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**The Trial of Religion and Politics in Soyinka's *The Trial of Brother Jero* and Ngugi and Mugo's *The Trial of Dedan Kimathi***

**Abstract**

Trial is a central motif in Soyinka's *The Trial of Brother Jero* and Ngugi's *The Trial of Dedan Kimathi* co-authored with Micere Githae Mugo. However, the recurring interpretive kernel of the former has consistently hovered the precincts of proliferation of churches and the dubious approach of those who posture as men of God while merchandising the Christian faith. The latter has also variously been interpreted from the prism of revolutionary ethos which encapsulates the struggle of Kenyans to achieve self-rule from British imperialists. While the two different analytical planks have contributed to the appreciation of the two texts, they prove inadequate to capture further existential parameters where religion and politics are implicitly on trial. Using Jaques Derrida's Deconstruction, this paper advances the above existing interpretive spectrum by arguing that the trials which the two protagonists in the plays, Brother Jero and Dedan Kimathi face are synecdochical for religion and politics. The paper reveals that the trials recreated in the texts continually rehash religion and politics in contemporary times. Thus, Brother Jero's trials and his disingenuous responses to them are symbolic of the trials which churches go through. Also, Dedan Kimathi's trials and the attendant social dislocations in Kenya during the precolonial era are redolent of the trials African societies go through in the face of capitalist, exploitative predilections of the ruling class. Therefore, the trials in the texts provide a mirror for examining churches on one hand and socio-political struggles on the other hand.

**Keywords:** trial, religion, politics, deconstruction, class-conflict

## Introduction

Wole Soyinka and Ngugi Wa Thiongo, both accomplished African writers, operate the nucleus of their literary machinery from two divergent, polysemic, literary possibilities. While Soyinka's creative impetus oscillates between the rehabilitation of African cultural, cosmological worldview and prophetic searchlight into the future seeking to animate positive realignments of socio-political realities in Africa, Ngugi is more of a revolutionary, Marxist writer who upbraids the materialistic proclivities of the African ruling class both in contemporary times and history. In *The Trial of Brother Jero*, Soyinka's interest is to satirise the church and those masquerading as men of God. Mireku-Gyimah (2013) summarises Soyinka's commitment in using the protagonist Brother Jero as a metaphor to examine the inherent chicanery in religious practices especially prophecy in churches. According to her "Soyinka ridicules the church by making Jero tell us about it from the very beginning. From all indications, its characteristics and activities reveal it as a false spiritual church with its multitudinous nature, places of operation and varied claims to spiritual power and abilities". Brother Jero's characteristics and his efforts to lead people astray for personal gains through manipulative religious practices namely - prophecies - present an allegory which implicates churches in the throes of trials.

In the same vein, Ngugi and Mugo locate the historical struggle of Kenyans to gain independence from British colonial overlords as a substratum to interrogate the trial of all progressive forces against oppressive, elite, capitalist attitude in Africa's leadership corridors. Ordu and Odukwu (2022) observe that "using the historical figure of Kimathi, Kimathi demonstrates a revolutionary dedication and battle against British colonial power. For the oppressed masses, Kimathi is a symbol of their unspoken ambition for revolution and their ability to take action as a result of it". In other words, we can rightly conclude that the trials of the protagonists in the two texts signify trials in a broader sense where churches and forces of revolution operate side by side. Thus, the two texts achieve contemporaneous immediacy and relevance which justify their selection in this study. In deploying the texts as reflexive parameters to examine issues of religious dubiety and revolutionary approaches in modern times, the paper seeks to address and answer the following questions – are there fake prophets in Africa today who, through counterfeiting procedures, deceive people for personal gains while operating their churches? Are there political conditions in Africa today which give rise to revolutionary attitudes in the quest for an egalitarian society? What are the *modus operandi* and consequent negative

impact of fake prophecy within churches in Africa? To what extent have revolutionary groups achieved their aims in enforcing good governance and class equilibrium in Africa. Using the two texts as guides, this study, while answering the foregoing questions, hopes to become a relevant manuscript for social appraisal with emphasis on churches and political leadership in Africa.

