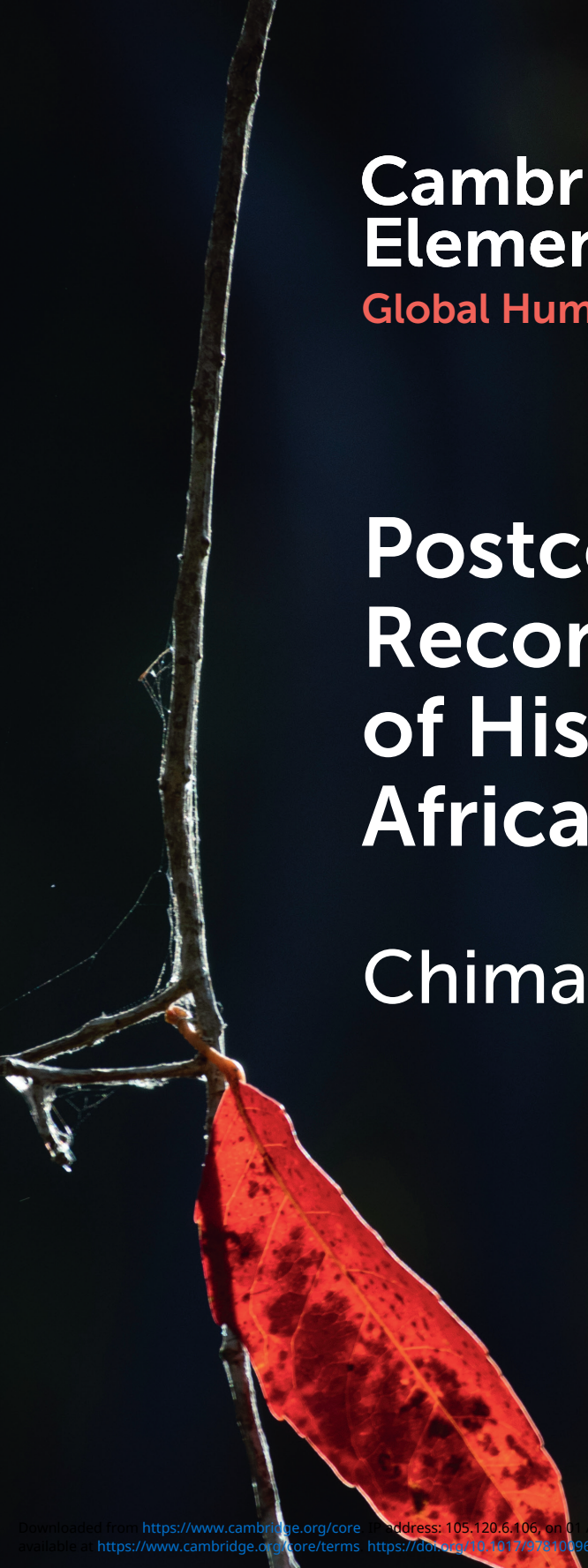


A vertical branch with a single red leaf against a dark background.

Cambridge
Elements



Global Humanities

Postcolonial Reconstruction of History in African Drama

Chima Osakwe

ISSN 3049-821X (online)

ISSN 3049-8201 (print)

Cambridge Elements

Elements in Global Humanities

edited by

Saul Dubow

University of Cambridge

Malvika Maheshwari

Ashoka University

Frisbee C. C. Sheffield

University of Cambridge

POSTCOLONIAL RECONSTRUCTION OF HISTORY IN AFRICAN DRAMA

*Soyinka, Ngũgĩ with Mugo, Hussein,
and Johnson*

Chima Osakwe
College of William & Mary



CAMBRIDGE
UNIVERSITY PRESS



CAMBRIDGE
UNIVERSITY PRESS

Shaftesbury Road, Cambridge CB2 8EA, United Kingdom

One Liberty Plaza, 20th Floor, New York, NY 10006, USA

477 Williamstown Road, Port Melbourne, VIC 3207, Australia

314–321, 3rd Floor, Plot 3, Splendor Forum, Jasola District Centre,
New Delhi – 110025, India

Cambridge University Press is part of Cambridge University Press & Assessment,
a department of the University of Cambridge.

We share the University's mission to contribute to society through the pursuit of
education, learning and research at the highest international levels of excellence.

www.cambridge.org

Information on this title: www.cambridge.org/9781009686372

DOI: [10.1017/9781009686358](https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009686358)

© Chima Osakwe 2026

This publication is in copyright. Subject to statutory exception and to the provisions
of relevant collective licensing agreements, no reproduction of any part may take
place without the written permission of Cambridge University Press & Assessment.

When citing this work, please include a reference to the DOI [10.1017/9781009686358](https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009686358)

First published 2026

A catalogue record for this publication is available from the British Library

*A Cataloging-in-Publication data record for this Element is available
from the Library of Congress*

ISBN 978-1-009-68637-2 Hardback

ISBN 978-1-009-68636-5 Paperback

ISSN 3049-821X (online)

ISSN 3049-8201 (print)

Cambridge University Press & Assessment has no responsibility for the persistence
or accuracy of URLs for external or third-party internet websites referred to in this
publication and does not guarantee that any content on such websites is, or will remain,
accurate or appropriate.

For EU product safety concerns, contact us at Calle de José Abascal, 56, 1º, 28003
Madrid, Spain, or email eugpsr@cambridge.org

Postcolonial Reconstruction of History in African Drama

Soyinka, Ngũgĩ with Mugo, Hussein, and Johnson

Elements in Global Humanities

DOI: 10.1017/9781009686358
First published online: July 2026

Chima Osakwe
College of William & Mary

Author for correspondence: Chima Osakwe, [cjusakwe@wm.edu](mailto:cjosakwe@wm.edu)

Abstract: This Element investigates how selected postcolonial African writers have adapted or rather reshaped historical sources for dramatic compositions. The writers and works the author focuses on are: Wole Soyinka (*Death and the King's Horseman*, 1975), Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o with Micere Githae Mugo (*The Trial of Dedan Kimathi*, 1976), Ebrahim Hussein (*Kinjeketile*, 1970), and Effiong Johnson (*Not Without Bones*, 2000). His reading of the plays emphasizes their status as *postcolonial* texts and not just works of African literature. In doing so, the Element is mindful of the fact that postcolonialism has inevitably involved the conceptualization of non-Western modes of thought as a means of challenging the West. The author's central argument is that the selected postcolonial African authors use artistic licence to rewrite colonial history from below, transforming historical trauma into counternarratives that restore agency, dignity, and futurity to the oppressed.

Keywords: postcolonial, literature, Africa, drama, Colonialism

© Chima Osakwe 2026

ISBNs: 9781009686372 (HB), 9781009686365 (PB), 9781009686358 (OC)
ISSNs: 3049-821X (online), 3049-8201 (print)

Contents

Introduction	1
1 Death and the King's Horseman	4
2 The Trial of Dedan Kimathi	22
3 Kinjeketile	42
4 Not Without Bones	50
Conclusion	61
Bibliography	63

Introduction

This Element investigates how selected postcolonial African writers have adapted or rather reshaped historical sources for dramatic compositions. It seeks to demonstrate that the selected authors use artistic licence to rewrite colonial history from below, transforming historical trauma into counternarratives that restore agency, dignity, and futurity to the oppressed. The writers and works I focus on are: Wole Soyinka (*Death and the King's Horseman* – 1975), Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o with Micere Githae Mugo (*The Trial of Dedan Kimathi* – 1976), Ebrahim Hussein (*Kinjeketile* – 1970), and Effiong Johnson (*Not Without Bones* – 2000). These works are representations of historical events that occurred in colonial Africa in the twentieth century. However, my choice of these four primary texts is equally informed by other considerations. Besides dealing with a historical incident in the context of colonial domination, Soyinka's play, for instance, is an internationally acclaimed masterpiece. It is arguably the most prominent work by the Nobel laureate. Ngũgĩ and Mugo's play, as well as Hussein's, are based on some particularly notable episodes in the series of anti-colonial resistance in Africa: Kenya's Mau Mau war (1952–1960) and Tanzania's Maji Maji uprising (1904–1907). And the historical event that inspired Johnson's play – the Aba Women's War of 1929 – is notable for featuring women in a central role.

Previous studies in African drama as literature, as exemplified by published research on the selected titles, have exhibited an inordinate bias toward the sociological.¹ But this Element explores more subtle aspects of drama as postcolonial resistance in African playwriting. My reading of the plays emphasizes their status as *postcolonial* texts and not just works of African literature. This emphasis stems from the fact that postcolonialism, as exemplified by the manner in which the plays deal with colonial relationships, has inevitably involved the conceptualization of non-Western modes of thought as a means of challenging the West. Again, the postcolonial identity of the plays is substantiated by the fact that they all come from once-colonized countries. Colonialism is a key concern in postcolonial writing and postcolonial authors have demonstrated

¹ See, for example, Biodun Jeyifo's study of *Death and the King's Horseman* and *Kinjeketile* in *The Truthful Lie: Essays in a Sociology of African Drama*; Nicholas Brown's study of *The Trial of Dedan Kimathi* in "Revolution and Recidivism," and Emmy Idegu's study of *Not Without Bones* in "Historical Play writing and the Identity Question." Moreover, none of these African plays is the subject of any chapter in a book like Gilbert and Tompkins' *Postcolonial Drama: Theory, Practice, Politics*. *Death and the King's Horseman* is only briefly commented upon (pp. 67–69) in an overview of ritual-driven or, more specifically, "Ritual-Centred Plays" (p. 66). The play also receives attention in Crow and Banfield's *An Introduction to Postcolonial Theatre*, but again, the authors briefly discuss the text in an overview of selected Soyinka titles for a chapter devoted to the "ritual vision" (p. 78) of the dramatist.

interest in subverting the power structures of colonialism. I apply a postcolonial theoretical framework in looking at how each selected text has reshaped historical accuracy to interpret, or rather reinterpret, history from the perspective of the colonized subject.

My analysis of each play engages the relevant historical backgrounds to properly contextualize my discussion. While investigating Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o and Micere Githae Mugo's *The Trial of Dedan Kimathi*, for instance, my discussion refers to the Mau Mau (1952–1960), Kenya's internationally renowned anti-colonial movement against British colonial rule just as my investigation of Effiong Johnson's *Not Without Bones* references the Aba Women's War of 1929 against British colonial rule in southeastern Nigeria. Exploring the relevant historical incidents and the often competing and shifting accounts that strive to authoritatively portray those pasts demonstrates how these plays serve as dramatic reinterpretations of history with the attendant political implications. When, for instance, Wole Soyinka writes with reference to his play *Death and the King's Horseman*, "[t]he action has . . . been set back to two or three years to while the [World War II] war was still on for minor reasons of dramaturgy,"² how truly "minor" are such amendments from a postcolonial point of view? Especially when such amendments have made it possible to refer in the play's action to an ongoing Second World War that had already ended when the historical incident on which the play is based supposedly took place? What are those amendments intended to achieve and whose interests do they serve? The implications of such questions have been investigated in my analyses of all the selected titles.

However, much as the Element seeks to understand the status of each selected play as a postcolonial engagement with the broad and long-lived genre of *historical fiction*, it also seeks to understand how each title serves as what one of the authors – Effiong Johnson – calls "faction."³ The idea of "faction" emphasizes the author's awareness that although his play, *Not Without Bones*, amends key historical details, it also aspires to some level of historical accuracy vis-à-vis the incident on which his work is based. Since the rest of the plays adopt an approach similar to Johnson's, my analyses demonstrate how each title serves as a mixture of facts and fiction that creates its own vision of history.

My reading of the plays draws theoretical inspiration from some leading postcolonial figures and others that include but are not limited to Edward Said (*Orientalism*), Frantz Fanon (*The Wretched of the Earth*), Aimé Césaire

² Soyinka, "Author's Note to *Death and the King's Horseman*," p. 548.

³ Effiong Johnson, author of *Not Without Bones*, provides this explanation in his introductory remarks on the published play [n.p.] He restated this point in a personal interview with me in July 2022.

(*Discourse on Colonialism*), Chinweizu (*The West and The Rest of Us*), and Walter Rodney (*How Europe Underdeveloped Africa*). Matching the selected plays with the relevant theoretical writings, my discussion illustrates how the plays engage some key arguments on colonial relationships articulated in the theoretical texts. My analysis of Soyinka's *Death and the King's Horseman*, for instance, demonstrates how the British colonizer's dismissal of the Yoruba custom of ritual suicide as "barbaric" illustrates Said's concept of *orientalism* as an Occident-serving system of representation tied to political domination.

The core of this Element, arguably speaking, is the theoretically informed readings of the plays – one that engages the existing scholarship on these works. Given that these are all historical fictions, I have tried to immerse myself in historical works that illuminate the events these plays dramatize, but I have also done archival work on some of these events. Because I seek to demonstrate that all of these works have clear political intent, in addition to (and as part of) their aesthetic or dramatic aspirations, I have interviewed the available authors. The perspectives and insights from the interviewed authors have been cited and analyzed to complement my textual analyses of the plays (see [Figure 1](#) and [Figure 2](#)).

Each of the four sections is devoted to one of the selected plays. And my analysis of each title focuses primarily on the playtext, paying close attention to the play's politics of representation in relation to the counter-Western perspective of postcolonial theory. Equally significant to my investigation is how the plays are useful to our understanding of some terms and concepts from postcolonial theory, such as the earlier mentioned *orientalism* in addition to *other/othering*, *subaltern*, and *agency*, among others. I conclude by commending all the selected titles for reconstructing historical facts in sympathy with the oppressed and suggest some questions that future studies may want to explore.

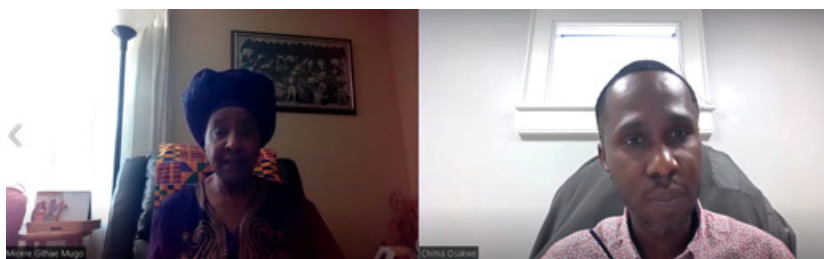


Figure 1 Chima Osakwe (R) interviewing Micere Githae Mugo, co-author of *The Trial of Dedan Kimathi*. Zoom, July 25, 2022.



Figure 2 Chima Osakwe (L) interviewing Effiong Johnson, author of *Not Without Bones*. Uyo, July 5, 2022.

Because the scholarship on postcolonial literature is heavily dominated by attention to prose fiction while drama has been a vital literary genre across Africa, I hope this Element will fill a gap in the field.

1 Death and the King's Horseman

Wole Soyinka's 1975 play *Death and the King's Horseman* is a universally acclaimed classic. The play is inspired by an event that occurred during the colonial period in the city of Oyo, located in the Yoruba-dominated Western Nigeria. The date of this event is stated as 1946 in the author's note to the play, but others have suggested alternative dates around the same period.⁴ Whatever the correct date, a British colonial district officer, John Mackenzie, successfully thwarted the ritual suicide of Olokun Esin Jinadu, the horseman of a departed Yoruba king in the real-life incident. In accordance with Yoruba customs, the horseman must commit ritual suicide in honour of the late monarch to maintain

⁴ Henry Louis Gates, Jr., for instance, suggests 1945 as the date of the incident, further stating that the Yoruba king died the previous year. "Being, the Will, and the Semantics of Death," p. 155.

harmony between the world of the dead, the living, and the unborn. Soyinka's play opens on the day that the king's horseman – Elesin – will perform the ritual suicide. The significance of the horseman's imminent suicide is captured in the following speech by the Praise Singer:

There is only one home to the life of the river-mussel; there is only one home to the life of a tortoise; there is only one shell to the soul of man; there is only one world to the spirit of our race. If that world leaves its course and smashes on boulders of the great void, whose world will give us shelter? (128)

Guaranteed social stability is therefore rooted in ritual suicide. As a custodian of tradition, the Praise Singer recognizes the grave implications of failing to proceed with it. Neither are the implications lost on Elesin himself, who commences the process of ritual suicide after consummating his marriage with a young bride on his final day on earth. But a British colonial officer – Simon Pilkings – who considers the suicide “barbaric” (144) arrests Elesin and locks him up. Seeing that the well-being of the community is under threat because of Elesin's prevented death, Olunde, his medical student son who has returned from Britain to bury his father, commits suicide in his place. Upon seeing Olunde's corpse, the detained Elesin strangles himself to death.

Death and the King's Horseman and Postcolonial Politics

In an author's note that prefaces the play, Soyinka is at pains to emphasize that the play is not about culture clash. He states, *inter alia*,

The bane of themes of this genre is that they are no sooner employed creatively than they acquire the facile tag of “clash of cultures,” a prejudicial label which, quite apart from its frequent misapplication, presupposes a potential equality *in every given situation* of the alien culture and the indigenous, on the actual soil of the latter . . . The Colonial Factor is an incident, a catalytic incident merely.⁵

The above statement inevitably triggers this question: What then is the play all about? Perhaps Soyinka is mindful of such a question when he goes further to explain, “The confrontation in the play is largely metaphysical, contained in the human vehicle which is Elesin and the universe of the Yoruba mind.”⁶ Soyinka is entitled to his views. In fact, as we shall see from the subsequent investigation of other selected titles, the authors have included some prefatory remarks on how they have utilized historical sources. But unlike Soyinka's, the rest of the authorial remarks contain no dictations concerning the *thematic*

⁵ Soyinka, “Author's Note to *Death and the King's Horseman*,” p. 548. ⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 548–549.

preoccupation of their works. However, some scholars would agree with Soyinka on the main theme of *Death and the King's Horseman*. Helen Gilbert and Joanne Tompkins, for instance, have observed that Elesin's "earthly pursuits" as demonstrated by his taking a wife on the day of his appointed death rather than concentrate solely on the ritual death "is the action – not the District Officer's meddling – that disturbs the ritual."⁷ As tempting as it is to accept this explanation and, by extension, Soyinka's position, the play deliberately or inadvertently dramatizes a culture clash between African traditional customs and Western values represented by the Yoruba people and the British, respectively. If Soyinka and like-minded critics are not completely incorrect by stating that the play is not about the clash of cultures, they are not telling the whole truth either. Let us take a moment to inspect this passage:

IYALOJA: White one, you have a king here, a visitor from your land. We know of his presence here. Tell me, were he to die would you leave his spirit roaming restlessly on the surface of earth? Would you bury him here among those you consider less than human? In your land have you no ceremonies of [sic]the dead?

PILKINGS: Yes. But we don't make our chiefs commit suicide to keep him company. (173)

The above exchange is just one of several instances that capture the antagonistic relationship between the Yoruba and the British. As we can see, Iyaloja – a Yoruba leader of the market women and keen supporter of her people's cultural values – is eager to press home the justification for Elesin's ritual suicide just as Pilkings, the British colonial district officer, is determined to stop it. Pilkings' response is a clear affirmation that the British style of organizing a funeral for a monarch or ordinary Britons and, by extension, overall approach to things of life is automatically superior to its Yoruba counterpart. With a closer observation, one will realize that his response arises from the colonialist mindset that stresses the innate superiority and inferiority of the colonizer and colonized, respectively. As district officer, Pilkings must demonstrate that he has full control over his "natives" – that is, that they have been "pacified" and, under British influence, have abandoned their "primitive" customs. Pilkings' deep-seated opposition to Elesin's ritual suicide is such that he is paternalistically protecting the Yoruba people, whom he believes do not know what is good for them, despite evidence of critical thinking by Iyaloja. This attitude of protective

⁷ Gilbert and Tompkins, *Postcolonial Drama*, pp. 67–68.

paternalism is even rendered more forcefully in a scene of battle of wits between Elesin and Pilkings. Hear the duo:

ELESIN: The night is not at peace, ghostly one. The world is not at peace. You have shattered the peace of the world forever. There is no sleep in the world tonight.

PILKINGS: It is still a good bargain if the world should lose one night's sleep as the price of saving a man's life.

ELESIN: You did not save my life, District Officer. You destroyed it.

PILKINGS: Now come on . . .

ELESIN: And not merely my life but the lives of many. The end of the night's work is not over. Neither this year nor the next will see it. If I wished you well, I would pray that you do not stay long enough on our land to see the disaster you have brought upon us.

PILKINGS: Well, I did my duty as I saw it. I have no regrets.

