both are corrupt in their dealings and also engage in shamanic contracts with the spirit world while feigning an altered state of consciousness as corrupt individuals. The Pastor needs the assistance of the Ifa priest, Ifawomi, to ward off the undue incursion into his dirty life, a Christian shaman who has embezzled church funds,

thinking that Ifawomi would help conceal the skeletons in his cupboard from the Public Complaint Commissioner, Solarin. In Ifagbemi's vicarage, the setting has false opulence and gaudy taste, similar to the house of the Chairman, JDG, that depicts their innate inanities with images of corruption, clumsiness, empty and material vomits in farcical modes. In fact, JDG is a mere caricature of the political position he holds in society, who is constantly driven into occasional psychosis by a dolt or mentally retarded wife who does not know what to do at the right time. Reverend Ifagbemi is a deluding and corrupt shaman whose daughter falls in love with Isola Oriebora, a scoundrel who claims he is a government official from Lagos and is mistaken by all as Solarin. The presence of the Chairman, JDG, and Polycap, his houseboy, throws up perceptible laughter in the audience due to the vicious motive that leads them to find out if truly, Solarin has been accommodated in the Reverend's vicarage for close to five days. This opens up some stench in all, including the beggars, Lamidi and Lemamu, to create clumsiness and hilarity, leading to the recognition of the true identity of Isola, who is nothing but a vicious villain.

But before then, the stage is ready for Isola Oriebora to swindle them all. In the nature of a comedy of manners, everyone, for their individual strife for self-desires, plays into his hand, thinking that Isola is the real Solarin. Isola is not, but no one knows this now. Even the Reverend and the Ifa Priest—the two religious shamans who represent both tradition and modernity—cannot use the apparatus of shamanism, through the exploits of whatever medium they tend to explore, to discover the pretence in his action. In fact, through the hypothetical conspiracy of the two beggars who were at one time clerks at the Council, the intended misinformation is done to keep sponging on the Chairman and other politicians with a flagrant display of their innuendos to heighten humorous motives in sharp and corruptive ways, just like everyone, except Cecilia, who prefers to be called “Cecilimisa-Misa” in an endearing tonality. The beggars equally serve as an alibi to spring up a spinning mistaken identity of Solarin. These politicians are like the corrupt post-colonial politicians in Nigeria, who enmesh themselves in the mire of mundane bribes and corruptions to cover up their acts; yet pretending to serve society. Many African literary works concern themselves thematically with socio-political and economic issues, class conflicts, and cultural identities that privilege the episteme of postcolonial experiences. In this regard, ‘African modernity involves historical, political, and intellectual transformation, occasioned by the European encounter, from the traditional to “new” ways’ (Ojaide 2012, p. 22). Tanure Ojaide's perception is quite analogous to the meta-critical understanding of Abiola Irele's *In Praise of Alienation*, by Tejumola Olaniyan, where he examines the prevailing African

postcolonial socio-political and economic conditions as related to leadership problems and the continued “neo-colonial” “forceful” influence of Western modernity on Africa, as he quotes Irele thus:

“The traditional precolonial culture and way of life continue to exist as a reality among us, but they constitute an order of existence that is engaged in forced March, in a direction dictated by the requirements of a modern scientific and technological civilization.” (cited in Olaniyan 2007, p. 14).

The moment of recognition is staring at all rudely now. But this happens when Baba Ifawomi comes into the Reverend’s house to meet all the politicians, the Reverend and his daughter, just after a short while, Isola has found his escape with the Chairman’s car. He leaves everyone exasperated, including Cecilia, who hopes to tie the nuptial knot with him the following day. Isola feigns to be a conscientious and “authentic” Solarin; when the Chief Medical Officer attempts to bribe him like others before him, he uses him as a route to find his final escape. Shortly thereafter, Baba Fawole enters with Isola’s diary and demands to know the whereabouts of the scoundrel, with the courage to confront and remind his “clients” as he says: ‘Didn’t I tell you this morning that the Commissioner will never step in this town?’ (Osofisan 2004, p. 79). While the revelation is being made in descriptive narratives through Isola’s diary, about his identity and the manner he ludicrously paints each character in his memoir, then the beggars come in again to inform all that the real Solarin is out there as Lamidi says, ‘Yes, the real Public Complaints Commissioner has arrived’ (Osofisan 2004, p. 86). You can conjecture what their reactions would be!

Dipo Kalajaiye’s *The Father of Secrets* is a short domestic comedy of manners. Salawu is a typist who resolves to seek the service of Obilade Ayanyan, a sham traditional Ifa shaman, to heal his daughter, Sikiratu. Salawu returns home after the day’s job to meet his wife, Aduke, and her friend, Folakemi, who are worried about the undiagnosed ailment of Sikiratu. Unfortunately, Ayanyan is a fake shaman, who deceives and boasts about his feats as the father of secrets around Beyerunke in Ibadan, yet he is just interested in making money out of the “unprofessional” service rendered. At the end, he capitalizes on the ignorance of all to run away and leaves Sikiratu uncured.