Over the years, critics have found it difficult to establish a correlation between Soyinka and Ngugi's ideological pursuits as writers. While Ngugi easily finds kindred spirits in Femi Osofisan, a radical writer of the Brechtian, avantgarde school of thought, Soyinka floats loosely as an accomplished eclectic writer whose works straddle different artistic genres including the spiritual and sublunary spheres. However, the writers' two texts, *The Trial of Brother Jero* and *The Trial of Dedan Kimathi* inevitably establish an artistic pluralism which examines religion using the church as a guide and politics using revolutionary struggle for emancipation as a standard. Soyinka's choice of religious focus is the Christian faith through churches and their proliferation with a counterfeit prophet Brother Jero as the leading protagonist. Brother Jero's flimflam and verbiage disposition is captured by Nwosu and Marchie (2015) who observe that "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". It is quite fashionable to see self-styled men of God establish business premises which they misname as church, thus rehabilitating Soyinka's prophetic creativity in *The Trial of Brother Jero*. Ngugi's political interest centres on the documented struggle of Kenyans led by Dedan Kimathi and the Mau-Mau movement to achieve self-rule from British imperialists. Dione (2018) summarises the play's ideological project by remarking that "it is rather an imaginative recreation of the Mau Mau uprising with their leader Dedan Kimathi in which they trace out the social and economic conditions during colonisation". Therefore, the text can rightly be delineated as a historical construction of a patch in Kenyans political evolution.

Different studies have shown that the contexts of the two paradigms, religion and politics, where the protagonists face different shades of trials, have variously been interrogated and examined on their merits. The focus has always been the individual reactions of the protagonists to their trials. While Brother Jero's trials are psychological, Dedan Kimathi's trials are both physical at the law court and psychological in his detention cell. However, this study is primarily concerned with expanding the boundaries of the trials in the two texts viewing them as prognostic

indicators which point to a more encompassing vista where the church and revolutionary social structures encounter different complexions of challenges. Prophetically, part of the religious trial which Soyinka envisioned in his play is the proliferation of churches which will inevitably happen due to economic reasons rather than for spiritual revival and the need for genuine evangelism. Using Brother Jero to represent fake prophets and their churches, Soyinka highlights the various degrees of challenges which will confront churches as they fluctuate to achieve their purpose in Nigeria and Africa. We can christen Brother Jero's trials as the trial of religion using his church as a guide.

Kimathi's trials, beyond the personal level, also aggregates the trials which African countries and their revolutionary struggles for self-rule encounter. Also, Kimathi and the Mau-Mau movement become a metaphor for the struggle of the masses to achieve an egalitarian social order and reject all forms of oppression while seeking to abolish class contradictions. In this way, trial in the two texts moves away from individual difficulties to more inclusive conditions of wider social relevance. Therefore, we can surmise that while Soyinka's text borders on religious trial using churches as a focal point, Ngugi's text borders on social trial or the struggle for a better society. The content of the two different shades of trial in the texts shows that they have contemporary relevance. Events in the *Trial of Brother Jero* indicate that churches are confronted with the trial of true identity, the trial of proper doctrine, the trial of prophetic ministration, the trial of sanctimony, the trial of holiness, and so on and so forth. Also, in the *Trial of Dedan Kimathi*, Kimathi's trials indicate the trial which social structures committed to challenging bourgeoisie, capitalist oppression undergo in their determination to achieve an egalitarian order where everyone will be treated fairly

### **Deconstructing the text**

Jacques Derrida's variant of deconstructing literature offers critics a degree of freedom to interpret literary texts from different perspectives which stretch the usual meaning accorded the text by other critics or the meaning which the writer may have implied in the text. Deconstruction in literature maintains that literary texts are composed of multiple meanings therefore no interpretation of any text is supreme or final. With deconstruction, critics can uncover meanings which the writer of the text is unaware of or never thought about. Concerning deconstruction, Tyson (2002) remarks that "no interpretation has the final word. Rather, literary texts, like all texts,

