

Tragic Form, Cultural Facts, and Symbolic Representations of Benin History in Ossa Earliece's *Nekighidi*

Tekena Gasper Mark

Department of Theatre and Film Studies,
University of Port Harcourt, Port Harcourt.

Abstract

Nigeria is rich with diverse cultural forms that are highlighted in the theatrical and dramatic traditions of her ethnic groups. However, discourses on Nigerian drama have focused more on the major ethnic groups of Yoruba, Igbo and Hausa-Fulani, and less on minority ethnic groups such as Ijaw, Tiv, Ibibio, Edo, Efik, Ogoni and Urhobo. This study attempts to balance the narrative on Nigerian drama with Edo perspectives as it examines the tragic form, cultural facts, and symbolic representations of Benin history in Ossa Earliece's *Nekighidi*. The findings reveal the use of prologue and epilogue as well as Benin expressions and songs to locate the cultural setting of the play along with suggestive titles to name the scenes, and references to rituals, charms, and gods/afterlife to evoke the Benin religious world view. Typical of African tragedy, the fall of *Nekighidi* is a communal tragedy and the play obeys only the unity of action. The use of a simple plot, climatic plot structure, prose, poetry, and Benin expressions in the play's language exemplify how playwrights can deploy myth and history to give voice to the cultural traditions of Africa in drama.

Keywords: *Tragedy, History, Ancient Benin, Drama, Culture, Myth.*

Introduction

Nigerian drama and theater have undergone a series of developments from pre-colonial to post-colonial times, and Nigerian dramatists have used drama as a medium to poke fun at, criticize, and correct social anomalies. However, controversies have risen over the nature of African drama and theater. According to Iyorwuese Hagher:

A battle of words which has been raging for the past decade, between African critics and their Western counterparts, over a large body of literature which African authors have produced. This literature, while written by Africans, has been derived from the Western genres of the novel, poetry and drama. Along with this Western formalism has been added the historical experience, with its mental conditioning from traditional backgrounds, Western education, colonialism and post-independence experiences. (156)

In an effort to indigenize African theater, Sam Ukala developed the theory of “folkism,” a theory steeped in African oral tradition. It advocates the composition and performance of plays based on African folk tradition, in order to overcome language difficulty and the bombastic nature of plays modeled after European drama and theater (Ukala 285). Ukala’s folkism is an attempt to define what really constitutes African drama and advocates that African dramatists should employ an alternative form of drama that thrives on the African performative modes of ritual, narrative, dance, singing and drumming, and celebrates the African communal ethos instead of adopting Western dramatic techniques.

Kofi Agawu argues that almost every aspect of performance in African traditional theater is motivated by participants' desire to join rather than divide, to unite rather than disintegrate, to unify rather than splinter, all of which define the communal ethos of African drama and theatrical tradition. "I am because I belong with others" is a fundamental belief that is frequently affirmed in a variety of ways (Agawu 1). Individual agency is not denied by the communal ethos; rather, it offers an atmosphere in which individuality is expressed in the presence of others, motivated by a primordial togetherness. Similarly, some Nigerian dramatists such as Ola Rotimi, Sam Ukala, Ahmed Yerima, Irene Salami-Agunloye, Pedro Agbonifo-Obaseki, and Ossa Earliece have attempted to domesticate Nigerian drama by using Nigerian songs, expressions, dances, costumes, makeup, and setting to locate the cultural milieux of their plays.

The development of Nigerian drama has been grouped into three generations that reflect the ideology and dramatic style of each period. Julius-Adeoye Rantimi Jays argues that the first generation of Nigerian playwrights are considered as cultural liberation proponents who discussed nationalistic ideals, cultural reaffirmation, and historical re-engineering in their dramas, with Wole Soyinka as a major proponent of this group. The second-generation playwrights are regarded as radical dramatists. Pioneered by Femi Osifisan, Bode Sowande, Meki Nzewi, and Tunde Fatunde, these dramatists, dissatisfied with the nationalistic or cultural liberationist drama of their predecessors, turned to Marxism in their dramatic approach. Their plays were committed to promoting "revolutionary change by Nigerian peasants and workers" (Dunton 123). The third-generation playwrights, including Ahmed Yerima, Tess Onwueme, Stella Oyedepo, Sam Ukala, Julie Okoh, Henry Leopold Bell-Gam, Emmanuel Emasealu, and Tracie Utoh-Ezeajugh craved a just socio-political order in the Nigerian system by reflecting in

their works leadership crises, military misadventure, issues of national unity, political and ethnic rivalry, and the state oppression of the people that plague the nation's socio-cultural politics. Other concerns that pervade their works include corruption, inadequate health care, and environmental and economic problems (Rantimi Jays 2-3). The works of these playwrights also reflect the theme of the survival of the individual in a chaotic society.

