

THE SUPERNATURAL CHARACTER IN BOLE BUTAKE'S *LAKE GOD AND PALM WINE-WILL FLOW*

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Abstract

The African universe consists of natural and supernatural phenomena. The ancestors, the living and the unborn are part of a cyclic trinity. This cosmic continuum is a vital aspect of African culture which African playwrights strive to represent in their plays. The manifestation of the supernatural in African drama is often reflected in themes, structure, style and characters. The concern of this paper is with the manifestation of the supernatural through character. Many critics, faced with the difficulties of presenting the supernatural have resorted to the allegorical approach of presenting supernatural characters but this approach is not effective because it does not bring out the traits or personality of the supernatural character. In this paper, character is considered as designating a human or human-like individual, existing in some possible world, an individual to whom inner states, mental properties and personality can be ascribed on the basis of textual data. The paper thus examines the extent to which Bole Butake in his plays presents gods and spirits and introduces them as characters in their own right, thus, presenting dramatic experiences, which one could describe as character manifestation of the supernatural.

It is discovered that Bole Butake presents gods and spirits and introduces them as characters in their own right; he concretizes and makes the invisible visible, the infinite finite, and the supernatural, human. He uses techniques like, anthropomorphism, spirit possession, apostrophe, epithets and masks in presenting the supernatural character.

Introduction

The African universe consists of natural and supernatural phenomena. The spiritual world, to use Geoffrey Parrinder's words "is so real and near, its forces intertwining and inspiring the visible world that whether pagan or Christian, man has to reckon with things invisible to mortal sight." (10) The ancestors, the living and the unborn are part of a cyclic trinity, with the revered ancestors and the deities still exerting tremendous force on the living, acting as their guardians and protectors. The gods and ancestors are eternally alive and it is believed they visit the earth to inspect it, regulate it, bestow blessings and mete out punishment. This cosmic continuum that Mircea Eliade describes in *The Myth of Eternal Return* as "the union of heaven and earth" (23), is a vital aspect of African culture. African playwrights thus, strive to represent this vital aspect of their culture in their works. The manifestation of the supernatural in African drama is often reflected in themes, structure, style and characters. The concern of this paper is with the manifestation of the supernatural through character.

Rudolf Otto has observed about the supernatural that "it is quite beyond the sphere of the usual, the intelligent and the familiar". (20) The supernatural figure functions outside the orb of human personality, intelligence and logic. Its nature escapes human comprehension, so its conception is often problematic. According to Umokoro, "many critics, faced with the difficulties of presenting the supernatural have resorted to the allegorical approach of presenting supernatural characters as symbolic representations of natural phenomena and human wishes and fears". (69) This allegorical approach seems incomplete because it does not bring out the traits or personality of the supernatural character. It is therefore, not our concern in this paper.

For the purpose of this paper, character should be understood as designating a human or human-like individual, existing in some possible world, an individual to whom inner states, mental properties and personality can be ascribed on the basis of textual data. This paper examines the extent to which Bole Butake in his plays *Lake God* and *And Palm-wine will Flow*¹ presents gods and spirits and introduces them as characters in their own right, thus, presenting dramatic experiences, which one could describe as character manifestation of the supernatural. The paper examines supernatural characters not as allegorical presentations but as supernatural figures that are distinct from human beings and function as individuals in the text. It seeks to decipher the feature of the supernatural and the techniques through which Butake portrays the supernatural in *Lake God* and *And Palm-wine*. Questions such as how the supernatural is presented, what the supernatural representation means, what it intends and what it expresses, need to be answered for this discussion to be complete. Techniques such as, Anthropomorphism, spirit possession, the use of apostrophe, the use of epithets and the use of masks (techniques that are used in the presentation of the supernatural) are identified and the cultural and aesthetic functions of the supernatural in Bole Butake's *Lake God* and *And Palm-wine* are examined.

