

INTERROGATING ETHNICITY AND TRIBALISM IN SOYINKA'S *A DANCE OF THE FORESTS*

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Abstract

Ethnicity and tribalism have played significant roles in shaping Nigeria's socio-political landscape, often serving as both a source of cultural identity and a tool for division. This study critically examines how Wole Soyinka's A Dance of the Forests interrogates ethnic tensions and the dangers of tribalism in Nigeria. The study offers a prophetic critique of the nation's fractured identity, exposing how historical grievances, ethnic rivalries, and political opportunism threaten national unity. Using Cultural Hegemony Theory, this study explores how Soyinka employs allegory, symbolism, and myth to challenge the glorification of the past and warn against the cyclical nature of ethnic conflicts. The study presents history as a burden rather than a source of pride, emphasizing the need for a new national consciousness that transcends tribal divisions. By examining Soyinka's representation of ethnic tensions and his vision for a unified Nigeria, this study highlights the enduring relevance of A Dance of the Forests in contemporary discussions on ethnicity, tribalism, nationalism, and governance. The findings contribute to the broader discourse on how Nigerian drama functions as a medium for social critique and nation-building.

Keywords: Ethnicity, Tribalism, Culture, Nigeria.

Introduction

Nigeria, often referred to as the "Giant of Africa" is one of the most ethnically diverse nations in the world. A nation with over 250 ethnic groups and more than 500 languages spoken across its regions (Ukiwo 2005), the country presents a rich cultural mosaic. However, this diversity has also been a source of socio-political complexity, particularly in the form of ethnicity and tribalism.

These two interrelated concepts have played significant roles in shaping Nigeria's history, governance, and national development trajectories, often leading to conflict, marginalization, and political instability (Adegbami & Uche 2015).

The origins of ethnic consciousness in Nigeria can be traced to the colonial era when British administrators, employed their policy of "divide and rule," exacerbated existing ethnic cleavages to maintain control (Ibrahim 2018). This approach not only deepened existing ethnic cleavages but also sowed seeds of mistrust among various groups. The amalgamation of the Northern and Southern Protectorates in 1914, without adequate consideration of the distinct cultural and historical backgrounds of various ethnic groups, laid the foundation for subsequent ethnic tensions (Johnson 2024). Since independence in 1960, ethnicity and tribalism have remained major factors in Nigeria's political landscape, influencing elections, governance, and public policy (Uwaifo 2013). This artificial union laid the groundwork for subsequent ethnic tensions and rivalries.

Ethnicity can be broadly defined as a shared identity based on common ancestry, language, culture, and historical experiences. It encompasses a sense of belonging those individuals feel toward a specific ethnic group (Sultana 2021). On the other hand, tribalism refers to the excessive loyalty to one's ethnic group, often at the expense of national unity. This form of social allegiance has led to discrimination, favouritism, and exclusion of other ethnic groups from political, economic, and social benefits (Obire & Chiemeké 2025). While both concepts involve group identity, tribalism is more about the actions and biases that arise from such identities.

One of the most significant manifestations of ethnicity and tribalism in Nigeria is their influence on political affiliations and elections. Political parties are often formed along ethnic lines, leading to a system where national interests are undermined in favour of regional and ethnic considerations (Ibrahim 2018). This alignment fosters a political environment where loyalty to one's ethnic group supersedes national interests, resulting in policies that favour specific groups and marginalize others. For instance, the First Republic (1963-1966) saw the emergence of major political parties that were predominantly ethnic-based: the Northern People's Congress (NPC) represented the Hausa-Fulani, the Action Group (AG) was largely Yoruba, and the National Council of Nigerian Citizens (NCNC) was predominantly Igbo (Ukiwo 2005). This trend has persisted, fuelling electoral violence and undermining democratic governance. Such practices have

hindered the emergence of competent leadership and have perpetuated corruption, as leaders prioritize ethnic allegiances over merit and national development. The consequence is a cycle of mediocrity in governance and a persistent struggle for equitable resource distribution among the diverse ethnic groups.

Beyond politics, ethnicity and tribalism have also impacted economic development. Resource allocation and infrastructural development are often influenced by ethnic considerations, leading to uneven distribution and fostering resentment among marginalized groups (Adegbami & Uche 2015). This has resulted in various agitations for self-determination, ethnic militias and separatist movements such as those led by the Indigenous People of Biafra (IPOB) in the Southeast and the Niger Delta militants, who have protested the perceived economic marginalization of their regions (Johnson 2024). These groups often resort to violence to assert their demands, leading to loss of lives, displacement of communities, and destruction of property. The government's response, often involving military intervention, sometimes exacerbates tensions, creating a cycle of violence and retaliation. Such conflicts not only strain national resources but also tarnish Nigeria's international image. Consequently, ethnic conflicts in Nigeria have had profound security implications. The country has witnessed numerous ethnic and sectarian clashes, including the Tiv-Jukun crisis, the Jos crisis, and the ongoing farmer-herder conflicts (Obire & Chiemeké 2025). These conflicts not only threaten national stability but also contribute to economic setbacks by discouraging investment and disrupting local economies.

