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Pastoral Verbal Performance and Visual Aesthetics Brother Jero's Cape as Sign

ABSTRACT

The words and actions of several men and women at the lecterns and pulpits of places of worship rely a lot on their physical appearance or visual aesthetic. Soyinka's Brother Jero in *The Trials of Brother Jero* has become an epitome of this dependence on 'looking good'. The appealing physical appearance and dress of many of these religious are held to be veritable means of proselytization and of enticing many to worship. This, in turn, has led to parsimony, philistinism, and mercenary traits in some of these people and places. The bane of religion in Nigeria today is not far from the above. This essay shall assess Brother Jero's purchase of the velvet material from Amope, why he did so, to what effect and profit, as well as the repercussions of men and women of God depending on dressing well and displaying good looks. The cape is thus a sign, signifier, and signified of the profound influence of Nigerian visual culture on religion.

Introduction

PLAYWRIGHTS HAVE NOT ONLY DRAMATIZED the roles of men of the collar, but have often taken on the roles of prophets and seers themselves because of how they are able to come to terms with events of the future and write about them before they fully manifest or even take shape. Wole Soyinka's play *The Trials of Brother Jero* signifies a bold attempt to chronicle the phenomenon of religious profiteering at a time free from its diverse shades and manifestations as we see in our body politic today. If profiteering was in its nascent stage when the play was written, so did Soyinka forecast national dissent in employing Jero to talk about a minister of war. In the course of just one day, we see the ways and means of the trickster-prophet in achieving fame and wealth. The heavy reliance on outward appearance in religious circles is fast becoming the norm rather than the exception it should be. In regard to the above play, the velvet cape of Brother Jeroboam is

the signifier of this flamboyance that is fast becoming the trademark of media-evangelism and word-work among proselytes.

In drama, some works feature men of the collar as heroes; two examples are Oti's *Evangelist Jeremiah* and Kobina Sekyi's *The Blinkards*. Soyinka's *The Trials of Brother Jero* is popular as a result of "the relevance of its topicality"¹ and as a sign of the breakdown of religion. The cape of Prophet Jero-boam, also known as Brother Jero, in Soyinka's *The Trials of Brother Jero* is the object of this study, as a transferer of meaning and as meaning transferred to the opponents of Jero's divine career, his competitors and his followers.

In the opening part of the play, it is evident that membership in his church constitutes a problem – their numbers are dwindling. To combat this extinction process, he needs to prevent the members from crossing over to another church and to seek more of 'the disgruntled, dissatisfied, and defeated' that worship there. The problem of membership is worsened by Jero's three-month-old debt, to Amope, wife to Jero's assistant, Chume. The cape in question was made from a material he bought from Amope, with the intention of not paying, as he thought he would not be discovered – as a man of God, why be a fraud? If his job is not a well-paid one as he claimed, why buy a costly cape? The third scene of the play reveals the prophet at his duty-post in full regalia, and he puts across a host of reasons why he, Brother Jero, opted for a cape as part of his paraphernalia of office.

Textual/Verbal Reasons for Jero's Use of the Cape

The prophet has the gift of the garb, which he knows. He is also a persuasive speaker, an attribute with which he captures his victims. Ethically, his verbal performance is foul. A prophet may not be respected in his own home, as is seen in his case, but respect for his 'seeing' eyes earns him some status and recognition in his environment. Jero's sect practises syncretism, the merging of contemporary Christian and modernity with traditional methods of worship. Jero is therefore not different from the seers in traditional settings.

Brother Jero himself adduces reasons for opting for the cape as part of his paraphernalia of prophetic office. Some of them are found in the third scene of the play. These are: to massage his ego and realize his ambition, he was

¹ Sam Ukala, "Go Gently Through Professor to the Road: A Perspective on Wole Soyinka's *The Road*," *Ekpoma Journal of Languages and Literary Studies* 3 (April 1990): 47.

forced to distinguish himself from other “scum” prophets; owing to the importance of standing out, to be “distinctive”; to be seen as good – for the “cloak to make the prophet”; to get a name and a corporate image like velvet-hearted Jeroboam, Immaculate Jero, the Articulate Hero of Christ Crusade; to move with the times; to maintain flamboyance and colour, as “lack of colour gets one nowhere in the prophet’s business”;² to fulfil his hedonistic tendencies. These are no different from the ones evident in the demeanour of most of the people behind the lectern in places of worship. They are also the epitome of verbal performance or speech arts affected to gain acceptability before one’s audience or to effect persuasion. Jero’s words signifying oratory are, therefore, examples of his fraudulent reality.