Scholarly discussions on Nigerian drama and theater have focused more on the major ethnic groups of Hausa-Fulani, Yoruba, and Igbo, than on such other ethnic groups as Ijaw, Tiv, Ibibio, Edo, Efik, Ogoni, and Urhobo that make up the country. There is therefore, the need to examine the dramatic traditions of minority ethnicities in Nigeria, and to situate their relevance to current theatrical practices to enrich the body of works on Nigerian drama and theater. In this context, the current qualitative study examines the tragic form, cultural facts, and symbolic representations of Benin history in Ossa Earliece's *Nekighidi*.

The Benin Kingdom was founded by Benin's first royal family, the Ogisos, and was later ruled by a king known as Oba, whose hereditary title is considered sacred. While the territory of the kingdom was called "Beny" and dates back to the 11th century, according to reports of Portuguese explorers and traders in the 15th and 16th centuries, historian Osarhieme Osadolor notes that the people or their territory was originally called Ubini, the name that was known to their Itsekiri neighbors (51). During the first millennium, when the institution of the monarchy under the Ogiso dynasty was established in Benin, the first king, Ogiso Igodo, called the numerous village communities joined together in a political union under him as Igodomigodo. His village at Ugbeku was the capital where he built the royal palace. His successor, Ogiso Ere,

is said to have transferred the Ogiso palace to Uhumwidunmwun, which was a more favorable seat of government for the dynasty than Ugbeku (Igbafe 6).

Prior to the 15th century and onwards, the kingdom was dominated by warrior kings who developed their power base through specific control of a powerful military (Kiwara-Wilson 377). The Benin kingdom grew prosperous, reaching a golden age in the 15th and 16th centuries. Its success encouraged artistic exploration within the kingdom, as highlighted by the royally commissioned works in brass that have come to be known as the Benin bronzes. The ownership of property was reserved for persons who belonged to certain social classes, but only the Oba could own brass objects. With the kingdom firmly established, Benin found the sociopolitical frames for all the changes of the subsequent centuries till the violent interruption of her independent existence by the British colonialists in 1897 (Bondarenko 56).

Backtracking slightly, by the 17th century, civil strife had begun to weaken the kingdom. This weakening was attributed to a change in the rules of royal succession in 1610, after the Oba died without issue or brothers to replace him, allowing indirect descendants to take the throne (Kiwara-Wilson 377). A power struggle for the kingship ensued, coupled with the belief that the Oba was no longer divinely ordained, undermining the people's support of his leadership.

An important aspect of the political structure in Benin that should be mentioned is the complexity of chieftaincy organization/titles. The Iyase (war chief) was an important chieftaincy position with great power and influence, resulting in conflicts between himself and the Oba (Kiwara-Wilson 377-378). By the late 17th century, the Iyase and other chiefs had grown so powerful that the selection process for installing a new king included confirmation by the Iyase. As the Oba battled to manage the fights and power struggles within the royal family as well as

maintain his dominance, he became less involved in fighting wars, allowing the position and power of the Iyase to grow even stronger. The increased political power of the chiefs is displayed in the 19th century deliberations that led to the attack on the British Vice-consul James Phillips' party. The Iyase played an important role that informed the attack on the British party (Kiwara-Wilson 378).

African Drama: An Overview

African drama refers to plays that explore the socio-cultural and religious lives of Africans. These plays are either written in strict adherence to European dramatic techniques or techniques that are adaptations of European dramatic principles to suit the African socio-cultural orientations. Austin Asagba identifies three critical approaches in defining African drama (84-5). These are the Evolutionary approach, the Divine approach, and the Relativistic approach.

