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Heroic Epic Aesthetics in Wale Ogunyemi's *Langbodo*: Towards an Ethical Approach

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Abstract

The epic tradition, in literary history, had always been to celebrate great actions of one or more legendary heroes of a community who were able to perform extraordinary and superhuman exploits in the interest of their communities. Such heroes often engaged in highly challenging and tortuous voyages, serious battles of life and death, and other exploits, to protect or promote their human societies. A close study of Wale Ogunyemi's *Langbodo* provides us with a paradigm for heroic epic in African drama. Hence, using 'genresical approach,' this paper examines the aesthetics of heroic epic in African drama with a particular focus on Ogunyemi's work. It avouches that the play is concerned with human heroic exploits and superhuman deeds which range the protagonist among epic characters, and that genuine heroism lies on duty, courage, persistency, and discipline, among others. Precisely, Ogunyemi's play, beyond conveying the heroic attributes of the lead character, exposes human foibles and aims at inculcating right behaviours in the human society.

Keywords: Aesthetics, didacticism, heroic epic, African drama

Introduction

The epic tradition constitutes a major part of world literature from ancient times to the modern era. The epic began as a long narrative work that celebrates heroic deeds, recounts foundational myths, and embodies the cultural values of a people. It tells the stories of legendary heroes who accomplish amazing feats for their communities, facing difficult journeys and serious battles to protect their people. These heroes are often imbued with superhuman capabilities, humanistic will and character, and altruistic mien to save humanity, ameliorate its crises or at least make it a better place to live in.

Classical and classic examples of epic literature include Virgil's *Aeneid* (30–20 BCE), Homer's *Iliad* and *Odyssey* (8thC BCE) and the Anglo-Saxon *Beowulf* (8thC AD). The epic tradition from its original poetic form is heroic poetry which encapsulated the totality of the literary genres and soon featured in dramatic and prose forms too. In pre-

literate societies of Africa, there was a spontaneous use of orature—the oral forms of the arts—to educate, entertain, inform and inculcate the right societal norms and values in citizens, especially the young generation. In oral narratives that are often dexterous concatenations of all the literary genres, epical characters are celebrated as achievers, recognized, promoted and recommended for emulation. Legends narrating the adventures and heroic actions of human characters are used to inspire the younger generation to quintessential heights of achievement.

Similar themes are evident in Ogunyemi's *Langbodo*. This work is an adaptation of D. O. Fagunwa's 1938, *Ògbójú Ọdẹ nínú Igbó Irúnmọlẹ* (The Valiant Hunter in the Forest of a Thousand Daemons) in dramatic form. The novel had earlier been translated into English by Wole Soyinka as *Forest of a Thousand Daemons: A Hunter's Saga* (1968). Daniel Orowole Olorunfemi Fagunwa (1903–1963) was a veteran and highly creative writer who pioneered the Yoruba language novel. Aside *Ògbójú Ọdẹ nínú Igbó Irúnmọlẹ* (1938), his other classic novels include *Igbó Olódùmarè* (*The Forest of God*, 1949), *Ìrèké Oníbùdó* (1949), *Ìrìnkèrindò nínú Igbó Elégbèje* (*Expedition to the Mount of Thought*, 1954), and *Adiitú Olódùmarè* (1961).

In adapting the highly interesting Yoruba novel into a play in English language, Ogunyemi selected the most stimulating events in *Ògbójú Ọdẹ nínú Igbó Irúnmọlẹ* to achieve his thematic foci. The title of the play, *Langbodo*, is taken from the original mountain—"Oke Langbodo"—visited by hunters in Fagunwa's novel. The novel that inspired Soyinka's translation into English and Ogunyemi's adaptation into dramatic genre is full of very fascinating adventures, epical feats, and entertaining deeds. It is filled with wisdom, proverbs, norms and values of the Yoruba people. The novel can be described as an African thriller that is devoid of any dull moments. This perhaps informs Ogunyemi's choice of it for a dramatic adaptation. The bulk of the original creativity therefore goes to Fagunwa. Hence, the utilization of this creativity by a veteran playwright who knows his onions makes the high appeal to become scintillating in superlative terms.