With all the reasons above advanced by Jero, the cape becomes an object of intimidation, like his beard, used to set himself apart in the business of prophethood. The beard thus complements the cape; both are icons in his paraphernalia of office.

Akomaye Oko has focused on the religious paradox in *The Trials of Brother Jero*, assessing the treatise of J.D.Y. Peel on African churches, or places of worship attractive to rising civil servants who wanted to prosper in the city:

the driving force behind this enthusiasm was material welfare. The prophecies of the leaders were strictly empirical and concerned conduct at work, advice to traders, young men and women³

This links us to Jero, who, Oko says, is a prophet satirized by Soyinka. The satire befits him and his type, who dominate the urban centres in Nigeria and other cities. From the robe donned by Brother Jero, his group can be likened to the Aladura sect, which focused to a great extent on prophecy, spirit-possession, and syncretistic worship.

Fixation on Good Looks and Verbal Performance

At the beginning of the play, Jero boasts: “you must admit that I’m rather good looking” (11). He directs our attention to his physical stature, which in turn redirects our attention to his ethical conduct. This boast is to make him

² Wole Soyinka, *The Trials of Brother Jero* (Ibadan: Spectrum, 1964): 19. Further page references are in the main text.

³ Akomaye Oko, *The Tragic Paradox* (Ibadan: Kraft, 1992): 36.

attractive, and links his thirst for prestige with maleness as well as patriarchy in the church. Jero therefore exhibits patriarchal excesses. Perhaps Soyinka would have made Jero a more boastful prophet than he made him due to the present-day use of the media to reach out to captive and captured worshippers. Had he known to what use television could be put to serve his end, Jero would not have complained about it, but cashed in on it to capture the 'wealthier persons'. His complaint about television as a competitor is a sign of the time the play was written; television was still an intruder trying to upstage radio from its central position.

In terms of leadership, what Jero displays in the leader-led dealings with his proselyte Chume is selfishness and a lust for lucre. He never wanted Chume to think of setting himself up as 'his' equal (22). When the Penitent, another of Jero's victims, goes into religious ecstasy when prayed for by Chume, the latter in turn becomes possessed like her, and his verbal performance rivals that of the prophet. Jero sees this clash of verbally sublime display as an incursion by Chume into an unauthorized religious zone.

Amope, the wife of Chume, one of Jero's captive worshippers, helps to extend the frontiers of femininity by storming the prophet's house, a supposedly sacred terrain. Amope helps us to see the base side of the prophet. Not fooled by his beard, Amope calls Jero a "bearded debtor," thus de-mythicizing or demystifying the man of God. The play can be seen as Wole Soyinka's attempt to focus not just on the man of God, but on the God of man, who contains charlatans and rogues due to His long suffering. For Ademola Dasylva, the play concerns "society's rejection of God and His replacement with a new god, mammon"; this is achieved through the "deliberate commercialization of religion by custodians of the otherwise sacred institution."⁴ The words and actions of Jero put the sacred and the sacrilegious side by side and we listen to demarcate one from the other.

Through Jero's hut and its window, he projects onto the world of his real and imagined audience. The hut is at the centre of the conflict between the space of worship at Bar Beach in Lagos and the preacher's highflying lifestyle and his appearance. Bar Beach becomes a sphere of competition in a priesthood market open for all to compete in, but where the worshipper-customer is at a disadvantage. His hut is the sanctum he escapes to unknown

⁴ Ademola Dasylva, *Dramatic Literature: A Critical Sourcebook* (Ibadan: Sam Bookman, 1997): 83.

