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ON THE MARGINS OF ORTHODOX AND APPLIED THEATRE: MEMORY, EXPIATION AND HEALING IN BOLE BUTAKE'S PLAY *FAMILY SAGA*

By Christopher J. Odhiambo and Naomi Nkealah (South Africa)

Abstract

The paper reads Bole Butake's play *Family Saga* as a conscious artistic intervention, written to mediate the conflict between the English-speaking Cameroonians and their French-speaking counterparts. It identifies and analyses the strategies of applied theatre, especially the techniques of forum theatre deployed by Butake to catalyse the process of expiation and amelioration that are a requisite for meaningful reconciliation. The paper further demonstrates how research is simulated within the plot of the play to offer opportunities for recollecting information for reconstructing the myth of origin. It is through the narration of the myth, framed in a play within a play and techniques of forum theatre, that the past is laid bare and interrogated. This forum theatre process that involves a backward glance leads to some kind of expiation, which results in the protagonists' discovery of their true identities. The paper argues that Butake uses the possibilities of applied theatre to create dialogue leading to healing of fractured relationships.

Résumé

Cet article interprète la pièce de Bole Butake *Family Saga* comme étant une intervention artistique consciente, écrite pour arbitrer le conflit entre les Camerounais anglophones et leurs compatriotes francophones. Il identifie et analyse les stratégies du théâtre appliqué, en particulier les techniques du théâtre de forum utilisé par Butake pour catalyser le processus d'expiation et d'amélioration qui sont une condition d'une réconciliation sérieuse. L'article démontre en outre comment la recherche est simulée au sein de l'intrigue de la pièce pour offrir des opportunités de se souvenir d'informations pour reconstruire le mythe de l'origine. C'est par l'intermédiaire de la narration du mythe, encadré au sein d'une pièce avec une pièce et les techniques de théâtre de forum, que le passé est mis à nu et interrogé. Ce processus de théâtre de forum qui demande un regard en arrière amène à un type d'expiation, qui a pour résultat la découverte par les protagonistes de leur vraie identité. Cet article argumente le fait que Butake utilise les possibilités de théâtre appliqué pour créer un dialogue amenant à la guérison de relations brisées.

Resumen

El publicado enuncia la obra *Drama de la Familia* de Bole Butake como una intervención artística consciente, escrita con el fin de mediar en el conflicto entre camerunianos que hablan inglés y sus opuestos que hablan francés. Este identifica y analiza las estrategias del teatro aplicado, especialmente las técnicas del teatro de foro expuestas por Butake para catalizar los procesos de expiación y amelioración, las cuales son un requisito para una reconciliación significativa. El publicado demuestra, además, como la investigación es simulada dentro del argumento de la obra para ofrecer oportunidades en cuanto a la recolección de información para la reconstrucción del origen del mito. Es mediante la narrativa del mito, enmarcado en una obra dentro de otra obra y las técnicas del teatro foro, en la cual el pasado queda al desnudo y es interrogado. El proceso de este teatro foro que consta de una mirada hacia atrás conduce a cierto tipo de expiación, la cual resulta en que los protagonistas 'descubren su verdadera identidad'. El publicado sostiene que Butake utiliza las posibilidades del teatro aplicado para crear el dialogo que conduce a la curación de relaciones fracturadas.

Authors' Biographies

Christopher J. Odhiambo is an Associate Professor of Literature and African Drama at Moi University's Department of Literature, Theatre and Film Studies. His book *Theatre for Development in Kenya* has just been published in Germany. Presently a Mellon Fellow in the Department of African Literature, Wits University, he has published extensively on intervention theatre.

Naomi Nkealah is a doctoral candidate in the Department of African Literature at the University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg. She holds an MA *cum laude* in Pan-African Literatures and has published articles in the *English Academy Review* and *Tydskrif vir Letterkunde* (Journal of Literature).

