

## From Worship to Commodification: Wole Soyinka and Sanctity of the Sacred in Swamp Dwellers and Trials of Brother Jero

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### Abstract

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There is no gainsaying that, man found himself in a nebulous and unfriendly environment that made him resort to first of all, sympathetic magic and rudimentary buying and selling (commerce) that enabled him to survive amidst harsh economic and environmental conditions. Despite the centrality of commerce in the existential essence of man, it is not every product of nature and man that is valued on its commercial face value. Even though some goods are not assessed on their commercial values; these categories of products and services are by and large, indispensable in the existential essence of man. Worship in its sacredness is in the class of the latter and should not be packaged for sale. Unfortunately, commodification of worship has become stock in trade of religious leaders; to the extent that church leaders and the people of God have desecrated the sacred through commodification. Therefore, the problem of this study is to investigate the causes of commodification of worship, appraise its consequences on ethical orientation and sanctity of the sacred in the contemporary Nigerian society. The researchers anchor the study on Soyinka's exploration of this subject in his *Swamp Dwellers and Trials of Brother Jero*. Furthermore, case study and content analysis approaches of the qualitative research method were adopted for the realization of the research objective.

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**Keywords:** God, Worship, Commodification, Sanctity, Sacred, Africa

### Introduction

Worship and religion among other practices, remain the most important influences on Africans; this is because of the prevalent religiosity in most African tribes.

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African religiosity and centrality of worship in African existential essence is mostly reflected in festival celebrations, rituals, folktales, myths and legends that dominate the cosmopolitan view of African life. Therefore, it is no coincidence that most ethnic groups in traditional African society, including Yoruba and Igbo tribes of the Nigerian nation-state have fascinating folktales, sacred stories or myths about creation of man and existence of God, gods, spirits and deities. These stories establish the involvement of supreme and mythical beings in the affairs of man, and also give meaning to the existence of man as it explains the purpose of man's creation. Oscar G. Brockett further validates these assertions when he states that; ... Each community develops numerous conventions which may be viewed as rituals that define societal relationship, and it seeks validation of these conventions through religion, morality, law or social utility (45).

Evidently many aspects of African life: farming, social and political affairs reflect African religiosity. Through religion man is disciplined into obeying laws, customs, traditions, and reverence of the sacred. Furthermore, for traditional Africans, the community is basically sacred, rather than secular, hence certain actions are forbidden so as to protect the interest of the community. Thus, the community forbids crimes like incest, adultery, stealing, prostitution; fornication or any evil that will bring calamity upon the land and the people.

The intrusion of colonialism placed Western religions above African religions, traditions, cultures and spirituality. Christianity watered down the punishment for sins and replaced punishment with mercy and forgiveness and a Christian God Whose mercy endures took over from gods and deities that used to kill sinners instantly. Modernism's tendency to contain the irrational and improper behavior of man finally laid a new foundation that consequently changed African attitude to religion. One may argue that the frequent violation of the sacred, the loss of African religion's ability to punish immoral acts instantly and Christianity's leniency on crime can be the cause of the high rate of social and religious adulteration that resulted to alarming rate of immorality. Evinma Ogieiriaixi, uses Oliha one of the characters in his play *Imaquero*, to express this discontentment over the erosion of African religious values through evangelization of Africans.

Oliha; ...He has helped this Portuguese to build church which now threatens the very foundation of our religion, our culture, our very existence.

In the good old days of our fathers, our daughters and wives would not go astray because they feared that the gods of our ancestors would question them. Now under the influence of Christianity it has become moral to be immoral and our sacred taboos are flouted (31).

Though traditional African religion has its own weaknesses, colonialism stifled genuine development of indigenous religions which could have sustained respect for the sacred. Hence, Ogieiriaixi, in his play, explores the corrupting influences caused by erosion of the sacred by the colonial enigma and its devastating effects on the citizens and African societies. Considering the birth of hundreds of modern day churches and other religious practices in Africa, and the fast dwindling moral values in the society, a doubt is cast on the functions and influences of modern day worship in the end time churches. The violation of worship is not only limited to Christian religion but also in other denominations and places including African traditional religion, hence, desecration of the sacred has made worship a means of survival, a marketable product and a table set for earning daily bread. The harsh economic situation in our society is also a contributing factor, man's need to survive and the urgent need for solution to people's unending problems has given birth to impious religious heads who seize the opportunity to exploit the self-doubting masses.

Identifying some of the causes of this ugly trend Aondowase Boh clearly observes that, "all the same, obsession with materialism, compulsion for shortcut to affluence, glorification of ill-gotten wealth by the general public are among the reasons for the persistence of the culture of corruption." (27) He further emphasizes that conflict between changing moral codes and the absence of a strong sense of national community contribute to the nation's retrogression. Thus, the effect of commodification on worship becomes a substantive issue of discourse in contemporary Nigerian society. Due to its turbulent consequences: high rate of religious atrocities, moral decadence, retrogression, degeneration, exploitation and indescribable level of corruption, have become common features of African societies.

To Africans, life is religion and religion is life, so religion serves as a moral entrepreneur of the African society. Therefore, the problem of this study stem from how to curb the rise of moral decadence through eradication of religious commodification and the need for restoration of the sanctity of the sacred.

There is need therefore for the African dramatist to sensitize the people towards the right direction to improve their standard of living.