A Resume of the Two Plays

Lake God, though inspired by the Lake Nyos natural gas disaster of 1986², goes beyond a mere dramatic representation of a toxic gas explosion. It presents a community caught up in the web of

¹ *Lake God* and *And Palm-wine will Flow*. Pp,4-49 and 87-114 respectively in Bole Butake's *Lake God and Other plays*. Yaounde: Cle, 1999. All references are from this edition. *And Palm-wine will Flow* will hereafter be referred to as *And Palm-wine* and where necessary, page numbers will be indicated in parentheses

² On the 26th of August 1986, several herds of cattle and about two thousand people living around a lake (*Lake Nyos*) in the Menchum Division of the North West Province of Cameroon were killed in a disaster that was attributed scientifically to a toxic gas emission from the Lake. Before this scientific revelation, there had been varied opinions and speculations by the

diverse social conflicts especially between Christianity and traditional beliefs. The central conflict in the play, results from Fon³ Joseph's refusal to lead his people in the yearly sacrifice to the Lake God, a sacrifice which the people believe will ensure regeneration and continuity of the community. The clan head (Fon Joseph), a recalcitrant Christian stooge, refuses to lead his people in the sacrifice to the god of the lake because he believes that as a devout Christian monarch, he should not partake in what his mentor, Father Leo, calls "fetish and pagan sacrifice". *Lake God* re-enacts the story of a village ruined by a catastrophe resulting from the rebuff of the people's traditions. We are presented with two opposing camps in the lake community - that of the Fon who is supported by Fr. Leo, a catholic priest and that of the rest of the members of the community led by Shey Bo Nyo. The women in this community feel particularly and directly affected by their Fon's attitude (his refusal to lead his people in the yearly sacrifice to the Lake God, his refusal to consummate his love and kingship by sharing the royal bed with the queen, and his refusal to send away from the village the cattle rearers whose cattle destroy the women's crops). They see the Fon's refusal to lead the people in the yearly sacrifice as an abuse to them, given that this could affect the regeneration and continuity of the village. Fon Joseph is a greedy hypocrite who bribes his way onto the throne and uses his position for his selfish ends. His double standards are portrayed in his handling of the crisis in the village. For example, Angela, his first wife, is childless but he refuses to take a second wife to have children and ensure the continuity of his lineage as tradition demands. He does this on the pretext to his religion but in reality, he is a liar, (he owns most of the cattle in the village), he is exploitative, (he obliges Dewa to pay twenty thousands for crops destroyed by the cattle but does not give the money to the women). When Dewa protests and insists that it is the fon's cattle that destroyed the crops and not his' Fon Joseph victimizes him as illustrated below.

Fon: You go pay all da chop wey you cow don choppam.

Dewa: No bi na ma nyun, Mbe! Na nyun don choppam corn.

Fon: Shurrup yum up, bloody fool!(to guards) If he opens his mouth again...!

Dewa: If na so Mbe don talkam....

Fon: You go muf two cow fo you nyun puttam fo me nyun. Woman cow wey get leke three year so dat small tam dem get belle. You don hear fine, fine? (*Lake God*, 16-18)

Frustrated by the heartlessness of the Fon and by the inability of their husbands to ensure that these wrongs are corrected, the women decide to mount pressure on their husbands whom they believe would in turn mount pressure on the Fon. Through Fibuen (the women's secret cult) whose ululation has not been heard in the land for eight years, the women take the "oath of sealed lips" with broomsticks cooked in most potent medicine and herbs in the land (*Lake God*, 25). This oath entails keeping secret their deliberations and depriving their husbands of food and sex (two things that they know their husbands cherish). Faced with this situation, the men, through the Kwifon⁴ decide to compel the Fon to lead them in the sacrifice. This move is however, too late. The Lake God, who is already too angry, unleashes a terrible disaster and there is desolation in the land. Hansel Eyoh, writing about *Lake God* in "Historicity and New Anglophone Drama" contends that:

local population about the cause of the disaster. Some people believed that Israel tried to test a newly manufactured bomb in the lake while others were of the view that it was caused by the inability of the people to pacify the anger of the god of the lake. These views are discernible in Butake's *Lake God*.

³ This is an appellation for traditional rulers in the North West Province of Cameroon

⁴ Kwifon is men's secret cult. The seven pillars of Kwifon are referred to in *Lake God* as the seven pillars of the land.

In *Lake God*, it is not the importance of the actual event that provides the focal point of the action but rather, the nature of the collective stock-taking that the play calls for. In its didactic thrust *Lake God* essentially draws our attention to a metaphysical questioning about what has become of our collective essence. It is an existential journey into our collective unconscious—a search for fresh paradigms for a future society—one which should be grounded on a perfect understanding of our relationship with the unknown gods who hover permanently over and above us. (103)

The dramatic finale in which the play ends, illustrates what Hilarious Ambe described as “an over influential role of supernatural forces which, control the lives of the mortals in the society”. The play, he writes, “injects a too powerful supernatural presence which undercuts the ability of mortals in resolving their problems and making their own decisions”. (96) The supernatural character in the text is therefore, a force to reckon with.

