Scapegoatism and the Messiah motif in Contemporary African Drama

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Abstract
Scapegoatism is a recurring motif in African tragic plays. It is used to show that though the tragic hero, who is once a carrier and who later becomes a scapegoat, is a victim of the gods and that his sufferings as well as his eventual death are for the redemption of all others who are alive. This article posits that though the scapegoat motif was first put to use in Egyptian festival of Osiris, the appropriation of religious figures as scapegoats of "God" or gods in Western drama popularized the concept. The article also affirms that the impact of the scapegoat motif on African drama is religious rather than secular. It has given rise to the hegemony between the superior Western gods and the subordinate others. This article debunks the postcolonial hegemonic discourse that represents African gods as the subordinate other to the Western superior other and affirms that the scapegoat motif is not peculiar to western religion but is also the foundation of the African traditional religion. It concludes that most African tragedies also recount the experiences of African traditional religious figures that once lived on earth as scapegoats of the gods which by virtue of their sufferings and death they are represented as the messiah gods from where redemption can only be sort.

Keywords: Scapegoat motif, Messiah, African gods, Postcolonial hegemony, African Drama

Introduction

Scapegoat ritual was first practiced in the Egyptian festival of Osiris and has since become a recurring motif in European drama. In the festival of Osiris it was practiced to validate human redemptive sacrifice and to honour the Egyptian vegetation god, Osiris. In Greek drama, scapegoatism was deployed as a motif to celebrate the death and rebirth of the Greek god, Dionysus. In Syrian drama it is also used to demonstrate the death and resurrection of Adonis whereas in Christian drama it is used to also celebrate the death and resurrection of the young Christian god, Jesus Christ. In sub-Saharan Africa, the scapegoat ritual was deployed to validate the rebirth of African deities/ gods such as Inikpi and Songo. The aim of this article is to show how scapegoatism has been deployed as a motif to validate death and rebirth of African gods in African drama. Through this article it is shown that drama as a genre of literature interfaces with these deities because they embody the divine attributes that compels humans to seek God. It reveals that the scapegoat motif validates the gods as entities that have experienced the three phases of existence: the living, the dead and the

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unborn. It also argues that by virtue of their sacrifices in their human incarnation, they translated into gods who have the capacity to intervene as the people's messiah.

Evolution of the Scapegoat Motif

In his attempts to show the connection between African dramatic literature and African ritual practice in his inaugural lecture, Isidore Diala argues that the concept of scapegoatism started in the form of ritual/ religious performance where goat is prepared as a carrier of the curse of a person (Diala, 2019). Usually, during the ritual performance, the curse from the person's past years is transferred upon the goat. Afterwards, the goat is let loose and allowed to wonder away, unattended. Normally, the goat dies after some time but then the person would have experienced redemption from the said curse lives on. Because of the short period of time in which the redemption last, contemporarily, such person would have need to reenact this goat sacrifice again. However, this goat sacrifice is also prevalent in Greek and Jew religious worships. For instance, the purification ritual in the worship of the ancient Greek god named Dionysus typically consists of sacrificing domestic animals which includes goats at the altar of Dionysus with hymn and prayer. The goat, which is usually of a young perfect kind, is decorated with garlands and led in procession to the altar. A girl with a basket on her head containing the concealed knife is expected to lead the way. After some ritual performance, the goat is slaughtered over the altar. As the goat dies, all the women present in the procession cry out in high, shrill tones. The Greeks believe that the goat is usually glad to be sacrificed hence they interpret its various behaviours to explain this (Clement, 1965). In the book of Leviticus, in the old testament of the Bible, the account of this practice is also given. God gave the rulers of Israel laws concerning sacrifices using goats (see Leviticus 4: 22-23).[1] In Leviticus (16:21), it is later fully described how Aaron was to put the law into practice. He was to lay his hands upon the head of the goat and confess over the head of the goat all the iniquities of the children of Israel by way of transferring the iniquities upon the head of the goat. The goat is later sent away into the wilderness; hence by so doing, the goat would become the carrier of iniquities of the children of Israel while the children of Israel would have themselves purified or redeemed of their sins.

Since this goat sacrifice has limited spiritual significance, in occasions where the collective lives of a people in a community are at stalk, rather than using a goat, the cursed community seeks for redemption using a willing human being. In time past, these willing human beings were referred to as "carriers"— persons set aside for scapegoat ritual sacrifices (Soyinka, 1975). In some communities, we have "carrier" families even though sometime we have scapegoat victims. However, the scapegoat who is initially willing to take upon himself the responsibility of acting as the messiah of the community, is usually overwhelmed at the point of the sacrifice with the fear of death and of course tries to run away. The sudden fear that made the scapegoat try to run away symbolically gave him the outlook of a goat. The scapegoat motif generally underscores the idea that human being is rebellious and behaves more like a goat than a sheep or a ram. If he is sacrificed, it is believed that the scapegoat will resolve the terror of the fear of the cure as well as the weight of the curse on the community. At the afterlife, the scapegoat helps the community to broker the divine feature such as agricultural prosperity, longevity on earth, human procreation and immortality after death.