Biographies des auteurs

Christopher J. Odhiambo est maître de conférences en Littérature et théâtre africain au Département de littérature, théâtre et études cinématographiques à Moi University. Son livre *Theatre for Development in Kenya* vient juste d'être publié en Allemagne. Il est actuellement un 'Mellon Fellow', un membre du Département de littérature africaine, à Wits University. Il a publié de nombreux travaux sur le théâtre d'intervention.

Naomi Nkealah est une doctorante au Département de littérature africaine à l'Université de Witwatersrand, à Johannesburg. Elle a une Maîtrise en Littérature panafricaine avec Mention très bien, et a publié des articles dans le *English Academy Review* et le *Tydskrif vir Letterkunde* (Revue de littérature).

Biografías de los autores

Christopher J. Odhiambo es Profesor Asociado de Literatura y Drama Africano en la Moi Universidad Departamento de Literatura, Teatro y Estudios de Filmación. Su libro *Teatro para el Desarrollo en Kenya* recién ha sido publicado en Alemania. Actualmente es un Mellon Fellow, del Departamento de la Literatura Africana — Universidad Wits, ha producido muchas publicaciones sobre el teatro de intervención.

Naomi Nkealah es candidata para obtener su doctorado en el Departamento de Literatura Africana en la Universidad de Witwatersrand, Johannesburgo. Ella posee una maestría con honores en Literatura Pan-Africana y ha publicado artículos en la Revista de la Academia Inglesa *Tydskrif vir Letterkunde* (Publicado de Literatura).

ON THE MARGINS OF ORTHODOX AND APPLIED THEATRE: MEMORY, EXPIATION AND HEALING IN BOLE BUTAKE'S PLAY *FAMILY SAGA*

Introduction

This is a reading of Bole Butake's play *Family Saga* (2005) as an artistic intervention, written to mediate in the conflict between the English-speaking Cameroonians and their French-speaking counterparts. Using this conflict as a dramatic structure, Butake provides his audience(s) with opportunities to engage pragmatically with the problematic issues of reunification, including the deeply felt sense of betrayal and the suspicions that threaten the very survival of Cameroon as a singular national entity. The play *Family Saga* can therefore be read as a conscious artistic attempt to ameliorate these tensions and anxieties. By laying bare historical injustices, from colonial history to the postcolonial project of reunification, Butake imaginatively weaves strategies of applied theatre and drama in a text that opens up vistas for engaging with memory as a way of dealing with the contradictions of reunification and at the same time providing possibilities for expiation, healing and reconciliation.

Before getting deep into this discussion, a brief synopsis of the play will suffice. *Family Saga*, as the title implies, is a narrative of a family in crisis. It is about twin brothers Kamala and Kamalo, who ironically have different fathers, Baakingoom and Fiekafhim respectively. This is part of the problem that they face as a family. To resolve this problem, the playwright takes the characters through a journey of memory using a communally reconstructed myth of their origin. At the end of this journey, performed as a collective narrative, Kamala and Kamalo discover that they are indeed brothers and that their real father is Wakadu, the mad village musician and dancer. This realisation leads to reconciliation between the two brothers. However, at another level the play can be read as an allegory of the entire history of Cameroon. It is this allegorical reading that this paper privileges.

Engaging with the materiality of conflict, tensions and anxieties that Butake dramatises within *Family Saga* inevitably invites a close attention to that whole world-view, which encompasses, in a historical sense, his dramatic imagery and the allegorical figurations in *Family Saga*. Historically, Cameroon initially was an estate of Germany, then known as German Cameroon. In the post-World War I period, its identity was to change radically, when it was partitioned arbitrarily and shared disproportionately between the new imperial masters, Britain and France. This resulted in the formation of two entities: an Anglophone minority and a Francophone majority. The two distinct entities, differentially defined by their respective masters' tongue, operated unilaterally until the signing of the accord of reunification, which would later face severe difficulties given the very different cultural ideologies and heritage(s) that each had been bequeathed by the respective colonial master.