And Palm-Wine on its part, is a dramatization of the efforts of the people of Ewawa (aided by their gods) to free themselves from the corrupt and dictatorial rule of their traditional ruler, Chila Kintasi. Every action in the play takes place in the sacred grove of Nyombom (the abode of the gods and ancestors of Ewawa), a place Hilarious Ambe describes as “a fantastic setting, where the dead are not dead and the natural and supernatural are accepted as part of the truth of communal existence”. (241) The play is a satirical presentation of actualities in contemporary society. The playwright presents a community where values of old have been emasculated because of greed. The core of the play as Alembong writes “relates to a repressive system of governance and unrealistic thinking, a system characterized by the misuse of power, injustice, corruption, and wanton greed”. (131) The main conflict in the play is between Shey Ngong, the priest of Nyombom whom Shadrack Ambanasom rightly describes as “the moral pillar and epitome of spiritual values” and the immoral Fon whom he sees as the epitome of pleasure and hedonism”. (220) Shey Ngong informs the readers of his antagonism to the traditional ruler when the play begins. He is strongly opposed to the Fon whom he describes as “the pig who knows only the hunger of its own stomach”. (91) Shey’s steadfastness in his condemnation of the Fon and his notables whom he believes have lost bearing and now listen only to the inner voice of greed, leads to the seizure of his wives’ farmland and the ominous plan by the Fon to destroy the sacred grove of Nyombom (the abode of the gods and ancestors of Ewawa). The only hope for a better future in Ewawa rests on the removal of the Fon from the helm of power. Aware of this, Shey invokes the gods who through Kibaranko and Earth-goddess, assist in demolishing the dictatorship of Ewawa. This ushers in a new dawn where all the people shall, in the market place, decide on the affairs of the land.

Modes of Presenting the Supernatural

In a discourse on character, titled, “Spectacle Binding on Character” John Frow observes that:

The concept of character, though the most widely used of critical tools at all levels of analysis, is perhaps the most problematic and the most under-theorized of the basic categories of narrative theory, and that its sheer obviousness disguises the conceptual difficulties it presents. (227)

The conceptual difficulties become more profound when the characters in question are supernatural characters because the nature of the supernatural defies human comprehension. The gods or the supernatural in African cosmology are seen as originators and sustainers of things. Mbiti believes “they are simultaneously transcendent and immanent”. (29) They are presented as omniscient, (knowing all things), as omnipresent, (being simultaneously everywhere) and as omnipotence (almighty, their might seen in the power they exercise over nature).

Butake is an acclaimed Anglophone Cameroonian playwright and critic whose conception of characters is in accordance with Obiechina’s claim that:

Characterization in African literary imagination is conceived in such a way as to partake of the special nature of the traditional culture, especially the status and professional definition of individuals, the organic nature of family and community relationships, the religious and mystical interpretation of character traits through such phenomena as relationship with tutelary deities, possession by a deity or spirit and the imputations of particular people to witchcraft and extraordinary psychic power. (101)

The techniques through which he presents supernatural characters are varied and include: anthropomorphism, spirit possession, the use of epithets, the use of apostrophe and the use of mask.

Anthropomorphism, which The *Cambridge International Dictionary of English* defines as “the showing or treating of animals, gods and objects as if they are human in appearance, character or behaviour”(49) is one of the methods Butake uses in delineating the supernatural character in *Lake God* and *And Palm-wine*. This is an attempt to concretize or make visible the invisible for as Andrew Horn writes

Man, as a material being in a material world, fears what he perceives as immaterial, for it cannot be contained or dominated. His defensive impulse is to concretize, to make the invisible visible, the infinite finite, and the supernatural human. (183)

Butake presents the supernatural characters in anthropomorphic images as powerful personalities. For example, Earth-goddess in *And Palm-wine* eavesdrops the conversation between Shey Ngong and Messenger, agitates and pronounces a drought:

Shey Ngong: The gods and the ancestors will fight their battle with the Fon. I am only their servant.

Messenger: Now that your wives have lost their farmlands what are the gods and your ancestors doing? (*One of the masks, Earth-goddess, suddenly becomes agitated and then pronounces*)

Earth-Goddess: The sun shines on the hills
The sun shines in the valley
The sun shines in the depths of the streams
The sun shines. (*Palm Wine 93-.94*)

Also, Kibaranko rumbles and Earth-goddess keens to establish their disapproval when Gwei swears by them.

Shey Ngong: Yet you were quick to bring me the news. Have you heard what happened to your friend? The rat does not play with the cat. Talk!