Scapegoat Motif and the African Dramatic Literature

In his book of essays entitled *Myth, Literature and the African World* (1976) Soyinka discloses that as a cultural entity, Africa has its own cultural and religious histories, which are foundations of its social neuroses as well as its value systems. He posits that African has produced "a body of myths and a literary tradition of its own and owns a world which extends beyond the physical environment of the mother continent […]" (Asanga, 1981). The book also reveals that the Africa world is made up of three phases of existence that are interlinked: the living, the dead and the unborn. It is in "The Fourth Stage," (Soyinka, 1976) the last essay of the book, that Soyinka links the argument to the Yoruba/ African vision of tragedy as well as the scapegoat tradition. He depicts that the fourth stage represents a realm in the tragic vision that links the living with their ancestors and with the future. This tragic vision is later realized in Soyinka's play entitled *The Strong Breed* (Soyinka, 1973). In *The Strong Breed*, Soyinka engages the theme of scapegoatism through the protagonist of the play named Eman. The play engages the paradox that underscores the tragic lives of the carriers: their death is meant to bring purification or healing to the land while their refusal to lay down their lives for the land has tragic consequences. The play reflects on the inability of Eman to successfully carry out the responsibility of being a scapegoat – even though he is a carrier. Part of the attempts to stress the tragic significance of the play is Soyinka's decision to begin the play by exploring Eman's past life. The importance of the revelation about Eman's past role as a carrier is made through flashbacks to stress the fact that a carrier cannot run away from his true identity. As the play develops to its climax, Eman tries to shy away from his true identity and to deny the very fact of his inherited role as the carrier of tribal guilt but later finds himself acting out the role in another community. The play particularly stresses some of Eman's endowed features as a carrier. He is an individual who is spiritually awake and has the ability to traverse multiple landscapes of human experience. Like other scapegoat characters such as Jesus Christ and Dionysus, Eman is able to navigate through the experience of the living, the dead, the present, the past and the future. Hence this makes the African world as depicted in Soyinka's *The Strong Breed* as well as the world associated with the scapegoats as one that is characterized by the mingling of mortals, gods, and spirits.

In the play, Eman is given the outlook of Jesus Christ: Soyinka identifies Eman as Jesus Christ figure at different aspects. First, the relationship between Eman and Jesus Christ is evident in the former's name abridgement. Eman is believed to be an abridged version of Jesus Christ's name: Emmanuel. Jesus Christ maintained that a prophet is not recognized in his home town and spent most of his useful days outside Galilee. Being a prophet himself who could not withstand his master's irresponsibility, Eman left for another community where he spent the rest of his useful days. Unlike Jesus Christ, Eman is likened to a fugitive carrier who came to another community to find a better life but ended up meeting with the fate he ran away from at home in the new community. Also unlike Jesus Christ, Eman reluctantly plays out his role as a carrier in another community with the same obsession that he would have paid for his rebellion in his home community. Like Jesus Christ, Eman is also a teacher, a healer and a benefactor. While at the New Testament of the Bible, Jesus Christ was reported to have scolded at his disciples for wanting to wall off children that were coming to him, in the play Eman is shown to always intervene with

cautions whenever Sunma wants Ifada or the little girl to stay away. This is evident in Eman's reply to Sunma's desire to keep Ifada away thus: "What is this? Hasn't he always plays here?"

Soyinka reveals the fate that befalls the mothers of the carrier through engaging with the exemplified self-sacrificial fate of Omae. It is unclasped in the play that the mothers of the carriers die in the process of childbirth. It is also disclosed that even though the carrier initiation process is sacred and as such very important, it is Omae's intrusion into the scene of the initiation that makes Eman to abandon the rite. Eman scolds Omae for coming to visit him at the scene and for trying to pollute him with her bodily contact. Even though he left the initiation process, Eman is able to identify the reward of seclusion during the initiation. He discovers the capacity for self-introspection with which the carrier achieves a new conception of manhood as the assumption of selfless public responsibility.