Through this highly allegorical play, *Family Saga*, Butake — a public intellectual artist — enters into this discourse of the reunification at a moment in its history when it is at its most volatile, and the hostilities between the contending forces are at their highest point. As poignantly summarised by Nicodemus Fru Awasom (2000: 113–14), 'the threats of the disintegration of bilingual Cameroon are real, if we are to go by the activities of Anglophone pressure groups in Cameroon, and the radicalism of the Anglophone Diaspora in the United States, who express their "secessionist" views on the Internet in the SCNC forum'.

Before demonstrating how Butake's drama anticipates to forestall this 'secessionist' mood in his project of remembering, expiation and healing, a brief mapping of the contours of the Cameroonian historical referents gesturing to the allegorical figurations in the play *Family Saga* would be illuminating. For instance the goddess Kamanda symbolises the pre-colonial Cameroon while the suitors — Yaman, Baakingoom and Fiekafhim — signify the colonisers, Germany, Britain and France, respectively. Kamalo's act of turning the deed of brotherhood into bondagehood resonates with the abandonment of a federal system of government, enforcing a unitary system that left the Anglophones with little say in political affairs.

The most striking feature of *Family Saga* is that Butake moves beyond the Anglophone/Francophone divide to resurrect the oneness of the Cameroon peoples before the advent of colonialism, through common cultural referents such as the myth of origin, to show the possibility of reconciliation. The play is intended not only to release Cameroonians from imprisonment to the colonial past but also to infuse them with the energy and insight to overcome the challenges of the neocolonial present. It could arguably be

seen as Butake's proposal of a truth and reconciliation commission in the Cameroonian context, as the following discussion on memory, expiation and healing demonstrates.

The Redemptive Role of Drama: Memory, Expiation and Healing in *Family Saga*

It is within this broad context that *Family Saga* is read as an extended metaphor of the Cameroonian crisis that emerges out of the perceived betrayal of the spirit of the reunification accord that brought together Anglophone and Francophone Cameroonians into a singular national entity. The play instructively starts at that crucial point when the conflict between the two oppositional forces, as symbolised by the protagonists Kamala (Anglophone) and Kamalo (Francophone), is at its climactic peak. Informing their disagreement is a deep-rooted problem symptomatic of a long-standing relationship of betrayal, exploitation, expropriation, dispossession and oppression.

Butake interprets the tensions evoked by the reunification as largely informed by misinterpretations of the spirit of the accord that brought it into being. Kamala, on the one hand, interprets the spirit of the accord in terms of brotherhood while Kamalo, on the other hand, conceives of it as some kind of bondagehood:

KAMALA: *Where is the deed of brotherhood that we both signed? I need my share of the resources.*

KAMALO: *You mean the deed of bondagehood? My papa is keeping it.*

KAMALA: *Keeping what? Your papa is keeping what?*

KAMALO: *The deed of bondagehood which you signed. (FS: 13)*

Butake uses the possibilities inherent in forum and playback theatre forms to reconstruct materiality of memory to catalyse a profoundly meaningful process of expiation, healing and transformation that leads to his vision of reconciliation. Butake emphasises that this play was conceived in the mode of applied theatre when he notes that:

Family Saga is a creative demonstration of the methodology I and my associates have developed and used in the process of these several workshops held with people at the grassroots on problems affecting them directly within their communities. They participated actively in the story creation process as well as in the plays that were collectively created and the films that were made. (Butake, 2005: 6)

Family Saga is structurally a very complex dramatic text; it is self-reflexive as it keeps commenting on its own composition and performance as an intervention text. It is also a 'syncretic' play, at the intersection of orthodox theatre and the improvised forms of applied drama. This explains the centrality of the 'workshop' and the play within the play. This dramatic mode of structuring allows the characters to engage with varying planes of 'realities and experiences' beyond their own defined characters and roles. But, more importantly, the 'workshop' and play within a play techniques allow Butake to draw elaborately from the various strategies found in applied drama and theatre forms. Consequently, the 'workshop' and the play within the play techniques allow him to introduce within the structure of this play some aspects of forum theatre, playback theatre and traditional oral narration. Indeed, the myth of origin that leads to expiation and reconciliation utilises oral narration techniques and Boal's idea of the 'joker' in the form of a master of ceremony. These aspects, mainly therapeutic and transformative, are the ones that he deploys to catalyse the acts of expiation, and in the healing of the fractured and tense 'worlding' encountered in *Family Saga*. As Joseph S. Salem (1977) would aptly remind us:

art is the ultimate expiation, for through it not only suffering, but falsehood which lies at the core of existence is transfigured beyond the pettiness and sordidness of its context and origins ... the shaky edifice of falsehood trembles and falls, and this final counterpoint of upward release and triumph and downward collapse and fatality is arts perfect image of both man's implication in falsehood, and his capacity for redemption. (1977: 136)

Of significance to this reading is also the way *Family Saga* is framed to reveal both falsehoods and truths, and at the same time offer the characters the capacity for redemption. The way that the 'workshop' and the play within the play as modes of structuring have been used in this play enables the conflation of different planes of experiences and realities, collapsing the boundaries of the multiple fictional realities of the world of its characters. For instance, in the first plane of fictional reality, Sawa (Kamala's daughter) is grappling with emotions following a rape, which she attempts to overcome through mourning. But what is important to note is that it is at this exact point in the play's plot that Butake introduces the 'workshop' and play within the play techniques, aesthetically merging the two planes of fictional realities. The 'real' and the 'world of play' are dissolved into one. Thus the actors playing different characters keep on shifting between the different planes of fictional realities. Paradoxically, it is in this ambiguous, archetypal kind of ritual space that acts of expiation and healing are fundamentally played out. The following excerpt from the play is most illuminating:

SAWA: (Joining them) *Daddy, you are there to take care of us na? See na, just for the short time of your going, see what happened to me na? You know what is good for us na? When I think of it, I will only just be crying na? Just be crying.* (She begins to sob.)

NGONG: *Father, I said it. A toad is not a frog even though they look alike.* (Kamala begins to sob too.

Before long Sawa is wailing, followed by Kamala.)

Father... father ... what is going on? What has happened to you, father? Tell me, father, or I will cry too.

Father nods head and Ngong bursts into wailing. A short while later, Kamala smiles through his sobs and soon is laughing heartily until he rolls on the ground. Ngong is the first to join in the laughter followed by Sawa. They laugh very loud and most heartily.

Father, when did you become so playful? One minute you're wailing like a woman and the next one you are laughing your heart to the skies. (FS: 41–42)

It is also at this point in the play that the 'double fictionality'. as revealed in the 'reality' of the play on the proscenium arch stage and that of the real lived world of the spectators in the auditorium, is dissolved. This may be interpreted as Butake's artistic tactic of reminding audience members that the performance on stage is indeed part of their own experience. At another level, it is a strategy to prompt the audience — that very microcosmic Cameroonian nation — that, just as the dichotomy between actors and audiences are superficial, so are the conflicts between the Anglophone and the Francophone Cameroonians. As such, even a most cursory encounter with these techniques suggests Butake's vision as decidedly national healing and reconciliation:

SAWA: (Nodding in the direction of the spectators) *Let's ask for volunteers among them na? They are only sitting there smiling at us and doing nothing na? Let's go and get some of them to join us na?*

Sawa, Ngong and Kamala go into spectators and return with as many volunteers as they can find ... Actors and spectators form a circle and perform a popular dance such as the Njang, Bensikin, Ndong, Bagalum, etc. Then they engage in simple relaxation exercises for controlled breathing and the body.

KAMALA: (Addressing spectators) *Good people, this is only the beginning. But a very promising one. We will be practising here every day until Kamalo comes to see what we have prepared for his entertainment and the amusement of his papa. Will you, please, kindly join us every day for the practice session? As you can see, dancing and play are very good for the heart and the soul; for the body and the mind ...*

NGONG: *I feel like a kite sailing high up in the blue, sunny sky. I have never known that*

dancing is very good medicine.