ELESIN: No. The regrets of life always come later. (166–167)

Judging who is right or wrong from the above exchange would probably depend on the identity of the judge and/or the reason for judging. Although Elesin is in the colonizer's jail at this moment, that does not eradicate his belief in the integrity of the ritual suicide just as his commitment to the suicide does not prevent the colonial officer from arresting him. The colonizer and the colonized cannot agree on what is good for the colonized because each believes in the integrity of their own people's way of life without a deeper comprehension of that of each other. Therefore, it is difficult if not impossible to not see a culture clash in this play. Accepting as the absolute truth Soyinka's explanation that culture clash is a nonissue in the play would be tantamount to strictly adhering to the concept of *intentional fallacy*. This concept entails the belief that an author's stated or implied purpose for writing a work should be the primary basis for understanding the work. But Roland Barthes argues convincingly in his essay, "The Death of the Author," that "it is language which speaks, not the author."⁸ Barthes further notes in a persuasive fashion that "[t]he reader is the space on which all the quotations that make up a writing are inscribed without any of them being lost; a text's unity lies not in its origin but in its destination."⁹ Hence, Soyinka's position on the theme of his play need not be necessarily accepted as the absolute truth. The author should not necessarily think for the reader. It should be noted that in dramatizing the polarized confrontation between the colonized Africans and the colonizing European power over Elesin's ritual suicide, the play does not necessarily adopt the perspective of

⁸ Barthes, "The Death of the Author," p. 1323. ⁹ *Ibid.*

an innocent bystander. As a postcolonial text, the politics of Soyinka's play align with the non-West in relation to the West while auditing colonial relationships. Listen closely to the following passage:

JANE: (*after a moment's pause*) Perhaps I can understand you now. The time we picked for you was not really one for seeing us at our best.

OLUNDE: Don't think it was just the war. Before that even started I had plenty of time to study your people. *I saw nothing, finally, that gave you the right to pass judgment on other peoples and their ways.* Nothing at all. (161, my emphasis)

Mindful of the highlighted portion of Olunde's speech above, Tejumola Olaniyan has argued that Olunde is "wrong," further noting that the colonizer's "political and military power over disparate spaces gave the Europeans that right" to lord it over others.¹⁰ Olaniyan's position does well by somehow reminding us that the colonizer's political domination of the colonized has been made possible by the former's superior military firepower. But some personal experiences¹¹ with the colonial regime, level of education, mental development, and international exposure of Soyinka's Olunde are such that Olaniyan's point may not be lost on him. However, it appears that Olunde is eager to point out that the colonizer's status as a violent conqueror need not be a source of pride to the colonizer in the same manner that colonization need not be a cause of jubilation for the colonized. Olunde, it seems to me, is acutely aware that the colonizer's superior military firepower need not be a justifiable basis for invading and subjugating others. From the counter-Western perspective of postcolonial theory, Olaniyan's position seems unconvincing. And this is so because the colonizer's guns and mortars, as well as other instruments of his artillery firepower, are symbols of *forceful* compliance and brutality but *not* the civilization that the colonizer claims to have brought to the colonized. In his polemical assault against colonial rule in *Discourse on Colonialism*, Aimé Césaire argues, "a nation which colonizes" or "a civilization which justifies colonization – and therefore force – is already a sick civilization."¹² As a postcolonial text, Soyinka's play would endorse Césaire's argument. The play vigorously contests the colonizer's

¹⁰ Olaniyan, *Scars of Conquest/ Masks of Resistance*, p. 59.

¹¹ Some of these experiences are cited elsewhere in this discussion; they include but are not limited to when the British Aide-de-Camp violently threatens to give Olunde "business in a moment" or when the district officer, Pilkings, informs Olunde of the presence of "armed policemen" who will not allow him (Olunde) to walk freely in town.

¹² Césaire, *Discourse on Colonialism*, pp. 17–18.

claim to a perfect civilization and sense of superiority. Consider the following passage:

OLUNDE. You white races know how to survive; I've seen proof of that. By all logical and natural laws this war should end with all the white races wiping out one another, wiping out their so-called civilization for all time and reverting to a state of primitivism the like of which has so far only existed in your imagination when you thought of us. I thought all that at the beginning. Then I slowly realized that your greatest art is the art of survival. But at least have the humility to have others survive in their own way.

JANE: Through ritual suicide?

OLUNDE: Is that worse than mass suicide? Mrs Pilkings, what do you call what those young men are sent to do by their generals in this war? (160–161).

Thus, we are invited to wonder the logic of a European civilization that denounces the ritual suicide of a single personality in a traditional African society but perpetrates death on a much larger scale in a conflict of Western nations. The “war” of mindless carnage cited by Olunde is the Second World War (1939–1945). As earlier noted, Soyinka states 1946 in the author’s note concerning the historical date of the incident on which the play is based. But going by his explanation, as evidenced shortly below, the play’s historical date is 1943 or 1944. And it is this deviation from the original historical date that makes it possible for Olunde to reference the Second World War in a manner that impugns the supposedly sophisticated behavior or stellar cognition of the colonizer. Changing the historical date of the narrative is arguably an empowering political move that accomplishes postcolonial objectives despite Soyinka’s explanation, “[t]he action has . . . been set back to two or three years to while the war was still on for minor reasons of dramaturgy.”¹³ It should be doubtful whether such changes are truly “minor” or done simply for purposes of “dramaturgy” when the play has relied on them to jettison the claims to superiority by a domineering alien civilization. Such changes are more deliberate than accidental; they are not done out of oversight or mere casual calculations, especially when they are not limited to issues of historical dates. Soyinka tampers with some other historical facts in a fashion that advances the interest of the colonized subject. Regarding these additional details of deviation from history, let me invite Biodun Jeyifo for explanation: “Elesin Oba’s marriage to the young maiden; the visit of H.R.H. the Prince; Olunde’s sojourn in, and timely return from Britain, and . . . the suicide of Elesin.”¹⁴ Of these listed items, all except

¹³ Soyinka, “Author’s Note to *Death and the King’s Horseman*,” p. 548.

¹⁴ Jeyifo, *The Truthful Lie*, p. 27.

perhaps the first, are of interest, for they greatly advance the play's postcolonial politics. It is worth noting, for instance, that Pilkings facilitated Olunde's travel to England for medical training to supposedly polish him up and liberate his mind from the shackles of ignorant customs. Such a scenario was a notable feature of colonization as demonstrated not only by Africa's experience with colonial rule but elsewhere. In "Minute on Indian Education," for example, Thomas Macaulay unambiguously articulates the British colonizer's intention to train some people who will be "Indian in blood and colour, but English in taste, in opinions, in morals, and in intellect."¹⁵ The brand of Indians captured in the quoted remarks is intended to assist in promoting the interests of the colonizer among the colonized people. And this is the same vision that the British colonizers have for Soyinka's Olunde. Pilkings wants to make Olunde an Englishman in Yoruba/Nigerian skin, a scenario captured in Fanonian terms as *black skin, white masks*.¹⁶ Fanon applies the emphasized expression to the experience of black Antilleans who travelled to France during the colonial period and emulated the culture and language of the white race. When these Antilleans return to their homeland, according to Fanon, they are treated as superior and they act in a condescending fashion. But Soyinka's Olunde remains a passionate defender of African customs despite his studies and exposure to Western tradition while living in Britain. In fact, as my analysis has demonstrated so far, Olunde is so much of a nativist in relation to Yoruba customs that we can see why it is persuasive to regard him as "the playwright's ideological spokesman."¹⁷ Indeed, he "is a perfect match for the arrogance and chauvinism of the colonial administrators."¹⁸ That a Western-educated character like Olunde voluntarily died in place of his father, thereby valorizing a culture considered evidence of plain stupidity by the colonizers speaks volumes about the play's unflinching support for traditional African customs. Indeed, the play projects the notion, consciously or unconsciously, that the culture of the colonized subject can only be as stupid or sensible as that of the colonizer. Césaire again: "colonization . . . dehumanizes even the most civilized man . . . the colonizer . . . who in order to ease his conscience gets into the habit of seeing the other man as *an animal*, accustoms himself to treating him like an animal, and tends objectively to transform *himself* into an animal."¹⁹ To appreciate the relevance of Soyinka's play to the quoted preceding argument, it is worth recognizing how the play encourages us to appreciate that the colonizers,

¹⁵ Macaulay, "Minute on Indian Education," p. 375.

¹⁶ This is also the title of Fanon's 1952 book that addresses the psychological effects of racism on the colonized subject.

¹⁷ Williams, "Cultural Death and the King's Horseman," p. 563. ¹⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁹ Césaire, *Discourse on Colonialism*, pp. 19–20.

just like the colonized people, are ritual practitioners who undertake actions that others might consider retrogressive and barbaric. Consider, for instance, Jane's story about the Caucasian captain who blew himself up with his ship in the local harbor to save other lives. Thus, we can draw a parallel between the self-sacrificing task of the captain and Elesin. Olunde, who acknowledges the "affirmative" nature of the captain's action, recognizes that the action is akin to Elesin's ritual suicide. Olunde is mindful of the fact that the colonizer's rejection of Elesin's ritual suicide or other aspects of Yoruba traditional customs is informed by plain insularity. He simultaneously reminds and upbraids the colonizers: "You forget that I have now spent four years among your people. I discovered that you have no respect for what you do not understand" (158).

Thus, the character of Olunde remains central to the play's rejection of the colonialist assault on traditional African values. Olunde's refusal to be brain-washed by colonialist doctrines despite his Western education and residence in England recalls Walter Rodney's argument, "[t]here was no sector of colonial life in which educated Africans appeared and remained wholly loyal to the colonialists. Teachers were supposed to have been steeped in the culture of domination, so as to pass it on to other Africans but, in the end, many of them stood in the vanguard of the national independence movement."²⁰ Indeed, Soyinka's Olunde helps to clarify Rodney's argument for here is a character who has used his Western education to challenge the colonial conquerors and uphold the dignity of black Africa rather than venerate the colonizer or discount traditional African customs and denigrate kinsmen who do not possess such education. Like Shakespeare's Caliban in *The Tempest*, Olunde appears to be saying, "You taught me language; and my profit on't/Is, I know how to curse."²¹ In fact, Olunde just like Caliban, appears to be further reminding the colonizers, "The red plague rid you For learning me your language!"²² Prospero is the addressee of the two quoted speeches from Caliban in Shakespeare's play and the Caliban–Prospero relationship is widely considered paradigmatic of the colonized and colonizer, respectively. Just as Prospero is taken aback by Caliban's boldness to talk back and challenge him in the language learned from the addressee, the British colonizers in *Death and the King's Horseman* are shocked by the manner in which Olunde has used his Western education to demystify the colonizer's claim to superior intelligence. It is likely that the colonizers regretted sending Olunde to school. Consider, for instance, when Jane Pilkings, wife of the British district officer, says to Olunde, "I see. So it isn't just medicine you studied in England" (160). Clearly, she is not happy that

²⁰ Rodney, *How Europe Underdeveloped Africa*, p. 275. ²¹ Shakespeare, *The Tempest*, p. 8.

²² *Ibid.*

Olunde has now become so knowledgeable that he is boldly challenging the colonizer's claim to civilization. Prior to the reported speech by Mrs. Pilkings, Olunde had intrepidly confronted her with logical argumentation in a fashion demonstrating that there is practically little or no difference between the significance of Elesin's ritual suicide and that of the visiting British Prince of Wales. Hear him: "No one can undertake what he [Elesin] does tonight without the deepest protection the mind can conceive. What can you offer him in place of his peace of mind, in place of the honour and veneration of his own people? What would you think of your Prince if he refused to accept the risk of losing his life on this voyage? This ... [sic] showing-the-flag tour of colonial possessions" (160). Thus, both Elesin and the Prince are performing tasks that are central to the well-being of their people. Elesin's ritual suicide is intended to secure the welfare of his people, while the Prince's tour is geared toward boosting the morale of his subjects. So, it is fair to assume that Elesin is the Yoruba equivalent of the visiting British Prince just as the Prince is the British equivalent of the Yoruba Elesin? Anyhow, we can see how the invented, nonhistorical character of Olunde as well as the visit by the Prince has been crucial in advancing the anti-Western, postcolonial politics of the play.

And Elesin's suicide, despite Olunde's death, is another invented, nonhistorical plot detail that arguably advances the play's postcolonial politics. Both deaths arguably amount to a *double* validation of Yoruba customs, although it may also be argued that Elesin's death is a mere face-saving gimmick. While it may be tempting to argue that it is Olunde and not his father who will take the honour for defending their people's traditions, it should not be lost on us that Elesin's eventual suicide means that *two* people and *not* one person eventually died directly or indirectly because the colonizer attempted to prevent the execution of a traditional practice espoused by the late father and son. The play could have concluded without the arrested Elesin eventually killing himself after Olunde's suicide. It is instructive to note that Pilkings is made to see both corpses. It is equally instructive to note that Pilkings is mindful of the fact that he is finally incapable of preventing Elesin from taking his life, whether or not the suicide of the departed king's horseman will bring honour to his African people. He finds it rather incomprehensible that Elesin still chooses to die even after his son has died in his stead. Elesin's suicide after that of his son further deepens the hopelessness and futility of Pilkings' effort to thwart the actualization of the ritual suicide. The district officer's sense of futility and stoic resignation is aptly captured after Elesin's suicide in the following speech: "Was this what you wanted?" (177). The stage directions do not hesitate to remind us that Pilkings spoke the quoted lines "*in a tired voice*" (177). By making Pilkings speak these lines in a groggy fashion after the *second* death

arising directly or indirectly from his inflexible opposition to the ritual suicide, the play arguably makes the dramatic conflict more compelling than would have been possible with *one* death. Notice what Iyaloja says, *inter alia*, in response to Pilkings' preceding helpless question: "The gods demanded only the old expired plantain but you cut down the sap-laden shoot to feed your pride" (177).

Prior to strangling himself to death, the detained Elesin occasionally reflects on his predicament in a manner seeming to suggest that he himself, rather than Pilkings, ought to be blamed for the disruption of his ritual suicide. I will let him speak for himself: "my weakness came not merely from the abomination of the white man who came violently into my fading presence, there was also a weight of longing on my earth-held limbs" (169). However, Elesin is quick to add: "I would have shaken it off, already my foot had begun to lift but then, the white ghost entered and all was defiled" (169). Elesin addresses each of the quoted remarks particularly to his young bride, and going by these statements, we can appreciate that although Elesin recognizes that he tended to vacillate in his duty by taking a new wife when he should have focused entirely on his ritual death, the European district officer's interference remains a more crucial factor regarding Elesin's inability to complete the ritual suicide in strict accordance with the Yoruba tradition. Indeed, it ought to be appreciated that the district officer's interference, and not some apparent shortcomings of Elesin's personality, remains the central factor in the disruption of the ritual suicide. Elesin again:

My powers deserted me. My charms, my spells, even my voice lacked strength when I made to summon the powers that would lead me over the last measure of earth into the land of the fleshless. You saw it, Iyaloja. *You saw me struggle to retrieve my will from the power of the stranger whose shadow fell across the doorway and left me floundering and blundering in a maze I had never before encountered. My senses were numbed when the touch of cold iron came upon my wrists. I could do nothing to save myself.* (171, my emphasis)

The above argument, especially the emphasized portion, is a useful reminder that Elesin would have surely completed the ritual suicide without the disruption by British colonial authorities. While the colonial authorities are not responsible for the time Elesin spends in the marketplace having his massive ego massaged by the praise singer and his appetites sated by the market women, the quoted passage demonstrates that the colonial factor cannot be simply overlooked as to why the ritual suicide was stymied. Particularly, the quoted argument compels us to appreciate that Elesin or his Yoruba people really can do nothing when confronted by a domineering colonizer with more sophisticated instruments of force. The "cold iron" is a metaphor for the handcuffs placed on Elesin's wrists during his arrest. The image invoked by the arrested Elesin as well as the cell in which he is

detained is such that the colonialists do not hesitate to remind us that colonial rule is a continuation of Europe's violent dehumanization of Africans under slavery. Let's hear from the horses' mouth:

PILKINGS: Listen Bob, that cellar in the disused annexe of the Residency . . . where the slaves were stored before being taken down to the coast.

AIDE-DE-CAMP: Oh yes, we use it as a storeroom for broken furniture.

PILKINGS: But it's still got the bars on it?

AIDE-DE-CAMP: Oh yes, they are quite intact.

PILKINGS: Get the keys please. I'll explain later. And I want a strong guard over the Residency tonight. (164)

The play does not include the above passage to celebrate slavery. Instead, with closer observation, the passage condemns the enslavement of Africans in the same manner that the play condemns the denigration of Africans and their traditional institutions under colonialism. Besides colonialism, slavery is one of the key concerns of postcolonialism, and it is hardly surprising that an anti-colonial text like Soyinka's play also disapproves of slavery. Pilkings' opening remarks in the quoted passage capture the status of slaves as human properties whose freedom belonged to their captors. The captured Elesin more or less mirrors a captured slave awaiting transportation to the Western world: "*His wrists are encased in thick iron bracelets, chained together; he stands against the bars, looking out*" (166). Placing the handcuffs on Elesin's wrists arguably becomes a metaphorical depiction of the subjugation of the Yoruba people who are living under colonial rule against their own will. Further resistance by Elesin or his Yoruba people against Elesin's arrest would have attracted a more ferocious retaliation in view of the colonizer's superior arms and weaponry. On several occasions, to be sure, our attention is drawn to the colonizer's instruments of intimidation and domination as per armed *soldiers*, *policemen*, and *guards* among others. There are instances in the play, reminding us from time to time, of this military superiority and the inability of the colonized subject to resist it. One such instance is when Pilkings promptly warns Olunde: "There are armed policemen that way and they have instructions to let no one pass. I suggest you wait a little. I'll . . . give you an escort" (164). Olunde does not reject this offer of escort that he considers "very kind of you" (164). And the "armed policemen" referenced by Pilkings have been stationed to crush any riot that could be triggered by Elesin's arrest. It is the inability of the Yoruba people to match the colonizer's firepower that makes it possible for Elesin to be arrested.

Indeed, the colonial factor is too significant to be missed as to who takes primary responsibility for Elesin's inability to complete the ritual suicide as

originally expected. Biodun Jeyifo asserts that “the loss of nerve or will of the hero wrenches the metaphysical order of the world from its course”²³ with respect to the play. If we accept this argument, then Elesin’s momentary diversion, lustfulness, or hedonistic tendencies can be regarded as a form of tragic flaw reminiscent of the Aristotelian notion of a tragic hero. Aristotle’s *Poetics*, in its explications on the theatre of *catharsis* (emotional purging), epitomized by ancient Greek tragedy, identifies the concept of *hamartia* (tragic flaw) as a crucial term concerning the personality of the tragic hero. And the theatre of “catharsis” was the theatre of the status quo. It sought through the use of pity and fear to purge the audience of any tendency toward resistance against an unfair Greek society that practiced slavery and treated women as second-class citizens. As to how the theatre of catharsis operates, the central character of a tragedy has one major flaw in his character, such as excessive pride, arrogance, or stubbornness. Audience members share this weakness with the protagonist and thus sympathize with him as this flaw threatens to ruin him. Eventually, the protagonist suffers misfortune because of his flaw. This compels the protagonist to appreciate his blunder and the consequent penalty.²⁴ Society is therefore blameless while the protagonist is at fault. And members of the audience are compelled to purge themselves of this similar fault with the protagonist. But the preceding scenario is not strictly applicable to *Death and the King’s Horseman*, although the play is a tragedy. In Soyinka’s play, it remains difficult to exonerate the colonial society or, more specifically, the colonial authorities of blame for stymying Elesin’s ritual suicide. Contrary to Jeyifo’s earlier cited argument, what threatens the harmony of the Yoruba world is *not* Elesin’s “loss of nerve or will” in killing himself but the colonial authority’s firm interest in thwarting his self-sacrifice. Elesin’s delay is *temporary*. Remove the confrontation between the colonial authority and Yoruba traditional customs and there is virtually no conflict in the play. Had Elesin completed the ritual suicide on the appointed day without Pilkings’ intervention, I am not aware of any proviso in Yoruba tradition that nullifies the ritual should the horseman take a new wife prior to executing the ritual. The dramatic action is significantly propelled by the colonial authority’s determination to prevent Elesin’s ritual suicide. The play could have made Elesin die outside of the colonizer’s jail. It is worth stating that Elesin’s death in the colonizer’s jail arguably sustains interest and heightens the dramatic intensity of the plot. It further energizes the political conflict of the play. From the Praise Singer came the observation, “Our world is tumbling in the void of strangers” (176). In

²³ Jeyifo, *Wole Soyinka*, p. 262.