Addressing these challenges posed by ethnicity and tribalism requires deliberate and sustained efforts aimed at fostering national integration. One approach is the promotion of inclusive governance that ensures equitable representation of all ethnic groups in political and economic spheres. Implementing policies that prioritize merit and competence over ethnic considerations can help in building a sense of national identity. Educational curricula that emphasize national history and shared values can also play a pivotal role in bridging ethnic divides. Additionally, inter-ethnic dialogues and community engagement initiatives can foster mutual understanding and respect among diverse groups.

Methodology

The data for this study were qualitatively sourced as earlier stated, this paper employed the qualitative research method in interrogating the complexities around Ethnicity and Tribalism in Nigeria with critical references from Soyinka's *A Dance of the Forest*.

Theoretical Framework: Cultural Hegemony Theory

To better understand the dynamics of ethnicity and tribalism in Nigeria, this study adopts Antonio Gramsci's Cultural Hegemony Theory. According to Gramsci, cultural hegemony is a process through which the ruling class maintains dominance by shaping societal norms, values, and ideologies in a manner that reinforces their authority (Gramsci 1971). Nicki Cole (2024, p.1) believes that, "Cultural hegemony refers to domination or rule maintained through ideological or cultural means. It is usually achieved through social institutions, which allow those in power to strongly influence the values, norms, ideas, expectations, worldviews, and behaviours of the rest of society". In order to maintain cultural hegemony, the dominant class's worldview and the social and economic systems that support it are presented as legitimate, just, and intended for the sake of all, even when these systems may only serve the interests of the ruling class. This type of power is different from military dictatorships, which employ force to maintain control, because it enables the ruling elite to use ideology and culture as "peaceful" tools to exert their dominance (Gramsci 1971). Gramsci maintained that the dissemination of ideologies—beliefs, presumptions, and values—through social institutions like the media, courts, churches, and schools, among others, is how agreement to the dominating group's control is accomplished. People are socialized into the norms, values, and beliefs of the dominant social group by these institutions. The remainder of society is therefore ruled by the group that controls these institutions. In the context of Nigeria, cultural hegemony manifests in the dominance of certain ethnic groups in politics, governance, and economic spheres, leading to systemic inequalities and social stratification.

When members of the dominant group start to think that their society's social and economic circumstances are normal and unavoidable rather than the product of individuals with a stake in specific social, economic, and political structures, cultural hegemony is most clearly displayed. Ethnic elites in Nigeria have historically used cultural hegemony to maintain control over political power and economic resources. By leveraging ethnic identity as a tool for

mobilization, these elites shape public discourse and influence policy decisions that serve their interests while marginalizing minority groups (Ibrahim 2018). This perpetuates a cycle where political loyalty is tied to ethnic identity rather than national consciousness, reinforcing division and tribal allegiances.

Furthermore, media representation and educational curricula play a crucial role in reinforcing cultural hegemony. The predominance of narratives that favour dominant ethnic groups over others fosters a sense of inferiority among marginalized groups (Ukiwo 2005). This not only impacts intergroup relations but also limits opportunities for national integration and collective development. The understanding of ethnicity and tribalism through the lens of cultural hegemony helps explain why attempts at national integration have often faced resistance. Policies such as the Federal Character Principle and the National Youth Service Corps (NYSC) are intended to promote unity, but their implementation has been hindered by deep-seated hegemonic structures that continue to privilege dominant ethnic groups (Sultana 2021). Irrespective of these challenges, efforts have been made to foster national integration. Government policies such as the Federal Character Principle, the National Youth Service Corps (NYSC), and state creation were designed to promote national unity and equitable representation (Sultana 2021). However, their effectiveness has been limited by deep-seated ethnic biases and political manipulation.

Synopsis of *A Dance of the Forest*

A Dance of a Forest takes a critical look at Nigerian post-colonial politics. The 'gathering of the tribes' which Soyinka refers to in the play is an allegory to the gathering of the different tribes in Nigeria to celebrate their independence from the British. He uses the play to warn Nigerians to explore their multicultural nature and embark on a journey of self-discovery.