### **Commodification of Worship and Ethical Re-orientation in Nigeria: A critical Appraisal**

Worship is reverence to God, a deity, or an act of religious devotion directed towards God, gods or deities. Worship is a daily occurrence in African society because Africans are highly religious, since most actions are connected to the metaphysical world. There are different deities in African cosmology that serve different purposes for the sustenance and continuance of race. Deities like Ala (earth goddess) Ifejioku (god of yams) Shango (god of thunder) Agwu (god of intoxication and madness) etc. These gods however serve as intermediaries between the people and the one true God. Worship is an act of religious devotion but the relationship between the two is clearly revealed in the discussion and meaning of the mother word religion. Defining religion, *The Free Encyclopedia* states that

A religion is an organized collection of beliefs cultural system, and the world views that relate humanity to order of existence. Many religions have narrative, symbols, and sacred histories that are intended to explain the meaning of life and\or explain the origin of life. From their beliefs about the cosmos and human nature; people derive morality, ethics, religious laws or a preferred lifestyle. (n.p)

Therefore, religion is a collection of cultural systems, belief systems and moral values, which help in defining the existence of a particular race. Hence, religion controls the spirituality of a people, thus, religion enhances respect for what is sacred and the obligation of man to God or gods. The important aspect of religion is seen in worship, morality, sacredness, holiness and ritual. Though, religious instructions may vary or differ according to highlights of religious sects, but there are intricacies and aspects of these elements mentioned above in the modus operandi of most religions. Worship in Africa, therefore is an extension of religion, as religion harbours sacred institutions dedicated to various deities worshipped by man. These institutions are sanctified and set aside as sacred and holy, therefore respect and devotion is expected. I.K.N.T Ogbukagu in the bid to define the process and viability of worship states that:

We worship, when we submit through sacrifices, our attitude towards God.

Worship therefore is used to describe religious actions directed to the supreme and the other supernatural beings (470).

Worship as an act of religious devotion deepens man's affiliation with the supernatural through prayers, meditations, rituals, sacrifices, chants, libations poured by a suppliant or mediator (priest of some sort) soliciting for favour for the worshipper. This is done to sustain spiritual growth through blessings and sacraments administered by the man of God who is only but a medium and a passage for such sacred blessings. Essentially, the goal of worship is to fortify and guide man in his daily activities through these presumed favours and blessings from God and gods. Worship also conditions behavioral patterns of man through his transient journey on earth for a blissful afterlife. Africans are acclaimed to be very religious; therefore, religion and worship in Africa control and influence all departments of life. Therefore, the word "sacred" which derived its meaning from the Latin word "Sacrare", sets things of God as presented by religion apart, as holy and sacrosanct. *Wikipedia Encyclopedia* defines the word sacred as "something or object set apart by solemn religious ceremony; especially in a good sense, made holy. Set apart for religious use" (n.p) Sacred connotes that there are forces that have transformative effect on the lives and destinies of people, defining the clean and the unclean, holy and profane thereby helping in the encouragement of absolute morality, and its ultimate importance is to maintain ethical balance in the society.

Traditional African religions, Oriental and Western religions recognize the importance of "the sacred" and its contributions to the moral well-being of human society. The Christian religion recognizes objects like Rosary, Holy water, sacraments, holy communions as sacred objects set aside for religious worship and they are as such sacred. The traditional religion also has various sacred days, spaces and objects and any violation of the sacred especially in traditional religions attracts punishment. Chinua Achebe captures this in his *Things Fall Apart*, where Ezulu addresses Okonkwo: The evil you have done can ruin the whole clan. The earth goddess whom you have insulted may refuse to give us her increase and we shall all perish ... you will bring to the shrine of Ani tomorrow one she-goat, one hen, a length of cloth and a hundred cowries (25)

Achebe emphasizes the need for the sacred in Igbo cosmology, the consequences and penalty that follows its violation in the society. He also portrays the function of the sacred in worship and religion and the role of the priest in ensuring sustenance of the sanctity of worship and the sacred. Similarly, the Christian religion sees violation of the sacred as mortal sin and the penalty for violating the sacred is hell fire after judgment. Religion therefore is an ultimate judge of morality and the conduct of man; it contributes immensely to the growth and moral stability of the society.

Unfortunately the contemporary society is bedeviled with a downward trend in worship and respect for the sacred. There is increase in the tendency towards profanity and commodification of worship. This shift in perspective can be blamed on harsh social, political and economic situations in the society. Hence, traditional spirituality is challenged by material power which modernism and capitalism helped to build. The prevalent material tendency is worsened by poor standard of living that ushered in dangerous survivalist tendency that encourages individualism, "rat race", "dog eat dog" that robbed the society her sense of morality and communalism. Hence, commodification of worship and bastardization of the sanctity of the sacred became fallouts of this socio-economic anomaly. According to *Wikipedia Encyclopedia* commodification is;

... the transformation of goods and services as well as ideas or other entities that normally may not be considered goods into a commodity ... it is used to describe the process by which something which does not have an economic value is assigned a value and hence how market values can replace other social values. It describes a modification of relationships, formerly untainted by commerce, into commercial relationships in everyday use (n.p).

Trading is the ultimate goal of commodification, thus, sacred objects; including sacraments and human beings the only sacred being created by God become items of trade. Following this fanatical commercial interest, there is obvious devaluation of the sanctity of the sacred and consequent fanaticism that leads to abuse of human life and other sacred objects by religious bigots and fanatics.

Furthermore, Uwe Schimank & Ute Volkmann further describes commodification as the: processes through which one or another aspect of material provisioning takes the form of commodity production and/or through which some economic agents seek to derive monetary revenues from material provisioning or immaterial activities that were not previously subject to monetary exchange (7).