In the play, Eman argues with Jaguna and Oroge when Ifada takes refuge in his house and emphasizes that self-sacrifice is morally superior to forced sacrifice. Even when Oroge tries to make him understand that the matter at hand is a serious matter, Eman notes that they ought not to have taken a helpless boy and insists: "In my home, we believe that a man should be willing" (p.128). Though, in many African communities, the victims of scapegoatism are usually idiots or stranded strangers, as is evident in the initial intention of the community to use Ifada, a normal African scapegoat figure, Eman's true identity as a carrier is revealed by someone to whom he has been good. Hence like Christ, Eman is betrayed by someone to whom he has good intent. Also like Jesus Christ, Eman gives his life for ungrateful people. Their ungratefulness is even evident in the scene where he thirsts and begs for water at the climax of his suffering. Rather than offer him water, the girl announces his hideout. Eman also dies hanging on trees like Jesus Christ but before then Soyinka allows him to have a vision of his father's role as a carrier – a vision similar to Christ's, during transfiguration. In the trance, Eman's father remonstrates with Eman for coming to him in that trance. The tragic component of the play is that Eman runs away and is unable to surrender his life with boldness as is required of a carrier. Part of the rituals meant to enable him undergo that process is disrupted by Eman when he escaped at the face of death. This component of the rite, according to Jaguna, is expected to fill the carrier with joy and make him walk to the slaughter with gladness. The disruption of the ritual, which is aimed at teaching the scapegoat the endurance in time of extremity as well as transform his personal terror to compassion for the human community and enhance his willingness to assume the responsibility of sacrificing his life, gives way to the tragic consequence.

Whereas *The Strong Breed* contemplates the character of Eman as the prototype of Jesus Christ, in *Death and the King's Horseman* Soyinka explains the purpose of the scapegoat tradition in the Yoruba culture. It is revealed in the play that the essence of the scapegoat practice as well as its continuous reenactment is to engage the routine renewal of human lease of life. In *Death and the King's Horseman*, Soyinka focuses on the idea of the "carrier" family as well as the scapegoat tradition rather than being particular about the clash between the Yoruba and the European cultures. He reveals that the carrier family culture and the scapegoat tradition are integral part of the Yoruba culture. This is part of the reason the play is adapted from the Yoruba Old Oyo history where when the Oba or *Alafin,* dies, the eldest carrier in the *Abobaku* (Elesin) family is prepared as a scapegoat to be buried alive alongside the Oba by way of accompanying the Oba to the afterlife.

The play, *Death and the King's Horseman* (Soyinka, 2012) begins after the death of the Oba and in anticipation that the Elesin will carry out his responsibility, not just to the

late Oba but to the people. The play shows that Elesin himself is not just consciously aware of the transformation significance of his responsibility at the beginning of the play, but he is also aware of the cultural conception of him as scapegoat. But at the time he is to undertake the transformation, Elesin refuses to uphold the transformational course. Part of what hinders the process is the fact that he becomes too obsessed with the desire to continue to live, hence he takes refuge in the colonial masters whom he believes would save him from his responsibility. On his return from abroad with the sole intent of witnessing the transformational process that accompanies the scapegoat sacrifice, Olunde is disappointed at his father, the eldest Elesin, and then decides to offer himself as a substitute sacrifice.

As the play reveals, the ritual sacrifice of the Elesin is supposed to represent a symbolic conquest of the curses and troubles of the past years of the late Oba's reign as well as his death. The Elesin is also supposed to act as the carrier of the pestilences of the people's past years to the afterlife. The essence of this is to make the reign of the new Oba worthwhile and to usher in agricultural prosperity, longevity, procreation, immortality as well as help the community to broker peace with their ancestors. The fact that the Elesin botched ruined the entire ritual and set the stage for the unimaginable: the self-sacrifice of his son, Olunde. The play shows that Olunde's death, rather than being regarded as messianic, it elicits apprehension and represents the main thrust of the tragedy. This is because, as it is revealed in the play, a thing of that nature has never happened before. Such substitute sacrifice where a younger Elesin dies for the elder Elesin beat the people imagination and threatens the harmony of the Yoruba universe as well as the regenerative cycle of nature. This is evident in the dialogue that ushers in the end of the play: "Your heir has taken the burden on himself. What the end will be, we are not gods to tell. But this young shoot has poured its sap into the parent stalk, and we know this is not the way of life" (p.75). On hearing this, the Elesin takes his own life but it is already late. Rather than being regarded as a sacrifice, his death becomes a suicide and even a curse upon him.

Conclusion

As it has been said in this article, scapegoat rituals were practiced in the festivals that commemorate the death and resurrection of European gods. And through the use of scapegoat motif, African plays have been able to reveal that some African gods were by virtue of their divine sacrifices that they translated into gods who have the capacity to intervene as the people's messiah. From the African perspective, scapegoatism makes it possible for the curse upon a community to be lifted through the sacrifice of a willing individual. The willing individuals that are sent out (by virtue of death) as scapegoat across the gulf that separates life from the afterlife are believed to intercede on behalf of the living in matters that make humans to seek god. By willingly undertaking the sacrifice, the scapegoat individual is believed to undergo a transformational course that gives him the outlook of a god. This transformational course is prevalent through the agency of other suffering divinities or deities. Reawakened in a new (spiritual) body, the dead scapegoat is empowered to intercede in the affairs that concern the community across the three phases of existence. The permanent communication between the community and the sacrificed scapegoat is ensured through an erected alters. Hence through this way most African religions were established.

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NOTES

1. The Holy Bible (King James Version, Dallas TX: Brown Books Publishing, 2004) Leviticus 4:22-23, 16:21.