consist of multiplicity of overlapping, conflicting meanings in dynamic, fluid relation to one another and to us". Tyson's observations elucidate the whole project of deconstructive criticism given that it provides a concise idea about the instability of meanings in a text and the possibilities of exploring different, plausible meanings in the same text. Soyinka's *The Trial of Brother Jero* easily yields itself to the proliferation of churches occasioned by the inordinate craving for materiality and popularity instead of true evangelism and the honest need to convert people to the Christian religion. Also, the text has over the years provided a mirror for examining charlatans who disguise as prophets of God to deceive the gullible and capitalise on their desperation for quick miracles. Of a truth, interpreting the text along the foregoing strands has sustained its position within academic province for many years. However, given that deconstruction dismembers a text to reveal various meanings in it, a critical examination of *The Trial of Brother Jero* exposes multiple significations which have hitherto been muted. One of such victims of interpretive disregard is Brother Jero and his trials as metaphoric identities of the Christian religion in Africa and all the incongruities that bedevil it.

Deconstruction breaks the barriers of closed, exclusive reading of a text which establishes a tyrannical meaning by a recognized authority. Vaaitinen (2022) infers that "in all texts there is a silenced, heterogeneous Other, whom deconstruction aims to reveal as an erased trace in the text, with attempts to rewrite the text into a form that makes space for the Other in its complete Otherness". It is improbable that any text will have one central, defined meaning or interpretation. It is therefore the committed responsibility of deconstruction to reveal the unheralded meaning of a text which contributes to its appreciation. Besides the multiple trials of churches which Brother Jero represents in the text, there are also subliminal issues of desire for political and public service advancement which reside in the minds of most politicians and public office holders. The relationship between Brother Jero and his master also underscores the inherent squabbles which define the relationship between master and servant, a pastor and his assistants. More importantly, Soyinka satirises the culture of apprenticeship which currently characterises church leadership hierarchy.

Also, Ngugi and Mugo's *The Trial of Dedan Kimathi* has consistently attracted various interpretations as a literary manuscript that reconstructs the struggle of Kenyans led by Dedan Kimathi through the Mau-Mau movement to achieve self-determination and independence from

British imperialists. However, equipped with deconstructive armament, the text provides other meanings which sustain its literary, creative, and historical relevance. Most African countries after independence were confronted by the need to enthrone democracy in their respective regions. The quest for democracy in Africa has encountered stiff opposition from an African leadership elite that desires to perpetually remain in power. In reaction to these anti-democratic forces, pro-democracy groups have emerged to resist what they consider as anti-people government which undermines the wishes of the people. These various pro-democracy groups which seek to dislodge the edifice of despotism in Africa and the challenges they face share direct correlation with the struggles and challenges faced by Dedan Kimathi and his Mau-Mau movement. Kimathi's struggles and challenges occupy a pride of place in Kenya history which grant contemporary pro-democracy groups the motivation to react against forces which revive the British rule of conquest across Africa.

Commenting on the influence of *The Trial of Dedan Kimathi* and the negotiation of equitable social contract between the people and government, Khawaldeh and Bani-Khair (2024) observe that “this drama resists oblivion and empowers representatives of the suppressed other with a unique capability of counter-remembering (or counter-historical narrating) that releases their long-suppressed voices”. Beyond the revolutionary template which the text provides for reactionary voices, there are important issues which also offer plausible patterns for the continual collaboration and unity of reactionary voices against totalitarian, oppressive governments. There is the strained relationship between the boy and girl in the text which offers an insight into potential conflict that keeps the people apart and hinders a united, progressive, organised force to dethroning imperial-like governance structures in Africa. The woman who apprehends the boy and the girl reprimand them for their failure to unite and identify the British as the common enemy. Thus, deconstruction empowers the critic to approach the interpretation of a text from multiple prisms. Adiele (2023) remarks that “according to the Derridean complexion of deconstruction, a text can be interpreted from multiple perspectives as long as it conforms with evident subjects in terms of language, characters, ideas and symbolism”. The interpretation of *The Trial of Brother Jero* and *The Trial of Dedan Kimathi* in this study shall offer alternative perspectives which contribute to the canonical milieu of the texts.