Gwei: I swear by Kibaranko that it was not me (*Kibanranko rumbles furiously*)
I mean I swear by the gods, by Earth-goddess. (*Earth-goddess keens furiously*). (*And Palm-wine, 103*).

They get hungry and are fed as is seen during the offering of sacrifices and the pouring of libations. Tanto in *Lake God* declares:

Tanto: Here is drink for you gods
Here is drink for you ancestors
Give us patience
Give us peace of mind; show us the right path. (*Lake God, 39*)

They get angry and make pronouncements or cause natural disasters. This is seen in the conversation between Kibow, Wong and Tanto in *Lake God*.

Kibow: I see.
The Lake disappeared six years ago.
Kwifon went to the Fon and demanded
That he performs the sacrifice of the lake
Like his fathers before him had always done...

Six years ago when the lake left the land
Taking along the fertilizing waters
And the Fon refused to lead in sacrifice,
Did Kwifon not seek and find a solution?

Wong: For that solution the Kwifon was banished from the land it had saved. ...

Kibow: Two years after, the Fon banished the Kwifon the lake god was hungry again for sacrifice. This time the lake generated landslides, brought down whole hills, destroying house and farms...

Tanto: There is trouble in the land...
The cattle are destroying farms.
The women are starving their husbands
The Fon must do something...
The lake is angry
The waters have been boiling for four days
The Lake God must be pacified through sacrifice. (*Lake God: 41-43*)

The thunder and lightning, the tremor and the boiling of the lake in *Lake God* are interpreted as manifestations of Lake God's anger. This anger, because it was not pacified led to a disaster in which a whole village is annihilated. In *And Palm-wine*, Earth-goddess in anger begins a giddy dance which rises in tempo until she pronounces:

Earth-goddess: The ground trembles in the valley!
The ground trembles where the stream flows!
The ground trembles where the palm grows!
The ground trembles!
(*Rising sound of thunder rumbling in the ground*)
(*And Palm-wine, 100*)

Imminent disaster is avoided when Shey Ngong takes immediate action after Earth-goddess' pronouncement of earthquake. For example, Shey urges Tapper, "You must make haste to the palace and bring palm wine for the incantation". (101) When the palm wine is finally brought by Kibaranko, the sacrifice is performed. The wrath of the gods is pacified so they assist the people in their struggle against their heartless ruler.

Though Butake presents supernatural characters in terms of human personality, they are not totally human. The human qualities they portray are not finite but infinite. They possess infinite power, infinite knowledge and infinite strength. The supernatural, which is limitless, is presented as a messianic figure that intervenes in the human world to check the excesses of men. For example, the solution to the conflict between the rulers and the ruled in the texts under study is brought about by the mysterious intervention of the supernatural. The anthropomorphic presentation of supernatural characters goes a long way to reiterate the African worldview, whereby the gods and ancestors are eternally alive and always regulate and punish the actions of the living.

Besides anthropomorphism, Bole Butake presents supernatural characters through spirit possession. According to Raymond Firth, spirit possession is "a form of a trance in which the behaviour and actions of a person are interpreted as evidence of control of his behaviour by a spirit normally external to him". (129) Discussing character conception in *And Palm-wine*, Alembong writes that "Butake like many African writers broadens the base of his characters through mystification and symbolism".(136) In his discussion on spirit possession in *And Palm-wine*, Alembong presents the supernatural character as "a spirit that through incantations and chants possesses a character and enables the possessed character do the will of the gods." (136) He sees Kwengong and Tapper as functioning at both the human and spiritual levels. Kwengong, he argues, functions as Earth-goddess at the spiritual level and as Shey Ngong's wife at the human level, while Tapper functions as Kibaranko at the spiritual level and as Shey's tapper at the human level. This researcher wishes to differ with this view and to submit that Kibaranko and Earth-goddess are characters in their own right, personalized figures. This is because a character that is possessed ceases to exist in his/her individualized state and functions as the supernatural. He cannot therefore be regarded as functioning at both the human and supernatural level. This is because Kwengong and Tapper, when possessed, no longer function as themselves but as Earth-goddess and Kibaranko, characters in their own right. For example, Earth-goddess eavesdrops the conversation between Shey Ngong and Messenger, agitates and pronounces a drought even before Kwengong who later takes refuge in the mask of Earth-goddess is introduced in the play. In the same manner, Kibaranko rumbles even before the ritual chants that lead to Tapper's possession by the spirit of Kibaranko.