to the bigots who believe he sleeps on the beach. This is the interplay between Jero's claimed ascetic self and his real hedonistic self. Amope's verbal exposure of Jero reveals this to us. By extension, there is the gap between work and profit. The execution of convicted armed robbers at Bar Beach in the sequel play, *Jero's Metamorphosis*, makes the location symbolic as a place to extort cash from customers, of Jero's fraudulent pastoral performances, and, later, as a place where the lives of convicted armed robbers are taken. The robbers and Jero are similar in the social roles they perform. Jero "holds the people in allegiance to him by pretending to be able to influence their fate."⁵ African culture is a visual one, and there is a saying that 'the way you dress for an in-law's house determines the kind of seat you are given there'. Prophet Jero therefore wanted a front seat in the presence of his competitors; hence, he opts for the cape.

In the theatre, adornment describes the character. The cape is therefore a sign; in fact, it is one of a multiplicity of signs in the play. It is one that refers to Jero's character, his culture, and his relationship to other male and female characters in the play. It does not clash with his personality but augments it. It is signified by the manner it tells us who the prophet is as a fixed or representational sign.

The visual effect the cape has on his followers is what we see in the play throughout. The cape is meaning-laden as an indicator of the grip of Prophet Jero on his follower-victims. At the end of the third scene, when he re-christens himself and again hoodwinks Chume into believing he is "Immaculate Jero, Articulate Hero of Christ's Crusade" (22), the last stage action by Jero is to "sadly finger the cape." By this time the prophet has sanctioned the beating of Amope by her husband and sees Chume gradually slipping from his grip, Jero "sadly fingers the velvet cape." The slip is occasioned by Chume's epiphany at his wife's outburst: "Brother Jeroboam ... you may keep the velvet cape if you curse this foolish man. I forgive you your debt" (36); "tell the prophet I forgive him his debt" (36). This eye-opening scene makes Chume burst out about his master: "So... so... suddenly he decides I may beat my wife, eh? For his own convenience. At his own convenience" (37). The prophet has intellectual and spiritual supremacy among his peers. Jero displays knowledge of Old Testament idols, and, in his vituperations, Chume is likened to Ashtoreth, a female idol, believed to be the wife of Baal,

⁵ Oko, *The Tragic Paradox*, 37.

the pagan god of the Canaanites. Amope is likened to Eve, Delilah, and Jezebel, temptresses of Adam, Samson, and Ahab respectively, leading to the fall of the latter into sin. Further, when Jero bamboozles the member of parliament, there is heavy reliance on visual and verbal (rhetorical) effects to swindle the politician.

The Cape as a Sign

Adornment in the sphere of performance is significant (sign and meaning). What a character in the text wears conveys a wide range of features such as age, class, gender, ethnicity, ability, and dis/ability. Prophet Jero's long white garment has less impact on his 'customers' than his cape. It is the cape that identifies him as a prophet. As a visual icon in an aesthetic scheme, the cape, apart from being a sign, is also signifier and signified. The velvet cape is shown as soft and beautiful to behold, it complements Jero's white robe and is esteemed enough to be bought on credit. It is an image or an aspect of the visual culture of spiritual worship.

The identification of beauty in an object pivots on its pleasing us 'in virtue of its aesthetic properties. [...] Beauty evokes a pleasurable response. If while perceiving an object you do not experience pleasure, you are not perceiving beauty.'⁶

Through the study of sign systems or semiotics, we are able to assess "the viability of the notion of the image as autonomous, as containing within itself an inherent meaning and value."⁷ Susan Wittig considers semiotics as

the study of sign systems, and of the functions of these systems within cultural, performative context – a context which includes not only messages, but senders and receivers of messages.⁸

The cape and its wearer send messages to the audience, making them referents. They refer to the status or class of the prophet as different from that of

⁶ Jennifer A. McMahon, "Beauty," in *The Routledge Companion to Aesthetics* (London: Routledge, 2003): 231, 232.

⁷ Amelia Jones, "Representation," in *The Feminism and Visual Culture Reader*, ed. Amelia Jones (London: Routledge, 2003): 33:

⁸ Susan Wittig, "Towards a Semiotic Theory of the Drama," *Education Theatre Journal* 26.4 (December 1974): 442.