²⁴ Sophocles’ *Oedipus the King* is normally considered the perfect example of ancient Greek tragedy.

speaking these lines, the Praise Singer recognizes that Elesin is detained by the colonizer while Olunde has already taken his own life – a scenario that is inconsistent with the expectations of Yoruba traditional customs, which demand that only Elesin should die at this hour. We are made to appreciate that the scenario that informs the Praise Singer's lines would have been clearly averted had the British district officer not interfered in Elesin's ritual suicide. The quoted speech by the Praise Singer becomes particularly imperative for it compels us to appreciate how a relatively stable traditional African society has been gravely threatened or devastated by the European colonial rulers. Hence, Soyinka's play is equally useful to our understanding of how Africa's dramatic practices reconceptualize tragedy as a communal rather than individual experience. Pilkings' intervention provokes consequences that go beyond Elesin to the entire community and accentuates the culture conflict that drives the plot. The district officer's Western individualistic mindset prevents him from understanding the ritual's collective significance. As we saw in an earlier quoted remark, he says to the detained Elesin: "Well, I did my duty as I saw it. I have no regrets" (167). Pilkings' intervention redirects the tragedy from an individual failure to a communal catastrophe because it dislocates the community's spiritual stability. Recognizing this play as one of the titles "that best illustrate Soyinka's aesthetics of tragedy," Ato Quayson also reminds us that "[w]hat prevents us from asserting a simple line of Greek influence to Soyinka's dramaturgy is his explicitly acknowledged debts to Yoruba cosmogony."²⁵ It is instructive to note that Quayson reaches this verdict despite acknowledging that Soyinka's play shares some "elements that are reminiscent of the Greeks, such as a strong degree of disputatiousness, a carefully choreographed chorus-function, and an idea of the *pharmakos* that aligns sacrifice directly with the welfare of the *polis*."²⁶ Quayson's contentions or, more specifically, his reference to "Yoruba cosmogony" can probably be best understood as lending support to my argument as to how Soyinka's play exemplifies African drama's reappropriation of European tragic tradition in fashioning African tragedy. Adam Lecznar observes that at the end of the play, "the future exists as a consolation to a wrecked present."²⁷ This verdict is inspired by Iyaloja's final remark to Elesin's bride: "Now forget the dead, forget even the living. Turn your mind only to the unborn" (177). But this speech does not suggest despondency. Instead, we can appreciate a defiant communal spirit. It is worth noting that Olunde's ritual suicide, though chronologically untimely, is considered a valid substitute for Elesin's failure. As Iyaloja observes shortly after Elesin's belated

²⁵ Quayson, *Tragedy and Postcolonial Literature*, p. 125. ²⁶ *Ibid.*

²⁷ Lecznar, *Wole Soyinka*, p. 102.

suicide: “His [Elesin] son will feast on the meat and throw him [Elesin] bones” (176). Therefore, unlike ancient Greek tragedy, the play does not conceive tragedy as necessarily entailing a final destruction of an individual protagonist evidenced by his demise or banishment. Instead, it provides an ending that also serves as a moment of communal regeneration despite the disturbing incidents leading to the conclusion. The play draws from a complex interaction between ritual, collective ethos, and cultural resistance against colonial interference in dramatizing a culture conflict that deepens the tragedy’s communal dimensions. And it remains a fact that the approach adopted by the play to the multiple tragedies (Elesin’s disappointment, Olunde’s suicide, and Elesin’s belated suicide) is such that the colonizers cannot be exculpated. We are encouraged to recognize how colonization disrupts social harmony of the Yoruba world, but the European colonizers would not share such a view because of their perception of the colonized people as a naturally backward species of humans desperately in need of assistance and enlightenment from the colonizers. As demonstrated by the Yoruba experience with colonization, the European conquerors dominated not only the physical space but also sought to influence the ideology of the colonized people.

The colonizer’s demeaning perception of the Yoruba culture recalls Edward Said’s notable concept of *orientalism*²⁸ – a term that Said defines as “a way of coming to terms with the Orient that is based on the Orient’s special place in European Western experience.”²⁹ Indeed, Said’s theorizing of this concept enables us to appreciate how the nineteenth-century European colonizers in “the East” fabricated non-Western stereotypes that pictured the people of the Middle East and Far East or Asian countries as irrational, asinine, thoughtless, lazy, and sexually perverted in order to justify their territorial ambition and conquest of the Orient. The colonizer’s mental perception of the Orientals loosely applies to the rest of the colonized people elsewhere. The Occident-serving, orientalist mindset that justifies colonization is on full display in Soyinka’s play. Hear Pilkings for instance: “You think you’ve stamped it all out but it’s always lurking under the surface somewhere” (140). The district officer makes the quoted remarks partly in response to his wife’s query as to whether it is “ritual murder” that Elesin wants to commit when husband and wife are discussing Amusa’s written note about Elesin’s imminent ritual suicide (140). The authoritative voice with which Pilkings says “stamped it all out” betrays an orientalist mentality. It is the same orientalist mentality that compels both Pilkings and his wife to dismiss Elesin’s ritual suicide as “barbaric”

²⁸ This is also the title of Said’s 1978 book considered a foundational text in postcolonial theory.

²⁹ Said, *Orientalism*, p. 1.

(144, 160). Because of such an orientalist mindset, the colonizers envisage the Yoruba people as a laggard group that needs to be salvaged from immoral traditions by the more culturally sophisticated European colonizers. This orientalist mindset is what bestows upon the colonizer the “moral” responsibility and “heavenly” obligation to introduce “civilization” to the native. By opposing “the civilized world” to the “black natives,” the impression is given that civilization is white. But if we can accept that the Yoruba people are content with their traditional customs and can lay claims to civilization because their traditions work perfectly well for them, then the coming of the British does not advance the Yoruba nation. As Said further reminds us regarding his concept of *orientalism*, what the European colonizers did not recognize is that all forms of human epistemology can be filtered through one’s own ideological and political viewpoints. Therefore, inasmuch as the European conquerors exemplified by the Pilkings of *Death and the King’s Horseman* believed that they were correctly portraying the denizens of their newly acquired territories, they were actually demonstrating their poorly disguised quest for power, exploitation, and domination. And that means *orientalism* is *not* an accurate knowledge of the colonized people. It is an “imperialist view of the world.”³⁰ Indeed, Said’s theorizing of the term also recalls the concept of *other/othering*, another notable term in postcolonial theory equally implicated in Soyinka’s play. The *other* is determined from the European colonizer’s point of view. It is a concept that views the colonized non-European as the victim of civilizational absence and considers him the direct opposite of civilization that the colonizer is believed to represent. It projects the notion that non-Europeans deserve to be colonized because they look different from Europeans. It espouses the master–servant relationship designed to benefit the colonizer at the expense of the colonized. Certainly, the British colonizers in Soyinka’s play do not hesitate to remind the colonized Africans of how different they look from the Europeans and hence, cannot be considered equal in the dignity department. This point is amply demonstrated in a scene involving Olunde and the British duo of the Aide-de-camp and Jane Pilkings. Shortly before the Aide-de-camp appears on the scene, Jane Pilkings had screamed loudly when Olunde, taking a cue from the drum sounds, announces his father’s supposed death in a clearly indifferent fashion. “I’ll give you business in a moment you impudent nigger” (162), barks the Aide-de-camp to Olunde shortly upon arrival. This bluntly racist, violent threat stems from the statement-maker’s utter disbelief that Olunde could summon the courage to answer on behalf of Mrs. Pilkings, assuring the Aide-de-camp that she would be fine when the Aide-de-camp asks Mrs. Pilkings about her well-

³⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 15.

being in view of her screaming. The term “nigger” is a derogatory reference to a black person and emphasizes the Eurocentric notion of black people as the racial *other* whose humanity is of less value. It is hardly surprising that shortly after uttering the racist slur, the Aide-de-camp summons the colonial “Orderly” (162) to knock some sense into Olunde’s head. But for the timely intervention of Mrs. Pilkings, Olunde would have been seized and roughened up, murdered, or subjected to any kind of cruel punishment by the agents of colonial brutality. From a colonialist point of view, as exemplified by the Aide-de-camp, someone like Olunde is violating a divinely arranged universal order by summoning the confidence to offer a caring response to a question intended for someone else by a white person. So Olunde has demonstrated the kind of confidence he is not racially designed for? One may be forgiven to answer in the affirmative for it is doubtful whether the Aide-de-camp would have reacted in the same fashion if Olunde were white. Or what else are we encouraged to believe when the Aide-de-camp further quips: “These natives put a suit on and they get high opinions of themselves” (162). Indeed, the racial *othering* of the colonized African cannot be overemphasized. To be black or non-white and well-dressed seems abnormal, but to be white and well-dressed is perfectly in order. Demeaning classification of colonized subjects and accentuation of their overall insignificance is a central tenet of the colonizing project. Even the Western-educated Olunde is eventually dismissed as a “savage” (162) by Mrs. Pilkings for no other reason than the former’s proud identification with his people’s cultural values.

When Pilkings and his wife dismiss the Yoruba custom of ritual suicide as “barbaric” while the Aide-de-camp and Jane Pilkings respectively call Olunde a “nigger” and “savage,” we are somehow reminded of Said’s contention about how orientalist epithets resulting from notions of occidental sophistication stems from “flexible *positional* superiority, which puts the Westerner in a whole series of possible relationships with the Orient without ever losing him the relative upper hand.”³¹ The Yoruba Africans can be easily substituted for “the Orient” in the quoted remarks by Said. And this is so because “the Orient” can be extended to other colonized regions and not just restricted to the Middle East and Far East as earlier noted. Hence, the Yoruba people’s relationship with the British colonizer, as captured at different moments involving distinct characters from both sides, is somehow useful in illustrating Said’s argument. Indeed, whether it is Pilkings, his wife, the Aide-de-camp, or the rest of the British characters addressing the Africans in Soyinka’s play, we cannot help but witness the painstaking claims to cultural superiority by the British over the Yoruba. However, Soyinka’s play does not, in the final analysis, give the British

³¹ *Ibid.*, p. 7.

the “upper hand” in relation to the Yoruba. It does not take the side of colonial authority. But when Soyinka announces that the play is not about culture clash, as earlier noted, it is quite possible that he would not want to be considered a postcolonial author who has aligned with the African or tended to become a nativist in the face of European political domination of Africa. However, the way his play has handled the issue of the ritual suicide cuts for the author such an image whether or not he concurs. This is so if we accept that no matter the angle from which the story of any literary work is told, the author is behind it. And recognizing that the author has deliberately or inadvertently aligned with the Yoruba Africans is intended as an observation and not a commendation or criticism. As a postcolonial text auditing colonial relations, *Death and the King's Horseman* somehow recalls the novel *Things Fall Apart* (1958) by Soyinka's compatriot Chinua Achebe. Like Achebe's novel that addresses the devastation of a viable traditional African society by British colonial rule, Soyinka's play aligns with traditional African society while rejecting the haughty disposition of European colonizers who denigrate indigenous African customs. Like Achebe, who insists that Africans “did not hear of culture for the first time from Europeans,”³² Soyinka's treatment of precolonial Yoruba customs in his play is such that he too appears to be saying that Africans “had a philosophy of great depth and value and beauty . . . they had dignity.”³³ For was it not Soyinka who stated in his 1986 Nobel Lecture?: “We also have our myths, but we have never employed them as a base for the subjugation of others.”³⁴ Hence, the author expresses solidarity with his black African identity and heritage while tacitly denouncing the domineering tendency of Western civilization. A play like *Death and King's Horseman* arguably offers a literary corroboration of the author's quoted remarks. The play's handling of the disagreement between the Yoruba and the British over Elesin's ritual suicide is such that we can see how it observes the British observing the Yoruba and is not happy with what it sees. Therefore, the play strongly encourages the Yoruba traditional customs to stand its ground despite the racist and condescending assault by the British colonial authorities. When some postcolonial scholars and African literary critics argue, “As an integral part of African cultural nationalism especially within the cultural imbrications and stranglehold of dominant European imperialism, African literature has also valorized indigenous values as part of a political programme of counterhegemony,”³⁵ we can see how a play like *Death and the King's Horseman* substantiates such a claim. And by using his play to address the uneasy relationship between European colonial rule and

³² Achebe, “The Role of the Writer in a New Nation,” p. 8. ³³ *Ibid.*

³⁴ Soyinka, “Nobel Lecture 1986: This Past Must Address Its Present,” p. 15.

³⁵ Tsaaior, *African Literature and the Politics of Culture*, p. 114.

traditional African customs and, in the process, rejecting alien interference with African customs, Soyinka arguably becomes the “real writer” who “has no alternative to being in constant conflict with oppression.”³⁶ Perhaps, as a bona fide “African writer,” he “cannot . . . be unaware of, or indifferent to, the monumental injustice which his people suffer,” in accordance with Achebe’s charge to African writers.³⁷ It is worth noting that the veracity of Soyinka’s tacit condemnation of the “subjugation” of non-Western cultures in an earlier quoted extract from his Nobel speech as well as the outright rejection of the claims to civilizing mission by European colonization in *Death and the King’s Horseman* may be probably best measured against the following observation by Rodney:

In predominantly black countries . . . the bulk of the social services went to whites. The southern part of Nigeria was one of the colonial areas that was supposed to have received the most from a benevolent mother country. Ibadan, one of the most heavily populated cities in Africa, had only about 50 Europeans . . . For those chosen few, the British colonial government maintained a segregated hospital service of 11 beds in well-furnished surroundings. There were 34 beds for the half-million blacks. The situation was repeated in other areas, so that altogether the 4,000 Europeans in the country in the 1930s had 12 modern hospitals, while the African population of at least 40 million had 52 hospitals.³⁸

So what does one think considering that the historical context of the above argument is colonial Africa including Nigeria? But especially considering that the city of Ibadan in the Yoruba geographical location of *Death and the King’s Horseman* has been specifically cited in relation to the gist of the passage? Anyhow, the rejection of colonial suppression of African traditions plus the counter-Western perspective of *Death and the King’s Horseman* are such that Soyinka may not just be viewed as a “real writer” or “African writer” but a “real postcolonial writer.” His brand of poetics and politics, as exemplified by the play under review, arguably affirms the universal significance of his works as well. Hence, it seems persuasive that he has been included in a tightly drawn list of four playwrights “with a global vision and an unshakeable commitment to the world’s most oppressed populations.”³⁹

³⁶ Osundare, *The Writer as Righter*, p. 4.

³⁷ Achebe, “The African Writer and the Biafran Cause,” p. 115.

³⁸ Rodney, *How Europe Underdeveloped Africa*, p. 207.

³⁹ Etherton, “Tribute to Wole Soyinka,” p. 567. Also, it may be worth noting that the rest of the playwrights cited by Etherton are Bertolt Brecht, John Arden, and Margaretta D’Arcy. The “social obligations” of these four writers, Etherton further states, is such that, “[t]hey are the greatest dramatists of our time – though First World critics may not agree with this judgement.”

2 The Trial of Dedan Kimathi

Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o and Githae Mugo's *The Trial of Dedan Kimathi* (1976) is inspired by the life and struggles of Dedan Kimathi, a notable hero of Kenya's anti-colonial war of independence. This war of liberation from colonial rule is internationally known as the Mau Mau (1952–1960). Given the international significance of the Mau Mau plus the fact that it constitutes a useful historical background for Ngũgĩ and Mugo's play, it is worth providing or rather recalling some specific details of this moment in Kenyan history to situate the subsequent analysis of the play in its sociohistorical context. The Mau Mau was inspired by the violent project of British colonization that resulted in the sociopolitical and economic oppression and subjugation of the Kenyan people under a foreign imperial power. Particularly, the usurpation of lands belonging to the Gikuyu⁴⁰ majority of Kenyans by the colonizers was too much for the indigenous Africans to take. For the Gikuyu, the land commands a central place in his life. And this may not be hard to understand regarding a people for whom agriculture is the mainstay of their economy. The colonial usurpation of Gikuyu land automatically results in the loss of a crucial means of livelihood. Besides, the land is deemed a material symbol of the religious and cultural life of the Gikuyu.⁴¹ Determined to secure the best arable land for European farmers and insensitive to the wounded pride of the Gikuyu, the colonial administration herded the natives into overcrowded settlements. Refusing the status of a *tenant* or *squatter* in their ancestral land under a colonial government that compels them to work through the implementation of unjust taxation, the Gikuyu, who were resentful of colonial rule right from its inception in Kenya, intensified their nationalist activities around the mid twentieth century. Rather than embrace an amicable resolution of the problem, the colonial government in Kenya responded by brutally suppressing the nationalist movement. By the end of 1952, the authorities apprehended the leaders of the nationalist movement. And the followers of the movement retaliated by launching a guerrilla war that came to be known globally as the Mau Mau revolt. It may well be that the guerrilla warriors of this movement did not actually use the name to describe themselves but instead preferred the military title of Kenya Land and Freedom Army (KLFA). Members of the movement, we are given to understand, also described themselves in Gikuyu names such as Muingi ("The Movement") or Muma wa Uiguanu ("The Oath of Unity"). Some scholars have noted that the *Mau*

⁴⁰ This ethnic group is same as Kikuyu.

⁴¹ Some scholars have made notable observations in this regard. Fred Majdalany, for instance, notes that "The Kikuyu has a mystical attachment to his land. It is something sacred and deeply involved in his religious observance. Any dispute over land is therefore not amenable to reason or logic or equity in the European sense of those terms, and this again makes rational negotiations in land problems virtually impossible." *State of Emergency*, p. 75.

Mau is derived from “‘Uma Uma’ . . . which means ‘out out’ and was a codeword based on a secret-language game the Kikuyu boys used to play at the time of their circumcision.”⁴² It is believed, however, that the British loosely applied the word *Mau Mau* to the Gikuyu guerrilla army and emphasized the word over *KLFA* in order to devalue the international recognition of the movement. But the oppressed Africans were determined to wrest their freedom through armed struggle in dealing with a violent opponent that made no room for peaceful resolution. However, the capture of the *Mau Mau* leader Dedan Kimathi in 1956 and his execution in 1957 was a major blow for this otherwise heroic movement that was finally crushed by the colonial authorities. But much as it was a military triumph for the British, the ferocity of the resistance compelled the British to recognize that they could not cling to power for long. It is within this background of a violent, acrimonious society of binary division between the Africans and Europeans that we must investigate Ngũgĩ and Mugo’s *The Trial of Dedan Kimathi*.

The play opens in a courtroom with the trial of Kimathi. And the action goes back and forth between the courtroom and other locations and, in the process, provides an insight into the grievances that provoked the Kenyan armed struggle against colonization as well as the fate of the *Mau Mau* upon the capture of the detained Kimathi. The dramatic action notably features the four temptations, or rather main trials, suffered by the detained Kimathi besides the courtroom trial witnessed by the generality of the people. In the first private temptation, the white judge Henderson encourages Kimathi to renounce the struggle and save his life in return. This is then followed by a visitation by the trio of British, Indian, and African bankers who promise Kimathi a slice of the cake from colonialism with his rejection of the struggle as a *quid pro quo*. In the third temptation, an all-African trio of Business Executive, Politician, and Priest who represent native apologists of colonial rule in addition to being agents of foreign powers in a foreseeable neocolonial Kenya try equally unsuccessfully to make Kimathi reject the struggle. And when Henderson returns in the fourth temptation, he seeks Kimathi’s surrender via torturous violence and finally decrees his death when Kimathi defies him. But some progressive forces among the Kenyan people present in the courtroom jettison the death sentence and the play concludes in a stalemate as “*a struggle between opposing forces ensues*” (84).