Salawu declines the suggestion made by Folake to take Sikiratu to any modern hospital not because he values traditional medicine above modern Western medicine, but because he abhors the putrid

negligence that manifests in most modern hospitals. He sees the government primary healthcare system in postcolonial Nigeria as a festering sphere of diseases, pains, and agonies, where hospitals become fertile grounds for germs and transmittable diseases for all patients. He does not only hate the negligent condition of the hospital environment but also the attitude of the health workers; doctors, nurses, and others who are arrogantly seen as mere egoistically bloated messiahs. He would prefer tertiary healthcare like Teaching Hospitals, but unfortunately, he is too poor to afford the cost, hence the reason a traditional Ifa shaman's service is needed to heal his daughter. However, contrarily, Ayanyan, the shaman, believes that modernity is gradually eroding away traditional values because of people's preference for medical feats. It is funny to hear from comic motives, as Ayanyan displays his buffoonery to ignite laughter as the playwright depicts him as a clumsy character like a bad raconteur who stupidly goes down memory lane to dig up his failures, rather than the successes of past deeds – a shaman that gives wrong prescriptions and doses that yield negative results. For instance, he offers a memory stimulant for candidates to pass their examinations; yet they fail, just as he makes a “magical balm” for soldiers to “appear or disappear” at critical moments during the war; yet all are killed, or for footballers to win in competitions; but they lose their matches – what a shaman! Despite his perilous acts, Salawu and his wife still ignorantly entrust the exorcising of Sikiratu's health challenges to him; they doubtfully believe that he can still do it.

History is used as a comic motive by Kalajaiye, and it alludes to the postcolonial problematic. The playwright uses these farcical elements to spurn the manners, attitudes, thoughts, and dictions of the corrupt shaman by structuring the ‘modernist techniques as tools used to express the multifarious modern African experience as lived or perceived,’ Ojaide (2012, p. 23) in post-independent Nigeria. The historical narratives of the Nigerian Civil War become expedient for Ayanyan, the father of secrets, to drive home his farcical innuendoes. He does this without the intent of the common good, but to exude flagrant incompetence, corruption, and deceit to swindle his clients in the same manner we see Brother Jero in Soyinka's play and Baba Ifawomi in Osofisan's play; all make attempts to swindle their clients. What could be vaguer than a man who prides himself as the father of secrets; yet sees nothing and does nothing to ameliorate the health condition of Sikiratu? What this suggests to us is the prevailing postcolonial circumstances of spiritual, socio-economic, political dysfunction, and a general culture of malaise and corruption in Africa, especially in Nigeria. In their works, African writers often interrogate the socio-political, economic, and other problems in their respective societies, such as Kalajaiye using this comedy, weaving it around the personalities of the fake religious

shaman, to tell us about the ailing economic and political situation that demands urgent critical attention, but unfortunately, the leadership lacks the vision and expertise to heal the dying nation. Most modern African literature is highly infused with folklore as writers invoke tradition, culture, and folk tales. The oral traditions of Africa originated from the earliest history of the people and have continued to evolve according to the conditions of the times. Panegyrics, folk tales, and songs are used in the play, not only for aesthetic embellishment alone but to reflect the constant nudging of tradition in modernity—that is, the undying past in the present. Each moment Aduke wants to get her husband, Salawu, into action, she showers compliments on him by praising his family lineage. The shaman, Ayanyan, sings a folk song that has no relevance, uses the wrong incantation, prescribes fake rituals, performs antics of deceit and foolery to be ‘clever as the tricky tortoise of our folk tales, we all like lots of money’ (Kalajaiye 2012, p. 106), and keeps demanding more money. Ayanyan continues to dribble and play on their ignorance, even when they know he lacks the knowledge of a good religious shaman, they still fail to take meaningful action. This comedy of manners thrives on farcical themes of corruption and deceit of a phony modern shaman as Folake says, ‘the father of secrets who feeds on our ignorance, of inability to be as real as their predecessors’ (Kalajaiye 2012, p. 123).

Conclusion

The three selected plays depict religious shamanism, as I have elucidated. Religious practice, modern or traditional, is characterized by belief in a metaphysical world of gods, demons, and ancestral spirits that can only be understood by shamans. However, in the case of the protagonists of the three plays—Brother Jeroboam, Baba Ifawomi, and Obilade Ayanyan respectively—they are phony shamans in their conceited manners and personalities, yet they play on the naivety of their clients. In this regard, I undertook an analysis of elements of religious shamanic practices to interrogate modernity in a postcolonial Nigeria as they evoke laughter in the audience in the nature of comedy.

About the Author(s)

Yemi Atanda is a playwright, director, and poet. He is the author of *Dialectics of Revolution in the Postcolonial Drama of Obafemi & Yerima: Towards the Theory of Revalorization* (Scholar’s Press, 2014). He is a co-editor (with Femi Osofisan & Abiola Fasoranti) of *The Time is Out of Joint: Playwriting in a Time of Global Incoherence* (Mosuro Publishers, 2016). He has published several articles in both local and international learned journals. He has a keen interest in play production, and as a director, he is

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