Tapper, apprehensive of going to get palm wine from the Fon's palace says, "not me Shey, let Kibaranko go. Kibaranko can do it. (*And Palm-wine* 104) This shows that Kibaranko and Tapper are distinct. Where Tapper is vulnerable, Kibaranko is invulnerable. However, after the ritual through which Shey Ngong induces the spirit of Kibaranko into Tapper, Kibaranko possesses him. The howling Kibaranko in terrifying frenzy exits to the Fon's palace and destroys not only pots and calabashes of wine, but also split the Fon's throne. Kibaranko, because he is supernatural and hence invulnerable, is able to do the unthinkable. He totally destroys the Fon's palace and brings with it the Fon's Bugle. This symbolizes the end of dictatorship in Ewawa. Tapper's possession by the spirit of Kibaranko, accounts for his inability to remember on his return from the Fon's palace, what happened in the Fon's palace. As illustrated below, he could remember only the discussion he had with Shey Ngong prior to his possession.

Shey Ngong: *The eagle flies and flies...*

(As Kibaranko makes entrance,. Shey Ngong not only empties the contents of the sacred horn on him. He begins a giddy dance and then collapses) He has not brought back wine for my invocations. (He unmask Kibaranko and gives him some herbs to chew) You did not bring the palm wine

Tapper: The Fon has seized the palm bush. His watchdogs are there now. They beat me severely. My clothes are in tatters (*And Palm-wine, 107*)

Kibaranko returns and Tapper, now in his human self, craves for palm wine. He urges Shey Ngong:

Tapper: The palm-wine? I need palm-wine

SheyNgong: There is none. Even for my libation and invocations. You forgot that you scattered all the pots and calabashes?

Tapper: What did I bring, then? When the spirit of Kibaranko takes you, it is hard to remember anything. (*And Palm-wine, 112*)

Tapper succeeds in devastating the palace, because the spirit of Kibaranko possesses him; (a spirit he describes as the whirlwind, and madness and which as he says, when it takes you, it is hard to remember anything). Kwengong is also distinct from Earth-goddess for as she recounts:

Kwengong: I went. I got to the place just as the Kibaranko was about departing. I walked straight into the inner court. Of course, the whole place was deserted. Not a single body around. When I opened my mouth to speak I could not recognise my own voice...

Fon: Woman, who showed you in here?

Who gave you leave to step into this place?

Kwengong: Earth-goddess needs no one's leave to walk where her feet will, Chila Kintasi. (*And Palm-wine 109*)

She is unable to recognise her voice because it is now that of Earth-goddess who has possessed her. These excerpts show that there is a clear distinction between Kibaranko/ Tapper and Earth-goddess / Kwengong. This is in line with Adelugba's assertion that:

When a trance is achieved, the possessed loses complete consciousness of even his/her essence, and is transformed into the essence of the god himself. And during the trance characterized by ritual, sacrifice incantations, music, song and dance, the possessed is capable of the prophet's sight, communicating with man as a first-person representative of the deity. (207)

The supernatural character is also presented in Bole Butake's plays through the use of epithets or praise names that distinguish them from mortals. For example, they are addressed as "illustrious forebears" (*Lake God, 39*), "the eagle that flies and flies but always returns home", "the prowling lion that comes back to its den for rest after devastating the forest", "the leopard that prowls amongst the goats and they scatter into the dark night", "The elephant that flaps his ears and sends the forest into disarray", "the whirl wind", "creator" and "guardian". (*And Palm-wine, 104-105, 107*) These epithets make vivid the absolute and infinite qualities of supernatural characters thus, placing them above

ordinary men and justifying the playwright's vision that we need to resort to the supernatural to cleanse our societies of the filth resulting from our leaders' iniquitous mannerisms

Butake also presents supernatural characters through the use of apostrophe, the device of addressing or calling someone absent as though he were present. They are presented as powerful personalities who are the watchdogs of the society and must be consulted through intermediaries or mediators. In the consultations, the presence of the supernatural is felt in a dramatic way because the playwright uses apostrophes. In the excerpt below from *Lake God*, the reader feels the active presence of the gods because Tanto addresses them in apostrophes as if they were present.

They Tanto: (*Invoking the spirits of the land and pouring libation*)n.