This definition tallies with the researchers' application of commodification in this study. Simply put, commodification means trading the things of God which are immaterial for monetary gain, just as our Lord Jesus Christ condemns in the Bible. It is in this light that *Miriam – Webster online Dictionary* says that the words commodify and commodification means;

to turn (an intrinsic value or a work of art) into a commodity. Accordingly commodification, "refers to the practice or process of turning that which is inherently valuable into a commodity (n.p) Marxist interpretation and theorization on commodification further justifies the above definitions of commodification. The Marxist posits that commodification is the effort to make unsalable things become salable. Hence, this study is hinged on the theoretical framework of Marx's theory of commodification. Marx's theorization on commodification refers to the way market values can replace other social values, or the way market system can replace communal systems by turning them into tradable commodity. Feudal and Tsarist political economies as captured by Karl Marx in his "Critique of Political Economy", presents a commodity as an object or a good or service produced by human labour and offered for sale. Contrarily Marx argues that, commodification is the assignment of economic value to something that previously does not have economic value, therefore any attachment of monetary value to things that should not be treated as tradable commodities can be referred to as commodification. Marx in his essay *commodity fetishism and alienation* extensively criticized the social impact of commodification, he maintains that commodification brings about inferior individuals and to overcome this debasement, people must change and learn not to live with the market mindset. In commodification of religion, market value is being attached to worship thereby diminishing its ultimate function. Hence, the need to reduce the economic value that has been added to worship arises. Commodification pervades every conscious human activity as the growth of capitalism commodifies every sphere of human activity into a product that can be bought (Wikipedia, 19).

Wole Soyinka captures this ugly trend in the activities of the protagonists of the two plays chosen for study. Jerney Prodnick further explains this capitalist tendency by stating that:

Even in post-modernity, commodification processes can be seen as being amongst crucial preconditions for the general preservation of capitalist social relations and continuing expansion of capital. Historically speaking, processes of transforming literally anything into a privatized form of (fictitious) commodity that can be exchanged in the market are thus of critical importance for both the rise and continuing reproduction of capitalism (274).

Once an object assumes a monetary or commodity form, be it religion, culture or historical object; it loses its social character because in the process, the ultimate value is altered and often destroyed and sometimes made meaningless to the people. In other words, attaching monetary value to religion, ritual and tradition, worship and the sacred de-values their true purposes. Prodnick to this effect states disadvantages of commodification below;

...It starts to erode and change almost all human contacts and relation...where commodity starts to reign supreme over society, any possible independence of use- value is eradicated (298).

Therefore commodification of worship deceives and defrauds the masses, by feeding on their weaknesses and making money out of their need for divine succour, the ultimate use-value of worship is altered for commercial purposes that blinds and brainwashes the citizenry, especially the youth. Through commodification, this most active but gullible segment of the population is manipulated, given false hope and instigated against the state through utopian religious ideologies that support commodification.

The alarming rate at which traditional and contemporary worship are becoming commodified is Soyinka's preoccupation in *Swamp Dwellers* and *Trial of Brother Jero*. Soyinka portrays that harsh economic situations and the need to survive have led to the bastardization of the moral and social function of worship, individuals who are stranded in the labour market and frustrated by the prevalent one dimensional socio-political stultesque, resort to commodification of worship as the easiest way to earn a living and make ends meet.



Through modernism, materialism has taken hold on worship in both traditional African religion and modern churches. Consequently, the sacred has been subjected to an object of ridicule, while days of worship like Sundays are now “mere market days for hawking, buying and receiving of religious goods.” The outcome of this trend is the negligence of universal religious values that actually promote ethical values, sound reasoning and moral conducts in communities. Thus, genuine pastoral guidance and peaceful co-existence of the laity and the priestly have given way to dangerous embrace of materialism by the two groups. Hence, spiritual degeneration and the failure of religion to serve as the moral voice of the society remain major causes of retrogression in moral, ethical and social standards among the citizenry. The mode of worship in the society negates Emile Durkheim’s argument which states that the function of religious ritual is to maintain social solidarity by affirming the moral superiority of the society. Rather according to Karl Marx; religious leaders have made religion the opium of the people and use it as a negative instrument of social control and exploitation. Through bigotry and commodification atrocities are being committed in the name of religion among religious leaders and the faithful. Religious leaders and the faithful freely indulge in violation of religious tenets partly because there is no regard for the sacred anymore. Consequently, horrible acts ranging from terrorism, raping, killing, stealing and assaults are carried out in the name of religion. Victims of these religious businessmen are abused and treated in most heinous manners psychologically, physically, economically and emotionally. To this effect Marx outlines a society where the individual reconciles with the society, rather than depend on a religion that is commodified. Marx proposes a community of free individuals devoid of religious bigotry, fanaticism and commodification. According to Torn Halves, there are two aspects to this kind of community. He states;

Firstly individuals are consciously and willingly social: they see their labour as a social service instead of unwittingly doing a social work while having their private ends in view. Secondly the organization of society becomes something that is consciously deliberated and planned. Instead of allowing unconscious forces in the market play a determining role, society gathers itself up and takes charge of its historical development. (n.p)

African theatre can checkmate the current trend in the Nigerian religious threshold and usher in total ethical reorientation that will stop religious commodification and restore the sanctity of the sacred in religious worship.

The reformative attribute of African theatre stems from the fact that, "it is a total theatre that combines many art forms, music, poetry, dance, acting, miming, mask, paintings, singing, dialogue etc" (Enekwe, 154) Beginning from its traditional origin, the indigenous performances served several purposes, both political, religious and social purposes, and promoted communal and healthy living. Hence, the African theatre is religious, integral, metaphysical and sensuous; it is both mythic, ritualistic and as well plays a defined role in the communal life of the people.