Fagunwa had a limited education (Standard Six) during the colonial times. There is no evidence that he was exposed to much of Western literature, especially the great epics that have remained relevant over centuries. It is safe to say that he was not inspired by them. He was rather exposed to the autochthonous African oral traditions of heroic epics, legends, fables, among others. Hence, he took his styles and thematic projection from the vast pool of African orature which were in vogue and being used to entertain, educate, and propagate correct ethical norms and values in pre-colonial African societies. Africa had her epics as well as other artistic forms before the infiltration of Western education as replicated in Ogunyemi's *Langbodo*. The paper, therefore, identifies and analyses the aesthetic elements in African heroic epic drama, using Ogunyemi's *Langbodo* as a paradigm.

Epic Tradition and African Heroic Epic

An epic is an extended narrative in poetic, dramatic and/or musical form dealing with topics or themes that are central to the cultures in which it is produced. It is a long narrative that relates the heroic deeds of a person of an unusual courage and unparalleled bravery, written in grandiose style. The hero is usually the representative of the values of a certain culture, race, nation or a religious group whose destiny depends on his victory or failure. Therefore, certain supernatural forces, *deus ex machina*, help the hero, who comes out victorious at the end. In the words of Akporobaro, "the hero, usually protected by or even descended from gods, performs superhuman exploits in battle or in marvellous voyages, often saving or founding a nation" (53). The epic tradition has been part of the

various cultures throughout human history. In the ancient classical tradition, among the most representative examples of ancient epic heroes are the Greek Achilles in the *Iliad*, the Greek Odysseus in the *Odyssey*, and the Trojan Aeneas in the *Aeneid*.

The African heroic epics belong in the oral traditions of the people of Africa. Accordingly, Biebuyck describes the African heroic epics as “long orally transmitted poetic narratives presented in an episodic manner and intermittently” (5). These African heroic epics “occur in many versions and are built around central thematic cores and plans by many, frequently unrelated, and independently working, bards...who perform, create, and recreate the specific epic tradition in their own manner” (Biebuyck, 5). In view of this, it is obvious that in whatever version it may occur, the central theme of the African heroic epic often revolves around the valorous exploits of the hero.

The African heroic epics possess some significant characteristics. One of these, according to Biebuyck, is that they are composed and narrated in “a rich, highly poetic, difficult African language” (5). They are usually formulated in verse form or a combination of poetic verse and rhythmic prose. Part of their themes, characters, episodes, and events are usually known to common storytellers, and they are not strange to the audience either. This is because many of these epics are narrated before a large and diverse audience, and their themes are known to the general public. In essence, the storytellers and the audience or audience participation constitute two major features of African heroic epics. The three categories of participants in the African heroic epics are the actual narrators, his aides including apprentices, and the actively participating audience. These participants usually and constantly interplay and interact among themselves during the narration (Biebuyck, 22). This interaction is usually in the form of singing, clapping, dancing, and responding to “calls”, as in the “call and response” scenarios in the performance.

One instance of the African traditional epic from West Africa is the *Ozidi* epic of the Ijaw of Southern Nigeria. This epic has been written, performed, and published by J. P. Clark-Bekederemo in 1966. The epic recounts the heroic exploits of the younger Ozidi. His father, Ozidi, is the most prominent warlord of all the many warlords in the city-state of Orua. He is conspired against and killed in an ambush by several other warlords. The epic deals with the extraordinary events of the younger Ozidi's youth, his apprenticeship with his grandmother, the great witch, Oreami. The hero goes through many battles and adventures to regain the lost glory of his lineage. Other examples of complex and serious African heroic epics are D. T. Niane's *Sundjiata*, Mubima Maneniang's *Elima Ngando Epic of the Congo* and the *Lianja* epic, and *The Mwindo epic* and the sagas of D. O. Fagunwa, including *Forest of a Thousand Daemons: A Hunter's Saga* as translated into English by Soyinka.

The African epics are multifunctional. An epic may convey a variety of messages, and/or perform different functions for a different period or generation, audience, class, and even individuals. Bazimaziki highlights some functions of epics. These include didactic function—perhaps the most significant of all and which focuses on a quest for a higher model and morality; social function, which positions epic as a model for relationship among individuals in a community; a patriotic function which focuses on the enhancement of national unity; and historical function, as epics often chronicle and document history (69-70). In addition to these, epics perform the functions of education, entertainment, and information dissemination.

