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THE CONCEPT OF TRAGEDY IN AFRICAN EXPERIENCE

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# THE CONCEPT OF TRAGEDY IN AFRICAN EXPERIENCE

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The title of this paper probably seems rather bold, presumptuous and self-deterministic, especially in an era where the African is seriously and relentlessly urged to dissolve into the melting pot of universalism. But bolder and presumptuous is probably the notion that there could be a concept of tragedy which could be termed African. The overwhelming grip which Euro-American theorists, critics and writers have on us seems to have turned us away from important concepts and metaphysical speculations which are common knowledge in our various communities. And in Nigeria where the emphasis on ethnic heterogeneity and sub-ethnic differences is a serious matter, it is probably even more ridiculous that one should be as presumptuous. But one makes bold to take this stance because, beneath the superficial differences is a general common denominator born of common humanity, general geographical conditions, and common experiences at traumatic moments of our history as a race. There is no doubt that there exists shades of differences in the cultural manifestations of our humanity and world view, yet there is a silver thread running through the rainbow. It is on the strength of this conviction that this topic was chosen, and for the same reason the Edo(Bi-i) and the Umu Ezechima peoples of Bendel State of Nigeria were also chosen as a paradigm. For it shall be through their cosmology and metaphysical speculations that the concept of

tragedy within African experience shall be examined.

Tragedy may be broadly defined as a purposive volitional involvement in a serious action which is moral, noble and desirable, but whose consequences are painful, even fatal. It is an experience where man is thrown into critical dilemmas which are difficult or impossible to escape. Man, as a sentient and moral being, is puzzled by the mysterious and inexplicable realities of life. But due to his restlessness and insistence on knowing the final truth and ultimate realities, he thrusts himself into a probing action whose repercussions find him at variance with his initial noble purpose. He is consequently caught in a web which seems to be of his own making, while at the same time, the making of a mind outside his own control and comprehension. He eventually finds himself at the mercy of a world which inspired him to quest, but which repudiates him so severely for the same. Man thus finds himself propelled and constrained to assert himself for his own survival in a world with its own will to exist, even at the expense of the well-being and the very life of man. Both forces invariably collide and man suffers or dies. It appears therefore that to exist means an infringement on the will or mind of cosmos, yet man must exist. He insists, and in tragedy, the universe revolts and man is crushed in the process.<sup>1</sup>

The primary concern of this paper is to examine some answers within the African context to questions raised by

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<sup>1</sup>William G. McCollom, TRAGEDY. (New York: The Macmillan Co., 1957) pp. 8-12



painful experiences while in pursuit of a noble and morally desirable course. The African, like other peoples of the world, also asked and still continues to ask questions. But for a better understanding of the point of view of the African, the cosmology of the people being used as a paradigm shall first be presented.

Tragedy as a moral aciton, occurs in a world with clear definitions of the essence of life, man's place in it, the moral codes that should guide the members of the community, and man's general relationship to his creator. It is a world whose ethics derive from the moral consciousness of the group.<sup>2</sup>

Among the Edo(Bini) and the Umu Ezechima there exists three significant concepts of tragedy:

1. suffering or tragic experience as a result of introducing new items into one's destiny while still here on earth.
2. an assertion of the individual's will at the expense of the common good and the well-being of the group.
3. a deliberate act of redemptive suffering for the sake of the group.

The Edo(Bini) cosmos is represented in a triangular metaphorical image of a king, a head queen, and a head servant. The king rules over his kingdom, the head queen rules over the palace household, and the head servant officiates as a house governor. The king is Osalobua, the Supreme Deit , the initiator of all things but Himself not initiated or created by any outside force. He is the Supreme Creator, the First Cause and reigns over the universe. The Headqueen is Avbeombo, and symbolically represents the earth and is thus the mother of all. The head servant, Esu, links Osalobue, the Headqueen, and the rest of creation as the head of the domestic sector of the kingdom. Both Avbeombo and Esu are minor deities, though,

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<sup>2</sup>J.O. Awolalu, "The African Traditional View of Man" in ORITA: Ibadan Journal of Religious Studies, V1/2, Dec. 1972 (Ibadan University Press, 1973) p. 114



the head queen as mother earth, is a more important deity than Esu. Both deities and many other minor ones are responsible to Osalobua. It was when some discord or misunderstanding arose among them that the cosmos became disrupted. Esu was mainly the cause of the disruption, but Avbeombo contributed when she allowed her motherly compassion to influence her judgment.