Hiiii Wong! Hiiii Bo-Nyo! Hiiii Kwifon!
 Here present are the seven pillars of Kwifon!
 Here present are the seven corners of the land.
 We cannot give food and drink to the illustrious ancestors
 We cannot even gain access to the sanctuary of Kwifon...
 Because the land is no longer the land.
 The Fon has banished Kwifon and given the land
 To strangers and rearers of cattle
 And now the women starve their men
 Hiiii Wong! Hiiii Bo-Nyo!Hiiii Kwifon!
 Here is drink for you gods
 Here is drink for you ancestors
 Give us patience
 Give us peace of mind; show us the right path (*Lake God*, 39)

This treatment of invisible gods as if they were present, reflects the nature of African cosmology where the dead, the living and the unborn are believed to be in an existential continuum.

The Significance of the Supernatural Character

Drama lives in the encounter of characters, so it is difficult to conceive of a story without characters. DiYanni writes that dramatic characters come together and affect each other, making things happen by coming into conflict. (23) Since some of the characters in the two plays under study are supernatural, it is important that we examine their significance in the texts. George Nyamndi in a paper titled, "The Symbolism of The Cattle in *Lake God*" asserts that, "*Lake God* is about little men grappling with the little circumstances of their existence". (29) The text as he believes, "is fired by dramatic realism with experiences etched in a certain number of conflicts: Christianity and traditional belief, stasis and change, farming and grazing and fertility and sterility". He argues that "if we search the universe of *Lake God* for larger-than life figures, our reward, if any, will be very small indeed". (29) This 'very small indeed' presence of 'the larger-than-life' that Nyamndi sees in *Lake God*, is a force to reckon with. One could, therefore, say that *Lake God* is the story of a village destroyed by a natural catastrophe resulting from the clan head's refusal to offer sacrifices to the god of the lake. These "little circumstances and experiences etched in a certain conflict" which Nyamndi writes about, emanates from the Fon's felony against the "larger than life figures" (supernatural characters) that

hold the village together. The Fon's neglect of the Lake God, (god of benevolence and of fertility), leads to the tremor, and boiling of the lake, which culminate in the disaster that destroys the land.

Lake God, as one may say, presents a society in conflict, a conflict between indigenous African values and the forces of Western civilization. Butake's attitude towards the supernatural, (he believes our communities can prosper only if we are in constant communion with our gods) which is a vital part of African culture, presents him as a promoter of African cultural values. He portrays the place and the importance of the gods who must be consulted not directly but through intermediaries. Tanto the head of the Kwifon in *Lake God* thus pleads with Shey:

Tanto: Shey Bo-Nyo, cast your sacred cowries
 And read the stars to the seven pillars
 Tell the seven corners of the land
 Yes let us see what the future holds.
 What the gods have in store for us.

Shey Bo-Nyo's reply suggests the need for a prompt response to the demands of the gods. As he replies:

Shey Bo-Nyo: No need to cast the cowries,
 No use to read the stars.
 The waters of the lake boil...
 The god's anger boils over. Today is day four (40)

Butake stresses the necessity of the relationship between the known and the unknown gods who, as custodians of the society are permanently around us. He rightly believes that man is helpless when out of touch with these supernatural forces. The community believes that yearly sacrifices to the Lake god ensure peace, regeneration and continuity of the community. Fon Joseph's blind refusal to lead them in this yearly sacrifice leads to a breach between the people and their gods. This is seen as the cause of all the problems in the village. Tanto in *Lake God* thus warns the Fon:

You will never have peace
 Because you have denied your people peace,
 Your ancestors will never allow you respite (*Lake God*, 44)

Alembong writes that, Butake presents the supernatural character as "that inevitable and irresistible tragic force necessary to purge society of its ills". (134) He portrays even Father Leo, (a catholic priest, and the Fon's mentor who regards the cultural practices of the village as fetish and paganism; so dissuades the Fon from leading his people in the yearly sacrifice.) and the police on whom Fon Joseph depends as helpless in the presence of the supernatural. As the passage below reveals:

(There is a terrible scream off. Then absolute silence.)

Fon: What is that?

Angela: One of the guards

Fon: What happened?

Angela: I don't know.

The Fon advances stealthily towards exit. Angela tries to stop him.

Fon: Keinchin? Keinchin? Where are the bas...?

(Another terrible scream.)

Voice: Yosew Kimbong? Yosew Kimbong?

Angela: They are calling you by name...

(She suddenly becomes mesmerized and in a dreamlike manner, the Fon moves with uncertain steps towards exit. Angela recovers. Finding that her husband has been taken away she throws a shawl over her head and as she exits there are rumblings of thunder.)

Angela: Help, Father! Help! They have taken my husband...

