



Political System in Africa and Its Inherent Evil Using Soyinka's Jero's Plays

Obiora Eke and Uche Oboko

Department of English, Madonna University Nigeria, Okija Campus.

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ABSTRACT

This paper focuses on the social and political ills prevalent in the African societies with a view to correcting them thus, making the contemporary society a better place to live. Using two texts from a renowned Nigerian writer, we see the religious, social and political evils which normally degrade our society and the community at large. These evils are being satirized to bring about transformation. Here, the sociological approach is employed. The quota sampling used in this paper, brings about the religious hypocrisy, moral decadence, marital instability and corruption palpable, a savage, portrait of group of dictatorial African leaders in our texts of study. This study brings out the evil inherent in African socio-political system and calls for a change especially in a society bedeviled by all sorts of evil.

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Introduction

It is generally conceived by many scholars that literature mirrors the society. Through this mirror, we see the good and bad aspects of life. However, literature goes beyond mirroring the society to depict various aspects of human life: the social, political, economic, religious and historical aspects of human life are portrayed through literature. Basically, there are three major genres of literature: poetry, prose and drama. Drama represents life in a more distinctive way. It educates, entertains, informs, orientates and satirizes. Drama originated from the Greek worship of the gods in the classical period as a form of ritual.

As pointed out earlier, drama can be used to satirize a person or society. Satire is a form of writing that holds up a person or society to ridicule or showing the foolishness of an idea. Satire can also be seen as a literary composition in which individuals, group of persons or a society is satirized on some ills, vices and follies that dominate the ways of life of the people. M.H. Abrams defined satire as "the literary art of diminishing or derogating a subject by making it ridiculous and evoking towards its attitude of amusement, contempt, scorn or indignation (166).

The theme of any satirical work always portrays the degeneration of social value of manners and indeed the very act of living. The motive behind any satirical work may be seen as having a reforming theme or to correct those weaknesses that are satirized. However, we know that we do not correct through malice. The moral it teaches is cynical and the laugh it raises is bitter and unkind. Pope quoted in Abrams' remarks that "those who are ashamed of nothing else are so being ridiculous" (166). Its frequent claims are to ridicule the fallen rather than the individual while those which a person is not responsible for should be excluded.

Wole Soyinka sees satire as his own task and in general the task of all artists to analyze and unravel the society's lack of awareness. Through the satirical writings he believes that transformation is achievable.

Soyinka's satire is seen as an attack on the conscience of his audience, the result of this would be transformation or change.

Satire on Religion

This focuses on Soyinka's satirical attack on religion, and it also shows the playwright's attitude towards the life of duplicity. In Act 1 of *Trial of Brother Jero*, one can observe acts of infidelity which Jero displays. He does this when he displaces his old tutor for his pieces of land at the beach. With craftiness, he helped his master in getting a piece of land at the beach. As one expected, it is unfaithful of Jero to displace his old prophet's land, since the prophet was his master, but Jero shows absolute indifference to the old master's feelings and dispossessed him of the land. According to Jero:

He did not move one bit. The old dodder had been foolish enough to imagine that when I organized the campaign to acquire this land in competition with The Brotherhood of Jehu, the Cherubim's and Seraphim, The Sisters of Judgment Day, the Heavenly Cow-boys, not to mention the Jehovah's witness whom the French girls impersonated – well, he must have been pretty conceited to think that I did it all for him... (10).

The old prophet could not believe that; even in the scene of Chume's confrontation with his pastor with a cutlass in hand. Then, scenes follow, which lead to the final revelation – the scenes with Amope, Chume, the messenger and Bother Jero, the prophet. This drama of revelation takes over two pages. The excitement increases, rather than diminishes, by being spread out.

Chume tries to make light of Jero's relationship with his wife, which has been accused by the prophet's allegations and questionings. He asked that this woman I see this morning who you so much desire to beat is your wife! (31) "You must take her home right... and beat her (32). The secret has been let out. On the other hand, the gullible MP's own experience

when he opens his eyes, and he thinks the pastor has gone to heaven to enquire about his ministerial position is an evidence of his great gullibility and produces yet another doubt in the mind of the MP. However, a little later, the scene with the prophet and Chume's wife rung the greatest possible shock for him, though all of them (Chume, Brother Jero and Amope) at that stage remains unenlightened. The shock for both the Prophet and Chume comes after his questioning of Chume in the scene that follows. The discovering of the truth by all of them is the culminating point of the play and the excitement it produces.