Esu was a very good and faithful servant until, as a result of an over-estimation of his own worth, he defied Osalobua. He was promptly ejected from the kingdom and flung into an abyss. The head queen, touched by Esu's plight, secretly brought him back and re-engaged him as a gateman. Esu, being near enough to the corridor of his former power but still too far from it to be effective, rebelled in frustration against Osalubua and His creation. Man, as the crown of creation, became Esu's main target.

The Umu Ezechima, as a people of Edo(Bini) origin, also share the same views but with some modifications and additions here and there. Osobue, the Supreme Deity, is also the source from which all things, good and bad, originated. "Osobue ke nma, ya ke njo " (Osobue created good and evil) is a common saying among them. This is so because, according to them all that are came from Osobue. The good was however more powerful than the non-good. The good contained the non-good in its being, but with a room for some moments of ripples on the part of the non-good. It was only after a certain incident when the non-good became over active at the expense of the good that the forces of Good and Evil emerged. The former became known as Osobue and the latter as Uke, the devil or

evil. Yet the fact of everything having emanated from a common source also means that all creatures possess both qualities of good and evil. Hence both in natural forces and in man there is a predominance of good with moments of evil outbursts. This, according to the Umu Ezechima, is the explanation for such natural phenomena as floods, volcanic eruptions, storms, etc., especially if man is not responsible for their occurrences. This is also the explanation for what they call natural evil inclinations in human beings. These inclinations are usually brought under control as a result of the overwhelming influence of the good. But when evil forces are excessive they are usually the activities of Uke. It should also be mentioned here that because Uke was once a part of Osobue, it also follows that Uke possesses innate goodness. And as a result, Uke is also capable of desiring good, pursuing it, has a certain degree of moral awareness, and at times may serve as a guardian angel to some individuals. But Uke is essentially evil and engages in disorganising and disrupting Osobue's creation. Man, as the crown of creation, is also his main target.

The importance of man lies in his greater spiritual potency which in turn qualifies him to participate actively in the making of his own destiny. The emphasis is essential goodness and optimism vis-a-vis the essential innate evil, depravity and incapacitating pessimism of the Euro-American world. It is believed among the people that man existed in essence in the spirit world as part of Osalobua or Osobue before it became flesh. In that state of being, man is possessed of the basic attributes of goodness, spiritual potency and high level of moral consciousness. Man in flesh is simply the spiritual essence incapsulated in the physical frame.



In other words, man is a walking spirit.<sup>3</sup> It is on the strength of these facts that man is the only creature given the power to participate in the making of his own destiny. The belief is that if given an opportunity to decide the content of one's own destiny the individual would choose the best for oneself. And as it obtains among the Umu Ezechima, the good in man naturally propels him to wish the good and the noble for himself. "Wa adi asi madu g'ekwue ka enue gadi, o si na oma diliya nma." (One does not have an opportunity to wish oneself well, but wishes evil instead.) It is therefore believed that in essence man planned a good life for himself but in the process of his journey to earth certain things went amiss. This occurred at two very crucial transitional stages. They occurred at heaven's gate where he encountered Esu or Uke, and at birth where he must pass through the "river" of the womb.

In the first stage, the individual is usually intercepted by Esu or Uke and his assistants, Idobo, Ese and Osome. They entice him into Esu's kingdom where his destiny is disorganised and distorted. It must be mentioned here that not all individuals are trapped by Esu. Some fortunate individuals may pass through the heaven's gate at a time when Esu is busy distracting and disorganising the destiny of others. In that case, such individuals are free but might still fail to realize a fruitful destiny as a result of a failure to co-operate with one's Ehi or Ashi, the guardian spirit who witnessed the contract

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<sup>3</sup>W. E. Abraham, The Mind of Africa, University of Chicago Press, 1962, p. 51.

of destiny between the individual's essence and Osalobua or Osobue. It is also at this stage of the individual's journey to earth that his essence may be completely destroyed and Esu or Uke incarnated in the person's physical frame. The living spirit of Osobue or the essence of the individual which was encased in the material, in this case, is dislodged and dispossessed for as long as it takes the person's spiritual essence to return to Osalobua or Osobue. This latter situation is more serious in that such an individual loses control of his being and is completely blunted both morally and spiritually. These are the individuals who are born wicked and therefore constitute the greatest threat to the people's cosmos. The Umu Ezechima expatiated its far-reaching consequences as follows.