The ensemble performative attribute of modern African theatre stem from the fact that; traditional African theatre influenced modern African drama to a large extent. The origin of modern African drama would be found in the attempts by individual playwrights to engage in creative writing using Western dramatic techniques to explore indigenous themes. Therefore, modern African drama combines traditional and foreign materials in its description of African experiential issues. Hence, Modern African theatre is a tripple heritage as it comprises of traditional, popular and literary theatres. It refuses to be compartmentalized into a specific form of presentational technique as it depends on indigenous performances such as dance, music, storytelling and mime, and combines them with ideas of drama drawn from experiences of Western influence as it interprets the socio-historical contact between Africans and the colonist. This trend is reflected in the products of pioneer African playwrights, who were exposed to the Western world and their drama. Such Playwrights include Wole Soyinka, J.P Clark, Ola Rotimi, Zulu Sofola, Ene Henshaw, Efua Sutherland, etc. Though, sophisticated dramatic theory and criticism did not start until 1971, when Michael J.C. Echeruo, a Nigerian of Igbo origin published his *Dramatic limits of Igbo Ritual*, modern African drama is not divorced from the experiential issues that conditioned the life of an African. Echerous's theory generated controversy among other theatre scholars, in his theory Echeruo compared Igbo performances to that of the Greeks and advised the Igbo to do what the Greeks did, expand ritual into life and give it a secular base. Echeruo's proposition influenced the relativist view which Wole Soyinka concretized in his *Myth Literature and African World* where he insists that African drama and theatre must portray African worldview which derives from ancestral worship, gods, kinship as manifested in festival celebration, ritual displays and initiation ceremonies. Soyinka's theory more or less revolves around African religiosity, the sacred and worship and African belief system. Soyinka changed the tone of dramatic theorization of modern Africa drama and fully established the emergence of modern African drama

There is no gainsaying that the sacred is given its place in the developmental trend of modern Africa drama especially the treatment given to rituals in Shage Gabre's *Oda Oak Oracle*, kalu Uka's treatment of myth and ritual in *Ikhamma*, Elechi Amadi's treatment of the myth of Amadioha in *Isiburu* etc. The metaphysical world which is the abode of the sacred provided Soyinka with materials that enabled him take a bold step in the evolutionary process of modern Africa drama. Considering the place of the sacred in modern African drama, it is hoped that the declining interest in the sanctity of the sacred will be checkmated through the sensibility potentials of modern African drama.

Theatre and the sacred are intertwined especially in the practice of the pre-colonial theatre. Many traditional institutions in some parts of Africa serve as both sacred tool for ensuring peace and order in the society as well as providers of entertainment and theatre for the people. Therefore the sacred plays a vital role in the promotion and development of healthy and peaceful co-existence in the society. No wonder the first generation African dramatist contributed immensely to the promotion of spirituality and the sacred through exploration of such themes in their plays. The sacred, the secular, and the profane are manifest in African societies till the effects of colonialism and pentecostalism overshadowed genuine interest in the sacred and lead to eventual commodification of worship. The need for dramas that will treat political, economic and social issues gave birth to a new kind of drama that was influenced by social realism. Hence, modern African drama started mirroring effects of Western influence, Christianity and Islamic religions as well as their commodification tendencies. However the playwright still highlights the importance of worship, sacrifice, ritual and the sacred to the people as well as the importance of religiosity to the existence of the community. Christianity and Islamic religions have proved to be most influencing factors in modern African society, both positively and negatively. Worship in the context of these religions asserts an amount of influence over power, social, economic, and political environment of African society. Therefore religious leaders cashed in on the importance of religion to the people to commodify worship. Though one would not say that there was no commodification in the traditional religion, there was, but it heightened with the dominance of Christianity and Islam. Traditional religious commodification is evident in Soyinka's the *Swamp Dwellers*; while his *Trials of Brother Jero* exemplifies it during the modern period.

Drama and theatre through social realism captures the social, political, economic and religious environment, therefore modern African drama has not neglected the sacred, spirituality and commodification of worship in its thematic fixation as it dramatizes conflicts between morality and materialism and tends to re-establish the essence of morality and ethics that have been destroyed by commodification. A.A Adeoye posits;

The dramaturgy of religion is not an escape from religious issues. It helps to have and dramatize the avoidable and unavoidable conflicts and crises within the religious worshippers and institutions while re-inventing same for moral and ethical sanctity of the society (2)

Theatre has been used for condemnation of religious commodification as well as propagation of worship, and religion in Africa as reflected in Wole Soyinka's *Trials of Brother Jero*, *Jero's Metamorphosis*, *Swamp Dwellers*, Ahmed Yerima's plays; *The Bishop and the Soul*, and the *Limam*. These dramatic works satirize and condemn fake prophets, pastors, imams, and their exploitation of followers and dependent members. By doing this, these playwrights call for sanitization and conscientization through drama for further promotion of morality in the contemporary society. Religious fanaticism, terrorism and political instability in the society can be curbed through collective acknowledgment of the importance of true worship, respect for religion and the sacred which will ensure high level of morality needed for stability and development of the African region. Adeoye further asserts

Religion is life and the theatre is a mirror of life. As much as religion mirrors our spiritual life, it will continue to be relevant in providing moral, social, cultural and political directions. (21)

Materialism and commodification have grown through globalization, secularization, and the need to survive in harsh economic environments. These are the motivating factors for moral depravity as presented by Soyinka in the case studies. V.O Adeniyi confirms that, "spiritual degeneration has also been identified as contributory factor to materialism and that materialism is the key generator to societal depravity" (17). The dramatist's ability to locate, dramatize and condemn these misconceptions and immoral activities that have swallowed the sacred nature of worship will certainly enhance the sanctity of the sacred, and morality in Africa.