The logical sequence of events in *The Jero Plays* is that nothing is forced; everything happened naturally. The quarrel between Amope and the fish seller is the coincidence in the play. All the five scenes produce various feelings in the reader: pity, fear, awe, resentment and irritation. Jero has no religious inclination; he conceals his real purpose in helping the old prophet to acquire a piece of land but at the end he hoodwinks his mentor by displacing him by an act of disloyalty. Soyinka thus uses it to satirize religious people who are also object of Soyinka's attack.

In *Jero's Metamorphoses*, Jero needs Chume's services and he tries to reunite with Chume for their lost relationship in the first play. Jero sees Chume as an ally who is indispensable in their newly found church, their first Church of the Apostolic Salvation Army (C.A.S.A.). Convincing Chume proved difficult, but Jero's usual crafty manner yielded positive result through false prophecy as he tells Chume to praise God for his coming promotion. Jero pleads with Chume thus:

Oh, Brother Chume, Brother Chume, great is the Lord and full of kindness. Let us kneel down and praise his name. Praise the Lord, Brother Chume, praise the Lord. Praise the Lord for the gift of life. Then praise Lord for gift of reason and the gift of life. Then praise him also for your coming promotion, yes, your coming promotion for this is the glad tidings of which I am the humble bearer... (70).

When Chume hears of the coming promotion, he instantly forgives his old master because he has falsely prophesied that he would be promoted. Through Chume, we would see the unending stupidity of man. Chume surrenders his mind and becomes a mere tool in the expert hands of Jero.

Through Jero's false prophecy, Jero skillfully captures the souls and minds of his followers because he is able to exploit their mundane yearnings by false prophecies, which will never materialize. He prophesied to a certain man that he would be made a chief of his home town. He also prophesied that another man will live to be eighty years. His joy and consolation is that if the man dies before he is eighty, he would not be alive to demand an explanation and if he is eighty, or lived to be eighty, Jero would acquire the status of a true prophet. He also prophesied to one of his followers that he would be made the "first prime minister" of the new Mid-North-East-State when it is created. Jero also prophesied falsely to the Member of Parliament. Brother Jero tells him:

Yes Brother, we have met. I saw this country plunged into strife. I saw the mustering of men, gathered in the name of peace through strength. And at a desk, in a large gilt room, great men of the land awaited your decision. Emissaries of foreign nations winged into your words, and on the door leading to your office, I read words minister of war... (40).

From the above, we can note that the gullible and ambitious Member of Parliament without hesitation believed Jero's prophecy. The most important character trait of the Member of Parliament is his stupidity. Prophet Jero tells him that his ancestors were worried and that he should be a minister for war by inheritance. Ambition makes politician bow before idiots. They are made fools by the hunger for office and they do anything to occupy high offices. Thus, the Member of Parliament has got a short cut to power in the person of Jero. The playwright uses this scene to laugh at false prophets in our religious circles today.

Thus, he satirizes their actions. In view of this, Adrian Roscoe argues that "*Trials of Brother Jero* is dominated by the personality and style of the holy fraud himself, whose oratory is cultivated to deceive, whose rhetoric serve duplicity rather than divinity" (223). At any rate, Prophet Jero portrays false prophecy; he is a swindler who bamboozles people for his selfish end. Jero therefore is devoid of any religious inclinations.

Through the *Jero's Plays*, Wole Soyinka suggests that religious fraud and false prophecies are unhealthy to the society and in order to effect a change, such acts must be discouraged. It is noted that characters in the *Jero Plays* achieve their inordinate ambition for worldly things through false prophecy. No wonder Ogumba Oyin comments:

Thus each of these characters come to pray with Brother Jero not so much for spiritual edification but to obtain supernatural (or perhaps magical) support for their worldly ambition or heart desires. It is less of religion and more of a business deal, an investment which is expected to yield great dividend in a very short time... (60).

These characters in the *Jero's Plays* think that Christians had delights in inordinate desire to get rich by all means. They forget the words of the Holy Bible King James Version (KJV) 2000 in 1 Timothy 8:9-10 which says:

But they that will be rich fall into many temptations and snares and into many foolish and hurtful lusts, which draws men into destruction and perdition. For the love of money is the root of all evil, which while some coveted after, they have erred from the faith and pierced themselves through many sorrows... (1215).