The Trial of Dedan Kimathi and Postcolonial Politics

Right from the opening of the play, we are treated to a sharply divided colonial society as captured in the following stage directions: “*The courtroom is overcrowded. Africans squeeze around one side, seated on rough benches. Whites*

⁴² Majdalany, *State of Emergency*, p. 75.

occupy more comfortable seats on the opposite side” (3). The subaltern status of the colonized subject in relation to the colonizer is evident in the preceding directions. But the asymmetrical power relations are more forcefully dramatized in a subsequent court scene:

Whites enter, women dressed as if for a show, fanning their faces. Men swagger in with pistols belted around their waists. They sit on one side of the court. As the Africans enter, it should be a study in contrast with their torn clothes and tattered shoes. They are frisked by the African soldiers under Waitina's orders . . . [B]lacks and whites sit on separate sides. It is as if a huge gulf lies between them. The air is still and tense. To break the tension, people on both sides try to make conversation in low voices. The clerk orders them to keep quiet – meaning the blacks more than the whites. (23)

The image evoked in the preceding directions recalls Fanon's description of “[t]he colonial world” as “a world divided into compartments.”⁴³ Although Fanon is referring to social arrangements in colonial societies, his observations are relevant to the courtroom in *The Trial of Dedan Kimathi*. Just as there were native quarters and European quarters or separate schools for natives and Europeans during Western colonization, the black Africans and the white Europeans are clearly separated in the courtroom of Ngũgĩ and Mugo's play and subjected to unequal treatment in a fashion that diminishes the humanity of the blacks in comparison with whites. The sharp dichotomy evoked in the courtroom, as well as the treatment of blacks, is aptly captured by Fanon's notion of “Manichean world” with respect to colonial society, where

The native is declared insensible to ethics; he represents not only the absence of values, but also the negation of values. He is, let us dare to admit, the enemy of values, and in this sense he is the absolute evil. He is the corrosive element, destroying all that comes near him; he is the deforming element, disfiguring all that has to do with beauty or morality; he is the depository of maleficent powers, the unconscious and irretrievable instrument of blind forces.⁴⁴

The colonizer's pejorative representation of the colonized subject, which the above passage reminds us, demonstrates that the colonized is deemed sub-human. Because the colonizer takes a dim view of the colonized, the colonial society tends to be rooted in oppositional binaries that are succinctly articulated in the words of Abdul JanMohamed: “white and black . . . civilization and savagery . . . superiority and inferiority . . . good and evil . . . the elect and the damned . . . the self and the other.”⁴⁵ *The Trial of Dedan Kimathi* provides

⁴³ Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, p. 29. ⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 32.

⁴⁵ JanMohamed, *Manichean Aesthetics*, p. 43.

a deeper insight into the nature of interaction between the elements of these oppositional binaries. As a representative of the colonial establishment, the white judge Henderson posits the European colonizer as the bringer of enlightenment and a superior legal system to the backward world of barbaric natives. As such, the colonizer deliberately or inadvertently conveys the impression that the natives ought to be grateful to the colonizer for introducing superior culture to the colonized society. But let's hear from the horse's mouth: "No society can be without laws to protect property . . . I mean protect our lives . . . Civilisation . . . Investment . . . Christianity . . . Order" (26). For us to appreciate the supposedly unique positive attributes of the white man's law, Henderson has no problem further reminding us that he is "not talking about the laws of Nyandaura jungle" of the natives (26). But Kimathi – the primary addressee of both remarks – is chained in both hands and feet while listening to an imperialist judge whose new legal system is pretending to derive legitimacy from the consent of the governed. It is worth noting that the chained Kimathi symbolizes the Kenyan masses. Hence, the irony of an imperialist judge boasting about the fairness or sophisticated nature of the judgments of a colonial court in the presence of subjugated natives need not be missed. But despite evidence of the suppression of freedom of the Kenyan people, the colonial government considers itself "democratic" (55) and conveys the impression of being a respecter of human rights and freedoms. Consider, for instance, Henderson announcing in the courtroom that Kimathi "has dismissed voluntary legal advice placed at his disposal by the Government" (80). But we are not shown how or when Kimathi was offered such an opportunity. Nor does Henderson challenge him to contradict his announcement. And when earlier on Henderson informs the court audience, "We have a lawyer to defend the accused" (79), it is not lost on us that no lawyer is specifically identified. And were an attorney to be identified, the idea of "We" as per those who have procured the lawyer leaves us with no doubt that the lawyer is a government stooge hired to assist the colonial authority in facilitating Kimathi's death without a bona fide due process. Going by Henderson's conduct, we can see why it is valid to contend that, "[t]he courts and the prisons represent the highest levels of colonial imperialism in its drive to radically restructure society after its own image."⁴⁶ Indeed, the play is useful in illustrating how colonial courts and prisons "act as consolidators and perpetuators of the new class structure and modes of social relations and guarantee the survival of the new formation."⁴⁷ In fact, Henderson's doubtful

⁴⁶ Udentia, *Revolutionary Aesthetics and the African Literary Process*, p. 96. ⁴⁷ *Ibid.*

authenticity as a judge and the Kangaroo-like nature of the court he represents in this play are vividly portrayed in the following stage directions:

Enter Shaw Henderson dressed as a judge. Not in disguise. He should in fact be seen to believe in his role as judge, to acquire the grave airs of a judge. Judge sits down. The audience sit. Clark gives him the file. Judge looks at it. (24)

Indeed, as a postcolonial text with a clear anti-colonial stance, the play recognizes that the oppressed victims of colonial rule cannot expect to get real justice in a court system evoked in the preceding directions. Kimathi, the mouthpiece of the Kenyan people, is mindful of this when he challenges colonial authority in the courtroom:

I despise your laws and your courts. What have they done for our people? . . .
Protected the oppressor. Licensed the murderers of the people:
Our people,
whipped when they did not pick your tea leaves

—

Imprisoned when they refused to “ayah”
your babies
and “boy” your houses and gardens
Murdered when they didn’t rickshaw
your ladies and your gentlemen. (26–27)

The above speech captures the master–servant relationship between the colonizer and colonized, respectively. And Kimathi’s tone is such that we can appreciate that the Kenyan people reject the status of second-class citizens in their ancestral land. But for the colonizer, such a status quo is perfectly justified. The colonialist mindset resulting in the devaluation of the natives as mere errand-goers or hewers of wood and drawers of water, naturally suitable for the white man’s menial jobs, is probably best captured by Ernest Renan, the French orientalist scholar and colonial apologist:

Nature has made a race of workers, the Chinese race, who have wonderful manual dexterity and almost no sense of honor; govern them with justice, levying from them, in return for the blessing of such a government, an ample allowance for the conquering race, and they will be satisfied; a race of the tillers of the soil, the Negro . . . ; a race of masters and soldiers, the European race . . . Let each one do what he is made for, and all will be well.⁴⁸

Thus, the racist ideology that motivates the colonial project assigns the negro the lowest rung of the socioeconomic ladder. It is because of such ideology that the colonizers in Ngũgĩ and Mugo’s play cannot understand why the natives have

⁴⁸ Ernest Renan, qtd. in Césaire, *Discourse on Colonialism*, p. 16.

taken up arms to challenge the colonial establishment, achieve emancipation, and enjoy fundamental human rights. For the colonizers, the Kenyans are violating a divinely arranged universal order by eventually attempting to enjoy the sort of freedom that negroes are not biologically designed for. As we saw earlier, the white colonial judge Henderson considers Kenya a “jungle” (26). And it is hardly surprising that other white settlers dismiss Kimathi and other natives as “Fucking black monkey” (28) and “wild savages” (29). The racist, arrogant mindset that justifies the quoted derogatory epithets and, by extension, colonialism also recalls Said’s concept of *orientalism* referenced in my previous discussion of Soyinka’s *Death and the King’s Horseman*. As in Soyinka’s play, the British colonizer’s impression of the Kenyan people in *The Trial of Dedan Kimathi* is that of the racially inferior *other* who can benefit from the benevolent guidance of the colonizer. Indeed, the entire information provided on the postcolonial concepts of *orientalism* and *other/othering* in my analysis of Soyinka’s play applies equally to Ngũgĩ and Mugo’s play and need not be repeated. However, there are other relevant terms from the postcolonial lexicon implicated in *The Trial of Dedan Kimathi*. One such concept is *subaltern*, which has been mentioned in passing prior to now but deserves to be considered a bit more closely in relation to the play. “Subaltern” denotes someone of lower or inferior rank. And “[s]ubaltern classes may include peasants, workers and other groups denied access to ‘hegemonic’ power.”⁴⁹ What the colonized Africans suffer at the hands of the colonial authorities or, more specifically, the unequal treatment they are being subjected to in the colonial society can be understood in relation to the quoted, preceding explanation concerning the concept of *subaltern*. We cannot help but notice how the Kenyan masses are deliberately “denied access to ‘hegemonic’ power” by the colonial masters. Indeed, their status helps to demonstrate how *subaltern* classes “are subject to the **hegemony** of the ruling classes.”⁵⁰ Recall the white colonial judge Henderson’s earlier cited remarks: “We have a lawyer to defend the accused” (79). This demonstrates how the subaltern should be spoken for. Kimathi, or rather the masses symbolized by him, are deemed incapable of self-representation or knowing what is good for them. The subaltern has no representation except what the ruling class says about him.

But despite all efforts by the colonial authority to silence Kimathi and crush the Mau Mau, the play does not, in the final analysis, portray the Kenyan masses as powerless victims of colonial brutality and injustice. As earlier noted, the play concludes with a clash of opposing forces after some progressive elements among the Kenyan people in the courtroom reject the death verdict on Kimathi. “Not dead” (84) are the specific words of two gun-brandishing characters, Boy and Girl,

⁴⁹ Ashcroft, Griffiths, and Tiffin, *Postcolonial Studies*, 2nd ed., p. 198. ⁵⁰ *Ibid.*

who have been drafted into Mau Mau to assist with rescuing Kimathi from colonial jail. By adopting such a conclusion, the play is clearly out of sync with historical accuracy. And this deviation from historical fact is not a happenstance for the playwrights appear to be mindful of the fact that Kimathi's death in real life at the hands of colonial authority empowers the foreign imperial aggressor. As the playwrights have noted in a preface to the play,

The play is *not* a reproduction of the farcical “trial” at Nyeri. It is rather an imaginative recreation and interpretation of the Kenyan peasants and workers in their refusal to break under sixty years of colonial torture and ruthless oppression by the British ruling classes and their continued determination to resist exploitation, oppression, and new forms of enslavement.⁵¹

The gist of the above passage is so crucial that one of the authors has emphasized, or rather reemphasized, the message in a recent interview. Asked to explain her primary motivation with Ngũgĩ for adapting a historical source for the play, Micere Githae Mugo states:

the main motivation . . . was to intervene and correct what we viewed as a misinterpretation of what Field Marshall Dedan Kĩmathi stood for and likewise, what the Kenyan Land and Freedom Army stood for – because they had been depicted up till then mainly from the eyes of the colonizers . . . We saw colonialism depicting the site of Kenya's liberation struggle as a place that was occupied by terrorists and outlaws. In fact, they did actually call our freedom fighters “terrorists!” . . . We felt the need to honour Field Marshal Dedan Kĩmathi and other Kenyan Land and Freedom Army fighters . . . our intention was to come up with an artistic record of Kĩmathi and the Kenya Land and Freedom Army that would counter what had disturbed us as misrepresentations of both.⁵²

Hence, the play chooses not to faithfully reproduce historical details because of its anti-colonial stance and sympathy for the colonized subject. It uses artistic license to amend historical facts in order to accomplish political objectives. The play's approach to its historical source amounts to rewriting and reinterpreting history from below. It is instructive to note that upon the rejection of the death sentence on Kimathi by some progressive forces among the Kenyan people in the courtroom, the peasants and workers in the courtroom break into “*a thunderous freedom song*” after “*A loud shot is heard*” (84). This song seeks to empower the oppressed masses. It is consistent with the authors' belief as follows:

good theatre is that which is on the side of the people, that which, without masking mistakes and weaknesses, give people courage and urges them to

⁵¹ Thiong'o and Mugo, preface to *The Trial of Dedan Kimathi*. The preface is not numbered but the quote is taken from the penultimate page.

⁵² Micere Githae Mugo in an interview by Chima Osakwe. June 25, 2022.

higher resolves in their struggle for total liberation. So the challenge was to truly depict the masses (symbolized by Kimathi) in the only historically correct perspective: positively, heroically and as the makers of history.⁵³

So the play has a clear liberatory intent. Hence, the determination of the masses to confront the forces of oppression in the end. However, some critics have consciously or unconsciously questioned the empowering credentials of the freedom song that concludes the play. One such critic is Nicholas Brown. In doing so, Brown has drawn attention to the “first substantive lines” of the Gikuyu song, which he translates:

Hoo-i, hoo-i how the enemy is truly a fool
He killed our first-born
Making him the victor.⁵⁴

In reading the above song, Brown posits that the “execution of Kimathi is simultaneously defeat and victory,” further pointing out, “this martyrdom is itself ambiguous.” In view of the preceding argument, Brown is demanding answers to the following questions: “What exactly is celebrated here? For what revolution was Kimathi’s death decisive in any other but a negative way? Does this poem, in commemorating Kimathi’s martyrdom, insist that it ultimately led to real independence? Or does it, rather, refer to a future victory against a ‘new enemy’?”⁵⁵ Of these questions, the second is of particular interest for it impugns the revolutionary credentials of the play – an issue I will be returning to shortly. For now, it is also worth noting that Brown does insert an endnote to the third question and links the following explanation with the note: “Ngugi’s recent writing seems to endorse this simpler reading.”⁵⁶ But it may not be mandatory to consult Ngũgĩ’s “recent writing(s)” to hazard an explanation for the question to which the explanatory note is linked as well as the fourth question. In stating this view, it is pertinent to inspect the following passage from the preface to the play:

[T]he war which Kimathi led was being waged with even greater vigour all over Africa and in all those parts of the world where Imperialism still enslaved the people and stole their wealth. It was crucial that all this be put together as one vision, stretching from the pre-colonial wars of resistance against European intrusion and European slavery, through the anti-colonial struggles for independence and democracy, to post-independence struggle against neo-colonialism.⁵⁷

⁵³ Thiong’o and Mugo, preface to *The Trial of Dedan Kimathi*. The preface is not numbered but the quote is taken from the fourth and fifth pages.

⁵⁴ Brown, “Revolution and Recidivism,” p. 129. ⁵⁵ *Ibid.* ⁵⁶ *Ibid.*

⁵⁷ Thiong’o and Mugo, preface to *The Trial of Dedan Kimathi*. The preface is not numbered but the quote is taken from the penultimate page.

The above passage is such that we are encouraged to appreciate the *timeless* significance of the Mau Mau war. As noted in the passage, the struggle for liberation from imperial domination was still present in places like Africa, for instance, as of the publication date (1976) of the play. Although Kenya was independent as of this date, a country like Zimbabwe, which was still fighting for liberation from British colonial rule, authenticates this claim. But it is noteworthy that Ngũgĩ and Mugo have tried to find commonalities between the issues of oppression versus resistance in three historical periods: the precolonial era of slavery, colonial period, and postindependence period. While investigating colonial domination, the play foresees Kenya's status as a victim of neocolonial domination – that is, a place where the foreign powers will continue to control the country, especially via indigenous leaders (e.g., Jomo Kenyatta and Daniel Arap Moi) who serve as agents of the foreign powers in the postindependence period. And when the authors reason this way while explaining the relevance or rather the motivation for writing *The Trial of Dedan Kimathi*, it is arguably persuasive to assume that the play is an attempt to rekindle the revolutionary instincts of Kenyans in particular, reminding them that the same spirit of commitment needed to chase away the colonial rulers is equally useful in overthrowing the oppressive indigenous leaders. Although the play does not conclude with the downfall of the colonial government, the freedom song following the rejection of the death sentence on Kimathi arguably suggests that liberation is in the offing. Historically, despite crushing the Mau Mau, the British colonial authority realized that the resistance was so fierce that they could not hang on to power for long. Ngũgĩ and Mugo's play, in dealing with this period of Kenyan history, is arguably revolutionary, although a critic like Nicholas Brown impugns the revolutionary credentials of the play as earlier noted – an issue I have now returned to as earlier promised. Like Brown, Udentia O. Udentia does not consider the play revolutionary because it does not conclude with victory for the oppressed. Hear Udentia: “[I]f Kimathi had triumphed and a revolutionary government established in Kenya, the play would undoubtedly have marked the acme of revolutionary aesthetic writing in Africa.”⁵⁸ But accepting this argument would be tantamount to accepting that Martin Luther King Jr., Malcolm X, or Amílcar Cabral, for instance, were not revolutionaries because the work they tried to do was not completed or the societies in which they lived and sought to transform did not achieve a revolution. Revolutions can be an ongoing journey and not necessarily a permanently accomplished destination. Contrary to Udentia and like-minded critics, *The Trial of Dedan Kimathi* is revolutionary in the same way as Ebrahim Hussein's *Kinjeketile* and Effiong

⁵⁸ Udentia, *Revolutionary Aesthetics and the African Literary Process*, p. 34.

Johnson's *Not Without Bones*, both of which are discussed in subsequent sections. That the oppressed characters in these plays do not overthrow the colonial government is not the main issue. Rather, the main issue is the fact that the oppressed are actively involved in the process of liberation from colonial rule or achieving emancipation from certain forms of colonial injustice. That means, rather than continue thinking of themselves as victims and simply lamenting or bemoaning their fate, the oppressed are clearly depicted as fighting back. To further appreciate the revolutionary quality of the play, it might be worth contrasting it with a play like *Sizwe Bansi is Dead* by Athol Fugard, John Kani, and Winston Ntshona. What we see in this play is how the oppressed black man has devised some tricks⁵⁹ with which to survive the injustices of apartheid South Africa; there is no rebellion or concrete action geared toward the emancipation of black people from apartheid. The play simply exposes and condemns an unjust status quo but does not attempt to dismantle it. But in *The Trial of Dedan Kimathi*, the technique of fighting back, which involves both action and words, is such that we can appreciate that the underprivileged are not willing to accept oppression with stoic resignation.

In articulating its revolutionary objectives in the interest of Mau Mau, Ngũgĩ and Mugo's play adopts certain notable techniques. The use of symbols is one such device and the character of Dedan Kimathi is particularly useful in this regard. Kimathi is presented as a symbol of the people's armed resistance against British colonial brutality. He personifies the revolutionary movement. Consider, for instance, a white soldier accusing an African woman: "You look like a Mau Mau. Like one of them Kimathi women" (10). And hear one of the African soldiers fighting on the side of the British: "The bloodyfuckin' Mau Mau are finished without that bugger Kimathi!" (12). Interestingly, another African soldier to whom the preceding speech is addressed counters: "Kimathi is a hero to the people. They love him like anything, say what you will" (13). Hence, we can appreciate how Kimathi's name can be used interchangeably with the Mau Mau – a scenario that is consistent with the intention of the playwrights. We are encouraged to appreciate that Kimathi made the revolution and the revolution made Kimathi. The name, Kimathi, symbolizes the Mau Mau so much that his personality is imbued with supernatural qualities. The unnamed African "Girl," for instance, has heard that Kimathi can "mimic any noise of a bird and none could tell the difference" (61) just as the unnamed African "Boy" observes that Kimathi can "turn himself into an aeroplane" (61). Because his name can be equated with the Mau Mau, each of these reported supernatural and mythic attributes of Kimathi arguably applies to the

⁵⁹ Such as the assumption of false identity in order to secure a job.

revolutionary movement. By portraying Kimathi in the entire fashion as captured here, it may well be that the playwrights are mindful of the meaning of his name. “Kimathi” is Gikuyu for “earnest provider” and “serious.” Hence, the playwrights may want us to appreciate that Kimathi’s love for the welfare of his people and strong-willed opposition against colonial domination are equally symbolized in the meaning of his name. Also notable is the play’s combination of narrative and dramatic techniques in highlighting injustice and the need for revolutionary transformation of society. The characters of the unnamed African “Woman,” “Boy,” and “Girl” are also useful here. When the boy and girl are introduced as destitute street children fighting over a monetary tip given to them by an American tourist, the disappointed woman narrates:

It is the same old story ... Our people tearing ... one another ... and all because of the crumbs thrown at them by the exploiting foreigners. Our own food eaten and leftovers thrown to us – in our land, where we should have the whole share. We buy wood from our own forests; sweat on our own soil for the profit of our oppressors. Kimathi’s teaching is: unite, drive out the enemy and control your own riches, enjoy the fruit of your own sweat. (18)

Shortly after the above remarks, we can appreciate how the speaker successfully indoctrinates the boy into the Mau Mau movement to assist in the release of Dedan Kimathi from detention. This moment is presented as a kind of mini ritual, a transition from a lesser stage of growth to a greater stage. And the significance of this moment is captured via some visually suggestive stage directions and dialogue: “*She is about to go ... then suddenly an idea strikes her. She looks at him closely, looks at her watch hidden in a pocket, then looks at him again.*” The woman then demands to know from the boy, “Are you ready for a job ... , a task? Are you ready to become a man?” to which he replies, “I am” (20). Besides narrative storytelling, visual cues, and dialogue, the play relies equally on songs and other sound effects in denouncing colonial oppression and emphasizing the revolutionary atmosphere. Consider, for instance, the end of the play: “*Utter commotion as a struggle between opposing forces ensues. A loud shot is heard ... the stage gives way to a mighty crowd of workers and peasants at the centre of which are Boy and Girl, singing a thunderous freedom song*” (84). Around the beginning of the play too, we are treated to an “*An angry procession of defiant Blacks, chanting anti-imperialist slogans through songs and thunderous shouts*”:

LEADER: Away with oppression!

Unchain the people!

CROWD: Away with oppression!