## **Wole Soyinka and Commodification of Worship in *Swamp Dwellers* and *Trials of Brother Jero***

Akinwande Oluwole "Wole" Soyinka is a Nigerian playwright, novelist, and poet, born on 13 July 1934. Soyinka was awarded the 1986 Nobel Prize in literature, the first African to be so honoured. His serious and notable plays are the *Strong Breed* (1963), *Kongi's Harvest* (1967), *The Road* (1965), *Madmen and the Specialist* (1971), *Death and the Kings Horseman* (1975), and *the Beautification of Area Boys* (1995). He sometimes wrote in satirical style, as reflected in plays like *Lion and the Jewel* (1963), *Trials of Brother Jero* (1963), and *Swamp Dwellers* (1985)

*Swamp Dwellers* and *Trials of Brother Jero* are selected for study by the researchers because Soyinka satirizes religious commodification in the two plays and highlights the dangers of commodification of worship on the citizenry. *Swamp Dwellers* tells the story of Igwezu who is a son of the swamp and his struggle with the vicissitudes of life. The play presents the suffering of the swamp dwellers under the spell of Kadiye's commodification manipulations, as he turns worship into a commercial product. Igwezu, as a victim of Kadiye's materialistic exploitation "revolts like a postmodern protagonist in a reformation crusade, Igwezu assaults that which is sacred... and prepares the people for revolt against conservatism, conventionalism and foundationalism." (Canice Chukwuma Nwosu, 223) Unfortunately, he does not consolidate the struggle as he is compelled by societal forces of religion and capitalism to head off to the city to avoid the wrath of the religiously brainwashed villagers.

*Swamp Dwellers* presents life at the swamp and the belief of the inhabitants that the Serpent of the Swamp, is the brain behind the dilemma of incessant flood in the swamp. The people's belief in the Serpent of the Swamp and his priest as capable of causing and quelling the flood lead to fraudulent exploitation of the people by the subscribed "holy one" the priest of the Serpent of the Swamp. Soyinka exposes religious atrocities through commodification and hypocrisy as he portrays the priest of the Serpent of the Swamp Kadiye as a corrupt; self centered, exploitative and greedy priest who feed fat on the proceeds of the inhabitants of the swamp, without offering them any protection from natural disaster. The physical features of Kadiye indicate and present him as more of a shrewd well-fed merchant than a religious leader. In the introduction of Kadiye, the playwright describes him as a big voluminous creature of about fifty, smooth-faced except for little tufts of beard around his Chin.

His head is shaved clean (19). This presentation shows Kadiye as one who is closer to a bourgeois, obsessed by his gluttonous attitude. This exposes him as someone who is wearing the mask of religion to intimidate, manipulate, and exploit the masses because of their ignorance. Though, the playwright presents Kadiye as fraudulent, the people should have been wiser to understand that there is little one can do to curb natural disasters. Rather, what wise ones do is to prepare for and guided against such disasters. Soyinka exposes the level of ignorance in modern African societies, especially Nigeria; where religious leaders grow fat on congregations' contributions. They fuel religious crises because of materialism, ambition and power. Like these fraudulent religious leaders, the magnitude of Kadiye's materialistic tendencies is displayed in the play as he quickly gets interested in how much money Igwezu made in the city, forgetting the disaster and pain the flood had caused him. However, for the people to come to the realization that they have fooled all these years, the playwright presents another character – The Beggar, who in his wisdom serves as alter ego to Igwezu. Unlike the people of the swamp, "The Beggar" has a different story; story of poverty, blindness, drought, and suffering, yet he sought to liberate himself through working hard and not resigning to fate. The home from which he hails Bukanji "the village of beggars" did not hold him back, so on entering Makuri's house he establishes that what he wants is work and not receiving alms. Like a postmodern beggar who resorts to alternative techniques for survival he says that he needs to knead the soil between his fingers so as to make it yield. The beggar represents new wisdom because he comes to the swamp with solution that will help the suffering of the swamp dwellers under the consequences of religious commodification perpetrated by the priest of the Serpent of the Swamps Kadiye. The Beggar in his wisdom asks Makuri an important question which Makuri and the swamp dwellers all these years failed to ask themselves. It is this lack of consciousness that made Kadiye hold them in bondage with religious commodification. The Beggar queries Makuri and says:

BEGGAR: But if a man is willing to take a piece of ground and redeem it from the swamp-will they let him? If a man is willing to drain the filth away and make the land yield cocoyams and lettuce-will they let him (17).

Makuri calls his question uttering profanities and concludes that the Beggar is trying to rob the Serpent of the Swamp. It is an irony that the person who comes with a suitable solution for the problem of the swamp dwellers is a blind man whom Makuri sees as an enemy but unfortunately regards the real enemy of the people - Kadiye as a saviour.

This is the same predicaments that retard progress in the present society, especially in Africa, where enemies of the people are celebrated and honoured by the same people who are victims of their selfishness and roguishness. Consequently, political and religious leaders will not stop at anything but exploit, manipulate and brainwash the citizenry for votes, monetary or material gains. The unfortunate thing is that there is no end in sight to this ugly trend as no one questions them and anyone who questions them is branded evil. This trend has caused more harm than good, envy, malice, broken homes, diabolical engagements, conflicts and crises in the society.