## Literature review

Religion and politics maintain conspicuous presence in global realities and in many instances, they combine to determine the manifest complexion of the various socio-political and cultural tensions that determine the byways of human evolution. Inevitably, both concepts have made serious incursions into literature, general arts, and social sciences. They currently maintain a dominant position in these disciplines since it is almost impossible to engage the nuances of literature, arts, and the social sciences without at least making subliminal references to them no matter how minimal. Various literary texts, drama, poetry, and prose make religion and politics their focus. Given the vacillating nature of religion and politics and all the social unease they enunciate in every society, given that religion continues to flounder in its promissory character as a reconciliatory paradigm of human order, given that politics continues to falter in its continuous embodiment of perfidy in the corridors of public service, literary texts that mirror these essentialities also continue to maintain sustained relevance as manuscripts of genuine reflexivity. Literary texts that focus on religion and politics have become prototypes to scrutinise their impact on humanity and how these impacts the upward growth or downward retardation of society.

Soyinka's *The Trial of Brother Jero* as a satire, has over the years commanded the heights of plausibility in the discussion and interrogation of Christian religion as a vocation where, through prophecy, some people of questionable character achieve fame and prominence by exploiting gullible, desperate followers in need of one urgent miracle or another. Alabi (2019) reiterates that "the play x-rays a charlatan and fraud, Brother Jeroboam, who preaches to his followers on Bar Beach. Jero is a master of manipulation and keeps his followers in a subservient position because he understands what they long for — money, position, social status, and power, which are the yearning of many in the contemporary world". Jero's choice of Bar Beach as a venue for his trade is symbolic of what the beach represents for seekers of spiritual power. After Nigeria's independence in 1960, many people capitalised on the euphoria of the new socio-political order in the country to make profit one way or another. One of such vocations which fell victim to charlatans is prophetic calling. Teiko (2021) infers that "the dramatist provides a cynicism of contemporary society in the activities of the new religious federations and Christian crusaders whose rampant denominationalism by the 1960s at the Lagos Bar Beaches created not only avenues for the roguery trade among the churches but also became a subject of ridicule". Soyinka

succinctly dramatises that patch of Nigeria's materialistic evolution in his play where the beach becomes a site of competing, materialistic indulgences.

Through a sparse, austere setting reminiscent of absurdist theatre, the playwright provides a peep into the kind of dubiety that resides in churches where fake people become prophets for personal aggrandisement. Brother Jero thus assumes a figure through which the deception that abounds in Christianity can be examined. Osae (2016) remarks that "through his fake prophecies, he has managed to capture a few ignorant people whom he feeds with one lie after another. He takes pleasure in keeping them dissatisfied (unhappy) because satisfaction (happiness) as he claims will keep them away". Perhaps Osae's submission points to one of the constituent elements of Jero's trials which is, among other things, to keep his congregation unhappy in order to sustain their interest in a quest to find happiness. It is this sort of inversive psychology that has characterised many churches today because the self-styled prophets create and magnify spiritual problems in a bid to enforce the patronage of their members whose determination to conquer these spiritual problems ultimately ensures their commitment to the prophetic calling of their pastors. Given its exact reflection of religious realities in Africa and indeed across the world where Christianity has become a profession for self-enrichment through fake prophecy and misinterpretation of the Holy Bible, *The Trial of Brother Jero* assumes a revolutionary hue which beckons on miracle seekers to be wary of prophets and prophecies. In that way, the text collapses the barriers of time because it maintains a relevance of immediacy as long as churches continue to proliferate with new pastors and prophets whose missions are largely clandestine and undisclosed.

Besides the relationship between fake prophets and their gullible followers, there are more implicating dimensions to the crisis in churches which Soyinka subtly dramatises. It is the struggle and strife among pastors who employ propaganda, slander, and character assassination to diminish the followership of other pastors they perceive as rivals. According to Davoodifar and Pourya Asl (2015) "Jero acquired his current beach-side reality in the name of the Old Prophet, his former master, by formulating a campaign against the other prophets. The Old Prophet, however, is also already driven off his own land. Midway into the monologue, the Old Prophet enters to curse Jero, "wishing his downfall via women". Jero's roguery as a self-styled prophet is all-encompassing. He acquired his present beach space for his fake prophetic, religious engagements by blackmailing his master through calumnious campaigns. When the master was eventually chased out of his



prophetic location on the beach, Jero took it over and started his trade. This is evocative of observable conflicts in various churches where material gain and capitalist value of the church has led pastors and their assistants into different degrees of tussles including legal. However, Adjandeh (2020) believes that “one of the things that constitute Jero’s trials and which most often lead him into problems is lust. Instead of devising practical steps to deal with this weakness, he sees it as part of his trials and then prays for God to help him”. From a wider perspective and reflecting the prevailing realities in many churches today, sexual immorality and lust of the flesh constitute major trials which have either led to the collapse of some churches or brought them to disrepute.