African Epic and ‘Genric’ Features

Genre theory focuses on the categorization of different structural elements and patterns which can be found in a body of literary works. In Nwaozuzu's theoretical

engagement, he refers to genre as “the tendency to compare art works and argue about their similarities and otherwise” (93). These involve the features that are similar which enable the readers/audience to recognize that a particular work is tragedy, comedy, melodrama, and epic, among other dramatic genres. Akporobaro outlines some ‘generic’ features of the African epic form, using the examples of *Ozidi*, *Mwindo*, and *Sundiata*. These features constitute a framework for reading and analysing African epics; hence, insights are drawn from them in analysing the play under examination.

One of these features is the long duration and wide imaginative scope of the epics. Epic narratives are of very extensive scope, taking days or many hours to narrate. Two, they convey serious themes. The subject matter of the epic form is generally of a very serious, elevated, heroic nature. It is full of dramatic conflicts which are moral, physical and psychological in nature. Akporobaro posits that the subject of an epic is of permanent human interest, being extremely enthralling to people at all times and everywhere, by virtue of these qualities. Three, characters in epic narratives are often extraordinary, weird and supernatural in nature. Four, events in epic narratives are dire and serious. They entail battles for existence, superhuman struggle over huge obstacles. Five, epic narratives portray human society as dominated by evil and evil men who have to be overcome. Although kindness may exist, it is very rare. Six, epic narratives are populated by supernatural beings. Seven, epics constitute ‘a marker’ or an indication of man’s creative genius at the level of narrative. And eight, epics thrive in the transformation of the normal into supernatural, defamiliarisation, making things strange and wonderful (Akporobaro, 259-261).

It is based on the foregoing features and others that this study discusses Ogunyemi’s *Langbodo* as a paradigm of the African heroic epic drama. It examines the aesthetic elements in the play to foreground the didactic function of the epic, including the aspects of patriotism and commitment to national peace, unity and progress that are identified in the play.

***Langbodo*: A Synoptic Account**

The play, *Langbodo*, focuses on heroism and adventure, quest for national well-being and unity, national service, leadership and commitment, human foibles, and suffering cum endurance, among other moral virtues. The play opens with the protagonist, Old Akara Oogun (who is later replaced with a younger version of himself) narrating how he was sent on a dangerous and tortuous journey to Mount Langbodo, together with six other hunters, by the king. The king wants the valiant hunters to go to Mount Langbodo to obtain a singular object which the king of Langbodo presents to hunters that visit his domain. Any kingdom that has this gift will be spared the horrors of war, disease and famine. Such kingdom will live in abundance of peace and well-being and become famous all over the world (6). This belief serves as inspiration and motivation for patriotic citizens of the kingdom who want their community to be in euphoria.

As the journey to Mount Langbodo requires prowess and stamina, only a valiant people can undertake such risk. Hence, the seven hunters chosen are not only very experienced but they are also endowed with one form of supernatural power or the other. The protagonist, Akara Oogun, is a veteran hunter nicknamed “Compound of Spells” (5) because of a huge number of efficacious charms; Kako of the Leopard Club is an extraordinarily physically strong hunter whose mother is “a gnom” and his father “a dewild” (9); Imodoye is a sage who is very well versed in the use of charms; Olohun Iyo, the Voice of Flavour is “the finest singer” who, when sings, creates supernatural effects (10-11); Elegbede Ode is a human child, who has three eyes instead of two, “one at the back of his head” (12); Efo Iye is a partly human and partly cockatoo, a very good archer whose arrows

never fail to hit their targets; and Aramonda Okunrin, a queer man, who “whenever he is under the sun or fire, he feels cold. . . . But whenever the weather turns cold, he sweats from heat. . . . Everything about him is the wrong way around” (14). He is, indeed, a mysterious being.

These seven are sent on national assignment, particularly in search of well-being for their country. In their journey, the hunters encounter several challenges, which result in the loss of many of the hunters. In the end, only the trio of Akara Ogun, Olohun Iyo and Imodoye successfully make it to Mount Langbodo and meet the king of Langbodo who appears with pomp and pageantry. Although the king gives them the totem (elephant tusk) to show that the hunters come to Langbodo, he tells them in pragmatic terms that the main gift he is offering to hunters has already been acquired by them through all their travails and experiences in the course of their journey to Mount Langbodo.