However, it appears the Beggar has just opened Igwezu's eyes to make him reason. Suddenly he questions the function, and duty of Kadiye and his involvement in the repeated cycles of suffering that the swamp dwellers find themselves. Soyinka created both characters to be a weighing balance between true worship and commodified worship, he uses the beggar to reveal the consequences of religious commodification on Igwezu and the villagers who refuse to ask questions until the arrival of the Beggar. At this point one can say that the society needs people like the Beggar to get rid of religious commodification because the arrival of the Beggar made Igwezu realize that Kadiye is only using them to achieve commercial and economic goals; hence, he agitates and complains in rhetorical questions:

IGWEZU: Yes is it not strange that his skin is tender? Is it not strange that he is smooth and well preserved?

BEGGAR: Is he fat, master? When he spoke, I determined a certain bulk in his voice.

IGWEZU; Ay, he is fat. He roles himself like a fat and greasy porpoise (28)

It is not surprising that in the midst of suffering and starving population the Kadiye remains well fed and robust while others suffer and languish. The playwright presents the Beggar and Igwezu as the mouth piece that raise issues inherent in religious commodification in the traditional society, where the holy ones live large and their followers wallow in abject poverty. The Beggar reveals this to us as he asks yet another strong question:

BEGGAR: Does the priest live well? Is the serpent well kept and nourished

IGWEZU: You may see for yourself. His thighs are skin full of palm oil

BEGGAR: How does the serpent fare in times of dearth? Does he thrive on the poisonous crabs? Does he drink the Ooze of the mire (29)

The Beggar shifts attention from Kadiye (the priest ) to his god, the serpent of the swamps. He equates the attributes of a serpent to the deity of the swamps; hence, considering the characteristics of a serpent, one begins to see the manipulative approaches of Kadiye and his god and how they reap where they do not sow; through multiple sacrifices that the serpent does not eat kadiye feeds fat, while the people retrogress. Having been sensitized, Igwezu poses questions to Kadiye which he must answer in one word.

IGWEZU: Who must appease the serpent of the swamp?

KADIYE: The Kadiye

IGWEZU: Who takes the gift of the people in order that the beast may be gorged and made sleeping eyed with the feast of sacrifice?

KADIYE: The Kadiye (37)

Kadiye's responses reveal that he is just like a business man, who makes his living out of the weakness, fear, and plight of the people of the swamp. Through religion, he gives them false hope that holds them bondage as captives of the serpent of the swamp. Hence, awareness and conscientization towards freedom and liberation of the people threatens the prison chains Kadiye put around the city. Thus, Igwezu asks Kadiye a question that fortifies the peoples' realization that they have been robbed and defrauded by a charlatan. He asks:

IGWEZU: Why are you so fat, Kadiye? ...You lie upon the land and you choke it in the folds of a serpent. If I slew the fatted calf Kadiye, do you think that the land might breathe again? If I slew all the cattle in the land and sacrificed every measure of goodness, would it make any difference to our fate? (38-39).

Igwezu exposes the Kadiye, carefully noting that their problem is only but nature's course and that Kadiye's sacrifices will not save them rather he will keep enriching himself while they suffer. Hence, Igwezu says: "I know that the floods can come again the swamp will continue to laugh at our endeavours. I know that we can feed the serpent of the swamp and kiss the Kadiye's feet but the vapours will still rise and corrupt the tassel of the corn." (39)

The situation Igwezu finds himself is critical, he feels the harshness of the city, lost his wife to his twin brother, and then lost his crops to the flood; he is finally compelled to leave the swamp so as to avert the wrath of the villagers for questioning Kadiye.



All his misfortunes are the same vicissitudes of life that the Kadiye blessed and took sacrifices to avert, yet Igwezu suffers all of them. No wonder, Igwezu now listens to the wise words of the Beggar that lead him to discovery. Through the reactions of Igwezu, Soyinka exposes religious hypocrisy and the effects of commodification on worship, the individual and the society. The spirituality and sacredness of worship have been distorted in the relationship between Igwezu and Kadiye, as a religious head, Kadiye, destroys the faith of the worshippers because of the falsity of the expected efficacy of the commodified ritual. Wearing the mask of religion, the Kadiye manipulates and exploits the people because of their gullibility and pessimisms in the face of adversity. However, this one dimensional statuesque is eventually countered by the Beggar. Thus, Canice Chukwuma Nwosu affirms that: "The Beggar's optimism contrasts Igwezu's pessimism". Hence, through the Beggar's optimism, Igwezu becomes optimistic and "loses confidence in the yearly rituals and propitiations to the priest of the Serpent of Swamps, eventually, he confronts the priest in antiphonal dialogue. "Like a post modern protagonist in a reformation crusade, Igwezu assaults that which is sacred ... (Nwosu 223).

Soyinka takes this greed among religions leaders to the next level in the second play *the Trials of Brother Jero* and reveals its implications in the modern and urban society. *Trials of Brother Jero* centers on a self styled pompous prophet, Jero; a fake prophet, who makes his living by exploiting his gullible and dependent congregation, Jero is an evangelical con who manipulates his followers through fake prophesies prayers and lies so as to make ends meet.

Soyinka consolidates his condemnation of desecration of the sanctity of the sacred in the traditional society in his exposition of the level of sophistication religious commodification has attained in the modern society. He indicates in the *Trials of Brother Jero*, that traditional and modern religions alike harbour charlatans who differ only in their methods of operation. It shows that this trend is not particular to the traditional society neither did it end with the modern era. Rather this societal evil becomes hydra-headed as years pass by and methods of the perpetrators change. Hence, Kadiye metamorphoses into Brother Jero in *the Trials of Brother Jero*, like *The Swamp Dwellers*, *Trials of Brother Jero* projects a beach of fake prophets and pastors. The protagonist Brother Jero thrives in the business of commodification of worship as his means of survival which he regards as a church. Like modern day prophets, Jero's mastery in the art of speech and eloquence cannot go unnoticed as it seems to be a powerful tool for psychological manipulations.