SAWA: *All the heaviness in my head is finished na? My body is very light and I am feeling very happy na? Daddy, we will be dancing every day na? Even after uncle Kamalo's folk dance na? (FS: 46–47)*

After using the theatre games and exercises to help the characters to relax, Butake then extends the possibilities of these therapeutic techniques to a new level. This is where the characters as representatives of a community initiate an activity directed at identifying and analysing the problems that face them. For those familiar with the techniques in intervention theatres, especially theatre for development, this is usually one of its important stages.

KAMALA: *Can I present my problems or where do we start?*

SAWA: *Daddy, let me start na? My own problems are just too many na?*

NGONG: *You can start, Sawa. After that I will give mine. And father will be last cocoyam. But remember that you are giving only three, the most important three of your very many problems. Not so, father?*

KAMALA: *That's what we agreed. Each of us will present three of their most pressing problems from the most to the least important. That was our collective decision. Sawa, over to you.*

SAWA: *My three problems are: uncle Kamalo, no mother and poverty na? These are my three problems na?*

NGONG: *You are really wonderful, Sawa. How did you come to think of no mother? We have grown up without a mother all our lives. I am sure that one will even surprise father; not so, father?*

KAMALA: *Let us present the problems first. We will discuss them later. But let us do the presentations. Ngong, your turn. (FS: 50–51)*

Though at this stage the characters in this play manage to identify some of the problems facing them, they also discover that they cannot appropriately analyse these problems without sufficient knowledge about their past. They realise that the past impacts immensely on their present and future. It is as a result of this realisation that the retrieval of the past by engaging with various aspects of memory becomes imperative. Though Kamala opens up his window of memory to his children, especially on the circumstances surrounding the absence of their mother, in itself, this revelation of their past is not sufficient to initiate a process of healing. For holistic healing to commence, they must first establish the true nature of their relationship with Kamalo, an act that demands a new interpretation of their past(s). This is because healing and reconciliation may only be possible when all of them, but most significantly Kamalo, come face to face with the materiality of memory which thus far has eluded all of them. It is to this end that Butake strategically deploys techniques of both forum theatre and playback drama in this play.

Forum theatre is that form of interactive theatre popularized by the Brazilian theatre worker Augusto Boal in his seminal book *Theatre of the Oppressed* (1979). In this kind of theatre, 'spec-actors', as Boal refers to spectators, are usually invited to the performance space where they take the role of actors to assist in finding solutions to problems. Playback theatre refers to type of improvisational theatre used by Jonathan Fox in New York in 1975, which generally involves a process in which the audience's stories are played to them instantaneously by a group of actors (Fox 1994). In Butake's hybridised drama, unlike 'proper' playback theatre, the stories to be told cannot be personalised as they transcend individual personal experience and identity. The problems facing his characters are of a collective nature and therefore gesture more towards the mythic vision. This seems to be consistent with Wolin's remarks, cited in Clarke E. Cochran (2002: 425), that 'the identity of a political society revolves around the myths and stories that its citizens remember and retell about themselves'. Thus Butake's healing project begins with the reconstruction and re-enactment of the founding myth, as well as how the people remember the

importance of the founding events of that myth. As Cochran aptly reminds us, 'communal memory does not mean living in the past; it means keeping the past in mind in a way that draws guidance for the future' (2002: 441). Therefore, in the context of *Family Saga*, for Kamala and his children the healing process targeting their fractured psyches and ambivalent identities inevitably begins when they start piecing together the knowledge and truth of their past. The following conversation is most revealing of this new realisation:

SAWA: *It is not good to be in the dark na? Now like this I am very happy na? All the people like Kamalo who pretend that they have power, it is just because they know certain things na? Which other people don't knowna?*