Tapestries of African Heroic Epic in Ogunyemi's *Langbodo*

Certain aesthetic elements/principles of a typical African heroic epic drama are identified for analysis in Ogunyemi's *Langbodo*. These are the aesthetic of African orature, aesthetic of heroic adventurism, supernatural agencies, tragic sentiments, and aesthetics of didacticism.

Aesthetics of African Orature

From the dramaturgical perspectives, Ogunyemi's *Langbodo* is an archetypal Africa drama that engages African oratory style. First, the style of dramatic presentation takes a form of African tales by moonlight. Typically, stories from Africa have traditionally been passed down by word of mouth. In those societies, adults tell their children these stories usually after their hard work during days. The story telling sessions take place in moonlight in their neighborhood after children and adults gather. These stories are traditionally known as Tales by Moonlight.

Taking this form, the play opens with a “Moonlight” (1). This suggests the time of the day—a time late in the evening, after a hard day's work. Old Akara Ogun is the tale teller—an old man in his seventies. He assumes the role of ‘singular narrator’ that is prominent with African oral traditions. He has apparently gathered his audience and addresses them as such: “Akara Ogun. My friends all, like the sonorous proverb do we drum the Ogidigbo; it is the wise who dance to it, and the learned who understand its language. Our story tonight is a veritable Ogidigbo, it is I who will drum it, and you the wise heads who will interpret it” (1). Contrary to epic poetry that is in poetic form, the playwright employs a dramatic form whereby Akara Ogun, the storyteller, chooses characters from the audience who reenact the tale. He tells his characters: “whenever a character in my story speaks in his own person, you must put yourself in his place and speak as if you are that very man. And whenever the other replies; you must relate the story to yourselves as if you, sitting down, had been addressed and now respond to the first speaker” (1-2). In essence, Akara Ogun's tale is (en)acted, using characters and other dramatic elements, including dialogues, actions, stage, and audience.

Another dimension of aesthetics of African orature is audience participation. Almost all of the the African oral forms that are performative is audience participation and a shunning of the Ibsen-like illusion of reality. Here, like in Brecht's Epic theatre, the protagonist addresses the audience directly and makes them know what they are watching in a play. In the play, the audience constitutes both the cast in Akara Ogun's tale and spectators. The narrator selects his cast from ‘members of the audience who volunteer’. The playwright, thus, employs the concept of “player audience” positioned among “the

conventional primary audience" (Adeoye, viii). He also casts Young Akara Oogun to replace himself—Old Akara Oogun. This is to allow him to assume fully the position of a typical narrator, and of course to achieve verisimilitude in the narration.

The members of the "player audience" constitute the bulk of the characters in the play. The seven hunters including Akara Oogun—Kako of the Leopard Club; Efo Iye, the Archer; Elegbede, father of the baboon; Aramonda, the miraculous man; Olohun Iyo, the voice of flavour; and Imodoye, the man of wisdom—are all chosen from the audience as participants in the enactment of the tale. Apart from these, other characters, including King, Retinue, Women, Townspeople, and Chorus are selected from the "player audience".

As spectators, the members of the audience are actively involved in the dramatisation of Akara Oogun's tale. He tells them: "this is the second task you must perform—I would request you to be part of my story and come with me on this expedition so that whatever booty the quest may bring could be shared amongst many" (2). This evinces an ideal narrator-audience interaction that characterises many African oral performances. Okpewho notes the significance of "the audience in a truly traditional setting of the oral performance" as "a force to be reckoned with" (63). Hence, some of the functions of the audience in oral narration, according to Okpewho, are to show approval of the creative act of the narrator and give him full encouragement as he builds his scenes. The audience is also to participate effectively in "dramatizing predicaments in which the characters find themselves" (Okpewho, 61). Akporobaro also observes that "the audience is very often involved in the actualisation and recreation of any given pieces of oral literature", inclusive of the African epic forms (7). All of these are to break the tendency towards emotionality that is devoid of rationality. It is to show that the story is their own story in which they have to take an active part.

Heroic Adventurism

Heroic adventurism is another major aesthetic feature in Ogunyemi's *Langbodo* which is typical of the African heroic epic. Heroism is indeed the heroic conducts evinced by a hero in fulfilling a high purpose or attaining a meritorious end despite the challenges that the hero faces in attaining such a noble cause. Akara Oogun in *Langbodo* is the hero who embarks on perilous expedition in search of peace, progress and well-being of his nation-state, along with six other hunters. The King desires the well-being of his people; hence, he remarks that "there is nothing on earth which surpasses well-being" and on this account sends the hunters in search of it (6).