It begins with the appearance of the characters, dead man and dead woman, who breaks free from their burial ground in the middle of a forest. The Dead Man and Dead Woman who were married in their past life, were tortured and killed by the emperor (Mata Kharibu) and his queen (Madame Tortoise). They were sent by Aroni, a god, to the gathering of the tribes with the permission of the Forest Head instead of the ancestors whom the living had requested of the gods to be in attendance.

Four characters comes into the forest and is asked by the August visitors to take their case. This includes Rola, a prostitute, once known as Madame Tortoise and a queen to Mata Kharibu, Adenebi, a court historian in the court of Mata Kharibu, Agboreko, who was a soothsayer and lastly Demoke, who though

now a carver, was once a poet in his past life. Both of them also served in the court of Kharibu. They were all selected by Aroni to know about and atone for their sins in their past life. Eshuoro and Ogun makes an entrance, while Eshuoro seeks vengeance for the death of Demoke's apprentice Oremole, Ogun stands up for Demoke.

The play is finally taken back to the court of Mata Kharibu where the injustice to the Dead Man and Dead Woman are finally explained. Each of them is made to see what sin they committed against the couple. They are all later returned to the mortal world where Demoke and other mortals discuss the ordeals of the night. The play is left open ended and there is no record of them atoning for their sins.

Critical Discourse on *A Dance of the Forest*

Soyinka's perception of Yoruba cosmology has been of utmost interest to him and has always been central to his works. He uses his works to not just explore the African culture but also educate both Africans and Non-Africans on African cosmology and mythology. According to Praveena Thompson (2019), "Soyinka wanted to liberate Africa from its crippling legacy of European imperialism. His attempt was to reformulate native myth to accommodate contemporary reality and to open the way to self-retrieval" (p. 95). He projects his work through a dynamic mythic vision which he inculcates into the contemporary Nigeria which he expects to lead to self-realization. He felt Africans glorify the unsullied past without much looking into the future. Which Arne Kildahl while quoting Edward Said (1978), postulates that "Nativism is a desire to celebrate and return a pre-imperial unsullied culture, and it is based on the notion of a pure, untouched and authentic national or cultural identity" (p. 973). Although it is important to return to the past as a deviance to the oppression of colonialism and the colonizers, too much emphasis on the glorification or romanticizing of the past can pose as an obstruction to achieving true liberation. This why Said (1978) goes ahead to say that "to remain at a stage of nativism is to accept the consequences of imperialism, the rural, the religious, and political divisions imposed by the imperialism itself. To reevaluate the hierarchy is no escape from hierarchical and 'us versus them' thinking" (p. 973). Soyinka uses his play to decolonize the minds of Africans from their oppressors but at the same time, as Sudha K.P. (2004) puts it, "communicate the sense of continuity between the past and the present, the ultimate relationship between mankind's collective experience and the primeval fears and desires of the individual" (p. 77).

As the time of writing the play indicates, Soyinka shows his political inclinations and how Africans should reflect on their present and work on their future because the past presents the ingredients on which the future is made. Melamu M.J (2001) opines that “The play warns to the people of Nigeria that if they if they do not remain alert, history will repeat its self and people would repeat their mistakes” (p. 43). Soyinka argues that there is an unquestioned acceptance of the past and blind adoration of the ancient rulers, while they were capable of committing monstrosities and had questionable characters too. A typical example is the Mata Kharibu of the past. He steals another kingdom’s queen and made her his queen. When there was no reaction from them, he seeks to provoke them by attempting to recover her trousseau. The warrior refuses to lead his soldiers to war and inevitably their death just to satisfy Mata. He is sold off into slavery alongside his soldiers. Another example is the character of Madame Tortoise, who is not just a prostitute, but also leads men to their death. As the play was written specifically for the independence of 1960, Soyinka uses the play to warn Africans especially Nigerians in which the play is set, that although the colonial rule, which signifies the end of segregation and oppression, has ended, they are now entrusted with the heavy burden of rebuilding and restructuring their country and shaping it to be theirs. It is a call to let completely go of the past (colonial rule) and focus solely on the growth of the country by starting afresh. According to Sudha (2004),

Soyinka wants to overcome the obstacles of too much adoration of the past and blind admirations of the past. Thus, he is often seen raising an eyebrow at the unquestioned acceptance of the past and blind admirations of past rulers. For Soyinka, the ancients were in no way superior just because they built empires. They were capable of frightening monstrosities and shocking selfishness too (p. 74).

This is evident in the Court of Mata Kharibu and his wife, Madame Tortoise. They are typical examples of hypocrisy and characterlessness. They are not just a part of the past but also belong to the present. When confronted for her sins both in the court and the present, she boasts of having sent men to their graves and refuses to take responsibility for her action.

ROLA: ... They were fools, fools to think they were better than ... the other men. My other men.

ADENEBI: Men! Some of them were hardly grown up. We heard you liked them young, really young.