Beyond its historical significance of reflecting a misleading patch in Kenya's political evolution, the revolutionary imprints in *The Trials of Dedan Kimathi* continue to resonate across Africa where it energises reactionary forces against all forms of oppressive, tyrannical and dictatorial attitudes. Kimathi and the Mau-Mau movement provided a resistance force against the British imperialist government that demonised the people’s struggle for self-determination. Awogu-Maduagwu and Onwuka (2017) remind us about the project of the playwrights in writing the play. “By resurrecting and celebrating the heroes of the freedom struggle in this dramatic work, the playwrights emblemize the Mau-Mau crisis as the spirit of resistance to all forms of social and political oppression, in this case, imperialist domination”. From the foregoing, there are two worlds which operate in parallel alignment in every society, the world of the capitalist oppressor and the world of the indigent victims of oppression and brute capitalism. In the play, the British colonial administration in Kenya represents the world of the capitalist oppressors while the struggling, freedom-seeking Kenyans, led by Kimathi and the Mau-Mau movement represent the world of the indigent victims of capitalist oppression. The friction between the two distinct groups is a reflection of the conflict that exists between forces of political oppression in Africa and resistant, pro-democracy groups across the continent. Kimathi’s trials therefore are reflections of the trials which various groups opposed to oppressive, capitalist propensity go through all over Africa.

The Kenya struggle for independence led by Kimathi and the Mau-Mau movement also portrays two very important aspects of nationalistic and democratic struggles in Africa. The first is the role and presence of women who hitherto were subsumed under the overbearing hegemony of patriarchy which grants inferior identity and roles to them. The second is the inevitable presence of betrayers and collaborators in the sustained struggle for democratic dispensation and the

dislodgement of tyrannical, despotic political forces in the corridors of power. Having highlighted these two important factors in the struggle for self-determination in Kenya, the playwrights facilitate a potential future prospect where women will play important roles in the dethronement of oppressive, capitalist order. It also points to the inexorable emergence of betrayers and collaborators with oppressive forces against the people. It is of note that Kimathi and the Mau-Mau movement were betrayed by Kenyans who became willing collaborators in the hands of British imperialists. Okunoye (2001) remarks that “the play becomes more significant because it links the three major phases of the African historical experience: the precolonial, the colonial, and the post-independence eras. Its appropriation of the Marxist historiography facilitates the universalization of the experiences it mirrors, making the world of the play that of the oppressor and the oppressed”. It is the “post-independence eras” signification of the play and all the contemporary unease it generates that is the concern of this paper.

Today in Africa, *The Trial of Dedan Kimathi* has become a canonical text for the struggle of different reactionary groups to oppose capitalist, anti-democratic dispensations. Affiah and Eni (2018) argue that “Dedan Kimathi, a historical figure and the major character in the play, is a symbol of relentless struggle and unyielding resistance. The playwrights delve into history by asserting Kimathi’s value so that the present generation of masses can continue with the struggle for liberation”. Indeed, to a great extent, Kimathi as a revolutionary archetype has provided the needed drive for different forces of resistance in Africa to emerge and be sustained. One of the iconic importance of the Mau-Mau struggle which Ngugi and Mugo recreate in their play is the spirit of documentation imbibed by the freedom fighters. The freedom fighters had an eye on the future, knowing full well that their struggle will have implications to the future struggle for independence and resistance against oppressive forces of dominance. According to Simatei (1999) “the fighters themselves engage in this activity of writing because they believe these records will in future stand not only as testimony to the sacrifices they made for freedom, but also as important sources for the writing of their history or, as they put it, "remembrance" by future generations”. Perhaps, part of the direct narratives by the fighters themselves have helped to foster a genuine historiography of the Mau-Mau era and also helped to counter Western misleading accounts of that epoch in Kenya history.