The evolutionary approach contends that African drama developed from the needs of the African man to control and dominate the natural and supernatural forces in his environment. Through ritual practice and sacrifices imbued with elements of magic and spiritual possession, he was able to placate and gain the favor of the supernatural forces around him in order to ensure his survival. With time, some of the ritual practices that proved to be effective were retained and evolved into festivals. These became not only joyous celebrations but also occasions for social and communal integration against the capricious forces that sought to annihilate him. According to evolutionary theorists, folklore, myths, legends, and history are sources for dramatic and theatrical presentations (Asagba 85-6).

The divine approach, as identified by Atiboroko Uyovbukerhi, traces the origin of African drama to a divine force or spiritual being. This being, by some inexplicable circumstance,

abducts a human who is set free later. Upon gaining freedom, the abductee takes with him the secrets, dance steps, and songs of his divine abductors (Uyovbuckerhi 17). There exist many examples of African drama of this type. The Ohworhu theater, in the Evwreni and Uwherun clans of the Urhobo people in Delta State, Nigeria, and the Ekine plays of the Ijaw in Nigeria are good examples (Uyovbuckerhi 18).

The third approach, the relativistic school of thought, contends that African dramatic forms must not adhere strictly or be judged by Western or European dramatic canons traceable to the Greeks. Rather, African drama should be written, performed, and appreciated based on the history and culture of Africa. Notable pioneers of the relativistic approach include Emmanuel Obiechina and Ossie Enekwe.

Defining Tragedy in African Drama

Tragedy refers to plays that deal with sorrowful events, have unhappy endings and usually involve the downfall of a character. According to Harold Osborne, tragedy originated as a literary genre in classical Greece during the fifth century B.C., at a time when it could reflect the sentiments and beliefs of a society passing through a transitional stage from what anthropologists have called a “shame culture” to a “guilt culture” (Osborne 287). As in other forms of drama, tragedy served a positive function by informing and educating the Greeks on how to behave as responsible citizens and by mirroring that the consequences of *hubris* (excessive pride towards or defiance of the gods) could attract Nemesis, the Greek goddess of vengeance who rewarded noble acts and punished evil ones. The personages of Greek tragedy were of the noble class. Their code of conduct, as Osborne notes, was founded on self-respect, a sense of what was due to

themselves and to others of their race and kind. Its sanction was fear of the disgrace consequent upon sacrificing the respect of others. In such an ethos, the highest good is public esteem — this is what honor means, and the strongest motive force is public opinion. The ultimate evil is that which brings upon a man loss of face, that is, the contempt or ridicule of his peers. A prominent motif in Greek plays is the tension between the impulses of an autocratic personality-type and the pressure of social conformity (Osborne 287).

Aristotle, one of the great authorities in the study of Greek drama, defines Tragedy, as:

an imitation of an action that is serious, complete, and of a certain magnitude; in language embellished with each kind of artistic ornament, the several kinds being found in separate parts of the play; in the form of action, not of narrative; through pity and fear effecting the proper purgation of these emotions. (Aristotle 10)

Based on Aristotle's explanation, pity and fear are central elements to the understanding and defining of the tragic. For Aristotle, the tragic event must arouse pity on the part of the audience for the tragic hero and fear that they might face the same fate if they make the same mistakes as the tragic hero.

In the late sixteenth century, a new form of tragedy had emerged in Europe, promoted by Christopher Marlowe, William Shakespeare, Benjamin Jonson, Lope de Vega, Pedro Calderón de la Barca, Pierre Corneille, and Jean Racine. In this new form of tragedy, Osborne suggests that the Indo-European concept of guilt-pollution has been replaced by the Christian concept of sin, more closely linked to the idea of individual responsibility. In the modern sense, guilt had acquired a moral connotation. Punishment for sin, meted out by a just and merciful God, was

presumed to be proportionate to personal guilt and was reserved for a future life with the possibility of repentance and divine forgiveness intervening (Osborne 289).