Father Leo: The police! We must get the police. We must go and get the police right away. I will get the keys of the land –rover. *(As Father Leo exits, there is a loud bang. A few minutes later, Father Leo is heard coughing wildly. Angela begins to cough too and suddenly crumbles to the floor).* (Lake God 46-49).

In *And Palm-wine* also, the Fon who is dreaded by all as Gwei in the passage below illustrates is helpless before the supernatural

Shey Ngong: Let the Fon come and sack the grove! Let him come and...

He has drunk wine until it has gone into his head

Gwei: In private, Shey ! I said in private, Holy One. Everyone says the Fon is mad. But in private.

Shey Ngong: And in Public you sing his praises. The wise One! Father of the land! Founder and guardian of Ewawa ...And all the time he is seizing people's farmlands and palm-bushes for himself and his notables.

Gwei: Out of fear, Holy One! Out of fear!

Shey Ngong: You even adulate him. You worship him! You worship a man

Gwei: Out of fear, Holy One. I have already said so. (102)

The dreaded Fon is helpless before Kibaranko because as Messenger reports in this excerpt below.

Messenger: We were all at various stages of drunkenness when suddenly we heard the howling of kibaranko and saw the Fon's wives and children running in total confusion and fear...The Fon staggered from his throne and fell. When he saw the notables were running he cried for assistance. 'Safe me from his wrath or I am dead. Save me I say!' (And Palm-wine 106)

Messenger also informs us that it is for fear of Kibaranko that the Fon has not yet confronted Shey Ngong. The supernatural is all-powerful and man is helpless in the hands of the supernatural. The presence of the supernatural besides justifying the tragic dimension of the plays evokes in the reader a sense of awe. It is also through the actions of supernatural characters that the purgation of emotions, an essential function of tragedy, is achieved. We are thus, led to believe that the supernatural could assist us to rid our societies of scores of tyrants and sycophants.

The presence of the supernatural is designed to present the limitation of the natural and one is tempted to believe that the playwright is emphasizing the reliance on the numinous as the only way

forward. If one were to think that Butake's vision is to eulogize the supernatural, one would conclude that if we become as audacious as Tapper and go into the mask of Kibaranko, we would be empowered with 'the whirlwind and madness (features of the supernatural) which the playwright seems to see as the only way to demolish or triumph over the whirlwind and madness of corruption that characterizes contemporary African society. This, I deduce is the submission of Tangwa whom Hilarious Ambe quotes thus:

Lake God, in its thematic scaffolding, does not rise above the mundane conflict between traditionalism and modernity or between the different conceptions of the supernatural... in spite of the artistic merits of the play, it should be considered as a work of false consciousness. (22)

To me instead, Butake's vision, especially as it relates to his presentation of the supernatural, can best be understood if the supernatural is looked upon as symbolic. Supernatural characters in Butake's two plays are a representation of the limitless strength and courage and the infinite and limitless abilities of will power. Butake in his two plays emphasizes the need for collective conscientiousness. He seems to believe that this can only be feasible if we wear the mask of Kibaranko and Earth-goddess; that is, if we tap from the limitless strength and courage and the infinite and limitless abilities of will power that they symbolize. This will rejuvenate us and enable us demolish the tyranny in contemporary society. This cannot be considered a false consciousness as Tangwa argues. On the contrary, Butake's plays expose the reader to the magical dimension of politics in Africa, which is often ignored by classic political and historical studies. Permeating the entire social and cultural spectrum of Africa, magic stands today as an ambivalent force that helps promote individual and collective accumulation as well as controls social differentiation. Nowadays more than ever, African politicians are widely believed to perform magic acts to ensure electoral success.

The supernatural character in *And Palm-wine*, executes justice and cleanses the land. It destroys only the culpable Fon and his henchmen who have violated the norms of the land. The supernatural character also contributes greatly to the advancement of the plot. Supernatural characters break the stasis in both plays leading to the advancement of the plot. Shey Ngong, on learning that the palm bushes are disappearing, supposes this to be "the beginning of the cure of the curse that has gripped the land in its claws", but Earth-goddess refutes it and insists that:

Earth-goddess: The curse remains!

The plaque remains!

The pot is whole!

The calabash is whole!

The curse remains!

Shey Ngong: You hear that? You must make haste to the palace and bring palm wine for the incantation (*And Palm-wine*, 101)

This pronouncement is very important in the play, because it sets into action other machineries in the text. Shey Ngong rightly declares that 'the pronouncements of the gods must be executed and promptly'. It is the attempt to ward off the curse pronounced by Earth-goddess that leads to the advancement of the plot.