The statement confirms the end result of the characters in the *Jero's Plays*. Even the "holy" fraudster is not exempted; Prophet Jero meets trials in the persons of Amope, Chume and the parliamentarian. Soyinka also criticizes the lustful nature of both the councillors and some so-called prophet which negates the Christian doctrines. Lust of the flesh (opposite sex) is very conspicuous in the *Jero's plays*. In the *Trials of Brother Jero*, Prophet Jero relates how many prophets got their allocation of pieces of land at bar beach. He says, "Some prophets I could name gained their present because of getting women patients to shake their bosoms in spiritual ecstasy. This prejudiced the councillors who cannot divide the beach among us" (1). The councillors who were supposed to be unbiased were blind-folded because of the instance nature of lust in them. They became prejudiced in sharing the beach among the prophets. Soyinka through Prophet Jero's statement exposes lust traits in councillors.

Furthermore, Soyinka reveals the lustful nature of the so-called prophets. Prophet Jero, for instance, sees women as forces militating against his divine calling. Therefore, it is not surprising when his old master reproached him for ungratefulness; he cursed him with the curse of the daughter of discord. The old prophet prayed that women should bring

ruin to Jero. Jero scarcely sees a woman without suffering emotionally. In *Trials of Brother Jero*, Jero sees a charming lady who had just had a swim crossing the stage; he falls on his knees and prays for strength against temptation. He implores Chume to pray with him against his weakness. "Pray with me, brother; pray with me. Pray for me against this one weakness... against this one weakness, O Lord... tear this love for the daughters of eve"... (20-21). This statement by Prophet Jero exposes the innate nature of lust in him. One wonders if a prophet who is a shepherd is unable to overcome lust of the flesh with the opposite sex, who else will? Jero's attitude therefore, depicts some character traits in some prophets who lust after women in our contemporary religious society which Soyinka's satire focuses on.

In *Jero's Metamorphosis*, Prophet Isaac reveals Prophet Mathew as a sex maniac. Rebecca also narrates how the Chief Executive Officer intended to seduce her. The clerk to the Tourist Board confirms the allegation, and he narrates how the chief eviction officer suffers from it as well. Through satire on religion, Soyinka also criticizes kleptomaniac traits through the character of Prophet Ananias. In *Jero's Metamorphosis*, as the Chief Executive Officer escapes through the windows in Jero's house during a moment of confusion, Ananias picks up the umbrella and the blower looks in the cupboard and pockets a piece of bread he finds there, stiffs the bottle and empties the contents. One could say without doubt that Ananias is nothing but a kleptomaniac; his action from the above sentences depicts him as a person without irresistible tendencies to steal. In another scene, Shadrach notices Ananias' intentions. Shadrach in order to stop Ananias from stealing his purse whips his hands and seizes that of Ananias by the wrist and brings it round to front. Shadrach exclaims:

Shadrach: Mine, I believe Ananais?

Ananias: It dropped on the ground. Is that the thanks I get for helping you pick it up?

Shadrach: I accuse no one, Ananias. We all met, I hope in a spirit of brotherhood. The lesson reads, I am my brother's keeper Ananias not I am my purse keeper. (74).

This dialogue between Shadrach and Ananias, who calls himself a prophet, portrays him as a kleptomaniac. Ananias' kleptomania nature therefore, as we clearly see in this scene negates the God's commandment in Exodus 20:15 which says: "thou shall not steal" (Holy Bible 83). The kleptomania instinct in Ananias who professes to be a man of God exposes the hypocritical trait of some prophets who preach one thing and do another thing in today's world. They tell their followers to "do what I say, not what I do". Soyinka therefore, criticizes religion through the character of Ananias whose irresistible tendency to steal negates the Christian doctrine and commandment against such crime.

Brother Jero's consideration, acceptance and practice of his missionary work as a "trade" really constitutes his central goal from which we derive the fact that he behaves as an ordinary human being with normal human weakness. Hence, in characterization, Jero portrays himself as an influential person than the other preachers at the Bar Beach to outwit his followers. In the Jero's Plays, other characterizations equally project this hypocrisy. But Soyinka's belief in Christian doctrine contrast with this sharply. In an interview with Tell Magazine, he says:

I believe that human beings have a spiritual dimension and for many people this spiritual dimension adds to its ritual... and so one of the reasons why I became attracted to Orisha religion which is our Yoruba traditional religion is that it

does not go out to convert... to him supreme deity cannot be articulated the way Islam and Christianity do it... and that has historical as a result of the evolution of society, these spiritual institutions, became structural into actual socio observances... (29-30).

In the above interview, Soyinka expresses his view on traditional and Christian religion. It is pertinent therefore to conclude that Soyinka satirizes our religious world, as he uses his characters to portray religious hypocrisy.