Classical tragedy thrived on a belief that the “Ideal” was realizable with the adaptation of mankind to an improved environment. Tragedy occurred when, in conflict with the cosmic forces, adaptation failed. In contrast, the Romantic era saw tragedy as the disconnection between man’s highest ideals and an unheeding world. The ideal was envisaged as unobtainable in a world that was constantly hostile to it. Heather Martienssen elaborates on this idea further, saying that:

The classical hero accepts the fate over which he has no control and triumphs nobly in this acquiescence; otherwise, he would not be a hero. The Romantic hero pits himself against a hostile environment and at no time comes to terms with it even if he reaches his goal, otherwise he would not be Romantic. The Classical hero evokes our pity and terror when he is signaled out by an inexorable fate and crushed by failure. The Romantic hero impels our admiration for his courage and perseverance in pursuing a superior ideal in the face of inevitable frustration, but admiration is tempered by a sense of futility arising from our awareness that his failure is not only inevitable but is inevitable precisely because he has set his target above the sights of the unheroic average. In the Classical drama the “tragic flaw” is either just bad luck or a weakness of character out of proportion with the seriousness of the penalty. The Romantic worldview found the “flaw” precisely in the basic disharmony between man’s highest ideals of nobility and the realities of the world in which he is doomed to posture and live. (quoted in Osborne 289)

In Africa, some dramatists and theorists have attempted to write tragic plays and advance arguments on the nature of tragedy, bearing in mind Africa’s communal nature as opposed to the Western concept of individuality. Wole Soyinka stands out amongst them. Tabitha Deh observes

that Soyinka's concept of tragedy is not overtly pro-Western and not totally Aristotelian in conception. Mainstream thinking about African theatricality considers it communalistic, and Soyinka is representative of many who views African tragedy as being governed by "the law of communal catharsis" (49). According to Peter Vordzorgbe, the communality theory, in the Ghanaian context, argues that every individual is an integral part of the community, and the individual's success in the community is seen as a collaborative effort of all members in the community (8 &10). In contrast to the Aristotelian concept of tragedy based on the tragic fall of the individual, tragedy in Africa is a communal catastrophe. If an individual is a victim of a tragic fate such as death, his/her entire community mourns and shares in the tragedy. Although Western drama may isolate and castigate the tragic hero, in Africa, the community comes together to identify with and share in the pain of the victim whose misfortune is seen as a collective tragedy. This is best illustrated by Ola Rotimi's concept of the "Tragedy of the Ruled" in his play *If: A Tragedy of the Ruled*, which marks a significant departure from Rotimi's earlier plays *The Gods Are Not to Blame*, *Kurunmi*, and *Ovonramwen Nogbaisi*, which all employed a neo-Aristotelian conception of tragedy. In *If: A Tragedy of the Ruled*, the masses or "the ruled" are victims of the corrupt and greedy practices of those in positions of power and authority. Landlord, the owner of the faceless hovel where both civil servants and the self-employed live together as society's downtrodden, issues eviction notices to some tenants because of their refusal to vote for his party in the coming elections. Papa, one of his tenants, addresses his colleagues:

Papa: Now, what I want to say first is simply this: we must let the landlord know that we all are one. If because we refuse to take oaths to vote for him in the

coming elections, this now is his way of punishing us, fair enough. But let him punish us all. No exceptions. I see divide and rule tactics at work here, and we must resist them at all costs. (Rotimi 13)

Thus, Papa uses the compulsion of oath-taking and the eviction notice as the basis of a call for unity amongst the tenants against the Landlord's unfair practice. He continues, saying,

“Everything really depends on our vote...any vote cast for a politician tomorrow on the basis of sheer fatherhood by birth; or of brotherhood by clan; or sisterhood by religion, is your doom and my doom” (Rotimi 14-5). Rotimi's conception of African tragedy as a tragedy of the ruled, the people, or the community, is consistent with Soyinka's technique of creating tragedy from a communalist rather than an individualistic perspective, which also aligns with Vordzorgbe's communality theory. This therefore is one of the ways in which African tragedy, drama, and theater differ from those of the West.

Death in many African societies and ethnic groups is perceived as a tragic event but not the ultimate end of the life cycle. Soyinka's play *Death and the King's Horseman* sheds light on the Yoruba view of death as an interruption in the connection between the worlds of the gods, the unborn, the living, and the dead. In the context of African tragic drama and theater, Soyinka reveals four worlds or stages of consciousness and the spiritual transitions that link them. The gods have their pantheon, the dead their world, the unborn their void, and the spirits of all these elements have a common space that they share with the living. It is this space or world that is fiercely contested by humans and spirits (Mark 7).

The realms of the gods, the unborn, the dead, and the living all coexist at the same time in the Yoruba metaphysical system, yet they are separated from each other by a dangerous abyss.