Unchain the people! (5)

Thus, songs and other relevant auditory signals capture the atmosphere of instability at various moments and enable us to recognize how the unjust colonial society is threatening to disintegrate. And the prominent positions of the male and female child among the singing crowd need not escape our attention. The boy and the girl represent the lofty aspirations of the anticipated better postindependence Kenyan society. The combination of narrative and dramatic techniques, use of generic (anonymous) characterization (Woman, Boy, Girl), and/or the didactic nature of the play, arguably reflects the influence of Bertolt Brecht on Ngũgĩ and Mugo. But the play's structural strategies also evince the influence of Africa's folk tradition. Hence, the play's overall dramatic technique can be understood as a hybrid of Western and traditional African elements. The play also adapts and subverts biblical narratives and tropes. Like Christ, Kimathi during his prison-cell trials, laments "the agony of a lone battle," but instantly repudiates this idea: "Alone, did I say? No. Cast out these doubts!" (51). This technique of paralleling Kimathi with Christ and, in the process, subverting the biblical notion of "trial" can be tied with postcoloniality as resistance. Using imagery such as costumes, the play mocks the spurious nature of the colonial court where the victims of colonial injustice cannot expect to find justice: "*Enter Shaw Henderson dressed as a judge. Not in disguise. He should in fact be seen to believe in his role as a judge, to acquire the grave airs of a judge*" (24). In view of the preceding directions, Henderson is only pretending to be a judge despite being clothed as a judge and presenting himself as one! So the oppressed need not be convinced on the need to seek justice and liberation outside a law court presided by the likes of him.

The way the play empowers the oppressed characters to fight back is such that it implicates another key postcolonial term: *agency*, "the ability of post-colonial subjects to initiate action in engaging or resisting imperial power."⁶⁰ But we would substitute "colonial subjects" for "post-colonial subjects" given the specific colonial context of the play. The play conveys *agency* to the colonized subjects. Indeed, the very act of resistance by the natives enables us to appreciate the concept of *agency* as "the ability to act effectively" or "a degree of, but not unlimited freedom, to act."⁶¹ By granting *agency* to the colonized people, the play appears to be suggesting that their subaltern position is neither divinely ordained nor an exclusive preserve of people like them. So the human condition is changeable rather than fixed and unchangeable. The natives in *The Trial of Dedan Kimathi* "disrupt the oppressor/victim dichotomy to demonstrate that agency and victimhood are not mutually exclusive, [and] to show that victims

⁶⁰ Ashcroft, Griffiths, and Tiffin (eds.), *Postcolonial Studies*, 2nd ed., p. 6.

⁶¹ Fortier, *Theory/Theatre*, 2nd ed., p. 223.

are also agents who can change their lives . . . in radical ways,” to borrow the words of Obioma Nnaemeka from a different context.⁶² So empowering is the *agency* of the colonized subject in Ngũgĩ and Mugo’s play that the detained Kimathi can afford to seize Henderson by the neck and subdue him – even if momentarily during one of Kimathi’s earlier referenced private temptations. Even prior to the commotion that ensues at the end of the play, we are reminded that despite the unequal treatment experienced by the natives in the courtroom, “Africans are **defiant** towards the settlers and the colonial authorities while appreciative of Kimathi’s stand” (23, my bold emphasis). That the African court attendees remain unfazed in the face of the intimidating gamble of the imperial oppressors can probably be best explained by the concept of *agency*. As earlier noted, the colonized subject’s technique of fighting back, which implicates *agency* does not involve only actions but words. Besides some earlier cited remarks by Kimathi, consider his first speech in court, or rather the entire play: “By what right dare you, a colonial judge, sit in judgement over me?” (25). This is in response to the criminal charges read against him. The empowering nature of such verbal acts of resistance is probably best explained by bell hooks:

Moving from silence into speech is for the oppressed, the colonized, the exploited, and those who stand and struggle side by side a gesture of defiance that heals, that makes new life and new growth possible. It is that act of speech, of “talking back,” that is no mere gesture of empty words, that is the expression of . . . movement from object to subject – the liberated voice.⁶³

The ability of the oppressed characters to reclaim the power of speech is crucial in the social emancipation envisaged in *The Trial of Dedan Kimathi*. Kimathi and, by extension, the Kenyan people seem to recognize that “talking back” to the oppressor is an act of *agency* and a necessary step in the process of liberation. And it is worth noting that taking to arms by the oppressed is a liberatory act of resistance that recalls Fanon’s key arguments on revolutionary violence, especially in the colonial context. Resorting to violence by the colonized in order to assert their humanity can be understood against the following observation from Fanon:

The existence of an armed struggle shows that the people are [sic] decided to trust to violent methods only. He of whom they have never stopped saying that the only language he understands is that of force, decides to give utterance by force. In fact, as always, the settler has shown him the way he should take if he is to become free.⁶⁴

⁶² Nnaemeka, Introduction to *The Politics of (M)Othering*, p. 3.

⁶³ Hooks, *Talking Back*, p. 9. ⁶⁴ Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, p. 66.

Fanon, in the above passage, is talking about the settler colony in the context of the European colonization of Africa and other parts of the world. And Fanon's postulations clearly suggest that it is the violence of the oppressor that triggers violence by the oppressed. *The Trial of Dedan Kimathi* substantiates Fanon's arguments for it portrays the violence of the colonized subject as an inevitable option in dealing with a ruling class that has become increasingly deaf and insensitive to the plight of the robbed and marginalized. Indeed, the Mau Mau guerrilla war must continue to be understood as a retaliatory violence against a colonial oppressor that brutally suppressed the nationalism of the Kenyan people. The colonizer violently suppressed the quest for freedom by the Kenyan people and, in the process, begat a violent response from the oppressed. As Fanon further argues, "decolonization is always a violent phenomenon" and

Decolonization, which sets out to change the order of the world, is, obviously, a programme of complete disorder. Decolonization is the meeting of two forces, opposed to each other by their very nature, which in fact owe their originality to that sort of substantification which results from and is nourished by the situation in the colonies. In decolonization, there is therefore the need of a complete calling in question of the colonial situation.⁶⁵

Again, Fanon's observations are about decolonization in Africa and other parts of the world. And Ngũgĩ and Mugo's play remains a useful illustration of Fanonian conflict in the context of colonization for it substantiates the notion that the only possible relationship between the colonizer and colonized is one of violence. The gist of Fanon's contentions is that decolonization is usually a violent project because the imperial oppressors hardly give up their privileged position without putting up a good fight. The scene of the forest meeting of Mau Mau guerrilla fighters in *The Trial of Dedan Kimathi* is particularly useful in clarifying how the violent struggle of this armed group stems from the excesses of a violent oppressor who is committed to crushing the armed rebellion, just as the oppressed remain committed to achieving emancipation. Hear Kimathi addressing the guerrillas:

Since we formed our six brave armies . . .

—
We have had great victories
Our enemies all over Kenya
Have not been able to sleep
That now they have called their best Generals:
Lathbury, Hinde, Erskine

⁶⁵ Ibid., pp. 27–28.

And also
 Their latest fighter bombers
 Shows that we have hit them
 Where it hurts most. (66)

It is noteworthy that the colonial authority is so determined to crush the Mau Mau that it engages the services of the most superior British military Generals referenced in Kimathi's preceding speech. And it is not lost on the reader or audience that Kimathi's speech at this moment is occasionally punctuated with gunfire signaling the execution of British soldiers captured by Mau Mau warriors. However, it is equally noteworthy that some captured African King's African Rifles (KAR) soldiers are equally executed at this moment. While addressing the plight of Kenyan people under colonial oppression, the play also draws attention to how some Africans collaborated with the colonizers in oppressing fellow Africans. The issue of African KAR soldiers is one such instance of collaboration. KAR, which stands for the King's African Rifles, was a colonial regiment raised from British-colonized countries in East Africa from the early twentieth century – before the First World War – until the independence period of the 1960s. As evident in *The Trial of Dedan Kimathi*, the KAR soldiers have been brainwashed into rejecting fellow Africans while fighting alongside the colonizer. Hear the following exchange:

FIRST SOLDIER: [*anger and cynicism fused*] Where are the terrorists who were supposed to be all over Nyeri? We've been patrolling all night without as much as catching sight of a single one of them . . . The way *mzungu* makes us thirst to kill one another!

SECOND SOLDIER: [*irrelevantly, viciously*] The bloodyfuckin' Mau Mau are finished without that bugger Kimathi!

SECOND SOLDIER: . . . These natives are very slippery . . . They are the same people as [*sic*] attacked the homeguard post last night trying to release Kimathi. But they will see. Their bloody Kimathi is appearing in court . . . today . . . He is going to get a proper court trial. Not like the jungle ones he used to stage in the forest. See how fair *mzungu* is? (12)

The preceding passage evinces mental colonization on the part of the two African soldiers. Notice how they adopt the mindset of the colonizer by dismissing Mau Mau fighters as "terrorists" or labelling fellow Africans

“natives” as if they themselves are not black Africans. Ironically, *mzungu* – which is *Swahili* for white people – are simultaneously acknowledged as enemies of black people and fair-minded people who treat black people fairly. The soldiers have turned against fellow Africans by fighting alongside the colonizer. Their civilian counterparts – Business Executive, Priest, and Politician – all of whom persuade Kimathi to renounce the struggle in his fourth temptation as earlier noted – perpetrate their act of betrayal to feed on the crumbs from the master’s table. Like the biblical Esau, the military and civilian betrayers of their people among the black Africans have sold their birthright for a measure of porridge. Particularly, the civilian collaborators seem unashamedly content with the role of second-class citizens as demonstrated in the following stage directions: “*Courtroom. But now the white people’s side is joined by Politician, Business Executive, Priest, Banker . . . who occupy a bench at the very back and not proper chairs like the whites*” (79).

Thus, the status of black professionals as second fiddle players cannot be overemphasized. Their overall conduct as well as that of the KAR soldiers in the play recalls the slave era, for instance, in the US, where

A few slaves were made into a slave elite. They were given a few privileges and, in return, they controlled for their masters the rest of the slaves. Even though an elite slave is still a slave, his economic mini-privilege and his carefully fostered sense of social superiority firmly tied his interests to those of his masters and made him loyal to the slaving system.⁶⁶

The above-noted “elite slave” with a deceptive sense of “social superiority” in relation to other slaves is reborn not just in the colonial era as demonstrated by some Black professionals and KAR soldiers who are loyal to the colonial system. They also resurface in the postindependence period for it is their likes who serve as agents of foreign powers in the neocolonial oppression of African people. As earlier noted, the play envisages a future neocolonial Kenya where civilian characters like the Business Executive, Politician, and Priest serve as agents of foreign powers in the postindependence period too. This is what Fanon is alluding to when he writes: “Spoilt children of yesterday’s colonialism and of today’s national governments, they organize the loot of whatever national resources exist.”⁶⁷ It is instructive to note that the black African characters in Ngũgĩ and Mugo’s play, who substantiate Fanon’s quoted argument, are not actually a capitalist class; they are mere intercessors in the exploitation of their

⁶⁶ Chinweizu, *The West and the Rest of Us*, p. 440.

⁶⁷ Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, p. 32.

country by powerful Western nations. Fanon further clarifies the character of such a ruling class:

The national middle class that takes over power at the end of the colonial regime is an under-developed middle class. It has practically no economic power, and in any case, it is in no way commensurate with the bourgeois of the mother country which it hopes to replace . . . The national bourgeois of under-developed countries is not engaged in production, nor in invention, nor building, nor labour; it is completely canalized into activities of the intermediary type. Its innermost vocation seems to be to keep in the running and to be part of the racket.⁶⁸

Ngũgĩ and Mugo's play condemns and disapproves the "intermediary" role of the indigenous African middle class in the foreign exploitation of African countries as captured in the above passage and exemplified by the Business Executive, Politician, and Priest in *The Trial of Dedan Kimathi*. It is hardly surprising that this anti-colonial play published during Kenya's postindependence period would equally oppose neocolonial subjugation. As earlier mentioned, the play seeks to recreate the Kenyan people's "continued determination to resist exploitation, oppression, and new forms of enslavement"⁶⁹ and not just the people's resistance to donkey's years of colonial domination. While the play focuses on the historical incident of Mau Mau and the heroic exploits of the movement's leaders such as Kimathi, it tries to make some connections between the struggle for independence in the colonial era and the struggle for liberation from neocolonial oppression in the postindependence period. This connection is more forcefully dramatized in a subsequent Ngũgĩ play: *I Will Marry When I Want* (1977). Regarding *The Trial of Dedan Kimathi*, which remains our primary concern here, it is worth noting that as a postcolonial text, the play appears to be equally mindful of some other hegemonic forces that perpetuate structural inequity besides colonialism. And it seeks equally to subvert such hegemonic forces in the same manner that it opposes colonialism. Consider, for instance, the issue of *gender*. The play seems to be mindful of the fact that Kenyan women were not only colonized as Kenyans but equally as *women*. Women simultaneously experienced the gender injustice of Kenyan patriarchy and the brutalities of foreign colonial rule. With respect to gender oppression of women, listen closely to the character simply identified as GIRL:

I'm . . . tired . . . of . . . running. All my life I have been running . . . Men molesting me. I was once a dutiful daughter . . . I ran away from school

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 119–120.

⁶⁹ Thiong'o and Mugo, preface to *The Trial of Dedan Kimathi*. The preface is not numbered but the quote is taken from the penultimate page.

because the headmaster wanted to do wicked things with me. Always: you remain behind. You take the wood to my house. You take this chalk and books to the office. Then he would follow me and all he wanted was to touch my breasts. So, I left school. I wanted to stay home and teach myself how to sew or do something with my life. But my father would have nothing of it. He called me an idler and sent me to pick tea leaves for that cruel settler, Mr. Jones. How he used to abuse and punish us! I had to run away from home, from my father, from Mr. Jones . . . In the city it was the boys. Always harassing me . . . And yet I did not want to starve! I lost my virginity while trying to run away from losing it. How else could I survive? (41)

The gist of the above passage is such that we are consciously or unconsciously reminded that although British and Kenyan men could be divided over colonialism, they could be united over the subjugation of women. The experience of the female speaker of the above passage arguably epitomizes that of other Kenyan women. Both the British male colonizer and the colonized male African, as suggested in the above passage, find a common object of oppression in women. And this is a scenario that recalls the title of Gayatri Spivak's influential essay, "Can the Subaltern Speak?" The experience of the lamenting girl substantiates Spivak's position, "the subaltern as female is . . . more deeply in shadow" and experiences "double silencing."⁷⁰ Just as Indian women are oppressed by British colonial rule and Indian patriarchy in the colonial Indian context of Spivak's essay, Kenyan women are doubly oppressed and colonized as per being victims of colonial rule and native patriarchal injustice. Even prior to *The Trial of Dedan Kimathi*, some notable works of African postcolonial literature poignantly capture the peon status of women in precolonial Africa. Take, for example, Chinua Achebe's novel *Things Fall Apart* (1958). In this novel, African female characters are pictured as mere acquisitions of their husbands and there is no single female member of the governing council of elders, the *ndichie* as well as the ancestral cult, *egwugwu*. But unlike in Achebe's novel, where the narrator does not seem to disapprove of the inferior status of African women despite the novel's anti-colonial stance, *The Trial of Dedan Kimathi* does not approve of the subaltern status of women while acknowledging the double oppression of women in colonized African nations like Kenya. Hence, the prominent role of female characters in the war of liberation from colonization. Although the play is not a feminist text, it is so gender-sensitive that it recalls Carol Boyce Davies sensible caveat: "A genuine African feminism" "is not antagonistic to African men but it challenges them to be aware of certain salient aspects of women's subjugation which differ from the generalized oppression of all African peoples"⁷¹ in addition to

⁷⁰ Spivak, "Can the Subaltern Speak?" p. 32.

⁷¹ Boyce Davies, Introduction to *Ngambika*, pp. 8–9.

recognizing “a common struggle with African men for the removal of the yokes of foreign domination and European/American exploitation.”⁷² The play performs some feminism-related tasks without necessarily being a feminist text. It does this by portraying the gender oppression of women and reflecting the equally heroic contribution of the African woman to Kenya’s anti-colonial war. The play projects the notion that the nation’s struggle for freedom from colonial bondage is incomplete without the crucial role played by women. Kimathi eulogizes a female member of Mau Mau as follows:

Do you see this woman . . .
 How many people has she snatched from jails, from colonial
 Jaws of death!
 How many brave warriors has she recruited at great risks!

*When this struggle is over
 We shall erect at all the city corners
 Monuments
 To our women* (73, my emphasis)

Hence, it need not come as a surprise that the first human character and, more specifically, pro-Mau Mau character we meet in the play is “this woman” referenced above? Simply identified as “Woman,” her role in the Mau Mau – especially her effort toward Kimathi’s release from freedom – right from her first appearance to the end of dramatic action is too prominent to be missed. Again, her prominent role can be hardly surprising if we can accept that the authors who created her character are equally conscious of the important contribution of Kenyan women to the Mau Mau war in the same way they recognize Kimathi and other male combatants. As a coauthor of the play has noted, the play recognizes the “heroism and sheroism” of the Mau Mau guerrilla fighters, further noting that, “both men and women participated in this and . . . the youth were also a part of the struggle especially in the urban areas.”⁷³

As a postcolonial text, the play is equally mindful of the fact that the European conquerors dominated not only the physical space but also sought to influence the minds of colonized people. It is sensitive to the violence of colonial rule as exemplified by the brand of education received at colonial schools in Kenya. This education sought to brainwash the native and make him or her perpetually submissive to the whims and caprices of the colonizer.

⁷² *Ibid.*, p. 8. ⁷³ Micere Githae Mugo in an interview by Chima Osakwe. June 25, 2022.

Such a brand of education is what the play seeks to debunk when Kimathi observes in the two separate speeches below:

We must kill the lie
That black people never invented anything
Lay forever to rest that inferiority
complex
Implanted in our minds by centuries
of oppression. (68)

They have greater and more efficient
Weapons of propaganda.
The radio, newspapers, schools,
Their universities where they give
Our children
An education to enfeeble minds,
Make them slaves, apes, parrots
Shadows of the men and women
they could have been. (69)

Going by the above-reported epistemological character of the knowledge espoused at Kenyan schools of the colonial era, it is crucial to emphasize that such education was not simply colonial for taking place during the colonial period. Instead, such education was *colonialist* by adopting and promoting the imperialist perspective – a brand of education that can continue after the historical end of formal colonization.⁷⁴ Perhaps, the play's oppositional stance against colonialist education can probably be best measured against Ngũgĩ's lamentation as follows:

It was after the declaration of a state of emergency over Kenya in 1952 that all the schools run by patriotic nationalists were taken over by the colonial regime and were placed under District Education Boards chaired by English men. English became more than a language: it was *the* language, and all the others had to bow before it in deference.⁷⁵

Thus, education was equally a valuable tool hijacked by the colonizer to achieve cultural imperialism – a fact rejected by Ngũgĩ's tone in the immediately preceding passage and offered fictional corroboration in *The Trial of Dedan Kimathi*. The earlier cited speech by the character of Kimathi seeking to debunk

⁷⁴ Consider, for instance, that we were taught in primary school in Nigeria in the 1970s that the Scottish explorer, Mungo Park, discovered River Niger. Such a claim does, of course, negate the presence of indigenous African people who were already present in places like today's Nigeria and who had discovered the river before Mungo Park was born.

⁷⁵ Thiong'o, *Decolonizing the Mind*, p. 11.

the claims of colonialist education that “black people never invented anything” is such that the play appears to be suggesting that cognitive transformation is a necessary prelude to a revolutionary war of independence from colonial subjugation. So far, the play’s status as a postcolonial text that rejects the colonizer’s version of history while reinterpreting history from the perspective of the colonized subject cannot be overemphasized.