Oburumu (2022) points out that “the trial of Dedan Kimathi is therefore the trial of all Kenyan peasants. The unwavering spirit of the Kenyan people is personified by Kimathi. Every time something goes wrong in Kenyan society as a whole, this spirit has the potential to be repeated. In this sense, Kenya's culture and the ongoing historical landscape of its material life will be continuously shaped by this tenacious spirit”. Beyond the artistic and dramatic relevance of the play, its historical content has influenced the revolutionary consciousness of all Kenyans and indeed the whole of Africa. Although Ngugi and Mugo have dramatised a historical event, their effort re-echoes across Africa and the world as a genuine and authoritative voice in indigenous nationalist attitude towards self and collective affirmation of defiance and struggle against repressive superstructures. It is the contemporary relevance of the play and its continual revival of Africa’s celebrated disagreeable attitude towards British rule of subjugation and conquest that partly constitute the spine of this study. Kimathi’s popularity and acceptance thus become a metaphor for all forces for the protection of the weak and enthronement of social equality.

### **The trial of trials: Brother Jero and Dedan Kimathi**

Soyinka’s *The Trial of Brother Jero* satirically reincarnates the recurring trial which contemporary churches and their many self-styled prophets are going through. In a wider domain, within the dualistic matrix of genuine spirituality and spiritual materiality, Soyinka’s play explores the typical fraudulence immanent in churches, characterised by the absurd theatricality of a dominant leader who capitalises on the docile gullibility and desperation of his followers for miracles to make profit. Although Brother Jero’s trials with lust is a product of a curse by his former master whom he chased out of his patch on the beach, the trials of current churches and their leaders have transmuted in leaps and bounds to include various mundane intensities. At the beginning of the play, through a monologue, Brother Jero gives the audience an overview of his personality, his historical journey, present situation, and future aspirations. According to the play:

**JEROBOAM:** I am a prophet. A prophet by birth and inclination. You have probably seen many of us on the streets, many with their own churches, many inland, many on the coast, many leading processions, many looking for processions to lead, many curing the deaf, many raising the dead. In fact, there are eggs and eggs. Same thing with prophets and I was born a prophet. I think my parents found that I was born with rather

thick and long hair. It was said to come right down to my eyes and down to my neck. For them this was a certain sign that I was born a prophet. (Soyinka, 145).

Jero's assertions above and his self-eulogy tracing how he came into the profession of prophecy sets the stage for spiritual immersion but also informs the audience about his treacherous background after betraying his master and chasing him out of his position on the beach. His immediate avowal that he is a "prophet by and by inclination" presupposes a divinely willed individual whose prophetic calling had been evident to his parents from birth. He goes on to outline to the audience what has been his major trials in his prophetic aspirations, which according to him include - stiff conflict and unnecessary competition among the prophets for the allocation of portions on the beach where they preached, the difficulty in convincing new converts as followers because they have found love in secular music than spiritual songs, and the rich worshippers preferring to stay at home to watch television rather than to come to church. These for Brother Jero were trials which affected his growth as a prophet and therefore, stifled the expansion of his prophetic ministry.

Jero's monologue is briefly interrupted by his former master, the Old Prophet who charges at him on stage, pronouncing a curse that women will surely be his downfall. As the Old Prophet exit the stage, Jero admits that true to his old master's curse, women constitute part of his trials although he has never been involved in any scandal with a woman. As the play begins proper, Jero fears that the curse on him by his old master was about to be fulfilled when he woke up one morning and found a woman at his door post. The woman, Amope, his assistant Chume's wife had come to Jero's house to demand payment for a velvet cap that the prophet purchased on credit. Brother Jero is not aware that his creditor is Chume's wife. Chume desperately wants to beat his wife for her constant nagging and overbearing attitude. In this web of trickery and deception, Jero's trial increases daily. In order to retain Chume's loyalty, he advises him not to beat his wife. However, when Jero finally discovers that his creditor Amope is Chume's wife, he quickly turns around to advise Chume to beat her. Chume becomes aware of Jero's dubiety and goes after him in anger to hurt him. While Jero was prophesying to a new convert, a member of parliament, Chume charges at him with a cutlass but Jero runs away. The member of parliament thinks that

Jero disappeared miraculously as a holy and highly spiritual prophet of God. After escaping from Chume, Jero appears again to play tricks on the member of parliament who calls him “master”.