It is also through the influence of the supernatural that we comprehend the thematic and ideological supposition of the playwright. It is through the medium of trance, for example, that Butake makes Gwei reveal the nature and the extent of the Fon's despotism. Gwei's presence off stage and his entry into the sacred grove of Nyombom are followed by his swift allusion to the unjustified imprisonment of Nsangong (Shey's friend) but his rapturous disposition is short-lived because, as reported in the text, the weird rumbling of Kibaranko and the keening of Earth-goddess entrances Gwei. The playwright writes in the stage direction that 'Gwei tries to flee but discovers that he cannot move'. (102) In this entranced state, as illustrated below, he exposes the Machiavellianism of the Fon and his notables:

Gwei: I swear by Kibaranko

Shey Ngong: You see how you perjure yourself? How do people disappear in this land?

Gwei: They are taken to Ekpang, Shey.

Shey Ngong: The bad bush?

Gwei: Yes the bad bush

Shey Ngong: And killed? You kill people in the bad bush on behalf of the Fon?

Gwei: Very often it is the notables that order. Especially Nformi Nyam and Nfomi Eleme

Shey Ngong: For what crimes? What are their crimes that you take their lives?

Gwei: For talking ill of the Fon

Shey Ngong: For that alone you take a man's life? (*And Palm-wine* 103)

The supernatural, which is limitless, is presented as a messianic figure that intervenes in the human world to check the excesses of man. For example, it can be purported that the resolution of the conflict in the plays under study is brought about by the mysterious intervention of supernatural characters. Butake is therefore, not merely celebrating Noni oral tradition; he uses it to embellish his art, and to communicate. The view he puts across is that, the goal of life and harmony can only be generated through constant communication with the gods in Since the supernatural symbolizes strength of will, it is my contention that if the oppressed become resolute, they can, like Tapper, openly declare without fear,

Tapper: I say no more Fons in this land. That is all!

Shey Ngong: What do you think you are doing?

Tapper: (*Getting into the mask of Kibaranko*) the palace must be burnt down. No more Fons in this land of Ewawa! No more grabbing of people's farmlands and palm bushes! No more piecemeal distribution of the red feather. No more!
(*Storms out of the grove knocking Shey Ngong to the ground*). (*Palm-wine* 111)

Such determination, will indubitably lead to success. This reinforces Butake's vision that victory can only be got through individual and collective effort.

Conclusion

It is clear from the foregoing discussion that Bole Butake in his plays *Lake God* and *And Palmwine*, presents gods and spirits and introduces them as characters in their own right and so, presents dramatic experiences, which one can describe as character manifestation of the supernatural. He concretizes and makes the invisible visible, the infinite finite, and the supernatural, human. To do this, he presents the supernatural characters in anthropomorphic images as powerful personalities who rationalize, get hungry and are fed, get angry and make pronouncements or cause natural disasters and are actively involved in human life processes. Though the supernatural is anthropomorphically presented, it is distinct from the human. The supernatural character is presented as that which makes things happen, the inevitable, the irresistible, the invulnerable, the complete and the absolute. It is these qualities that distinguish the supernatural from the natural.

The supernatural character is also presented by the use of epithets, praise names or attributes that portray it as above the ordinary. They are presented through spirit possession whereby, a spirit possesses an individual and he/she functions as the deity whose spirit has possessed him/her. The supernatural character besides creating a sense of awe in the plays is the driving force in the texts.

Butake's two plays are commentaries on leadership. They examine tyranny and its implication on the socio-political well being of the people. The playwright reiterates the responsibility of the masses in the determination of their political destiny. The main conflict in the plays however, seems to be between the Fons and the gods, and these act as indispensable components of the plays. Man is presented as incapable of overcoming the forces that stand on his way to progress. Man, as the playwright seems to say can only move forward by tapping from his spiritual potentials, which like the supernatural, are limitless. The supernatural character contributes to the complex nature of the plot and makes vivid the tragic content and the writer's vision.

The main purpose of drama and tragedy in particular, is the purgation of emotions and in these plays, the supernatural character functions as a moral force to purge the societies of undesirable elements. The supernatural character is presented as a messianic figure that intervenes in the human world to check the excesses of man. It can be supposed that the resolution of the conflict between the rulers and the ruled is brought about by the mysterious intervention of the supernatural. An interpretation of characterization in these plays that excludes the role of the supernatural character, will be neglecting an important aspect of the plays.

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