The Umu Ezechima believe that when the first persons were created they each started a family tree. Each family tree retains its identity and grows through the re-incarnation of its members. And as there is a physical family tree here on earth so also is there a spirit family tree in the spirit world. The essence of the family remains and grows as the members live and die. The essence of each individual member re-incarnates through several new additions to the earthly family tree until he completely exhausts the several parts of his own physical frame. After this, he becomes re-absorbed into the spirit of Osobue from where he might start another tree and new series of re-incarnation.

The family tree in essence is started by an individual's spiritual essence which in time grows, through series of deaths and re-incarnation, into an extended family, a village, a town and a kingdom just as the physical family tree also grows.



Hence just as the act of an individual can disrupt the earthly family so also can it disrupt the spirit family tree.

An individual into whom Uke is incarnated is a problem to both the earthly and spirit family trees. The crux of the problem lies in the fact of re-incarnation.

When the essence of an individual leaves Osobue after having taken to a destiny, it joins a spirit family tree and incarnates through an ancestor. If on his journey to earth his essence is destroyed by Uke who in turn replaces it with its own evil essence, the family tree through whom he has chosen to incarnate is automatically polluted. This pollution is further complicated because of the series of re-incarnation his essence will have to undergo before it finally rejoins Osobue. And being thus possessed by Uke, he naturally leads an evil life and by it disrupts both his spirit and temporal family trees. As those to whom he has done evil abuse and curse him so are both his spirit and temporal family trees. When he does die, fear grips the temporal family tree because no one can control his spirit nor can any one prevent his re-incarnation through a new addition to the family. For the parents through whose child this evil ancestor re-incarnates would be daily bedeviled with myriads of purificatory rites related to the evils perpetrated by him in his previous life before the child may lead a normal life.

In addition to the agony experienced by the immediate parents of the child is that experienced by the extended family, community or kingdom. Through series of re-incarnation this evil possessed ancestor proliferates, for as he re-

incarnates he multiplies his number. Each re-incarnation also starts a new series of re-incarnation. And in this process both the spirit and temporal families are inundated with evil individuals who pose a dire threat to their very existence. For these reasons people are usually very perturbed by the presence of such individuals in their family. Such people cannot be changed nor can their essence be destroyed. The only alternative is a series of purificatory rituals, which, hopefully, might succeed in transferring their spirit into an Elo Oga, a type of mushroom which dies in the evening of the same day it comes to life, and an anthill. He might spring to life again, but he must die the same day and never return as a human being.

This is not the proper place to expatiate on the system whereby re-incarnation is determined, but a mention should be made of the difference between the re-incarnation of the essence of the departed and the actual return of the dead through a new addition to the family.

In the case of the re-incarnation of the essence of an ancestor, the process is controlled by the physical being of the individual. The parts of the body return separately, one at a time, until the physical structure of the ancestor is completely exhausted. In this case, the essence may re-incarnate as many times as is required to exhaust the person's physical constitution. In addition, the essence can also assume whatever sex it wishes

at any particular period of re-incarnation. Consequently an ancestor through this system of re-incarnation has the privilege of experiencing life from the perspective of both sexes. Thus what he suffered in the previous life as a result



of his sex, he attempts to rectify by returning differently.

In the case of the direct return of the departed, there is only one return and only one sex. This second system is very brief and very obvious. Generally, the ancestor involved must have just died before the birth of the new child through whom he is returning. It requires no consultation with the oracle as is the case in the former. It also poses little problem because of its limitations in its ability to proliferate. It is the re-incarnation of the essence of the departed that constitutes a threat to life and is thus crucial in the people's concept of tragedy.

The other crucial transitional stage in man's journey to earth was earlier referred to as the "river" or the "liquid veil of the womb". The "river" of the womb serves two purposes. It encases the essence in flesh at a delicate point of transition when the flesh is still highly spiritually potent. The womb is an abyss between the spirit and the temporal worlds. The forces and traumas from both worlds do collide within an uncircumscribed and humanly uncontrollable gulf. The "river" of the womb serves as a protective shield for the flesh in transition.