Although communication across realms is possible through specific persons who function as

mediators, moving from one realm to another is always hazardous. In this regard, Michael Rydman argues that an individual's attempt to move from one realm to the other is a direct challenge to the supernatural powers who guard the gates of each realm. The abyss becomes a battleground during the transition as the chthonic powers pit their collective strength against individual human will. Any attempt to bridge the abyss is considered an act of hubris in the Yoruba tradition, and in their metaphysical worldview, dying is just as much an act of hubris as being born. Hence, being born or dying are rites of passage from one realm to another. Soyinka's interpretation of tragic drama and its relevance to Yoruba culture is shaped by the hubristic nature of the rites of passage associated with such transitions (64). The unborn, the living, the dead, and the gods are united by the collective tragic web of oneness/communal existence in the African cosmological belief. Tragedy therefore, in the African sense, transcends the physical world.

In Ghana, death is regarded as a tragic phenomenon. This perhaps explains Kofi Opoku's reference to the "Theory of Causation," in a bid to explain why the indigenous African wants to find out why things happen. This is based on the belief that such phenomena as sickness, natural disaster, epidemic, misfortune, and even death may be caused by a severed relationship between man and the gods or spirits. Consequently, finding solutions, preventing and curing such phenomena usually involve the physical, the organic, and the spiritual (Opoku 145-49).

Examining how African playwrights have dramatized myth in various ways in their plays to reflect dramatic forms, Owusu categorizes African plays into four types. He calls the first "Straight Forward Dramatization" and cites J.P Clark's *Ozidi* as an example. In the second, he examines the interpretations of myth as a metaphor of socio-cultural issues affecting African

societies, and cites Obotunde Ijimere's *The Imprisonment of Obatala* as an example. The third group locates the use of myth or ritual as a plot device and Soyinka's *The Strong Breed* and *The Swamp Dwellers* are used as examples. The fourth example refers to plays that transform Western myth and ritual into an African experience. He observes that most adaptations of Greek tragedy fall within this category (qtd. in Deh 50). Notable examples include Ola Rotimi's adaptation of Sophocles' *Oedipus Rex* into *The God's Are Not to Blame* and Afua Sutherland's adaptation of *Alcestis* into *Edufa* amongst others.

Tragic Form, Cultural Facts and Symbolic Representation of Benin History in *Nekighidi*

The play *Nekighidi* revolves around a feud between the newly crowned king of Benin, Oba Ozolua, and Nekighidi, a Benin warlord, who is warned in a dream of his wife's betrayal. The warlord defies Oba Ozolua's authority and tells the Oba that he should prepare for war. Oba Ozolua goes to war with Nekighidi, but loses – retaliating by approaching him through his wife Eyowo who is childless. Her cooperation with the Oba is achieved through Oba Ozolua's daughter Imagbogho who promises Eyowo a new husband and children if she betrays Nekighidi. Eyowo agrees, eats the charm laden *emienki* (plantain or yam pudding) served by Imagbogho, and desecrates her husband's shrine. The two men go to war again. This time Nekighidi's charms fail to protect him and he dies, having ignored the warning of the gods that his wife would betray him.

In terms of dramatic technique, the playwright injects a lot of Benin words, phrases, and songs to locate the cultural setting of the play and evoke in terms of mood and tone, the Edo world, period atmosphere, and time of the play. For example, the phrase "*Uzama ne ihiwon*"

which means “kingmakers” made up of seven noblemen,” is used by Oliha as he crowns the new Oba. In his words:

Oliha: By the powers vested in me as Oliha, leader of Uzama ne ihiro, we hereby crown our son, Okpame with the title OZOLUA as he has chosen. (*He carries the crown from the tray held out by the attendant*). (Earliece 5)

Similarly, Imagbogho tells her father that *emienki*, should be prepared for Eyowo with charms to win her over (Earliece 30). Other words used in the play include *Ogbe* and *Oghionba*. *Ogbe* is a Benin word used to refer to the Headquarters of the Benin kingdom and location of the palace.. Nekighidi uses this word when he tells the emissaries of Oba Ozolua that he and his aides-in-council have created their own Ogbe (Earliece 13). Eyowo tells her husband that he is called *Oghionba* by the Benin people. *Oghionba* is a Benin word that means an enemy of the Oba (Earliece 17). She uses this to highlight the hostile relationship between Nekighidi and the Oba. These and many other words and phrases help to situate the dramatic setting of the play.