3 Kinjeketile

Ebrahim Hussein’s *Kinjeketile* (1970) is inspired by the historical figure of Kinjeketile Ngwale. This historical figure is widely believed to have led the *Maji Maji* uprising against German colonialism in what is now Tanzania during the early twentieth century (1904–1907). Some relevant details of this historical event, which are reportedly stated in *Records of the Maji Maji Rising*, are reproduced in Hussein’s introduction to the published play: “in the year 1904 a prophet arose. His name was Kinjeketile. Near his home at Ngarambe there was a pool in a tributary of the river Rufiji. Kinjeketile was possessed by the spirit Hongo who dwelt in the pool.”⁷⁶ Then, Hussein in his own words, offers additional background information on the historical personality in relation to resistance to colonial rule: “Kinjeketile taught the people the meaning of unity, and encouraged them to unite by symbolically using water as a medicine against divisive forces. Hundreds of people who heard of his name through . . . the whispering campaign, came to join forces with him.”⁷⁷

Mindful of the above-cited historical character without necessarily reproducing him faithfully in relation to anti-colonial activities, Hussein’s play reenacts this crucial moment in Tanzanian history. Around the beginning of the play, we are made to appreciate the atrocious acts of German colonialism and why the oppressed cannot take it anymore:

MKICHI: The Red Earth is still in our country. What’s more, he has taken our country from us by force. And we, like women, just stare at him. Now he has forced us to cultivate his plantation for him. We just stare at him. He has got us paying him taxes. We just stare at him. Is it for him to demand taxes from us? He should be paying us tax, but oh no! We, like women, just meekly sit, watching him do what he wants with us, with our land. How long are we going to remain meek and silent? Are we going to allow ourselves to be persecuted in our own country? (5)

But despite the preceding lamentation, the planned war of liberation by the Africans against the German colonizers is stymied by interethnic rivalry and disunity. Kinjeketile then emerges against this backdrop. Believed to be possessed

⁷⁶ Hussein, Introduction to *Kinjeketile*, p.vi. ⁷⁷ *Ibid.*

by supernatural powers, he acts in a bizarre fashion while in solitude. And the people are witnesses to how Kinjeketile, who is in a trance-like state, is eventually “hauled” into the Maji river. While some of the people conclude that he is dead because he does not resurface after a day, others express belief that Kinjeketile will resurface and that he is possessed by Hongo, a spirit of the river. Kinjeketile finally resurfaces and addresses the people while still in possession. The people listen with rapt attention as he proclaims a new dawn of unity among the Africans and victory for the people against the European rulers. While consecrating the people’s assembly with the waters of the Maji, Kinjeketile declares that the African combatants will be protected by the water and will not be pierced by German bullets. The warriors feel so much inspired by the promised protection that they quickly unite and get ready for the revolt. But Kinjeketile suddenly withdraws support for the imminent armed revolt because of some apparent contradictions in his prophecy. While still possessed, Kinjeketile also prophesies that the people will place themselves under the protection of Seyyid Said, the Arab Sultan of Zanzibar, after defeating the Germans. But the people are already so intoxicated with the expected miracle of the water that they ignore Kinjeketile’s warnings not to launch the offensive. And Kinjeketile’s sense of helplessness in the face of the dangerously deteriorating situation is repeatedly captured in the following statement: “A man gives birth to a . . . word. And the word . . . grows . . . it grows bigger and bigger. Finally, it becomes bigger than the man who gave it birth” (30). Notwithstanding Kinjeketile’s repudiation of the magical powers of the water, his refusal to join the fighting, and caution to the people to fight without relying on the water if they chose to proceed with the battle, the leaders of the African army commenced the offensive against the Germans. After some initial successful campaigns with sizable losses, the African warriors attack a German fortress in a scene of decisive confrontation but are crushed with brutal force. And the rebellion crumbles!

Kinjeketile and Postcolonial Politics

As a postcolonial text, *Kinjeketile* adopts an anti-colonial stance in dramatizing the *Maji Maji* war. The play violates historical accuracy by conveying the impression that the Germans did not actually win the war. Instead, the play projects the notion that the Germans won the battle but *not* the war. This crucial message is poignantly dramatized in the last scene when the German authorities demand from the captured and bleeding Kinjeketile to publicly denounce the magical powers of the *maji* (water). Kinjeketile’s response is such that I will let him speak for himself:

They want me to say that the water was a lie . . . Do you know what they will say tomorrow? The officer will say that we were wrong. He will tell our

children that we were wrong in fighting him . . . That to fight him is wrong! *That to fight for one's country is wrong!* And he wants me to help him by retracting all that I said. He wants me to say that the water was a lie. Do you know what that means? The moment I say that, people in the north, south, east and west will stop fighting . . . I will not say that! A word has been born. Our children will tell their children about this word. Our great grandchildren will hear of it. One day the word will cease to be a dream, it will be a reality! (53)

Thus, the spirit of the uprising, though battered, remains defiant in anticipation of a better future. As Biodun Jeyifo has rightly observed, “Kinjeketile refuses, against the clamours and pleadings of the prisoners, maintaining that the myth is not ultimately a lie because it has produced a historical truth: the absolute necessity for the Africans to fight and defeat the German colonizers.”⁷⁸ It is instructive to note that while the play concludes with his refusal to renounce the efficacy of the water, Kinjeketile neither commits suicide nor gets executed by the German authorities. Such a conclusion flies in the face of historical accuracy for the real-life Kinjeketile is known to have been captured and hanged by the colonizers. The playwright is not insensitive to his use of artistic license to reshape history. Hear him:

Kinjeketile of the play – *Kinjeketile* – is not an historical evocation of the real man. Kinjeketile here is a creature of the imagination, and although the “two men” closely resemble one another in their actions, they are not identical. I have had to mould my character to suit artistic needs, borrowing freely from the imagination when historical facts did not suit my purpose.⁷⁹

Hence, we are encouraged to appreciate that the truth of history need not necessarily tally with the truth of art. But one might wonder: Why has the author amended historical sources? What are these amendments intended to achieve and whose interests do they serve? One might be forgiven to assume that the answers to such questions can hardly be divorced from the play’s anti-colonial stance for as the author has further explained:

In my play, I have tried to demonstrate three things. First, I have tried to show how the Wamatumbi felt about the cruel invasion by the Germans, especially to show the master-servant relationship then pertaining. Secondly, I have tried to show briefly the political climate of that period (1890–1904). Thirdly, I have touched on the theme of economic exploitation of the Africans by the Germans, when Tanzania was being deprived of her produce and manpower, and yet her people were being made to pay taxes, without being given any chance of earning an income.⁸⁰

⁷⁸ Jeyifo, *The Truthful Lie*, p. 37.

⁷⁹ Hussein, Introduction to *Kinjeketile*, p.v.

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, pp.vi–vii.

Therefore, Hussein is not a dramatist interested in ordinary entertainment. His preceding remarks are no mere observation but an expression of discontent with the plight of the Tanzanian people under colonial domination. Such sentiments must have determined the sympathy for Africans in a work cited by some critics as one of the plays that “expose the violence which the colonial order inflicted on Africa.”⁸¹ Indeed, Hussein’s play projects the notion that, contrary to colonialist claims about introducing civilization to Africa, the colonized Africans have nothing useful to benefit from colonization. Listen closely to Kinjeketile: “They said there would be light . . . to get rid of the darkness. Now I know better; I know their light is far more dangerous. It is better that we remain in this darkness. The darkness is far better. I prefer the enslavement of the body to that of the mind brought by light” (26). This passage recalls an equally searing indictment of colonization by Jamaica Kincaid: “Even if I really came from people who were living like monkeys in trees, it was better to be that than what happened to me, what I became after I met you.”⁸² Interestingly, Hussein’s protagonist does not directly reference the colonizer just like Kincaid does not directly mention the colonizer. The hated colonizers are indirectly referenced as “they” and “their” by Hussein’s protagonist or “you” by Kincaid. Such indirect references – particularly as exemplified by Hussein’s play, which remains our main concern here – arguably accentuate the resentment against colonization in such works more than a direct reference can achieve on some occasions.

The anti-colonial stance of Hussein’s play probably explains its revolutionary credentials. As hinted in my [preceding section](#), the play just like *The Trial of Dedan Kimathi*, is a revolutionary text. That the colonized Africans have yet to achieve liberation at the end of such plays, as noted in my [previous section](#), is not the main issue but the fact that the oppressed are actively involved in the process of liberation from colonial rule. As evident in *Kinjeketile*, the oppressed are not robots who accept punishment and ask for more but courageous gladiators who are determined to eliminate any obstacle to their freedom.

Prior to the armed confrontation with the Germans, the determination of the colonized Africans to offer resistance was communicated via other techniques besides verbal speech. The spirited will of the oppressed to resist colonial tyranny is equally highlighted via imagery. While dancing to the war song – *likida* – for instance, we are made to appreciate how “*A number of men . . . armed with guns and some with sticks*” “*are lined up like soldiers*” and proceed to “*fling themselves to the ground as they chant the . . . slogan and crawl on their bellies with the help of their arms, ready to pounce on the enemy*” (21–22). The spectacle evoked by

⁸¹ Awhefeada, “History and the Politics of Representation in the Postcolonial African Text,” p. 178.

⁸² Kincaid, *A Small Place*, p. 37.

the image of the African warriors in the preceding directions offers a visually compelling message that probably speaks more than words regarding the determination of the warriors to eliminate colonial injustice. We are made to *see* and not just hear about the iron resolve by the Africans to confront the oppressive foreign enemy. And when the revolutionary war eventually begins, the atmosphere of tension and crisis is supported with appropriate auditory techniques other than verbal speech: “*Sounds of intense fighting can be heard, with the boom of the big gun showering bullets clearly audible above the din*” (48). The play adopts a fair share of auditory and visual cues in stressing the significance of some key moments in the oppositional relationship between the colonizer and the colonized. It mixes narrative and dramatic techniques in a manner consistent with the Brechtian concept of *epic* theatre. The crushing defeat of the Africans by the Germans, for instance, is reported rather than shown to us when “*lights come up on Kitunda addressing the audience*” (48). Hussein blends traditional African ritualistic techniques with Brechtian dramatic conventions in crafting a revolutionary, anti-colonial narrative.

The play concludes with an act of defiance because the protagonist, as earlier noted, refuses to denounce the magical powers of the water. Such defiance rightly conveys the impression that revolutions can be an ongoing process and not necessarily a onetime event. And because of its revolutionary credentials, it is perhaps hardly surprising that the play has granted the oppressed *agency*, a key postcolonial concept cited equally in my discussion of *The Trial of Dedan Kimathi*. To refresh our minds on this concept: *Agency* refers to “the ability of post-colonial subjects to initiate action in engaging or resisting imperial power.”⁸³ *Kinjeketile* grants the colonized Africans the ability, or rather *agency*, to challenge the colonial relations that debase their humanity. There is no scintilla of doubt that the African occupies the lower rung of the socioeconomic ladder under colonial rule. The status of the African under colonial establishment is probably best captured by another postcolonial concept: *subaltern*. As noted in my preceding section, *subaltern* denotes someone of lower or inferior rank, and “[s]ubaltern classes may include peasants, workers and other groups denied access to ‘hegemonic’ power.”⁸⁴ We are made to recognize or deepen our understanding of the *subaltern* status of the Africans in Hussein’s play when a member of the oppressed class reminds us that “it is better to die than to live like this. We are made to work like beasts in the cotton plantations . . . We die of hunger because we cannot work on our shambas. I say death is better than this life” (8). Hence, we can appreciate the status of the Africans as the living-dead – a scenario that the play opposes and hence, empowers the

⁸³ Ashcroft, Griffiths, and Tiffin, *Postcolonial Studies*, p. 6. ⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 198.

oppressed to redirect their destiny. Like *The Trial of Dedan Kimathi*, as we saw in the [preceding section](#), *Kinjeketile* substantiates Fanon's argument that decolonization is usually a violent project because the imperial oppressors hardly give up their privileged position without putting up a good fight. "They may grant reforms," as Kwame Nkrumah reminds us about the privileged class, "but will not yield an inch when basic pillars of their entrenched positions are threatened."⁸⁵ By taking up arms to confront the colonial oppressors, the Africans in Hussein's play appear to be mindful of Frederick Douglas' caveat: "Power concedes nothing without a demand. It never did and it never will."⁸⁶ It is hardly surprising that the German colonizers crushed the African rebellion with brute force for the success of such a rebellion would mean an end to the benefits and entitlements accruing to the colonizer. The colonizer finds nothing wrong in using the instruments of force to achieve ascendancy and perpetuate colonial domination but would not tolerate the oppressed using similar instruments to seek liberation. Therein lies the validity of Albert Memmi's argument: "While it is pardonable for the colonizer to have his little arsenals, the discovery of even a rusty weapon among the colonized is cause for immediate punishment."⁸⁷ The colonizer is mortally afraid of any liberatory acts of resistance by an oppressed people with less sophisticated weapons. As in real life, the Maji Maji uprising in *Kinjeketile* crumbled because the oppressed Africans cannot match the superior firepower of the Europeans. In view of this, British historian John Illife's assertion that the "Maji Maji . . . finally crumbled as crisis compelled reliance on fundamental loyalties to kin and tribe"⁸⁸ becomes disputable. By blaming intertribal animosity among oppressed Africans for the collapse of the revolutionary war, Illife tactfully exonerates the German colonial conquerors for brutally crushing a justifiable rebellion. As an artistic reincarnation of the historical Maji Maji war, Hussein's play replicates certain aspects of history while altering others. One instance of faithful depiction of historical accuracy is the fact of the Africans being outgunned by the Germans. Despite some initial problems of ethnic bickering, the African characters are sufficiently united prior to and during the war against the Germans but could not withstand the enemy's firepower. I submit for your review the following passage:

KITUNDA: That is what we thought. But we were wrong. Ngulumbalyo and his men simply advanced on the fort, nakedly. And all along we thought that

⁸⁵ Nkrumah, *Class Struggle in Africa*, p. 80.

⁸⁶ Douglas, "If There is No Struggle, There is No Progress." 1987 Speech. Additional bibliographic information is included in the "bibliography" section of this Element.

⁸⁷ Memmi, *The Colonizer and The Colonized*, p. 93.

⁸⁸ Illife, "The Organization of The Maji Maji Rebellion," p. 495.

the stories circulating about this big gun were lies. How wrong we were! For suddenly it started spurting bullets, and all the while Ngulumbalyo and his men matched right on, chanting, “Maji!” “Maji” “Maji!” and being mown down by the thousand. Kibasila, on hearing the chant, also got possessed. His people . . . took up the chant, “Maji!” “Maji!” “Maji!” and rushed toward the fort. And all the time they were being mown down by the thousand. (48)

It is worth noting that the two African characters cited in the above passage, Ngulumbalyo and Kibasila, hail from different ethnic groups. But as evident in the passage, the German “big gun” that eliminated both and other African warriors makes no distinction between Africans based on ethnic group. The owners of the big guns recognize each slain African warrior as a threat to the colonial status quo that ensures that the colonizer continues to reap profits at the expense of the colonized. In colonial relationships, “[t]he vanquished were to be exploited; the master was to benefit. If the vanquished got anything, it would be incidental crumbs from the master’s table.”⁸⁹ The play offers a convincing fictional corroboration of the relations of domination associated with colonization while dealing with the Maji Maji war. Whether in real life or the fictional world of the play, it is not lost on the colonizer that the Maji Maji uprising entails “an anti-colonialist and counter-hegemonic strategy aimed at countervailing and containing German imperialist stranglehold and exploitation.”⁹⁰ The historical uprising was a well-articulated, armed struggle intended to achieve emancipation from an unjust status quo. But John Illife, who appears unwilling to indict the Germans for crushing the rebellion, as earlier noted, partially validates and partially debunks the “organizational possibility”⁹¹ of the uprising in a somewhat confusing fashion. Conceding that the “Maji Maji rebels” “may . . . have some historical unity,” Illife concludes, “but this seems extremely unlikely.”⁹² He further asserts that the rebels “lack even close linguistic affinity.”⁹³ Hence, we are led to think that the Maji Maji rebellion collapsed mainly because of organizational defects occasioned by lack of unity and differences in mother tongue among the African combatants. Yet Illife has no problem conceding, “[t]he *maji* – the water-medicine accepted by each rebel – united in common action peoples with no known prior unity. Its power was believed to be religious, or in German terms was due to witchcraft.”⁹⁴ Interestingly, *Kinjeketile* enables us to appreciate why Illife’s argument has some merit but remains invalid in the final analysis. While suggesting that intertribal disunity robbed the African warriors of

⁸⁹ Chinweizu, *The West and the Rest of Us*, p. 70.

⁹⁰ Tsaaior, *African Literature and the Politics of Culture*, p. 47.

⁹¹ Illife, “The Organization of The Maji Maji Rebellion,” p. 501. ⁹² *Ibid.*, p. 501.

⁹³ *Ibid.*, p. 501. ⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 502.

victory against the Germans, Illife shoots himself in the foot by recognizing that the water eventually gave the Africans sufficient unity to proceed with the battle. Indeed, the unifying capabilities of the water or similar medicinal devices have been equally acknowledged by other historians.⁹⁵ As earlier stated, *Kinjeketile* does provide strong evidence that the Africans were eventually sufficiently united prior to and during the rebellion despite initial challenges with solidarity arising from belonging to different ethnic groups. Going by the play, it is hardly persuasive to fault the Africans for their crushing defeat by the Germans. The play condemns the greed and rapacity of the colonizer and manipulates our sympathy in favor of the colonized subject. Going by its conclusion, the play does not project the notion that might is right. Nor does it encourage us to accept that the colonizer's possession of superior military armament advances the Tanzanian society in any meaningful way. The play demonstrates that the Tanzanian people have nothing to celebrate about being colonized and that the colonizers are cold-blooded drones who grow fat on the economic resources of Tanzania while exploiting the labour of the African people. And the historical injustice of colonial brutality against the Tanzanian people is acknowledged by some pan-African historians. Hear Chinweizu:

The Germans, after winning hegemony over Tanganyika [now Tanzania], built fort in strategic places, planted white settlements, suppressed revolts, exacted taxes, and conscripted African labor for their plantations . . . The ferocity of the planter regime soon drove all the peoples of southern Tanganyika into a united rebellion, the Maji Maji rebellion.⁹⁶

Hence, we can appreciate once more the justification for the Maji Maji uprising dramatized in Hussein's play. And the play jettisons the conquering Western capitalist establishment while aligning with the African people. Therefore, in conclusion, it is worth noting that the following observation from Walter Rodney in relation to the colonizer's economic exploitation of Tanzania is a valid judgment the play would want us to embrace: "If that was modernization, and given the price paid in exploitation and oppression, then Africans would have been better off in the bush."⁹⁷

⁹⁵ Terence Osborn Ranger, for instance, observes, "Prophets . . . played a major part in the Maji-Maji rebellion . . . The prophets imposed new regulations and new instruction on the faithful; they brought believers into the congregation by dispensing "medicine"; they promised immunity both from witchcraft and from bullets; they promised success in this world and a return from death. They spoke to all black men." "African Reactions to the Imposition of Colonial Rule in East and Central Africa," p. 314.

⁹⁶ Chinweizu, *The West and the Rest of Us*, p. 59.

⁹⁷ Rodney, *How Europe Underdeveloped Africa*, p. 219.

4 Not Without Bones

Effiong Johnson's *Not Without Bones* (2000) is based on a historical incident that occurred in colonial Nigeria: Aba Women's War⁹⁸ of 1929. Grievances that provoked this incident had to do with taxation and how the colonially appointed African warrant chiefs assisted in this regard. The women of the Igbo-and Ibibio-speaking ethnic groups in eastern Nigeria began to suspect that they would be taxed when the colonial authorities decided to include women, children, and domestic animals such as goats and fowls in census data recorded against male taxpayers. The women then began to mobilize and eventually exploded into an uprising. As an anti-colonial revolt, the Aba Women's War stands out as one of the documented pieces of evidence of African women's rebellion and assertiveness. It demonstrates that colonial oppression and resistance are not necessarily an all-male affair. A more detailed background information on this notable episode in Africa's long history of resistance to colonial injustice is necessary to enhance our understanding of the subsequent analysis of Johnson's play. Several scholars have documented this relevant background information. One such scholar is Adiele Afigbo and I will let him explain:

Before the end of October the women of Oloko [in Aba] were convinced that there was a secret and wicked plan to tax them and had made up their minds to resist. Chief Okugo of Oloko, one of the Warrant Chiefs whose unpleasant duty . . . was to conduct the count, finding the whole business unpopular and explosive, refused to do anything about it until 18 November, when [British colonial District Officer] Captain Cook stampeded him into action with the order that he had to be ready with the census figures within eight days or face disciplinary action. Still Okugo refused to take direct part in the count. On the contrary, he delegated it to a mission schoolteacher, Mark Emeruwa, who went . . . and received instructions from Cook. There, runs the story, Emeruwa was told to count only men but to obtain from them details relating to their wives and livestock. The count went on without incident until Emeruwa came to the compound of one Ojim, where he saw Nwanyereuwa, one of Ojim's wives preparing palm oil. The details of what happened are extremely obscure, but probably Emeruwa requested the woman to count "her people" and livestock. Nwanyeruwa replied aggressively, asking Emeruwa pointedly whether his mother was ever counted. By the time the altercation got to this

⁹⁸ This incident is also referred to as "Aba Women's Riots" by some scholars. Adu Boahen suggests that this alternative name is preferred by "colonial historians." *African Perspectives on Colonialism*, p. 79. Perhaps Boahen's explanation is partly convincing and partly unconvincing because the British colonial historian Margery Perham and Nigerian historian Adiele Afigbo in *Native Administration in Nigeria* and *The Warrant Chiefs*, respectively, subscribe to the alternative name. I prefer the concept of "war" or "rebellion" to "riot" because of my conviction that the women were fighting a just cause and need not be seen as an undisciplined or reckless bunch of hooligans disturbing the peace of the government or society.

point both parties had completely lost their tempers and had gone for each other's throats in earnest . . . Unfortunately for Emeruwa, Okugo, Cook, there was a mass rally of women in a neighbouring compound, a rally which, the women said, had met to discuss issues unconnected with tax, but which the Donald Kingdon Commission of Inquiry into the subsequent Riots said had met on the tax question. In any case whatever was its purpose, Nwanyeruwa ran to this meeting in a state of frenzy to announce that the awaited enumerator of women had arrived. The women did not hesitate to act. They went at once to Emeruwa's house in the mission compound and, since they had come to regard "counting" as synonymous with taxation, asked him why he said "women should pay tax." They also sent messengers "armed" with fresh folded palm leaves to women of neighbouring villages inviting them to come to Oloko. Thus began the Women's Riot of 1929.⁹⁹

Hence, we gain better clarity regarding the historical incident on which Johnson's play is based. Beginning in Oloko (Aba), the women's uprising spread to several other eastern Nigerian cities such as the geographical location of *Not Without Bones*: Opobo (now Ikot Abasi).