On the other hand, it also serves as a "liquid veil" which preserves the spiritual potency in the process of birth when the membrane ruptures. It is believed that man forgets the content of his destiny after birth as a result of this action. This is necessary otherwise man might become a god here on earth. Thus at birth, this "river" washes away some of the individual's knowledge of himself in his spiritual state and makes him a finite being.<sup>4</sup> Consequent to this

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<sup>4</sup> Bolaji Idowu, Olodumare: God In Yoruba Belief, (New York: Frederick A. Praeger, 1963) pp. 170 - 200.

reduced spiritual potency, the individual's spiritual guardian, the Ehi or Ashi, guides and directs the individual provided the person is co-operative.

Man finally arrives here on earth either confused, disorganised, spiritually diminished or completely destroyed. The spiritual guardian whose greater spirituality should have been of greater use is forced to depend to a great extent on the cooperation of his confused and devitalized ward. Man thus groaps about on earth and in the spirit world seeking the fulfilment of a yearning which he verbalized in essence before Osobue, but whose fulfilment eludes him. Death offers him an opportunity to return to the spirit world for a re-assessment and re-organisation of his destiny while the system of re-incarnation offers him an opportunity to test the new blueprint.

Each individual in flesh undergoes certain experiences here on earth which he might wish to retain or alter when he re-incarnates. After death his spirit returns to Osalobua or Osobue to report of his sojourn and to add or delete items from his book of destiny which he believes would respectively enhance or prevent a meaningful life on his return to earth. The Supreme Deity would once again sanction the new destiny and again the individual returns to earth for yet another attempt at a meaningful and fulfilling life. But complications would invariable enter into the exercise because each cycle is a new life with new or different problems to solve. And as long as man is in the flesh he must know and see in part. Consequently, the individual might have deleted from his book of destiny an item without which his previous sojourn might not have been successful, but



an item which he must have been blinded to by a lack which he understood to have been responsible for his previous unsuccessful sojourn. And once more, the individual on his return to earth receives the desired addition to his book of destiny but still fails to achieve ultimum fulfilment and fruition because, in his finitude, he has deleted or forgotten to include in his destiny important items which he would have needed for a fruitful and satisfying life. Thus one who enjoyed material wealth but had no children in his previous sojourn might be so obsessed with an ever-riding desire to include children in his modified destiny that he might forget to include money and other material necessities required for their maintenance. He would naturally have the children but would still suffer as a result of material deprivation. Another individual, in a bid to avoid a repeat of an unsuccessful and miserable marriage, might alter her destiny on her return to include series of marriages of short duration. In other words, a bad husband would soon vanish from one's life for hopefully, a better husband. And in most aggrieved cases, those husbands must vanish through the intervention of death. When, however, the individual returns to be wedded to good men she suffers the agony of their deaths. And like a vicious circle, man pursues a dream which, in his finitude, he believes he has the power to bring to fruition, but which never does because of the inexplicable mysteries and complications of life.

The concern of this paper is the concept of tragedy within African experience. In the above presentation of Edo (Bini) and the Umu Exechima cosmology, certain concepts and forces which contribute to human suffering were examined.

Tragedy was defined not simply as any human suffering, but that which arises in the process of executing a well-intentioned moral action. The emphasis is on volitional involvement where the agent believes in the morality and desirability of his objective and course of action, expects approbation and acceptance but meets with disaster instead. As a finite being he embarks on a moral action, not aware of the hidden and mysterious forces which might work against his objective. He is only fully aware of the pull in him which propels him to thrust all his being into an abyss of a universe which in his moments of self-assessment and noble elevation he believes himself capable of controlling and overcoming, but which, at the moment of truth, he finds himself reduced to nothing. Truth and reality split apart. The noble action looms before us as an event that shows the terrifying aspects of existence. It reveals ~~in~~ myriads of painful colours ~~it~~ entanglement ~~with~~ the uncharted background of man's humanity.<sup>5</sup> It is an action whose consequences call up out of the depths the eternal questions of existence, what ~~it~~ means to be. It recalls the original terror, reaching back to a world that antedates the conceptions of philosophy, the consolations of religions and whatever constructions science has devised to persuade ~~an~~ that his universe is secure. It recalls the original un-reason, the terror of the irrational, and sees man as a questioner, naked, unaccommodated, alone, facing

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<sup>5</sup>Karl Jaspers, "Basic Characteristics of the Tragic" in Tragedy: Vision and Form, Robert W. Corrigan, ed., (San Francisco, Chandler Publishers, 1965) pp. 43 7 46.



mysterious, demonic forces in his own nature and outside, and the irreducible facts of suffering and death.<sup>6</sup> Generations have questioned and given some answers and insight, Africans not exempted. Three significant reasons or answers to the problem of painful experiences while engaged in a volitional purposive action which is serious and morally admirable were presented earlier. They shall now be analyzed.