The play has three major parts. The first part that begins with a prologue is followed by an exposition and building up of the main action that is captured in four scenes entitled “Gathering Clouds 1,” “Gathering Clouds 2,” “Gathering Clouds 3,” and “Gathering Clouds 4.” The term “gathering clouds” suggests the development of events that would set the background for the main action to occur. The second part that dramatizes the intense rivalry and complicated relationship between Nekighidi and Oba Ozolua is entitled “Hanging Moments 1,” “Hanging Moments 2,” and “Hanging Moments 3.” The third section, the epilogue, concludes the play. The words “hanging moments” are a deliberate attempt by the playwright to capture the

uncertain fate of Nekighidi, as his life hangs in the air because of an impending doom that he cannot escape.

In Benin culture, death is regarded as a tragic event and the play is replete with elements of ritual, the use of charms, belief in gods and the afterlife. As a warlord, Nekighidi fortifies himself with charms against his enemies. He refers to this as he addresses his wife in *Gathering Clouds* 1: "...I stand undared by the Leopard. All these shrines my dear, are no pots of soup. Here lies my immunity from any harm meant by my adversaries" (Earliece 9). Similarly, Oba Ozolua sends for the best medicine men after the gods reveal the key to defeating Nekighidi. He addresses one of his chiefs: "...Osodin, you go out into the interior, bring me the best medicine men there..." (Earliece 29). The Oba hopes to use them to fortify himself as he prepares for an armed confrontation with Nekighidi. Nekighidi also repeatedly performs rituals and makes enchantments while praying in his shrine.

Another significant revelation regarding the belief system and religious life of the Benin people is the nullification of the charms and powers of Nekighidi by his wife Eyowo. In Edo culture, as in many African societies, a menstruating woman or her menses are believed to be potent enough to nullify charms. As such, traditional religious specialists warn their patrons to avoid contact with these to keep their charms powerful. It is this belief that Eyowo exploits when she dips her hands between her thighs and washes it into the big pot containing Nekighidi's charms. She also thrusts his amulets between her thighs before returning them to their initial position. These acts render Nekighidi's charms powerless, making him vulnerable and susceptible to attacks, eventually leading to his death. In the epilogue, Nekighidi draws our attention to the Benin belief in the afterlife in his last words. Before dying, he says, "Tell Ozolua

that I still bear my grudge, and... and that... I carry it with me till we meet again, sooner... sooner...later...I...I.” (Earliece 48).

The play *Nekighidi* explores the history of the Benin people and employs myth as a metaphor of the socio-cultural issues challenging the Benin Kingdom during the reign of Oba Ozolua. The playwright uses myth as a plot device in his attempt to re-enact Benin history in the world of the play. While the entire story is factual and taken from history, the playwright makes some creative adjustments in the arrangements of the events. He selects only the aspects of Benin history necessary to drive the plot of the play. For example, principal characters in the play such as Nekighidi, Oba Ozolua, and Eyowo are considered historical figures. The defying of Oba Ozolua by Nekighidi, and the war between both, in which Nekighidi’s wife betrays him, and his eventual death in the war, are in the historical narrative. However, the playwright embellishes his story with fictional characters and events in order to propel the plot. Aspects of history not captured in the play are Oba Ozolua’s marriage to Eyowo as a reward for her betraying Nekighidi, and her eventual execution by him because of his belief that having betrayed her late husband, Nekighidi, she might eventually betray him if the need arose.

The play has a simple plot because it focuses on one main event: Nekighidi’s disloyalty to Oba Ozolua and the Oba’s attempt to restrain him and thus maintain his authority and power in Benin. The play also has a climatic plot structure which is common in tragedies. The exposition is very long and the main action (point of attack) begins late in the story. However, unlike Greek tragedies, the play does not adhere to unities of time and place. The exposition providing the background information of the play begins from the prologue as Oba Ozolua is crowned as the new Oba. Nekighidi’s worries about his dreadful dream, his wife’s childlessness,