ROLA: I regret nothing. You men are conceited fools. Nothing was ever done on my account. Nothing. What you do is boost yourselves all the time... (pp. 23-24)

The 21st century Nigeria validates the relevance of the prophetic vision of Soyinka's *A Dance of the Forests*, one of the major recurring features in the play is its recourse to mythology and rituals. While relying on narrative and words to a considerable extent, Soyinka also employs rites, rituals and gestures. Sudha (2004) supports this assertion by saying that "the creative writers of Africa have a clear vision of the ideal society for which they have to combine the best of the old cultural traditions with the enlightened ideas of the modern world" (p. 76). It is clearly Soyinka's intention to communicate as much through actions as through words in *A Dance of the Forests*, he does not abhor the modern world and its scientific knowledge, he absorbs, adapts and grafts both these modernity and ancient traditions into his works. The play demythologizes old myths of progress by presenting parallel contradictions in such a way that makes readers see how these myths have failed. Sudha (2004) posits that "*A Dance of the Forests* shows that the modern society is in no way better than the ancient society, for, in the past as well as the present, the plight of the artist as well as the common man remains unchanged" (p. 76). During the 'gathering of the tribes', the people invite their ancestors whom they highly glorified and mystified. Instead, they are sent the 'dead ones' who bear grudges against the living for the injustice done to them.

ADENEBI: ... Talking about guests, what about the half dozen or so special guests whom we were supposed to expect.

OLD MAN: They are the very people we are trying to drive off.

ADENEBI: What! What kind of welcome is that?

OLD MAN: Well, believe me when I tell you that everything has misfired. These people who have come to claim our hospitality do not wish us well. We were

sent the wrong people. We asked for statesmen and were sent executioners (p. 30).

From the above dialogue between Adenebi and the old man, it is visible that when the guest they were expecting turned out to be the Dead man and his pregnant Dead wife, instead of people in “purple robes. White horses dressed in gold. Processions through the town with communion and service around our symbol”. They turn to their hunters trying to hunt them down throughout the night. This dislodges the idea that the past is without violence or vices unlike the present. As far as Soyinka is concerned, the vices which is popular in this modern time was obtainable in the past too and the past should not be mystified and idolized as unsullied. He suggests in the play that the modern Africans do not need to depend solely on the past or the dead. The play urges them to own up to their actions by taking responsibilities, reflect on themselves and finally, work towards being a better version of themselves.

It is important to note that the play highlights the fact that the modern society is in no way better than the ancient society because, just as in the ancient times, the problems of mankind has remained the same. It showcases a sublime continuity from the old down to the modern times. There is a likeness between the ancient and the modern. The play draws a parallel line between the past and present and shows that there is a repetition or continuation of events. This can be seen in the characters of Rola, Adenebi, Demoke, and Agbereko. Rola, a prostitute, was known as Madame Tortoise in her past life. Adenebi, who collects bribe both in the court of Mata Kharibu from the slave dealer and also in the present for collecting bribe from the driver to pass a lorry which can only carry forty as suitable to carry seventy-five passengers. Demoke, a court poet in his past life and now a carver continues in his present as an artist who pushes his apprentice off a tree. It is also suggested that he pushed his assistant in the court off the roof of the palace. Agbereko, who in the court was a soothsayer and now an ‘elder of the sealed lips’ which means the same thing in both existences. As Eldred Jones (1988) puts it in his *The Writing of Wole Soyinka*, “For Soyinka, History is viewed as a nearly cyclical movement, any progress being represented by a kink after an evolution and at the start of a new cycle” (p. 33). Opposed to what the people believe, the past was not glorious or happy, not more glorious and happier than the present is, nothing has changed. Society and human beings have remained the same. There as and there is violence. It is still corrupted and all the vices of the ancient world prevails. As the Dead Woman remarks in the

play, 'A hundred generations has made no difference/ I was a fool to come' (p. 26). According to Tejumola Olaniyan (1992), "the purpose of the play is 'the celebration of a geopolitical transformation of a stage in the historic encounter between Africa and the Western World'" (p. 489).

Conclusion

In conclusion, ethnicity and tribalism remain central to Nigeria's socio-political and economic landscape. These issues have significantly impacted the nation's political development, socio-economic progress, and national security. While diversity should ideally be a strength, the persistent ethnic divisions and tribal allegiances have often undermined national unity and progress. Addressing these issues requires deliberate efforts to promote inclusive governance, equitable resource distribution, and the development of a national identity that transcends ethnic affiliations. However, with conscious efforts towards inclusive governance, equitable development, and the promotion of a unified national identity, Nigeria can harness its diversity as a strength rather than a source of division.

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