Johnson's play opens in an atmosphere of the women's imminent uprising. The colonial authorities, upon being alerted of the imminent rebellion, are determined to crush it. While instructing his police officers, A.R Whitman – the colonial District Officer of Opobo – minces no words concerning the government's zero tolerance of the looming rebellion: "If they [women] are meeting to kick against government, you must disperse them" (4). But the women's determination is so strong that some abandon several personal priorities to attend the anti-colonial rally. Buoyed by their leader Ekaiban's revolutionary rhetoric, the women can recognize that their confrontation with the colonial authorities is long overdue. Says Ekaiban: "Women of Opobo, we have decided to say **NO MORE** to the White man and all his tricks" (9). And the women are further driven by the awareness that their men have been silenced and rendered impotent by the colonial authorities. Unfair taxation of African men now about to be extended to women, rising prices of basic commodities, and seizure of the women's market products for the benefit of the white man are some of the grievances that provoke the rebellion. As they ready for war, the women are also determined to confront the African errand boys of the colonial masters, such as the warrant chiefs who assist the colonial masters in the exploitation of African people. Finally, inspired by oracular support for their cause, the women launch the rebellion. Upon disrupting a taxation-induced exercise facilitated by a colonial officer at the house of the African warrant chief, the women proceed to set ablaze

⁹⁹ Afigbo, *The Warrant Chiefs*, pp. 237–238.

several government and public buildings, namely the court, postal office, church, dispensary, and post office. Disturbed by the women's violent actions, the District Officer sues for peace and accepts some major demands by the women, such as the abrogation of the intended taxation of women and the market-related fees paid by the women. But before the District Officer could formalize the agreement in writing, the women who are hell-bent on unleashing additional havoc invade the district office building of the colonial administration. In a scene of epic confrontation with the colonial soldiers, some women are shot dead while their leader is arrested and detained. Not yet renouncing their demands, the women insist on burying their dead colleagues and upon the release of the detained leader, Ekaiban, who must participate in the ceremony in accordance with traditional customs. The initially reluctant District Officer is eventually forced to cooperate. The final scene is dedicated to the burial of the fallen women, and the District Officer who attends with some members of the colonial security personnel ensures that the fallen women receive a state burial. And given that the District Officer who had earlier acceded to some key demands by the women also accepts to pay compensation to the victims of the riot, it is a victory for the women who sing and dance heroically at this final moment. Hence, we can appreciate the significance of the play's title: *Not Without Bones*, "the full idea meaning that Women are Not Without Bones."¹⁰⁰ And throughout the dramatic action, Ekaiban, the women's leader, occasionally issues statements with the play's title while emphasizing the heroism (or is it sheroism?) of the women.

Not Without Bones and Postcolonial Politics

In dealing with the historical source of this play, Johnson's approach amounts to a harmonious blending of fact and fiction while making an anti-colonial statement. And that means the play is neither a complete dramatization of historical facts nor a complete deviation from it. As the author explains:

Though the play has a strong historical root, it is not history, but an imaginative recreation of it. Characters, dialogue and situations are invented. This makes it fiction. However, that some real names of colonial officers, such as, A.R. Whitman, Lt.Hill, Mr. R.K. Floyer and others such as Mark Pepple and Madam Adiaha Edem, have been retained, raises the play to the level of "faction." Similarly, certain settings for the dramatic presentations are typical playbacks of the real venues where the women

¹⁰⁰ The author, Effiong Johnson, provides this explanation in his introductory remarks on the published play [n.p.] He restated this point in a personal interview with me in July 2022.

rioted along. All these deliberate attempts help advance the drama's psycho-historical immediacy and accuracy.¹⁰¹

Of the real historical names mentioned above, Mark Pepple is of interest for it symbolizes a notable tradition in colonial administration of eastern Nigeria: The Warrant Chief System. These colonially appointed indigenous chiefs were inevitably involved in the grievances that provoked the women's uprising. As indicated in *Not Without Bones*, the warrant chief, Mark Pepple, helps to facilitate the unjust taxation system that triggers the women's war. The British system of indirect rule, which entails traditional African rulers governing their subjects under the supervision of British officials, worked smoothly in northern Nigeria and achieved a partial success in the western part of the country, but was simply unworkable in the eastern part of the country due to the absence of a centralized system of government in precolonial Igbo and Ibibio societies. But because of the absence of a centralized system of government in precolonial Igbo and Ibibio societies, the colonial administration created the position of warrant chief in eastern Nigeria. As an instrument of indirect rule, the warrant chief system is cited as part of the justification for Sean Stilwell's seemingly persuasive argument that "European definitions did not correspond to African realities."¹⁰² As Afigbo further clarifies:

Under the false impression that Eastern Nigerian communities, like some other communities elsewhere in Africa, were ruled by "kings and chiefs," the British appointed a "chief" or sometimes several "chiefs" for each village or group of villages as the case might be. These "chiefs" were given "warrants" or "certificates of recognition" which made them the sole executive heads of their local communities and entitled them to be called upon from time to time to participate in the trial of cases in the "Native Courts" which were established under the system. In a number of places the men who were appointed Warrant Chiefs were the traditional ritual heads of their villages, but in the overwhelming majority of cases they were either scoundrels or just ordinary young men of no special standing in indigenous society who had been pushed forward for the specific purpose of parleying with the white man. The institution of the Warrant Chief System was seen as the rape of the indigenous political constitution of the people. Everywhere the popular assembly, which hitherto had been the sovereign body of each autonomous unit, was superseded by the Native Court and the pretentious Warrant Chiefs. To the people the Native Court was "native" only in name. Its procedure was patterned on that of the British courts.¹⁰³

In view of the foregoing, the role of the warrant chiefs as agents of imperial domination cannot be overemphasized. Compared to the rest of colonized

¹⁰¹ Effiong Johnson in his introductory remarks on the published play [n.p.]

¹⁰² Stilwell, "The Imposition of Colonial Rule," p. 17.

¹⁰³ Afigbo, "Revolution and Reaction in Eastern Nigeria," pp. 540–541.

Africans, the chiefs enjoyed a higher status for they “were members of the Native Court System. They could make laws on the authority granted by their membership.”¹⁰⁴ But the warrant chiefs were notoriously unpopular among fellow Africans. So it is hardly surprising that the women’s litany of destruction in *Not Without Bones* commences in the household of Mark Pepple, the warrant chief of Opobo. As the women’s leader, Ekaiban, states, “The fight is on, but first to Pepple’s house” (21). In its portrayal of Pepple, the play is sensitive to his role as an instrument of colonial injustice and conveys the impression that his assistance with the unjust taxation justifies the women’s violent action on his premises. I submit for your review the following excerpt:

Action shifts to Chief Mark Pepple Jaja’s compound. We see a few boxes, some clothes on top of them. Mr. Floyer sits on a stool in the veranda with his legs crossed. He holds a file in his left hand and a pen on the right. Chief stands impatiently by his side.

FLOYER: Is that all, Chief?

PEPPLE: Yes Sir, that is all.

FLOYER: I will like to see your animals, Chief, all of them.

PEPPLE: Yes Sir, I will take you to where the goats are kept . . .

—
FLOYER: . . . Where are your wives, Chief?

PEPPLE: Okon Asibong, call them out. (21, 23)

Given that Pepple “stands impatiently” as noted in the stage directions portion of the above passage, it is quite possible that he is tormented by an inner self-guilt because of the immoral nature of the taxation but cannot afford to disobey the British colonial master who has elevated him above his people, although Pepple remains a colonized subject in the final analysis. Like the black professionals and K.A.R soldiers in *The Trial of Dedan Kimathi*, as we saw in a [previous section](#), Pepple’s role recalls the slave era, for instance, in the US, where

A few slaves were made into a slave elite. They were given a few privileges and, in return, they controlled for their masters the rest of the slaves. Even though an elite slave is still a slave, his economic mini-privilege and his carefully fostered sense of social superiority firmly tied his interests to those of his masters and made him loyal to the slaving system.¹⁰⁵

Like the “elite slave” noted above, the African warrant chiefs were also known to have taken advantage of their “mini-privilege” and turned to petty tyrants against their kinsmen and women. The warrant chiefs became powerful and

¹⁰⁴ Stilwell, “The Imposition of Colonial Rule,” p. 17.

¹⁰⁵ Chinweizu, *The West and the Rest of Us*, p. 440.

autocratic. They extorted fellow Africans by imposing unlawful fines and charges. And they commandeered private properties and victimized or brutalized anyone who challenged their autocratic power. So we can see why it seems justifiable for the revolting women in *Not Without Bones* to include as part of their demands from the colonial authorities the removal from office of warrant chief Mark Pepple or rather “[t]hat unfortunate son of Opobo” (46). And it is instructive to note that the play’s sympathy with the oppressed is such that Mark Pepple is eventually made to renounce his alignment with the colonial authorities and validate the women’s war. Hear him:

Your unprecedented heroic challenges on the strange authority, in our motherland, has resurrected in me, and indeed all the men of Opobo, our lost manhood and prowess. We have learnt warfare from you, and from now we shall fight with tutored artistry till the freedom of the land is fully attained. (68)

Whether the preceding statement is informed by the death of Pepple’s wife in the uprising or plain realization of the justification for the women’s war, we can appreciate how Pepple’s volte face amounts to the reclaiming of self-identity that he had previously betrayed. And perhaps, the play could have let Pepple’s wife stay alive, but killed her because of its anti-colonial politics that logically disapprove of her husband’s role? Just as the play evinces an antagonistic stance against colonization while dealing with real historical facts like the warrant chief system, it also adopts an anti-colonial stance in fabricating or amending certain aspects of the events of 1929. There is evidence in the play suggesting that certain historical details have been tampered with in order to advance the interests of the colonized subject. It is common knowledge, for instance, that the colonial authorities were unapologetic and brutally crushed the historical rebellion. But in the play, the District Officer – A. R. Whitman – who was initially opposed to the rebellion eventually develops an inner self-guilt. As previously noted, Whitman was so intolerant of the women’s anti-government rally that he issued the order to “disperse them” (4). But Whitman, it is, who finally accedes to some major demands by the women and grants a state funeral to the fallen women. In the end, he cuts the image of a passionate advocate of the women’s cause. His volte-face recalls the biblical, anti-Christian Saul who eventually became the Christian Paul. Indeed, Whitman appears to have experienced an ideological conversion of Apostolic dimensions. Or what else are we expected to make out of his following statement?:

Freedom indeed shall be fully attained. It’s simply sane to do so. I do, on behalf of the governor regret all the trouble we have seen . . . I assure you, adequate compensation shall be paid to all deserving victims of the riot . . . I think these women heroes have stunned us with their bravery and rare

commitment. In the military it is a mark of honour to salute ideal military heroes at their burial sites with a number of gunshots. These women . . . deserve that honour. (68)

Whitman's sense of remorse, as captured in the above passage, is inconsistent with his real-life namesake. Nor is it consistent with some other real-life British colonial district officers in eastern Nigeria such as John Cook. These real-life figures were ruthlessly determined to protect unjust taxation and crush the women's rebellion. Again, no fewer than fifty women were known to have died during the historical rebellion in the affected locations of eastern Nigeria, but the play records only two late victims. This drastic reduction of the number is particularly noteworthy because the single largest number of late victims in the historical uprising was recorded in Opobo (now Ikot Abasi), the geographical location of *Not Without Bones*. The significant pruning of the number is not a happenstance for as the playwright has noted, the play

attempts to capture the essence of that riot which climaxed in the bloody outrage at the Consular Beach . . . in Opobo . . . with *hundreds of women* left dead either through bullets of colonial guns or through drowning in the creeks in a bid to escape from the cannons of the colonial authority.¹⁰⁶ (my emphasis)

The emphasized portion of the preceding passage confirms that the number of late victims of the historical rebellion significantly outweighs the relevant number in the play. Names of the hundreds of late victims are displayed at the Women War Memorial Museum in Ikot Abasi (Figure 3). The large list further enables us to appreciate how the few casualties in Johnson's play deviate from historical accuracy. We might ask, therefore, what the amended figure is intended to achieve and whose interest does it serve? Clearly, as earlier noted with respect to the colonial District Officer Whitman's sudden change from a strong opponent of the women's rebellion to its passionate defender, the play's lowering of the number of late victims is consistent with its intention to rewrite history from below. The play deliberately chooses *not* to dramatize history from the perspective of the conqueror. It uses artistic license to amend or fabricate some relevant details of the events of 1929 to champion the interests of the underprivileged. Such an approach validates the women's action and does not concur with the attitude of colonial apologists such as Margery Perham, who takes a dim view of the historical uprising. Hear Perham:

People [referring to eastern Nigerian women] who do not know how to communicate or even to formulate their sense of grievance in constitutional

¹⁰⁶ Effiong Johnson in his introductory remarks on the published play, [n.p.].

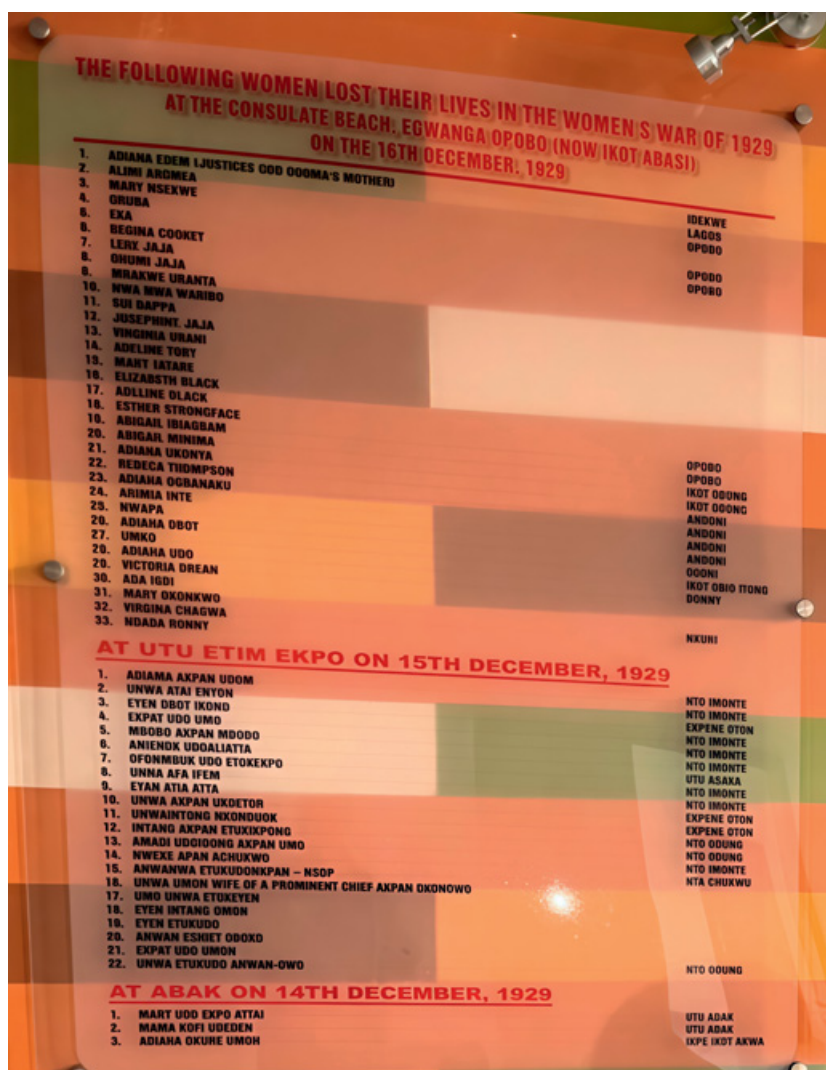


Figure 3 List of female demonstrators who died in Opobo (now Ikot Abasi) during the Aba Women's War of 1929. Photo taken by Chima Osakwe. June 28, 2023.

terms may resort to violence as the only effective way in which they can show their dissatisfaction with their conditions.¹⁰⁷

The above sentiment seeks to discredit the women's action or rather the "Aba Riots."¹⁰⁸ As evident in the passage, Perham clearly opposes the women's

¹⁰⁷ Perham, *Native Administration in Nigeria*, p. 206.

¹⁰⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 206.

violent rebellion and projects the notion that the women are barbaric or less civilized by taking to violence. The reason for the women's violent resistance is not an issue to Perham. And she appears to be unmindful of the fact that "[i]n the absence of due democratic channels and procedures of seeking redress, customarily available in Ibibio and Igbo women's culture, uprising were [sic] the only recourse the women had, to express their anger and resentment."¹⁰⁹ Indeed, some scholars who are sympathetic to the historical uprising dramatized in Johnson's play project the notion that the women's anti-government demonstration may be understood as having a nationalist undertone. Emmy Idegu, for instance, reminds us that,

The women's war was an epoch in itself, a solid part of the commencement of the Nigerian journey to independence. By their heroic participation in the war, the women rose together in a united, formidable and collective display of utmost patriotism and nationalism . . . They were . . . nationalists who had an organized movement against domination.¹¹⁰

Some other scholars have equally noted the nationalist undertone of the women's historical war expressed in the preceding quote.¹¹¹ In its fictional corroboration of the historical uprising, *Not Without Bones* manipulates our psyche in a fashion that compels us to admire the patriotic qualities of the revolting women or sympathize with their cause. The image of the rampaging women recalls their counterparts in Euripides' *Bacchae*. Like their counterparts in Euripides' play, the female warriors in *Not Without Bones* are fighting against an unjust state. Just as Pentheus – the tyrannical Greek monarch – is determined to use force against the women, Whitman – the colonial District Officer – uses force against the women in *Not Without Bones*. But unlike Euripides' Pentheus, Johnson's Whitman is an alien invader whose authoritarian colonial state undermines the sovereignty of the native population. However, the women in both plays refuse to be cowed into submission in the face of authoritarian dispensation.

The militant revolutionary atmosphere of *Not Without Bones* is brilliantly aided by appropriate auditory and visual signals. Johnson's use of songs, dance, and spectacle advances the theme of the play. Consider, for instance, the scene where the women invade the warrant chief Mark Pepple's house. Having wreaked havoc at his house, the women "*march out with their war song*" (27). The nature of the song in the preceding directions clearly indicates that

¹⁰⁹ Idegu, "Historical Play Writing and the Identity Question," p. 83. ¹¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 86.

¹¹¹ Adiele Afigbo, for instance, writes in his essay "Revolution and Reaction in Eastern Nigeria" that the women's war "was essentially anti-Government and that in fighting for the old political and moral order the women were asking for the exodus of the British," p. 554.

the women did not come to negotiate for peace. So it is hardly surprising that upon their arrival at Pepple's house earlier on, we see them "*Charged. All of them carry cassava leaves, sticks and similar weapons*" (26). The militant song and war-like images of the women support the volatile atmosphere of the play and stand as further evidence of the audible rumblings of a society destabilized by colonial malpractices. The effective use of sound and spectacular movement in capturing the war of liberation against injustice is further appreciated in the climax of the play when the women invade the colonial district office building. Notice how "*The women overcome the police and push forward. Lt Hill blows a whistle and immediately, we hear explosion outside from the soldiers*" (55). Therefore, using relevant auditory devices and moving spectacle, the play heightens its dramatic intensity while condemning the unjust status quo.