and the strained relationship between him and the Oba are exposed. However, the point of attack begins when Nekighidi refuses to plead before Oba Ozolua and decides to go to war against him. This is captured in his words to the emissaries, “Tell Ozolua that if he must have peace, he must be ready to get wet” (Earliece 13). The actions build up and complicate further, leading to war between Nekighidi and the Oba. Unfortunately, the Oba suffers defeat but retaliates with the help of the gods. His daughter Imagbogho is instrumental in strategizing how to get Eyowo on their side. The strategy works as Eyowo invalidates the charms of Nekighidi. The action moves to the climax as Nekighidi is wounded in a battle with the forces of Oba Ozolua. There is recognition (the movement from ignorance to knowledge) as Nekighidi realizes that his wife must have betrayed him. In his words, “It is finished! The gods warned, I heeded not. Eyowo!” (Earliece 48). The recognition leads to a reversal of fortune as Nekighidi eventually dies and the play comes to a resolution.

Typical of African tragedies, the play dramatizes a collective tragedy for the Benin people in the death of Nekighidi. Although Nekighidi is an individual, his actions and eventual death are not performed in isolation, but in the presence of others, evoking emotions of pity and fear. We feel pity for Nekighidi’s weakness and his inability to take the dream he had seriously or believe that the woman he loves could be the source of his downfall. His pride and arrogance complicate the narrative as we fear for his eventual fall. We also fear that we could suffer the same fate if we do not take care, but allow pride and ego to rule over us. Nekighidi’s decision to choose war over peace costs him his life. However, we experience a purging of these built-up emotions with the death of Nekighidi, taking lessons from his actions.

The tragic hero, as prescribed by Aristotle, must be someone of high social status which makes his fall dramatic and disastrous. Nekighidi was a warrior in Benin history who grew and became powerful and feared in the Benin kingdom, rendering him fitting as a hero whose tragic downfall result from an error in judgment. Also, the change of the hero's fortune comes with a reversal as Nekighidi's fate moves from good to bad, as he realizes that his wife betrayed him. Also, characteristic of African drama, the play's dialogue is embellished with re-enacted ritual behavior, action, dance, singing, and drumming. For example, in the prologue, ritual features in the coronation of Oba Ozolua, while dancing, singing, and drumming are employed in the procession dance of the Ifin-Eto and the Ugho dance by the Isikhen. Ifin-Eto is a guild of royal barbers within the palace, who also serve as palace guards, while the Isikhen are a group of singers (wives of late chiefs) who serenade the Oba in the palace.

In terms of language, the playwright combines the languages of prose and poetry to create a simple yet elevated kind of language that is further embellished with Benin words and expressions. An example is seen in the conversation between Nekighidi and his wife as she enquires about what is bothering him in "Gathering Clouds 1." In her words, "My lord and husband does not look himself this dawn of a god's day. What is it that ripples the stable waters of my Lord's soul?" Nekighidi replies to her, "What sunshine you are that lights up my gloomy and heavy dawn... We should have no fears, Eyowo. I am still the Osadolo, the Okakuo here in Errie. Like the Okpagha tree I stand undared by the Leopard" (Earliece 8-9).

In the above exchange, Nekighidi compares himself with the Okpagha tree and refers to Oba Ozolua as the Leopard, a formidable enemy. The Okpagha tree is the African oil bean tree. It is a large tree, low branching and firmly rooted in the ground. Its seeds are toxic and can be used

for arrow and fish poisons. The seeds can be eaten after they have been detoxified, and the oil extracted from the seeds is used in making soaps and candles as well as for medicinal purposes. The importance and multiple uses of the Okpagma tree suggests the role of Nekighidi and his importance in the Benin kingdom at the time.

Conclusion

The origins of theater and drama are traceable to the ritualistic practices of ancient Greeks in the Dionysian festival. However, African playwrights have not followed blindly European dramatic principles in the crafting of African plays but have relied on African performative modes of ritual, narrative, dance, singing and drumming, and the celebration of the African communal ethos.

This study examined the tragic form, cultural facts, and symbolic representations of Benin history in Ossa Earliece's *Nekighidi*. In specific terms, it explored such thematic areas in the play as tragic elements, language, death, mythology, pride, and ego. The findings reveal the use of Benin words, expressions, and songs to locate the cultural setting of the play. Prologue and epilogue, suggestive titles to name scenes, ritual, charms, the belief in gods and afterlife are all used to evoke the Benin religious world view. Typical of African tragedy, the fall of Nekighidi is a communal tragedy due to his status, and his actions evoke emotions of pity and fear because of his weakness, with his death leading to a purging of these feelings. The play displays unity of action, has a simple plot, employs a climactic plot structure, and combines prose, poetry, and Benin expressions in terms of language. Therefore, it serves as an ideal model for how African playwrights can give voice to the art and craft of playwriting in ways that are not alien to African socio-cultural sensibilities.