The first ~~states~~ that one undergoes such painful experiences if one introduces new and extraneous items into one's destiny while still on earth. It is believed that once the contract of destiny (ikwe Nkwa) has been sealed by Osalobua or Osobue with the full knowledge and consent of the individual's essence it is irrevocable and unalterable until after death when one returns to the Creator for necessary changes if the individual wishes it. It is the duty of the individual to seek to abide by the content of his destiny rather than fight it. The tragic figure, in African experience is not impelled to "...fight against his destiny..."<sup>7</sup> because it is assumed that if he was given an opportunity to participate in the making of it, he naturally would have chosen a good one. Hence, instead of fighting it he seeks to discover its contents and tries to bring it into fruition. He would however, work against his destiny unwittingly as a result of his diminished spiritual potency during the second transitional stage at birth. In this case, the individual upon arriving on earth might discover many things to desire and possess

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<sup>6</sup> Richard B. Sewall, The Vision of Tragedy (New Haven : Yale University Press, 1967) pp. 4-5

<sup>7</sup> Ibid. p. 4.

which he probably failed to state before the Supreme Deity and which consequently failed to receive sanction.<sup>8</sup> Having forgotten the content of his destiny, the individual may pursue the wrong objectives and desires, while in the process he loses sight of what he had stated and accepted in essence. What he pursues may be noble and worthwhile, but because they are not in his destiny, they will fail to materialize. The individual eventually wastes his life in the pursuit of what he would never achieve, and in the process he suffers emotional distress, frustration and even death. This situation is often likened to the experiences of a business man who embarks on a project with a definite and clearly stated objective. He maps out his programme and commences on a business venture sure and sober. But upon arriving on the scene of action, he gets distracted by other tempting and highly promising proposals. He instantly succumbs and embarks on a programme different from the original one without first considering the facts. Such a man would generally meet with economic disaster.

Though seemingly far-fetched, this analogy seems in order. For an individual who gets distracted to items not included in his programme of life would surely suffer disappointments, heartbreaks, frustration and in some cases, death. The belief is that one does not get what one did not ask for before embarking on one's earthly sojourn., and if one does, one must suffer, noble and moral objectives notwithstanding.

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<sup>8</sup>. E. Bolaji Idowu, Olodumare: God In Yoruba Belief, pp. 170-181.



But the tragedy of it lies in the fact of the individual not knowing that he has digressed. He suffers, but elicits sympathy and concern because his plight reminds one of the human condition.

The next states that tragic experience may ensue as a result of the individual's assertion of will at the expense of the common. The quest here is also noble and morally desirable, but pursued at the expense of the group. Although such tragic figures are usually propelled by some forces within the system to assert their own will against that of the group, there is generally no sympathy for such an individual in the altruistic communalistic African society. Man is created for the purpose of fellowship. He is not left to the whims and caprices of his passions and lusts. "His rights and obligations are prescribed, his duties are enjoined, and his relations to others are regulated."<sup>9</sup> Yet in essence man seems to be given the type of freedom which it appears he is denied here on earth. Man, according to E. Bolaji Idowu, is an enigma to his fellowman and to himself. He received his first consciousness of himself as a being-in-relation to the physical universe, to the various aspects of the created order, to the Supreme Deity, and to other persons, yet this self-conscious being asserts his own will against the system that gave him the image which he asserts. In the process there are confrontations and encounters with others, resulting in reactionary attitudes, comments and personal judgments by others. The end result is usually a head-on collision.

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<sup>9</sup>J. O. Awolalu, "The African Traditional View of Man", in Orita: Ibadan Journal of Religious Studies, VI/2 Dec. 1972, p. 114

And in the African context, such a tragic ~~figure~~ figure suffers and deserves it.<sup>10</sup>

In Euro-American world where destiny is seen as being basically against man, the attitude is different. The individual deserves to resist any system which denies him a meaningful life even if in the process the group or other individuals suffer. Any system or ideology or religion which dehumanizes any individual member of the society or denies him liberty and self-fulfillment should be resisted for one's own ~~sk~~ sake because in the final analysis it is the individual that counts. And if, in a tragic action, the individual must fight with his own life, let it be. For tragedy "...is the consequence of a man's total compulsion to evaluate himself just...<sup>11</sup>