The hunters have to embark on an adventure to Mount Langbodo to get a singular object which the king's father tells him that "if this object came into the hand of any King, that King's domain would be spared the horrors of war, disease and famine such as we have known for so long and it would win an abundance of peace and well-being; its fame resounding to every corner upon earth" (6). Hence, the hero, Akara Oogun, together with six other hunters, embarks on this adventure which is fraught with perils orchestrated by supernatural forces.

One of the attributes evinced by the hunters in fulfilling their mission is courage. Despite several challenges on their way including supernatural forces, they remain undaunted. They wrestle with "Sand Elves" (27). They conquer them through the help of Second Medium who gives them a pouch containing "sand from the vault of heaven, created specially by the Creator for blinding those who stand in the way of others when they engage in a noble cause" (28). It is this sand that the hunters sprayed on the elves to kill them off.

The hero-hunters also exude doggedness and perseverance. This is evident in their combat with Agbako (disaster). Although the spirit defeats all of them individually and

collectively, derides the human race in despicable terms, and mesmerizes them, they are able to recover from the effects of the battle with Agbako. This heroic attribute also manifests in the manner that they fight Were Orun, "the lunatic of heaven" whose pet-bear one of the hunters—Akara Oogun—kills (42-43). The victory over this spirit does not come easily. They have to engage in series of fights individually with the spirit. They are able to defeat and kill him because of their doggedness.

The hero-leader of the adventurers, Akara Oogun, among others also demonstrates discipline which is another major attribute of a hero on a mission. Most of the hunters lose their self-control and almost abandon their original mission to Langbodo in the "city of lustful women". Well received and entertained sumptuously by the townspeople, the hunters get carried away by the beauty, appeal and sexual generosity of the women. Though they are forewarned by Second Medium, only Akara Oogun the leader of the expedition to Mount Langbodo is able to maintain a cool head. The theme of sex as major temptation and setback to attainments in life manifests here. Aramonda dies making love to his neighbour's wife and Kako is killed by the townspeople with his own leopard club in the riot that ensues. In the melee, Imodoye who follows the wailing ghommid (Egbere) in the first movement returns. He has found the correct route to Langbodo and has made contact with the Langbodo King.

Supernatural Agencies

One of the greatest epical features of *Langbodo* is its wide display of African worldview, traditional beliefs, norms and values. As Tamari has also observed, "most or all African epics have a religious element, as suggested by the major roles played by deities and the supernatural in the narratives" (186). This indeed attests to the qualification of *Langbodo* as an African epic. The play manifests the Yoruba cosmogony and world order. There is a Supreme Being, a transcendental order who takes abode in heaven. He is known as Eledumare among the Yorubas where the play is set. He has lesser gods who act as his ministers, each with a portfolio and responsibility. One of these deities is Ogun, the hunter god of iron, conflict and war who is worshipped by the Mount Langbodo bound hunters. When the hunters are set to embark on the journey, the king says: "I leave the rest to Ogun, our god of war, for it is surely death you are going to battle" (15). Hence, the hunter-adventurers make ritual sacrifices to Ogun before embarking on this voyage.

The hunters dance. Soon, they assemble their guns, cutlass and all on the floor. A woman comes in with a gourd of palmwine. Akara Oogun takes it from her, pours some on the weapons, drinks a part of it, hands the gourd back to the woman who serves the hunters round before taking the gourd to the King who also drinks from it. Akara Oogun breaks opens a four segmented kolanut and throws it at the weapons. Two men who wear a skirt of yellow palm-frond rush onto the stage holding a dog by the neck and the hind legs. The dog is stretched over the weapons. Akara Oogun takes a matchet and, after dancing for a while, puts the cutlass on the dog's neck, cutting it neat and clean. There is shout of joy everywhere. The men who hold the dog quickly disappear with the two halves. (16)

The Yoruba believe in spirits and their supernatural powers. The Yoruba believe in approaching the Creator through some of His creations—His ministers. They believe in using those creatures below them in hierarchical order to appease those in the higher order, as done in another ritual sacrifice, when a bird is killed and offered to appease the spirits angered by the way Kako maltreated his wife Paminku and killed her: "Her creator is angry, her people are angry" (24). Thus, 1st Bird is killed in appeasement of her spirit so that they

can be released from the imprisonment they find themselves when the trees close in on them (22):

(Elegbede dips his hand into his hunting bag, brings out a bottle of palmoil and pours it on the bird. He and Kako carry the bird while Elegbede sings as they carefully lay the bird down behind a big tree.)