Hear him:

I am a prophet. A prophet by birth and by inclination. You have probably seen many of us on the streets, many with their own churches many in land, many on the coast, many leading processions, many looking for processions to lead. Infact there are eggs and there are eggs same thing with prophets...I was born a natural prophet. And I grew to love the trade. It used to be a very respectable one in those days and competition was dignified. But in the last few years, the beach has become fashionable and the struggle for land has turned the profession into a thing of ridicule some prophets I could name gained their present beaches by getting women penitents to shake their bossom in spiritual ecstasy (9).

Soyinka satirizes hypocrisy, moral bankruptcy and religious exploitations prevalent in the contemporary Nigerian society in this play. The character Jero represents multiple pastors in the modern day society, whose tactics include "getting women to shake their bosoms in spiritual ecstasy," so that they can convert the church to a mini-club where skimpy, miniskirts and other inappropriate wears are showcased, all in the name of worship. Globalization and modernization of the churches for increased membership is part of the commodification exercise that according to Jero made priesthood lose all the dignity attached to it. Though some men of God still respect the sanctity of worship; the competition of who has the biggest church, highest number of congregation, biggest investments has led to constant fall out between men of God, betrayal, conspiracies against one another just like Jero who out of greed, selfishness and the need to survive deceives his old master and tutor, and takes over his piece of land.

Constantly, Jero refers to the church as trade and business, and his congregation as customers. Hence, it is clear that Jero uses his church as a means of survival like the modern day evangelists who according to Nwosu's theorizations on the Pulpit Theatre evolved theatrical begging as alternative means of livelihood in the mist of harsh economic situations bred by capitalism. Fortunately or unfortunately, this practice is thriving in contemporary African societies because of the society's urgent need for comfort, prosperity, fast miracles and material wealth. Men of God like Jero cash in on these desirous members of the congregations to make their living through exploitation and manipulation of these groups of worshippers. Jero confirms this practice below

... I am glad I got here before any customers – I mean worshippers- if you like. I always get that feeling every morning that I am a shop keeper waiting for customers (20).

Jero's proclamation, simply points towards the present perception of what the church is to pastors and priests who have desecrated the sacredness of worship by reducing the place of worship to a shop. To maintain these "shops", the "shopkeepers" have evolved means to sustain their customers so that profit will keep flowing in. One strategy includes leaving them in a state of dissatisfaction through manipulations. According to brother Jero those who fall for this strategy are the regular ones who come at definite times. They are dissatisfied people. I know they are dissatisfied because I keep them dissatisfied. Once they are full, they won't come again (20).

Prophecies are inevitable aspects of worship and spirituality in Africa, it has been an important aspect of both traditional religion and Christianity. Prophecy involves the reciprocal communication of a prophet with the divine. Hence, the likes of brother Jero have capitalized on fake prophecy to capture the middle class citizens who seek God's blessings for a brighter future and quick progress. Jero's manipulative use of prophecy is evident in the play; he keeps his congregation in a subservient position because he understands what they long for- money, lucrative jobs, social status, and power. Hence, Prophecy and vision becomes the most effective instrument for the practice of religious commodification because of its efficiency in swindling the people, giving them false hope just to keep their purses open. Jero believes that prophecy is his calling; unfortunately, rather than use it positively for evangelism and genuine service of God, he uses it as an instrument of exploitation and extortion. Hear him;

... I have prophesied that he will be made a Chief in his home town. That is a very safe prophecy. As safe as our most popular prophecy, that a man will live to be eighty. If it doesn't come true, that man doesn't find out until he's on the other side.... One of my most faithful adherents- firmly believes that he is going to be the first prime ministers of the new mid-North-East-State- when it is created. That was a risky prophecy of mine, but I badly needed more worshippers around that time (24-25)

The play shows that most prophets and pastors in Nigeria are master strategists, planners and tricksters.

They carefully map out strategies of manipulation and Jero seems to be a master in such acts. This is seen in the encounter between Amope and Jero. Jero's attempt to steal from Amope fails and on finding out that Amope is Chume's "bad mouthed wife" whom he has been holding Chume from beating, he grabs the opportunity to retaliate even at the expense of Chume's patronage to him. Jero's reason for not letting Chume beat his wife shows his skills in strategic planning.

Jero feeds on the weaknesses and the desires of his followers; he exploits these weak people and makes his profit from it. Thus, Jero uses Chume's desire to beat his nagging wife, to achieve his own selfish need, which is removing Amope from his door post where she camps in pursuance of Brother Jero who owes her some money. Chume like most defrauded victims of religious commodification finds out that he has been fooled and goes after Brother Jero looking for revenge. He also discovers that the prophet is a liar, and fraudster who is using people to satisfy his own needs Chume laments. "So...so... suddenly he decides I may beat my wife, eh? For his own convenience. At his own convenience." ( 37). Jero further exposes his monstrous and double faced character by declaring Chume a mad man because he tries to expose Jero for who he really is.