J. O. Awolalu objects to any action which would jeopardize the common good for personal and selfish reasons. For according to him, though Africans also object to oppression African ethic and philosophy do not permit self assertion at the expense of the common good. Man is created as a being-in-relation. "...the behaviour of every member of the community is of concern to all... Disloyalty in the communalistic set-up was held to endanger the very fabric of the society extending to and including the spirit of the departed."<sup>12</sup> In other words, the will of the group must over-ride the interest of the individual. The individual has

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10. E. Bolaji Idowu, "An Introduction: Man, An Enigma", in ORITA: Ibadan Journal of Religious Studies VI/2 Dec. 1972 p. 67

11. Arthur Miller, "Tragedy and the Common Man", in The Idea of Tragedy, C. Benson, T. Littleton, ed. (Glenview, Scott, Foreman & Co. 1966) pp. 69-70.

12. J. O. Awolalu, "The African Traditional View of Man" Op. Cit. pp. 112-113.



a limited freedom to exercise and assert his own will. But when one does so at the expense of the group chaos is precipitated. Consequently such an offender must suffer for his action without eliciting any sympathy from others. For such an individual is seen as an agent of discord and chaos, lacking in moral altruism and wholesome human relations.<sup>13</sup> The individual is not greater than his community and should therefore not deliberately embark on an action that would jeopardize the life of the community or the family.

In Euro- American world, all serious actions with moral objective generally elicit the feeling of concern for the suffering agent, even the volitional purposeful quest is selfish and self-centered. The emphasis seems to be on the survival of the individual even if at the expense of the common good. For, according to Henrick Ibsen, any action embarked upon for one's own good is justified.

The individual is a revolutionary man, superior to all confining social, political, or moral imperatives, who finds his purpose in the pursuit of his own personal... self-realization is the highest value, and if this conflicts with the public welfare, then the welfare can go hang. Now there is absolutely no reasonable necessity for the individual to be a citizen...on the contrary, the state is the curse of the individual...The state must be abolished!<sup>14</sup>

Thus the individual deliberately poises his own will against the common good for his own personal good. And this action appears inevitable in a cosmology where the individual in essence did not participate in the making of his own destiny.

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J.A. Sofola, African Culture and The African Personality: What Makes An African Person African, (Ibadan: African Resources Publishers, 1973) p. 67.

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Robert Brustein, The Theatre of Revolt: An Approach to the Modern Drama, (London: Mathuen & Co. Ltd., 1964) pp. 38-39.

Instead, it was formulated and thrust at each individual. God in His own goodness or displeasure, through incomprehensible decrees decides the fate of every individual and regulates the tiniest details of the cosmos from eternity. The individual has no voice and cannot alter any aspect of God's decree.<sup>15</sup> Caught in such a web it would thus appear reasonable that the individual would stubbornly fight with his own life, if need be, to gain that which he was denied opportunity to possess even in essence. It follows, therefore, that the individual in tragic action should "...fight against his destiny, kick against the pricks, and state his case before God or his fellows."<sup>16</sup>

In Edo (Bini) and Umu Ezechima cosmology, where the individual participated in the making of his destiny, one must stay within reasonable limits and avoid disrupting the life and destiny of others with his narcissism. But if he must assert himself to a disruptive extent, he must suffer the dire consequences without any sympathetic understanding from the community.

The third and final significant concept of tragedy to be considered is that in which one deliberately chooses to suffer for the common good. We have termed it as an altruistic redemptive suffering. Redemptive suffering is nothing new to human experience. Human history is replete with it from Prometheus of Greece to the Christ of Christianity. But a special notion of redemptive suffering is apparent here.

Our concept of suffering which is redemptive in its design and purpose emanates from the disruption of the people's

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<sup>15</sup> Max Weber, The Protestant Ethic and The Spirit of Capitalism, (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1958) p.104