Perhaps it is not for nothing that the play has been listed among some other titles by Nigerian playwrights that "call for the masses to put an end to exploitative, unresponsive, irresponsible and oppressive leadership by marching against and pulling down the status quo through violence."¹¹² Going by this quoted argument, the play is arguably revolutionary, although it does not conclude with the downfall of colonial rule. And this is so if we can accept that a radical change on the scale we designate as revolutionary must be such that "the idea of freedom and the experience of a new beginning should coincide" in it.¹¹³ The fact that the revolting women in Johnson's play won much of their demands – especially in relation to taxation of women – can probably be understood as a litmus test of the validity of the play as a drama of revolutionary change. It is not lost on us that when military honour is mounted by the colonial government for the late victims of the riot, the concluding stage directions state, *inter alia*, "*Whitman goes to Eka [Ekaiban], extends his hands to her . . . [S]he shakes hands with Whitman . . . as [t]he women sing and dance to war songs*" (69). This moment between the European district officer and the African women leader entails the recognition of each other's humanity. Hence, this can be further understood as a validation of the play's revolutionary credential for in the wake of social transformation arising from revolutionary action, life can no longer be the same for anyone, especially for the members of a mistreated and dominated group. For the women in *Not Without Bones* and, by extension, the entire colonized Africans in the society that generated the play, the night of pain and misery gives way to the morning of joy and cackling laughter with respect to the grievances that provoked the women's war. It is instructive to note that the real-life colonial administration was forced to

¹¹² Utoh-Ezeajugh, Okeke, and Okafor, "Revolutionary Ideology in Nigerian Playwrighting and the Fate of a Nation in Crisis," p. 88.

¹¹³ Arendt, *On Revolution*, pp. 21–22.

relocate its capital from the eastern Nigeria city of Calabar to the western Nigeria city of Lagos because of the historical uprising. And *Not Without Bones* arguably portrays the colonial administration as being cowardly, insecure, and unsure of itself.

As a postcolonial text auditing colonial relations, the play aligns with the colonized subject while adopting an anti-Western perspective. One of the postcolonial concepts implicated here is *agency*, which was equally cited in my discussion of *Kinjeketile* and *The Trial of Dedan Kimathi*. Once again, to refresh our minds, *agency* is the ability of the colonized subject to initiate action against or resist imperial power to some extent. By empowering the women to launch a war against colonial exploitation and injustice, the play grants them *agency*. The women are not pictured as spineless victims of colonial mistreatment, but courageous Amazons who are determined to fight any obstacle to their self-fulfillment in a colonial society. And the author who created their characters envisions them as agents rather than objects of history. Listen closely to him:

women are not without bones. Women are strong; they can fight, they can go to war, they can carry ammunitions, they can kill if need be. So don't think because they are women, they are weak or unable to carry out such actions.¹¹⁴

The preceding explanation is offered as part of the elucidation justifying the play's title. As noted earlier, the full idea regarding the title is that women are not without bones. Hence, the full idea behind the title implies a sense of *agency*. The women are determined to assert *agency* in a repressive milieu. Also, certain attitudes of condescension on the part of the colonizers evoke some other relevant concepts in postcolonial theory. It is not lost on us that the European characters address the rioting women with several derogatory epithets: "pagans" (35), "wild natives" (38), "wild women" (50). The quoted epithets evoke the twin concepts of *orientalism* and *other/othering*. Once again, to refresh our minds, *orientalism* is Said's proposed concept for the mental attitude adopted by the European colonizers toward the Orient in order to justify colonization of the Orient. But as noted in some previous sections, the colonizer's mental perception of the Orientals loosely applies to the rest of the colonized people elsewhere. Each of the quoted epithets from Johnson's play are instances of orientalist stereotypes that deemed the colonized Africans as subhuman and in need of refinement and salvation from the much more enlightened colonizer. The notion of "pagans," which the white missionary – Rev. Floyer – attaches to the rioting African women, for instance, implies that the Africans have no true knowledge of God. Such a scenario recalls Rev. Floyer's

¹¹⁴ Effiong Johnson. Personal Interview by Chima Osakwe, July 2022.

counterpart – Mr. Brown – in Achebe’s classic novel *Things Fall Apart* (1958). Indeed, Rev. Floyer’s attitude in Johnson’s play can be read in line with Achebe’s Mr. Brown who recognizes that black Africans, as exemplified by the Igbo, recognize a supreme God/*Chukwu*, acknowledging that, “Chukwu is the only God,”¹¹⁵ but insists that the African knowledge of God is invalid in the final analysis unless the Africans begin to worship God through Jesus Christ. Like Achebe’s Rev. Brown, Effiong’s Rev. Floyer has an unchanging perception of Africans as mere heathens unless they fully embrace the Christian doctrine symbolized by Christ. Hence, we need not miss the Eurocentric justification for the presence of Caucasian missionaries in the African society that generated *Not Without Bones*. Because the Africans are “pagans” – to quote the Rev. Floyer of *Not Without Bones* again – who, according to the Mr. Brown of *Things Fall Apart*, worship some “gods” that are “false,”¹¹⁶ we are expected to appreciate why Europe has a God-given responsibility to introduce Africa to the real God. As agents of colonization, the Christian missionaries in Johnson’s play can only recognize the Africans as nothing but untamed savages and are eager “to recruit black souls for the heaven of their white god,”¹¹⁷ to borrow Chinweizu’s words in a related context. Because the play aligns with “black souls,” it does not subscribe to colonialist denigration of the colonized subject. Nor does it project the view that colonialism is a positive contribution to the well-being of Africans. Hence, it has empowered the African women to challenge colonial exploitation and win much of their justifiable demands.

Conclusion

I hope to have demonstrated in the preceding sections how selected postcolonial African playwrights have reconstructed historical facts in solidarity with the colonized subject. As evident in my reading of selected titles, a notable strategy employed by the playwrights in deviating from historical accuracy is the invention of certain plot details. As we saw in the sections for *The Trial of Dedan Kimathi* and *Kinjeketile*, for instance, the plays do not conclude with the execution of the title characters by the colonial authorities. The conclusion of both plays, as we saw, conveys the impression that the revolutionary war continues until freedom for the colonized is achieved. Refusing to make both characters die at the hands of the colonial authorities in the same way as the real-life figures that inspired them remains a notable plot invention that contradicts historical truth. Similarly, the female characters of *Not Without Bones*, as we saw, won their legitimate demands rather than being brutally crushed by

¹¹⁵ Achebe, *Things Fall Apart*, p. 179. ¹¹⁶ *Ibid.*

¹¹⁷ Chinweizu, *The West and the Rest of Us*, p. 49.

colonial firepower in the same way as the real-life women who inspired them. Soyinka's *Death and the Kings Horseman*, as we saw in my reading of the play, invented the Western-educated Olunde, who has the audacity to debunk the colonizer's claim to cultural sophistication while projecting a positive image of traditional African customs.

In view of the foregoing, we can further appreciate the central argument announced in my Introduction. The main gist remains that the selected postcolonial African authors have used artistic licence to rewrite colonial history from below, transforming historical trauma into counter-narratives that restore agency, dignity, and futurity to the oppressed. Indeed, the approaches adopted by these writers in the examined plays arguably amount to rewriting history from below. And such approaches demonstrate how history can be a malleable material at the hands of a writer. As a postcolonial text, each of the plays adopts a counter-Western perspective while dealing with the colonial encounter. The anti-colonial stance of the plays, which is inspired by their sympathy for the colonized Africans, is worthy of commendation if we can accept Ngũgĩ's observation that the artist "looks at things not only as they are, but more essentially as they could be."¹¹⁸ This is a plausible argument and the rest of the selected authors would agree going by the evidence in their works. As evident in my analyses of the selected titles in preceding sections, the plays are not merely content with reenacting specific historical moments but seek to redirect their meaning. The plays, it seems to me, should be highly commended for using artistic license to challenge the conqueror's version of history, align with the underprivileged, mount a heroic resistance, and/or enable the oppressed to achieve liberation from oppression. Perhaps the plays could have also encouraged Africans to remedy their deficiency in technological and military might, because this was the single most important reason for the colonizer's ability to subjugate African people in the first place? Future studies may want to explore such questions. But the political commitment of the plays to anti-colonial resistance is beyond obvious. And such a commitment serves as evidence of how African historical drama can be seen as vital postcolonial texts deserving of appreciation in the same way as the continent's prose and fiction.

¹¹⁸ Ngũgĩ, *Penpoints, Gunpoints, and Dreams*, p. 13.

Bibliography

- Achebe, Chinua. "The African Writer and the Biafran Cause." *Morning Yet on Creation Day: Essays*, Anchor Books, 1976, pp. 113–121.
- "The Role of the Writer in a New Nation." *African Writers on African Writing*, edited by G. D. Killam, Northwestern University Press, 1973, pp. 7–13.
- Things Fall Apart*. 1958. Anchor Books, 1994.
- Afigbo, Adiele. "Revolution and Reaction in Eastern Nigeria: 1900–1929 (The Background to the Women's War of 1929)." *Journal of the Historical Society of Nigeria*, vol. 3, no. 3, December 1966, pp. 539–557.
- The Warrant Chiefs: Indirect Rule in Southeastern Nigeria 1891–1929*. Humanities Press, 1972.
- Arendt, Hannah. *On Revolution*. 2nd ed. The Viking Press, 1963.
- Aristotle. *The Poetics*. Edited and Translated by Stephen Halliwell. Cambridge University Press, 1995.
- Ashcroft, Bill, Gareth Griffiths, and Helen Tiffin. eds. *Post-colonial Studies: The Key Concepts*. 2nd ed. Routledge, 2007.
- Awhefeada, Sunny. "History and the Politics of Representation in the Postcolonial African Text." *Politics of the Postcolonial Text: Africa and Its Diaspora*, edited by James Tar Tsaaio, Lincom Europa, 2010, pp. 172–187.
- Barthes, Roland. "The Death of the Author." *The Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism*, edited by Vincent B. Leicht, 2nd ed., W.W. Norton, 2010, pp. 1322–1326.
- Boahen, Adu. *African Perspectives on Colonialism*. The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1987.
- Brown, Nicholas. "Revolution and Recidivism: The Problem of Kenyan History in the Plays of Ngugi wa Thiong'o." *African Drama and Performance*, edited by John Conteh-Morgan and Tejumola Olaniyan, Indiana University Press, 2004, pp.126–143.
- Césaire, Aimé. *Discourse on Colonialism*. Translated by Joan Pinkham. Monthly Review Press, 1972.
- Chinweizu. *The West and the Rest of Us: White Predators, Black Slavers and the African Elite*. Vintage Books, 1975.
- Crow, Brian, and Chris Banfield. *An Introduction to Post-colonial Theatre*. Cambridge University Press, 1996.

- Davies, Carole Boyce. Introduction. *Ngambika: Studies of Women in African Literature*, edited by Carol Boyce Davies and Anne Adams Graves, Africa World Press, 1986, pp. 1–23.
- Douglas, Frederick. “If There is No Struggle, There is No Progress.” 1857 Speech. www.blackpast.org/african-american-history/1857-frederick-douglass-if-there-no-struggle-there-no-progress/.
- Etherton, Michael. “Tribute to Wole Soyinka.” *Modern African Drama*, edited by Biodun Jeyifo, A Norton Critical Edition, W.W. Norton, 2002, pp. 566–569.
- Euripides. *The Medea. The Complete Greek Tragedies*. Edited by David Greene and Richmond Lattimore, Washington Square Press, 1971, pp. 59–117.
- Fanon, Frantz. *The Wretched of the Earth*. 1961. Translated by Constance Farrington. Penguin, 1990.
- Fortier, Mark. *Theory/Theatre: An Introduction*. 2nd ed. Routledge, 2002.
- Fugard, Athol, John Kani, and Winston Ntshona. *Sizwe Bansi is Dead*. 1974. *Modern African Drama*, edited by Biodun Jeyifo, A Norton Critical Edition, W.W. Norton, 2002, pp. 92–125.
- Gates, Henry Louis, Jr. “Being, the Will, and the Semantics of Death.” *Death and the King’s Horseman: Wole Soyinka*, A Norton Critical Edition, edited by Simon Gikandi, W.W. Norton, 2003, pp. 155–164.
- Gilbert, Helen, and Joanne Tompkins. *Post-colonial Drama: Theory, Practice, Politics*. Routledge, 1996.
- Hooks, Bell. *Talking Back: Thinking Feminist, Thinking Black: Thinking Feminist, Thinking Black*. South End Press, 1989.
- Hussein, Ebrahim. *Kinjeketile*. Oxford University Press, 1970.
- Idegú, Emmy. “Historical Play Writing and the Identity Question: An Examination of Effiong Etim Johnson’s *Not without Bones*.” *Nigeria Educational Forum: A Journal of the Institute of Education*, Ahmadu Bello University, vol. 16, no. 2, December 2000, pp. 82–92.
- Illife, John. “The Organization of The Maji Maji Rebellion.” *Journal of African History*, vol. 8, no. 3, 1967, pp. 495–512.
- JanMohamed, Abdul. *Manichean Aesthetics: The Politics of Literature in Colonial Africa*. The University of Massachusetts Press, 1983.
- Jeyifo, Biodun. *The Truthful Lie: Essays in a Sociology of African Drama*. New Beacon Books, 1985.
- Wole Soyinka: *Politics, Poetics and Postcolonialism*. Cambridge University Press, 2004.
- Johnson, Effiong. *Not without Bones*, Caltop, 2000.
- Kincaid, Jamaica. *A Small Place*. Plume, 1989.
- Leczna, Adam. *Wole Soyinka: Tragic Classicism*. Bloomsbury, 2024.

- Macaulay, Thomas. "Minute on Indian Education." *The Post-colonial Studies Reader*, edited by Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths, and Helen Tiffin, 2nd. ed., Routledge, 2006, pp. 374–375.
- Majdalany, Fred. *State of Emergency: The Full Story of Mau Mau*. Houghton Mifflin Company, 1963.
- Memmi, Albert. *The Colonizer and The Colonized*. Expanded Edition. Beacon Press, 1967.
- Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o. *Decolonizing the Mind: The Politics of Language in African Literature*. James Currey, 1997.
- _____. *Penpoints, Gunpoints, and Dreams: Toward a Critical Theory of Arts and the State in Africa*. Clarendon Press, 1998.
- Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o and Micere Githae Mugo. *The Trial of Dedan Kimathi*. 1976. Heinemann, 1988.
- Nkrumah, Kwame. *Class Struggle in Africa*. International Publishers, 1970.
- Nnaemeka, Obioma. Introduction. *The Politics of (M)Othering: Womanhood, Identity, and Resistance in African Literature*, edited by Obioma Nnaemeka, Routledge, 1997, pp. 1–25.
- Olaniyan, Tejumola. *Scars of Conquest/ Masks of Resistance*. Oxford University Press, 1995.
- Osakwe, Chima. Personal Interview with Effiong Johnson. July 5, 2022.
- _____. Personal Interview (Zoom) with Micere Githae Mugo. June 25, 2022.
- Osundare, Niyi. "The Writer as Righter." *Ife Monograph on Literature and Criticism*, 4th series, no.5, 1986.
- Perham, Margery. *Native Administration in Nigeria*. Oxford University Press, 1962.
- Quayson, Ato. *Tragedy and Postcolonial Literature*. Cambridge University Press, 2021.
- Ranger, Terence O. "African Reactions to the Imposition of Colonial Rule in East and Central Africa." *Colonialism in Africa 1870–1960*. Vol. 1 (The History and Politics of Colonialism 1870–1914), edited by Lewis. Henry Gann and Peter Duignan, Cambridge University Press, 1969, pp. 293–324.
- Rodney, Walter. *How Europe Underdeveloped Africa*. 1972. Howard University Press, 1981.
- Said, Edward. *Orientalism*. 1978. Vintage Books, 1979.
- Shakespeare, William. *The Tempest. The Complete Works of William Shakespeare*. Introduced by Peter Ackroyd. Harper Collins, 2006, pp. 3–28.
- Soyinka, Wole. "Author's Note to *Death and the King's Horseman*." *Modern African Drama*, edited by Biodun Jeyifo, A Norton Critical Edition, W.W. Norton, 2002, pp. 548–549.

- Death and the King's Horseman*. 1975. *Modern African Drama*, edited by Biodun Jeyifo, A Norton Critical Edition, W.W. Norton, 2002, pp. 126–177.
- “Nobel Lecture 1986: This Past Must Address Its Present.” *Wole Soyinka: An Appraisal*, edited by Adewale Maja-Pearce, Heinemann, 1994, pp. 1–21.
- Spivak, Gayatri. “Can the Subaltern Speak?” *The Post-colonial Studies Reader*, 2nd ed., edited by Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths, Helen Tiffin, Routledge, 2007, pp. 28–37.
- Stilwell, Sean. “The Imposition of Colonial Rule.” *Africa*, vol.3 (Colonial Africa 1885–1939), edited by Toyin Falola, Carolina Academic Press, 2002, pp. 3–25.
- Tsaior, James Tar. *African Literature and the Politics of Culture*: Cambridge Scholars, 2013.
- Udenta, O. Udenta. *Revolutionary Aesthetics and the African Literary Process*. Fourth Dimensions, 1993.
- Utoh-Ezeajugh, Tracie, Prisca Ifeoma Okeke, and Uchenna Okafor. “Revolutionary Ideology in Nigerian Playwrighting and the Fate of a Nation in Crisis: A Critical Analysis of Selected Plays.” *The Creative Artist: A Journal of Theatre and Media Studies*, vol. 13, no. 2, 2019, pp. 79–109.
- Williams, Adebayo. “Cultural Death and the King's Horseman.” *Modern African Drama*, edited by Biodun Jeyifo, A Norton Critical Edition, W.W. Norton, 2002, pp. 561–566.

Acknowledgments

I am highly grateful to the College of William & Mary for providing me with the much-needed financial support in writing this Element. I twice received the university's Summer Research Award. In addition, I received financial support from the university's Arts and Science Faculty Research Grants. The English Department and Program in Africana Studies also provided financial assistance. The financial support from various sources at the university enabled me to undertake various research trips in addition to attending relevant conferences where I presented papers based on the project. Professors Hermine Pinson, Arthur Knight, Suzanne Raitt, Brett Wilson, and Chinua Thelwell persistently gave me a word of encouragement or used their privileged positions at the university to assist my work in one way or another.

I am also grateful to Professors Owen Seda and Uzoma Esonwanne for reading the preliminary drafts of my sections and offering useful feedback that assisted in my revisions. And I am equally grateful to Drs. Arua Oko Omaka and Ada Nnaji for their word of encouragement, assisting with procuring some relevant research materials, or facilitating transportation to some relevant locations for my archival work. And thanks to my wife, Chizoba, for her encouragement.

In loving memory of Chief D.M. Osakwe (1943–2022), Oluoma 1 of Amurie-Omanze:

The people's orator! From your tongue, the people sipped the honey that nourished their souls, brought roaring laughter to unsmiling faces, and assisted in healing fractured relationships. I could *never* have wished for a better father. Mpa, rest in peace, and I hope we shall someday meet to part no more.

Saul Dubow

University of Cambridge

Saul Dubow is Smuts Professor of Commonwealth History in the University of Cambridge and a Fellow of Magdalene College, Cambridge.

Malvika Maheshwari

Ashoka University

Malvika Maheshwari is Associate Professor of Political Science at Ashoka University.

Frisbee C. C. Sheffield

University of Cambridge

Frisbee C. C. Sheffield is Associate Professor of Classics in the University of Cambridge and a Fellow of Downing College, Cambridge.

About the Series

How do we express our common humanity in ways that articulate the things that connect us while also giving due credence to cultural, geographical, social, political, religious and economic differences? What does it mean to be a human being in our increasingly intricate, varied and challenging global contexts? And how might we address the matter of being human, and what that entails, in these same contexts, via the humanities disciplines? It is those key questions that this new series will attempt, however tentatively and exploratively, to answer. The Elements will bring fresh insights to a range of topics which – though worldwide in scope – will also have the solidity of rootedness in the local and the particular. Commonality will be meshed with singularity and distinctiveness. In moving towards fresh understandings of the 'global humanities', the series will try to construct a vision for the humanities that breaks down barriers, rethinks the past, and reimagines the future.

Published in conjunction with the Global Humanities Initiative of the School of Arts and Humanities in the University of Cambridge.

Elements in the Series

Esoteric Orientalism

Mandakini Dubey

Postcolonial Reconstruction of History in African Drama:

Soyinka, Ngũgĩ with Mugo, Hussein, and Johnson

Chima Osakwe

A full series listing is available at: www.cambridge.org/EHUM