OLOHUN IYO. Paminku, citizen of Oke Odan,

CHORUS. Race here to accept your husband's sacrifice.

OLOHUN IYO. Paminku, citizen of Oke Odan,

CHORUS. Rush here to accept your husband's sacrifice.

OLOHUN IYO. The bird is dead!

There is great happening

Citizen of Oke Odan.

CHORUS. Come and take your husband's sacrifice (24-25)

It is until Paminku's spirit accepts the sacrifice that "trees begin to give way and the hunters meander their way through them" (25).

One other supernatural element in the play is mediumship. There are two mediums in the play—First Medium and Second Medium. Each of them represents agent of evil and good respectively, and they contend for the success of the heroic hunters. While First Medium seeks their destruction: "raises the rod and begins to mutter some words. The canoe begins to drift and thick cloud begins to form in the sky. . . . There is storm followed by thunder and lightning. Elegbede tips over and falls into the river with a scream", Second Medium seeks their safety; she resists First Medium: "without a word points a finger at the First Medium. Thunder strikes two more times and a flash of light hits First Medium" (51-52). This dramatic presentation portrays the Yoruba cosmological belief in the existence of the forces of evil and goodness operating in the lives of human beings. The canoe drifting on the river is the journey of life, the occupants of the canoe are the human beings travelling through life. As symbolically represented by the scene, life is turbulent, and it is only those who are lucky and strong that wade through it successfully.

Ogunyemi deploys these superhuman forces in the play similar to Homer's and Virgil's deployment of same in their epics, *Iliad* and *Aeneid*. Second Medium intervenes to prevent what could mark the utter end of the adventurers. This is similar to the intervention of Aeneas's mother Aphrodite (or Venus in Virgil's *Aeneid*) in Homer's *Iliad*, for instance, who saves him from death. Elaine Fantham accounts that:

When Aeneas dismounts to defend his friend's body he is seriously wounded by a rock cast by Diomedes and falls to the ground. Only the instant intervention of his mother Aphrodite (Virgil's Venus) saves him from death. Diomedes takes possession of Aeneas' horses, then chases Aphrodite and wounds her arm. Aphrodite drops her son, who is snatched up and covered in a dark cloud by Apollo. Even under Apollo's charge Aeneas is not out of range; three times Diomedes leaps at Aeneas in rage, and three times Apollo repels him, but the fourth time Apollo rebukes him for trying to fight with a god. He raises Aeneas up to his sanctuary in Troy's citadel where Aeneas is healed and made more splendid by Apollo's divine mother, Leto (Virgil's Latona), and sister Artemis (Virgil's Diana). (xii)

The belief in charm and their efficacy is also displayed throughout the journey of the hunters to Mount Langbodo. It is evident that many of the hunters possess charm as depicted in their names and actions. For instance, the protagonist is named "Akara Oogun, Compound of Spells" because he possesses many efficacious charms—"even as my name is, so I am" (5). Again, the hunters display many magical feats such as mesmerising the enemies. This is seen in the manner that Olohun Iyo uses his flute to hypnotise the Sand

Elves to the extent that they begin to dance. The hunters also use sand given to them by Second Medium to blind all the Sand Elves and they “begin to fight one another until only one of them is left alive and this Kako kills with his club” (30). During combat with Agbako, the hunters engage charms. For instance, “Aramonda dips his hand into his pocket, brings a charm, rubs his head with the charm and suddenly smoke begins to gush out from his head” (30). Another element of charm that the hunters display in the play is incantations. An instance is when Kako utters incantations against Were Orun which he (Were Orun) rebuffs. These among other beliefs in charm and their efficacy are evident in the play and they demonstrate the magical and supernatural aesthetic in the Yoruba cosmology. In essence, charm is a major supernatural element deployed in the play that makes it a paradigm of African epic drama.