Works Cited

- Agawu, Kofi. "The Communal Ethos in African Performance: Ritual, Narrative and Music among the Northern Ewe." *Trans. Revista Transcultural de Música* 11 (2007): 1-10. Print.
- Aristotle. *Poetics*. Translated by Samuel Henry Butcher. New York: Cosimo, Inc. 1895. Print.
- Asagba, Austin. "Roots of African Drama: Critical Approaches and Elements of Continuity." *Kunapipi* 8.3 (1986): 84-99. Print.
- Bondarenko, Dmitri. "The Benin Kingdom (13th – 19th Centuries) as a Megacommunity." *Social Evolution & History* 14.2 (2015): 46-76. Print.
- Deh, Tabitha. "To Call It Tragedy or Not To Call It Tragedy: The Cultural Politics Involved." *European Journal of Literature, Language and Linguistics Studies* 2.1 (2018): 48-55. Print.
- Dunton, Chris. *Make Man Talk True: Nigerian Drama in English Since 1970*. London: Hans Zell, 1992. Print.
- Earliece, Ossa. *Nekighidi*. Benin: Bards Culture Company, 2001. Print.
- Egharevba, Jacob. *The Origin of Benin*. Benin City: African Industrial Press, 1954. Print.
- Hagher, Iyorwuese. "The Aesthetic Problem in the Criticism of African Drama." *Ufahamu* 10.1-2 (1980):156-65. Print.
- Igbafe, Philip. "Benin in the Pre-Colonial Era." *Tarikh* 5.1 (1974):1-16. Print.
- Kiwara-Wilson, Salome. "Restituting Colonial Plunder: The Case for the Benin Bronzes and

- Ivories.” *DePaul Journal of Art, Technology & Intellectual Property Law* 23.2 (2013): 375-425. Print.
- Mark, Tekena Gasper. “Niger Delta Conflict and the Cry for Restructuring and True Federalism in Nigeria: A Study of Akpos Adesi's *Agadagba Warriors*.” *Literature Compass* 18.1 (2020): 1-11. Print.
- Opoku, Kofi. *West African Traditional Religion*. Accra: FEP International, 1978. Print.
- Osadolor, Osarhieme. “The Military System of Benin Kingdom, C.1440 – 1897.” PhD diss., University of Hamburg, Germany, 2001. Print.
- Osborne, Harold. “The Concept of Tragedy.” *British Journal of Aesthetics* 15. 4 (1975): 287-93. Print.
- Ossie, Enekwe. “Myth, Ritual Drama in Igboland.” *Drama and Theatre in Nigeria: A Critical Source Book*. Ed. Yemi Ogunbiyi. Lagos: Nigeria Magazine, 1981. 149-63. Print.
- Rantimi Jays, Julius-Adeoye. *The Drama of Ahmed Yerima: Studies in Nigerian Theatre*. 2013. Leiden U, PhD dissertation. Print.
- Rotimi, Ola. *If: A Tragedy of the Ruled*. Ibadan: Heinemann Educational Books (Nigeria) Plc. 1983. Print.
- Rydman, Michael. “The Word Within the Word: Wole Soyinka's Perspective.” *Grand Valley Review* 2.2 (1986): 64-9. Print.
- Ukala, Sam. “Folkism: Towards a National Aesthetic Principle for Nigerian Dramaturgy.” *New Theatre Quarterly* 12.47 (1996): 279-87. Print.

Uyovbuckerhi, Atiboroko. *The Idea of Tragic Form in Nigerian Drama Written in English*.

1976. University of Wisconsin, PhD dissertation. Print.

Vordzorgbe, P. *Music in Healing: The Case of the LediKpɔligafa shrine at Anlo-Afiadɛnyigba*

in the Keta District of the Volta Region, Ghana. 2010. University of Education,

Winneba, Ghana, Mphil dissertation. Print.