NGONG: *Knowledge is power! Father, of all the things that you have ever done for us, this one is the best. Going out to look for the story of our family has been the best school that we have gone to. (To spectators) Good people, the best inheritance that you can give to your children is giving them education, information. A person who is informed, who is aware of his surroundings, who is educated, can never become the slave of another man or woman. I am now ready, we are ready to dance for Kamalo and his papa not because we are their slaves but because knowledge of who we are has liberated us and given us dignity, pride and a sense of purpose in life. Father, we will dance for Kamalo with all our hearts, souls and minds. I have never been so proud of these rags that have been the symbol of our enslavement after what I have learnt about our family.*

KAMALA: *My dear children, good people, now I know that the easiest way to make someone your slave is to deny that person knowledge. To deny that person an identity. To deny that person the story of his roots, his origins. In short the best way to make someone your slave is to take away that person's identity and give them yours. That is what Kamalo tried to do to me and my children. (emphasis mine) (FS: 60–61)*

Again utilising the possibilities of theatre practice as research, Butake uses his characters, specifically Kamala, when he sends out his children — Ngong and Sawa — to the community, to the archives and books, to find out their past as well as that of community. It is the narratives that they recollect as 'mythic' in character that are used. Typical of playback and forum theatre strategies, this is a catalyst towards healing their traumatic experiences, such as identity crisis, bondagehood, a sense of betrayal, social class tendencies of oppressions and exploitation, and the debilitating effects of imperial history.

The performance of this invented myth of origin does not only arouse their consciousness, but also seems to liberate Kamala and his children from their culture of fear and silence. More importantly, this enactment provides them with the space to confront Kamalo with truth. Confronting Kamalo with this truth, as manifest in the myth of origin, is profoundly essential. Their own healing is inextricably intertwined with Kamalo's own expiation, an act which is eventually actualised when Kamalo is confronted with aspects of his past that have always eluded him, denying him a sense of his true identity and making him believe that Fiekafhim was his real papa. This distorted sense of history, as it were, results in the patronising relationship between him and his false 'papa'. This re-enactment of the 'invented myth' of origin, conflated with the history of colonialism, awakens his consciousness, making him realise that all along he has been manipulated, puppet-like, by Fiekafhim — the person he has always thought of as his papa.

Yet the definitive moment that leads his expiation and healing comes when he accepts the role of Yaman, the trader who raped his own mother, in the play within the play. In this role, he re-enacts the historic rape of his own mother, Kamanda. It is instructive that he is paired with the only female character in the play, Sawa, whom he had raped. Thus two different incidences of female violation are dissolved into one. This shows that the colonial violations have dissipated into the neocolonial period. In a sense, therefore, Kamalo is just another reincarnation of Yaman. During the enactment of the rape, he gets completely possessed in the act and only realises how far he has become entranced in the role when Sawa suddenly reminds him that he had raped her before and should therefore not repeat this act of violation. This is what shocks him back to reality, emerging from the role feeling extremely ashamed, guilty and remorseful. Realising his sins of omission and commission, he seeks forgiveness from all those against

whom he had transgressed. Thus the simulation of the 'original rape' opens up discursive space which has potential for liberation and the awakening of new consciousness. The way Kamalo and Sawa are brought together, fate-like, to re-enact the episodes of violations point to the fact that expiation and healing must be based on the physical presence of both the victim and the perpetrator of the violation.

- YAMAN: (Now played by Kamalo with no makeup, etc.) *My Lady Queen, I am privileged to respond to your summons ...*
- KAMANDA: *Get out of my sight. It is not you I summoned. Get out of my sight.*
(Aside) I am choking with his stench.
Please get out of my sight ...
- YAMAN: *Do you know how long I have waited for this moment? This is my moment of truth. I will not let it slip from my fingers. I will not let you slip from me ever. I will ravish you. Might is right. I am strong. You are weak. I take the upper hand. I will have you now!*
 He lifts her, protesting vehemently.
- SAWA: *Not again na, uncle Kamalo! You will not do that again to your own brother's daughter na, Uncle Kamalo. (Kamalo freezes with Sawa in his arms) (FS, 79–80)*