The interaction of physical and spiritual beings in Yoruba/African cosmology is equally smoothly displayed in the play, as men and spirits—gnomes, ghommids, magical birds, trees, and objects interact. In most cases there is concretisation of abstraction, as some of the beings which are normally considered to be abstract entities are brought out in material forms in the play. The prized concrete object which the hunters set out for, also turns to be an abstraction—the wisdom and experiences they have gathered. The Yoruba belief in duality of human experience is brought out in the presentation of first and second medium, both diametrically opposed. In the Taoist conception of Yang and Yin, the Yoruba too believe that the world is an admixture of good and bad. The very popular Yoruba adage “Tibi tire la da’le aye” (the world is created to be good and bad) attests to this. The experiences of sadness and joy, rotating like W. B. Yeats’ turning gyre, in the expedition to Langbodo are explications of this traditional belief.

Tragic Sentiments

One other aesthetic feature of the African heroic epic is the tragic occurrences. Ogunyemi's *Langbodo* from the beginning of the hunters' journey to Mount Langbodo exudes tragic sentiments. The fact that the hunters have to encounter and battle with the supernatural and superhuman forces foregrounds the idea of tragic events in the play. For instance, First Medium vows that even if the hunters appease Ogun or pacify Sango, “even if they propitiate all the four hundred and one deities in the pantheon, I swear, they will never return for I shall spell their doom that their quest may two-fold be sorrow and disaster for all” (18). Indeed, the hunters experience several disasters on their way, ranging from loss to death of some hunters.

An instance of the tragic events in the play is the ‘death’ of Paminku, Kako's newly wedded wife, whom Kako clubs to ‘death’ out of provocation. The consequence of this is more tragic phenomena that the hunters experience. In the process of atoning for Paminku's ‘death’, they lose Efo Iye to the birds. Apart from Imodoye who is lost to Egberé, Elegbede is also lost in the storm engineered by First Medium. In the city of lustful women, Aramonda equally dies while making love to his neighbour's wife. Kako is also killed by the townspeople with his own leopard club in the riot that ensues. Though they are forewarned by Second Medium, only Akara Oogun maintains self-control while others are lost in sexual escapades in the city.

In the end, First Medium indeed spells their doom as all the hunters but Akara Oogun—the hero are blown away by a violent wind that sweeps across the town orchestrated by First Medium. The tragic end is indeed Ogunyemi's style of conveying the theme of consequences of human foibles and evils. First Medium clearly states this, invoking some fear in the audience. He sends Akara Oogun, the only surviving hero to the world of humans: “Go your way. . . and tell your people that their world will soon crash like

the tower of Babel; and no redeemer, none whatsoever will save her from total annihilation because the seeds of hatred, corruption and self-centredness which destroy a nation are already firmly rooted in the fertile soil of your world" (67). This summarises the playwright's thematic preoccupation, that as long as a human society is fraught with hatred, corruption and self-centeredness the society cannot survive.

Aesthetics of Didacticism

Epics all over the world have a basic characteristic of teaching the virtues of endurance, determination and bravery in the attainment of success in life. They often teach good conduct and impeccable character and moral values as antecedents to the quintessential human life. This is particular of the African epic tradition that often teaches good virtues. *Langbodo* portrays these virtues, including heroic attributes as earlier discussed. These heroic qualities include courage, doggedness, perseverance, determination, discipline, and others which are expected to characterise every member of the society.

In another dimension, inadequacies in the behaviour and dispositions of human beings are artistically disparaged by the playwright, using some of his characters. Ogunyemi uses characters such as First Medium, Ostrich, Agbako, and Egberé to rebuke human foibles in order for the society to have a rethink and turn over a new leaf. Individually, these characters clinically x-ray the behaviour of human beings and condemn them, often suggesting the correct model of behaviour for man. For instance, First Medium condemns backstabbing phenomenon and betrayal that are prevalent in human society. He describes human society as "a country full of rogues and dishonest people". In a dramatic monologue, he points at members of the audience in order to achieve particularity:

That fellow sitting near you is not your friend in case you think he or she is. He is your enemy, trust him not. If tomorrow he has the whip in his hand, he will make life unbearable for you. Now, I ask, are these the type of people you will lay down your lives for like these fools? Your masters live in plenty, my friends, while you suffer in the midst of plenty. That is why I dislike them. (18)

First Medium also condemns the inconsistent nature of human beings. He jibes: "the tongue of mankind is most inconsistent, the same tongue that praises a man also reviles him. Slanderers all! You have not one jot of good in your nature" (19).