Though Soyinka presents Igwezu in the *Swamp Dwellers* and Chume in the *Trials of Brother Jero* as victims of commodification of worship, the process of change differs. Igwezu needed conscientization while Chume's change comes through self realization. Similarly, the setting of the two plays differ, the *Swamp Dwellers* is a traditional setting while *Trials of Brother Jero* is set in urban city. However they show similarity in their aquatic characteristics that affirm symbolic presence of the supernatural in the physical environment. By and large the two plays portray that it is man's hope in the supernatural that leads to the success of commodification of worship. The two major oppressors and perpetrators of commodification of worship Kadiye and Brother Jero are products of capitalism and failed post-colonial states. They represent the frustrated African postmodern characters identified by Nwosu in his *Beggars' and Pulpitic Theatres*. According to Nwosu:

The Beggars' Theatre is not a theatre of a single beggar and the Pulpitic Theatre as well is not a theatre of a single preacher inside a church building even though there is a certain similitude.

The Pulpitic theatre is organized by groups of "Evangelists" who preach, sing, dance and entertain at market places, motor parks and inside big buses. Similarly, the Beggars' Theatre is a group of beggars who come together for the purpose of earning a living through alternative means rather sitting or standing idly begging. These "troupes" sing, dance, and entertain at motor parks, market places and church premises (231).

However the fraudulent nature of Kadiye and Brother Jero differentiates them from the practitioners of the two theatres mentioned above. While the former defies professional ethics the later enhances and improves it. Nwosu also differs from Soyinka because he focuses on group beggars while Soyinka presents a single beggar. Points of convergence lies in the presentation of worship as an alternative means of survival, like in the Beggars' and Pulpitic Theatres. Kadiye and Brother Jero are the single able bodied beggars who like the present day beggars camouflage their begging activities with religion. Thus, their approach commodifies worship and enables market values replace the social and religious values of worship. The two plays succeeded in passing the playwright's message across, through exposing the effects of commodification on worship, the individual and the society. Furthermore, other themes like betrayal, misconception, rebellion, greed, religious fanaticism and militancy are presented as consequences of the later as seen in the reactions and activities of Igwezu and Chume.

*Swamp Dwellers* and *Trials of Brother Jero* capture the absurdities, follies, prejudices, and inadequacies of religions during different eras in Africa. The playwright dramatizes and condemns these warmer but false presumptions about religion and advocates conscientization, in order to raise the consciousness of the people towards the restoration of the sacred and differentiating it from the realities of life. Like the characters of Igwezu and Chume who are victims of commodification, victims of the opium of religion in the contemporary society, must wake from slumber, debunk fantasies that brainwash the people and make them fanatics and terrorists. Fanaticism will only make such people lose interest in the sacred; thus when it is too late, they become extremists; fundamentalists like the Boko Haram group and follow Igwezu's footsteps in assaulting that which is sacred.

## Conclusion

The researchers during the course of the research deduced that the rate at which commodification of worship is going on in the contemporary society is alarming. The consequences of this trend pose serious threat to moral conduct and spiritual well being of Africans. It is observed that commodification of worship is not limited to the Pentecostal churches and other Western system of worship but it is also practiced in African traditional worship as well. The African dramatist to this effect has highlighted the consequences of these practices in their plays as a means of conscientizing the people to checkmate desecration of the sacred including human life. Hence, the consequences and effects of commodification on worship, society and spirituality as deduced by the researchers from the analysis of the selected case studies are destructive as they debase the citizens.

Furthermore, it is discovered that the perpetrators are the custodians of religion whose original function is to maintain, preserve the sacredness of worship to re-enforce the people's faith, and true worship. The researchers affirmed the failure of religious leaders especially for making religion and worship means of survival in their harsh and capitalist societies. The characters of Kadiye in the *Swamp Dwellers* and Brother Jero in *Trials of Brother Jero* as revealed by the researchers' analyses are archetypes of these religious leaders who defraud the people. Again the researchers also discovered that the people contribute to this manipulation through their ignorance and gullibility. Rather than join in the liberation process, they choose to stay dormant and be manipulated with the promise of a miracle and prophecy, so as to overcome the harsh economic situation in the society. It has been noted that most of the so called "Holy Men" and "Men of God" who operate churches or religious spaces, operate them as "shops", hence the major objective is profit making. Thus, they prosper while their "customers" retrogress and end up as frustrated citizens in the society.

Finally the researchers conclude that the two plays selected for study succeeded in interrogating the trends of commodified worship and the roles of fraudulent religious leaders in the desecration of the sacred. The playwright through these works conscientizes the society and drives towards the sanctification of worship and the stoppage of religious manipulations and exploitations that lead to terrorism and religious war.

The researchers recommend that modern African playwrights should explore the sacred and commodification of worship in their creative enterprise and use it as thematic materials for their plays. The value and function of the sacred in the society should also be promoted as more dramatic works that treat and expose the vices of fake pastors and prophets of the modern churches should be created. This is because it will help curb the consequences of commodification of worship, and help in re-branding the face of worship in African societies and enhance ethical revolution. Such works will help create higher probability for an ethical and moral society.

African playwrights should strive towards the restoration of the sacred, tackling issues of commodification and its destructive effects in most African societies. The dramatist's portrayal of such issues will help in reminding the African society the need and the value of the sacred. The playwright's effort is needed to build a crime free and safe community for the benefit of Africans. This will go a long way to preserve the most integral part of genuine African worship.

African dramatist through drama can restore the sanctity of the sacred by preaching against commodification of worship as they define its effects on the society at large. Through dramatization, commodification and its effect on worship can further be explored by the African dramatist to sensitize the audience. Furthermore if commodification and materialism is wiped out or reduced through this means, the society can feel the relevance of religion and sanctity of the sacred for societal restructuring.

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