<sup>16</sup> Richard B. Sewall, The Vision of Tragedy, p. 4



cosmos through the activities of an individual in whom Uke or Esu is incarnated. The crux of the problem lies in the threat posed by the proliferation of such a person's essence. As an individual whose moral consciousness has been blunted and whose good essence has been destroyed, he is not expected to be accountable for his actions. The point was made earlier that such an individual is insensitive and unfeeling. He is like a mad man and therefore has to be saved by the sane. And as a disruptive agent both to the spirit and temporal cosmos, a redemptive agent is required to re-establish order and equilibrium. This agent must voluntarily offer himself for this mission and must not, by any act of omission or commission, add to the already threatening disorder and chaos. His primary mission is to serve as an antidote to the disorganisation and moral disorder which another member of the community has precipitated. Such a redemptive agent is also believed to possess the moral qualities and spiritual potency required for his mission. And in most cases, this type of volitional involvement is fraternal. It is usually one's own close relation, a brother, sister or a cousin, who would thus offer himself. But at the moment when the agent plunges into action, the whole truth of the situation is mysteriously veiled. The attitude generally runs as follows: A brother seems possessed by Uke; he acts unaware of what he is doing and insensitive to the havoc he is causing. He is not himself and therefore cannot be held responsible for his actions. I am his brother, and I am sane and sober. I am capable of counteracting my brother's evil with my good essence to avoid chaos and destruction. I will help save my brother and my people. Ewere of the famous Ogieka sisters of Edo (Bini) and Moremi of Ile-Ife are

are examples. But in a tragic mould this noble stanne gets bedeviled with inexplicable problems. Generally the action commences unclouded and uncomplicated, but later unfold certain experiences which make a mockery of the redemptive agent and his mission. It might be ingratitude as in the case of Moremi after offering her only child for the salvation of the people of Ile-Ife, or a callous slap in the face as in the case of Ewere whose junior sister, Oyoyo, engaged in an illicit affair with her own husband at a time when she offered to rectify the disorder precipitated by her Uke possessed senior sister, Ubi. The shock of the incest was enough to make Ewere abandon her mission or commit suicide. But another abomination would have trippled what Ubi and Oyoyo had done, and thrice greater would have been the threat to the people's cosmos and very existence. Thus agonised by unexpected turn of events, the redemptive agent has to live and suffer rather than take his life or abandon what was a noble mission. Moremi, though she was finally honoured and enshrined by the people of Ile-Ife as also did the Edo (Bini) for Ewere, could be heard questioning:

Was it a sin, Almighty God,  
To have saved Ifes from that  
rod of scourge, for which I must atone  
By bearing this distress alone?<sup>17</sup>

Such tragic figures usually choose to persevere and endure trying agonies, the like which Wole Soyinka referred to as a redemptive suffering in his explanation of Obatala's tragic

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<sup>17</sup> J.O.O. Abiri, Moremi: An Epic of Feminine Heroism, Ibadan: Onibonoje Press & Book Industries, 1970) p. 38.



experience.

At every stage he is the embodiment of the suffering spirit of man, uncomplaining, agonised, full of the redemptive qualities of the spirit of endurance and martyrdom.<sup>18</sup>

But in the end, the redemptive act succeeds even though the agent has lived a life of distressing agony. It appears in this case that the end justifies the means. If an individual would choose to live a life of agony for the common good it was a noble act and must receive approbation and elicit sympathy from others. The question is usually not asked as to whether it was in the agent's destiny to undertake such a mission. It is usually assumed that one who boldly thrusts himself into such a serious action must have had it written in his destiny otherwise the venture would have miscarried and would have thrown the people's existence into a complete disarray. In addition one might also suggest that for such a redemptive act the agent must possess a high level of moral consciousness, high degree of altruism and spiritual potency. He suffers in addition to what he had seen and anticipated because of his finitude and the inscrutable and inexplicable mysteries of life. But in the manifest defeat and destruction of the tragic figure, positive affirmations about life and the order of which humanity is part are made. The vindication of human qualities, the strange assurance of their values, their truth, and their enduring power that alone engenders sublimation seem only to come from higher truths enshrined in the same mysteries of life.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> Wole Soyinka, "The Fourth Stage" in The Morality of Art, D.W. Jefferson, ed. (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1969) pp. 128-129

<sup>19</sup> Ivor Morris, Shakespeare's God: The Role of Religion In The Tragedies, (George Allen & Unwin Ltd. London, 1972) p. 194.

Three concepts of tragedy within African experience were examined and what seems to have unfolded seems to anchor heavily on the existence of the individual in essence, his meaningful participation in the fashioning of his destiny in that spiritual state and what he does on earth as regards his destiny, the destiny of others, the general common good and his search for his place in general order of the cosmos. The intensity and profundity of tragic experience seems to depend on the interaction of his essence, his destiny, and the well-being of others. The tragic life is a painful one, but it appears that it is through its traumas that man seems to gain a glimpse of eternal truth.