Looking at the Bar Beach setting, Brother Jero leaves us with no doubt as to the ecclesiastical profession as a means to acquiring earthly wealth. As a result, he takes over a piece of land belonging to his old master, dissatisfied his fervent followers, Chume from beating his erring wife, buys a velvet cape for image making and holds the parliamentarian captive. All these are well clothed in his "holier than thou attitude". The bar beach setting of the play contrast with the religious atmosphere with the end device of Jero's business venture.

Satire on the Military

Here, attention is drawn to Soyinka's satire against the military as an establishment. In this, the playwright satirizes power consciousness in the military circle.

Soyinka mocks how Jero has invited all the various ways of leadership into the church of Christ. In the same vein, Soyinka's *Jero's Metamorphosis* in the Jero's Plays is an indirect satire on military rule. In Jero's Plays, Soyinka mocks the religious institution and the reality of society under military regime. In *Trials of Brother Jero*, the playwright's attitude towards the prophet is ironical. Soyinka makes Jero say one thing publicly and do another privately. Jero says he suffers in the cold and heat of the beach, and at the other time, he confesses that he sleeps in his house. Jero also confesses that he bought the cape to win more admiration and/or followers. It can therefore, be seen that Soyinka sees Jero and his types as a danger to the society.

In *Jero's Metamorphosis*, Jero needed the services of Chume; Jero wanted Chume as an ally in his newly found church, The First Church of the Apostolic Salvation Army. Convincing Chume a second time proved difficult but Jero's high powered heroism paid off. He raises false hope by prophesying that he should praise the Lord for his coming promotion. As usual, Chume falls into the hands of the trickster thus sharing the gullibility of man.

The playwright laughs at religious institutions and the entire society under military regime by using humour, wit and sarcasm to make satire more effective. Soyinka employs the use of irony, humour, wit and sarcasm to mock the religious institution and sad reality of a society under military rule. Soyinka uses Jero as a tool to bring about his satirical attitude. The government intends to license religious body to say prayers after execution of arm robbers at the bar beach. As a result of this government intention, Jero and his fellow prophets want to have exclusive or sole authority to operate at the beach not only to say prayers before and after the execution, but also to preach against the evil of armed robbery. From Jero's statements, he sees Christ Apostolic Salvation Army dictatorship as his yearning for sole possession of the stadium as undemocratic. It is the undemocratic process of the military government that Soyinka satirizes in *Jero's Metamorphosis*.

Soyinka criticizes government policy on condemning armed robbers to death at the beach. The playwright sees the military action to be inhuman. Apart from the moral and religious violation of his policy execution, it is also dehumanizing and barbaric; it is also violates the Bible

injunction in the book of Exodus 20:13 which say “thou shall not kill” (Holy Bible 83). The preposition that public execution is therefore ironic; public execution of armed robbers has no morals to teach. It only shows how deprived and inhuman man has become.

The playwright also satirizes the issue of power within the military. Due to the desire for power and position, Shadrach’s proposition that Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego Apostolic should absorb all other denominations into this spiritual fold is greeted with open resistance. Tussle for power and supremacy characterizes the military profession or any other political setup, tussle for this or that is the order of the day. It is the survival of the fittest. This is so because one can go to any length to remain at the top. This is clearly seen in the struggle between Shadrach and Jero. At the end, Shadrach is humiliated when Ananias obeys Jero’s order, thus leading to his ejection from the vicinity of the meeting.

Soyinka further uses how Jero blackmails the Chief Executive Officer in signing the documents in Jero’s favour to operate solely in the new stadium, to show how corruption has dominated every aspect of life even in the military circle. The Chief Executive Officer of the tourist board falls a victim of Jero’s blackmail strategy. Jero obtains a file through Rebecca with incriminating evidence of the officer’s shady dealings with some officers on the tourist board. This incriminating file which Jero says the eviction officer generously loaned to them has a great implication. For instance, if the Chief Executive Officer refuses to sign Jero’s document to enable him have a monopoly of the stadium, he may report his deeds to the military authority. Sensing the danger, the Chief Executive Officer falls prey to Jero’s blackmail and he signs Jero’s C.A.S.A. to be the sole religious body authorized to say prayers before and after execution. As Jero puts it:

We are already in business, of course we expect you to declare that all land actually occupied as of now by the various religious bodies would from now be held in trust, managed and developed by the newly approved representative body at all Apostolic bodies, C.A.S.A. ... (88).

The obvious implication and threat is that Jero would inform the military authorities of the fraudulent act if the Chief Executive Officer refuses to sign that the land would be held in trust by the Christ Apostolic Salvation Army. One could see the submission of sheer act of cowardice.