The re-enactment of this invented myth of origin in a sense takes on ritual dimensions that catalyse expiation, cleansing, exorcism and healing. In a way, this confirms Soyinka's assertion that 'the logic of "Truth and Reconciliation" however demands that the mind prepare itself for the spectacle of a penitent'. Thus Kamalo's expiatory act and Sawa's healing are inextricably intertwined. The truth is unpacked as Kamalo's acts are laid bare. He accepts his sins and is in return forgiven by the rest of the family members against whom he has transgressed. The enactment of the myth of origin enables him to come to terms not only with his past but, perhaps even more importantly, with the magnitude of his transgressions. He realises that all along he has been violating and enslaving his blood brother and his children. Thus truth, to use the idiom that has become a cliché, sets him free. It is in this regard that one can conclude that Butake's project is apparently not one of assigning blame but one intended to provide possibilities of expiation, healing and reconciliation through the transformative powers of applied theatre and the materiality of memory. Thus, as Klein (2000: 130) reminds us, 'memory serves as a critical site for the generation and inflection of affective bonds'. Invoking traditional communal rituals of cleansing, Kamalo — like the biblical prodigal son — is eventually reconciled with his family:

- KAMALO: (Unfreezing and gently placing Sawa on her feet) *Nothing can be hidden from the face of the sun! History can never be changed or forgotten.*
The truth, at last, has come out! Cursed be the day I saw the light
To have been so evil to my own brother To have committed these abominations
Against my own niece, my own daughter The offspring of my dear twin brother.
Goddess Kamanda, why did you permit This evil to stride the world?
What sacrifice, to what Gods shall pacify This horrid, damnable abomination
That has visited the peace-loving people of Kamanda? My daughter, Sawa, I do not ask for forgiveness
For such abominations are not, can never, be forgiven.
Sawa, my daughter, I ask you to condemn me to the cruellest death.
Kneeling before Sawa
I await the pronouncement from your lips, my daughter.
- SAWA: (Taking his hand and lifting him to his feet) *It was not your fault na? It is that your*

papa who was fooling you na? Now that you are truly sorry, I am sure that the elders of the community can find a solution na? Or we can even sit together and discuss what to do na? There is no problem without a solution na? We can sit in a circle and discuss what to do na?

NGONG: *Uncle Kamalo, it is enough that you have realised that you were in error and that you are very sorry for your terrible acts against your own brother and us your children. There is no illness without a cure. The mere fact that you have finally consented to mingle with us is the beginning of the cure. (FS: 82–83)*

Though Butake's vision of expiation, healing and reconciliation appears to be somewhat utopian and simplistic, it is in many ways consistent with Soyinka's (1999) comment on the South African TRC when he asserts that:

Now, it is possible that there is something about the magnitude of some wrongs that transcends the feelings of vengeance, even of redress in any form. A kind of crimino- critical mass after which wrongs and suffering are transmuted into a totally different stage of sensibility from which can only derive a sense of peace, a space of truth that overawes all else and chastens the human moral dimension. It is not surrender to evil, not a condoning of wrongs; perhaps it is akin to a balm that comes after cataclysm of Nature, even when clearly of man's making. It overrides grief and despair, diffuses rage, infuses one with a sense of purgation, the aftermath of the tragic apprehension. (1999: 68)

Conclusion

The deployment of aspects of forum and playback theatre has certainly offered a safety zone in which expiation and healing, through enactments of memory, have been played out. Indeed, drama and theatre have provided a space for the open confession of acts of violations and transgression in what Soyinka (1999: 27) describes as 'rites of open confession with the prospect of amnesty'. Utilising the possibilities of the liminal space (see Turner 1969, 1974, 1982a, 1982b), carved out by the history of rupture and the 'false' spirit of reunification, Butake delves into mythic memory in search of possible expiation, national healing and reconciliation, locating it in aspects of traditional oral narration performances, forum and playback theatre. These opportunities and possibilities may be equated to what Kamala calls the 'force of argument', as opposed to Kamalo's 'argument of force'. Or they could be summed up by what Freud refers to as the 'quintessential talking cure'.

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