Some critics have tried to bring new perspectives to Jero’s trials which are reminiscent of contemporary realities prevalent in many churches. Pijuan (2020) interprets Jero’s trials as misfortune by remarking that “*The Trials of Brother Jero* follows the well-deserved misfortunes, and their subsequent resolution, of Jeroboam, a false prophet with a thirst for power. He has established himself as a church leader and has built a congregation of followers who have been led to think that by doing the Prophet’s bidding, they will be granted what they long for”. Jero’s riveting trials and the constellation of their deceptive possibilities sum up the inconsequentialities of prophetic reprobation which describes religious guile in Africa and most parts of the world. Although the play is a comedy, its aesthetic value thrives on satire which squeezes society to extract tangible, intrinsic elements, namely fake prophecy and deception as can sauce the ideological and creative menu of the playwright. Jero’s documented trials constitute a moral burden for many fake prophets who insist on preying on the people’s psyche vehemently violated by hash economic realities. Osoba (2014) argues that Jero’s whole ambition, his ultimate aim which propels him to withstand different shades of trials, is his inordinate ambition for a high sounding, inchoate identity as a prophet. According to him “Soyinka’s *The Trials of Brother Jero*, portrays the protagonist, Prophet Jero, as a charlatan who attempts to achieve his ambition as an important and distinctive prophet by appearing immaculate in a velvet cape, which he had not yet paid for, and articulate in prophecy. His ultimate ambition is to be called the Velvet-hearted Jeroboam, Immaculate Jero, and Articulate Hero of Christ’s Crusade”. The implicit presence of a self-seeking but morally degenerate personality who sees his failings as trials is reflected in Jero’s character. However, Soyinka achieves his creative and ideological purpose in the play by providing a timeless text that serves plurimental purposes which continually holds churches and prophecy to scrutiny.

The *Trial of Dedan Kimathi* and its dramatic value is sustained by the historical content which the playwrights admitted in the introduction that they were revisiting to reconstruct. Thus, the play could be appreciated from two important artistic universal merits, from the standpoint of an actual historical event and from the conspicuous prism of literature as a reflection of social dynamics. The two different imports of the play also validate the trials which are easily located in

the play – Kimathi’s trials in the actual historical incident and the trial which that historical incident energised among Africans against political leadership and elite, capitalist structures. At the beginning of the play, the court scene sets the centre stage for Kimathi’s trial where he is charged with the crime of possessing a firearm without licence. His ominous silence as the charge was read against him underscores his rejection of the entire imperialist judicial system:

**JUDGE:** Dedan Kimathi s/o Wachiuru, alias Prime Minister or Field Marshal of no fixed address, you are charged that on the night of Sunday, October 21<sup>st</sup> 1956, at or near Ihururu in Nyeri District, you were found in possession of a firearm, namely, a revolver, without licence, contrary to section 89 of the penal code which under Special Emergency Regulations, constitutes a criminal offence. Guilty or not guilty?

(Kimathi remains silent) (24).

Kimathi’s silence to the charge against him is a demonstration of the defiance and fearlessness with which he views the entire judicial procedure. However, his silence could be interpreted as acquiescence since it seems he had no clear objection or defence to the charges. Beyond the law courts and through a flashback, the play re-enacts the struggle of Africans under colonial hegemony, working, being punished but showing resilience in the midst of their tortuous experience. This scene captures the collective determination of Africans, especially Kenyans to resist imperialist domination. These realities are captured in the first movement phase IV.

*Phase IV: An angry procession of defiant blacks, chanting anti-imperialist slogans through songs and thunderous shouts:*

Leader: Away with oppression!

Unchain the people!

Crowd: Away with oppression!

Unchain the people!

Leader: Away with oppression!

Unchain the people!

Crowd: Away with exploitation!

Unchain the people!

Leader: way with human slaughter!

Crowd: Unchain the people!