Counting on these satiric blows on society of military ranks, and focusing attention on the army ranks, one can say that both have military and religious undertone in their new government which is reflection on the military government of the day. Ananias’ rank as sergeant major is arbitrary and questionable. The dialogue between Ananias’ promotion to the rank of sergeant – major, by saying, “It’s a sin to be missing in this Garden of Eden”, which is the newly formed C.A.S.A. shows the absolute conviction of Ananias that the newly formed C.A.S.A. is an organization which is indispensable. Another interpretation one can give to Ananias’ statement is that he is a flatterer. This is because just immediately after he addresses Jero as “general”, Jero in return gives Ananias the rank of sergeant – major. Brother Ananias’ and Jero’s ranks are therefore, arbitrary.

Caleb’s rank as lieutenant colonel is also arbitrary. It shows that in order to receive favour in the new mini government, one has to be a sycophant. Caleb’s refusing Shadrach’s remark on Jero obviously shows that he is a sycophant. He says: “Wrong again, Shadrach you don’t

know the worth – Jero. It seems if he says he’ll get the monopoly, he will. A thorough methodical man, very much after my heart ...” (84).

This statement earns Caleb the rank of lieutenant colonel. Here, we observed that those who cannot flatter the general are not likely to be promoted. The implication of this arbitrary nature of military ranks is that, the mediocre will be at the helm of affairs while the underdog or the hardworking people are ignored. To Soyinka, both the rank and file, and the commissioned officers should not only be on merit but also on training, years of service and practical field experience. But here, the reverse is the case; mediocre are given ranks which they are not worthy of. It is this arbitrariness in the military ranks that Soyinka attacks critically.

It is also noted that Chume’s rank is arbitrary. Jero addresses him as Brigadier Joshua. His name is symbolic of his absolute commitment to the Christ Apostolic Salvation Army. His name symbolizes his low position in the army hierarchy which he maintains in the newly C.A.S.A. Rebecca’s remark about him is quite worthy of note. She says, “Think that this uniform is just as size as my general” ... (91). Jero as a general is the head of C.A.S.A., whatever he says is final; his position depicts that of dictatorship as it is seen in the military profession. His last statement after giving order to Chume and Ananias to clean “all the pestilential separation snacks which infect the holy atmosphere of the United Apostolate of the Lord” is worth commenting upon. Jero says, “After all, it is the fashion these days to be a desk General” (92). Jero’s statement is ironical. In a nominal military profession, a General is supposed to lead the soldiers if there is any cause to defend the country against internal or external aggression. But what do we have? Desk generals, who give order during war but they do not taste the pains of war.

According to Soyinka’s statement, it shows that they do not have both field experience of war and practical training. This is clearly seen in the last scene, as Brigadier Joshua (Chume) blows the trumpet, Ananias the sergeant major is assigned the sole responsibility to make miracle happen or else he will have some explanation to give. This idea of top officers in the military profession is what Soyinka criticized through the rank of Jero as General. Jero’s rank shows that it is the rank and file in the military profession that bears the sufferings during crises of war. Thus far, it has been natural that Soyinka in *Trials of Brother Jero* and *Jero’s Metamorphosis* has dramatized his satirical attitude towards the military. In this endeavour, the playwright uses military satire and power consciousness to illustrate his displeasure with the misadministration of the military.

Conclusion

Soyinka as a satirist exposes the incredible traits of those who profess Christianity. These traits include infidelity, lustfulness, kleptomania, fraud and false prophecy. These traits are Soyinka’s satirical focus. He sees them as minimal to religion hence, he satirizes his victims. In satire against religion, Soyinka portrays how the gullible parliamentarian falls prey to Jero’s false prophecy; Soyinka depicts the problem of politics. He shows a society where fools and half-baked people pose as leaders. The Member of Parliament who cannot express himself in the parliament wants to become a minister in the country.

Soyinka also satirizes how Jero used military tactics to organize his religious dynasty. He criticized government policy on condemning armed robbers and the arbitrary nature of military. *Trials of Brother Jero* therefore raises the

question about the quality of leaders we have in contemporary Nigeria politics. Soyinka also satirizes the undemocratic process of the military profession. He questions the arbitrary nature of the military ranks. Jero's last statement in *Jero's Metamorphosis* portrays that it is not only the underdog and hardworking people that suffer but the military system and the society at large.

Soyinka's satire is very effective. Although, we may think that the vices he criticized are no longer in our society, yet they are still very much amongst us today. Though there are genuine prophets in our society, we still have the holy fraudster like Jero. One can therefore say that Soyinka's satire though may be seen as criticizing vices which appear not to be real in our society, yet they are real hence one can say categorically that Soyinka's satire is very much relevant to our contemporary society.

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