Ostrich equally rebukes wanton killings that are rampant among human beings. When they get to "the city of the King of Birds" (25), Ostrich asks them who they are. Imodoye responds that they are hunters on "country's duty" to Mount Langbodo (26). Ostrich exposes the wickedness that humans perpetrate: "What country? That country of filth where human life is of no value let alone that of birds of the woods. I have heard tales of your country where the rich become richer and the poor, poorer; where respect for people's opinion is a thing forgotten" (26-27).

The ungrateful and insatiable nature of man is also severely reprimanded by Egberé in the play. When Akara Oogun threatens to shoot Egberé for disturbing them with his wailing, Egberé describes humans as people "who have turned kindness sour to the charitable" (35). He goes on to castigate their insatiable behaviours:

We watch you, you who chase emptiness all your life. Those who already boast a full stomach continue to seek glorified positions, seek to live like kings forgetting the less fortunate ones. And it is also in your nature that your minds are never at peace; those who find happiness today ensure that their neighbours find no peace the day following. Death today, tomorrow sorrow—such is the common pursuit of you children of earth. (35)

The abuse indeed brings about repentance in the hunters as they are sincerely sorry and seek

forgiveness. Akara Oogun pleads: "All you said are true of us human beings, but as humans we are prone to bad influences. Forgive our frailties. . . ." (35). Egberé indeed sees the repentance in them: "You've spoken like a repentant child" (35). This agrees with Alabi's (2019, 40) position that "abuse serves as a weapon of societal resistance to the violators of its established customs and norms." He maintains that "In correcting a societal menace, abuse may be directed at the target as the direct butt or the members of the audience that 'witness' the abuse. . . . Abuse is employed in some situations to ridicule the erring and it is a means of restoring him or her to order. In this way, abuse assumes a mode through which necessary change is affected in the target" (Alabi, 2019: 40). Agbako (disaster) similarly rebukes the wicked nature of man, engaging name-calling technique. He, indeed, humiliates the hunters and calls them by their wicked acts: "Greedy people. Primitives! . . . Backscratchers! Baby snatchers! War mongers! Murderers!! My visitation is come upon you, upon you and your race who daily corrupt and pollute the world" (38).

For all of these human foibles, the hunters, representing human society are severely punished. They encounter difficulties and sufferings. In essence, all of these constitute a challenge to the audience to see the weaknesses and wickedness that are associated with human society. They are condemned with the intention of effecting a notable change in them. The lessons which the adventurers learnt and the experiences which they gained are also lessons for the audience and readers of the play. In them, the panacea for success in life is established.

Conclusion

This paper has examined Ogunyemi's *Langbodo* as a paradigm of the African heroic epic play. Some of the aesthetics of the African heroic epic identified and analysed in the play include the use of African storytelling techniques—tale by the moonlight. Instead of asking for stage lights, the playwright asks for moonlight on stage. There is also the use of audience participation technique which is a hallmark of African oral performances, one of which is epic. There is direct address of audience, picking cast from the audience for the tale by the tale-teller—Akara Oogun—in the play. The paper has also established that the play conveys the idea of heroism that is specific to the African heroic epic. Akara Oogun, the hero of the play, exhibits the attributes of courage, perseverance, doggedness, discipline, among other virtues of a hero, which are expected of members of the human society. Another aesthetic in *Langbodo* is wide display of African worldview, traditional beliefs, and particularly supernatural forces which attest to its qualification as an African epic. There is a sumptuous display of supernatural beings such as the deities, spirits, superhuman forces, supernatural and magical fauna and flora. One special aesthetic feature of the African heroic epic that is evident in the play is tragic occurrences, ranging from loss to death of the characters and particularly the hunters, except the hero—Akara Oogun. In all, the play teaches the virtues of endurance, determination and bravery in the attainment of success in life. It teaches good conduct and impeccable character and moral values as antecedents to quintessential human life. It exposes inadequacies in the human society and artistically disparages them through some characters, particularly First Medium, Ostrich, Agbako, and Egberé who rebuke human foibles in order to effect positive change of behaviour in the society. In all, Wale Ogunyemi in *Langbodo* has artistically displayed the basic elements of the heroic epic tradition in African theatre. These he has imbued with his convictions as a critical realist in order to make the human society a better place to live in. This is accentuated by a dexterous blend of form and content in the play.

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