Leader: Brothers we shall break (5-6)

The trials which the Africans go through in their bid to uproot forces of imperialism provides the basis for Kimathi's subsequent trials in the play. Although Kimathi's trials are the overwhelming, acknowledged event in the play, different classes of Kenyans also go through difficulties and trials either to maintain their resolve in their march to self-determination or to betray the cause of the struggle and succumb to imperialist efforts to break their ranks. Women, children, and all classes of the local people are all involved as the trial navigates through the length and breadth of the land. When Kimathi makes the second appearance in court, the same charges are read to him but this time, unlike the first time, he responds to the charges in the most defiant, fearless manner. Slowly and patiently, the judge reads out the charge against Kimathi the second time and this time, Kimathi gives a response:

**KIMATHI:** By what right, dare you, a colonial judge sit in judgement over me?

**JUDGE:** (Playing with his glasses, oozing infinite patience): Kimathi, I may remind you that we are in a law court.

**KIMATHI:** An imperialist court of law. (25)

Kimathi's response to the charges against him aggregates his entire attitude to his trials by British imperialist forces. Vashisht (2021) points out that "as a counter-discourse, Wa Thiong'o and Mugo put Dedan Kimathi on trial, and the subsequent dramatisation of dialectical opinions exalts the freedom fighter's determined stoicism in his rejection of colonialists' and capitalists' offers to betray the fight for Kenya's self-determination, which he paid for with his life". Kimathi's resolute disposition in court provokes a schemed and manipulated round of trials in his detention cell. This time, the trials move away from the law courts but assume a different dimension geared towards breaking his resolve and determination. In the first trial in his detention cell, the British Henderson visits Kimathi and asks him to betray his Kenyan people and plead guilty in court the next day in exchange to have his life spared. Kimathi maintains his stance and remains defiant to the chagrin of the British officer. In the second trial, the banker and the Indian visit Kimathi in his detention cell. They ask Kimathi to confess and plead guilty so that the war will end. In return, they offer to build hotels and finance large businesses which will lead to the development of the country. Again, Kimathi maintains his resolve and refuses to betray his people. In the third trial, the Business Executive, the Politician, and the Priest all visit him again in his detention cell offering diverse,

mouth-watering conditions to break Kimathi's resistance and have him plead guilty. Again, as always, he refuses to their utter dismay and consternation. In the fourth trial, Henderson visits him again with a final onslaught to break his resistance. This time, Kimathi loses his temper and attempts to strangle Henderson who escapes from the cell. Eventually, Kimathi appears in court for the last time and is found guilty and sentenced to death. Although he was sentenced to death, his unflinching, die-hard attitude to the resistance and protection of his people is remarkable and has left an indelible mark on the seashore of Africa's struggle and resistance against all forms of oppressive establishment.

## **Conclusions**

*The Trial of Brother Jero* and *The Trial of Dedan Kimathi* both harmonise the inescapable challenges which confront religion and politics in Africa. This they do by highlighting the psychological configurations and various physical encounters which confront the two protagonists, Brother Jero and Dedan Kimathi. Given the inscrutable nature of religion, especially Christianity and the ecclesiastical emotions it exerts, focus on its various practicable outlets and modes of participation have been the concern of many critics. Christianity today is on trial. Prophecy and prophets are also on trial and society is forewarned not to succumb to various forms of indoctrination and beguiling mechanisms. Written immediately after Nigeria's independence, the play continues to define an aspect of moral decadence in society through wanton proselytising. In many instances, fake prophecy and spiritual merchandise have become important socio-political indices to gauge public evolution and future occurrences in Nigeria. Government officials and highly placed individuals have been known to consult these prophets to gain insight into the future. Thus, Jero's character will continually be a metaphor for a critical appraisal of religious dupery and fake prophetic machinations. It, therefore, behooves individuals and society to be wary of many Jeroboams that abound. Also, Ngugi and Mugo's play continually charts a new part in the direction of socio-economic emancipation following the radical templates established by Dedan Kimathi and the Mau-Mau movement. Many countries in Africa are on trial. Also, on trial are all the struggles to free and liberate the masses from the strangulating economic policies enunciated by the political class which hardly address the malaise among the people. Kimathi's trial as dramatised in the text, beyond its significance as a historical reconstruction, also drives all efforts to engineer a people-oriented political order which speeds off freedom in the continent.



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