Dramaturgical challenges of moral characterisation in select Nigerian plays

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Abstract

This study interrogates the maxim that "it is easier to play the devil than to play god." It particularly examines the dramaturgical challenges inherent in portraying morally-ideal or divine figures (colloquially termed "playing god") in Nigerian theatre. The research focuses on selected Nigerian plays, which were purposively chosen and qualitatively reviewed. Drawing on Stanislavski's system, Sam Ukala's folkism, and postmodern African dramaturgy as theoretical frameworks, the study explores cultural, performative, and philosophical reasons why villainous characters often overshadow their virtuous counterparts in dramatic works, and the extent to which moral idealism has been sustained in Nigerian plays. The findings reveal that moral roles often lack the narrative elasticity and emotional dynamism required to sustain audience engagement. The study recommends a nuanced reimagining of the "god role" to balance theatre's dual mission of reflection and transformation.

Key words: dramaturgical challenges, playing god, moral idealism, Nigerian plays

Introduction

The depiction of divine or morally-ideal characters (those who essentially 'play God') has long been a challenging subject in Nigerian theatre. At its core, theatre thrives on conflict, transformation, and contradiction. However, the 'god-character', representing absolute virtue and justice, often appears detached from these dynamics. In Nigerian performance traditions where socio-political tensions, spiritual dualities, and moral ambiguities are prevalent, the god-figure rarely takes centre stage as a dramatic force. Instead, it functions as an ethical constant that is difficult to humanise or render theatrically engaging (Ukpokodu, 2000).

In the light of the foregoing, this study investigates why those roles lack the same dynamic appeal as their villainous counterparts, with focus on four select Nigerian plays - Ola Rotimi's *The Gods Are Not to Blame*, Femi Osofisan's *Once Upon Four Robbers*, Soyinka's *Death and the King's Horseman*, and Sam Ukala's *Iredi War*, and *The Bacchae of Euripides: A Communion Rite* by Soyinka. The central dramaturgical challenge lies in the absence of transformation and emotional depth in such characters. While scholarly discourse on African theatre has examined its socio-political dimensions, however, in Nigerian drama, few studies have addressed the specific difficulties of depicting moral idealism through divine characters. This gap raises questions about how Nigerian theatre might bridge the divide between moral authority and dramatic vitality through the creative choices of playwrights. The objectives of the study are to analyse the challenges of 'playing god' in Nigerian theatre, assess their effects on performance dynamics, and propose strategies for reimagining these roles to achieve a balance between moral integrity and artistic authenticity in theatrical engagements.

Theoretical frameworks

This study examines the complexities of portraying god-like figures in Nigerian theatre through three key theoretical frameworks - Stanislavski's System, Ukala's Folkism, and postmodern African dramaturgy. Collectively, these perspectives provide a multidimensional lens for understanding the cultural and performance challenges of embodying morally-ideal god=characters on the Nigerian stage.

Stanislavski's System emphasises emotional truth and internal conflict (Stanislavski, 1989). Compelling characters often undergo transformation driven by goals, obstacles, and evolving motivations. However, when god-characters are portrayed as morally infallible, they resist such evolution, which can lead to a disconnect between actor and role, thus creating what may be termed actorly dissonance.

In contrast, Ukala's Folkism advocates for incorporating indigenous oral traditions such as proverbs, songs, chants, myths, and communal storytelling into modern theatre (Ukala, 2001). This approach allows divine roles to be represented indirectly or allegorically, thereby preserving reverence while affording actors more expressive flexibility. This method aligns with traditional Nigerian performance styles that are participatory, rhythmic, visually engaging, and show respect toward theological sensitivities/sensibilities.

Postmodern African dramaturgy challenges rigid moral binaries, embracing fragmentation, reflexivity, and interactive engagement (Awunor, 2021). This approach resonates with African cosmologies where deities embody both strengths and weaknesses, which enables more dynamic stage portrayals. It encourages reimagining god-characters as complex, evolving beings rather than static moral absolutes.

By considering Stanislavski's psychological depth, Ukala's culturally-rooted narrative techniques, and the adaptability of postmodern African dramaturgy, Nigerian theatre can move beyond the constraints of traditional moral idealism that enable god-characters to retain moral authority while becoming more relatable and theatrically compelling.

Analysis and findings

Analysis of the select Nigerian plays demonstrates that the burden of playing god is a recurring dramaturgical challenge. Ola Rotimi's *The Gods Are Not to Blame* remains one of the most significant reworkings of classical tragedy in African literature. Adapted from Sophocles' *Oedipus Rex*, the play situates its narrative within Yoruba cosmology, replacing the Greek oracle of Delphi with Yoruba divination practices, and recasting Oedipus as Odewale, a Yoruba king. The adaptation does more than "translate" the setting; it re-imagines the tragic dilemma of fate and freewill in a society where the gods are omnipresent forces, yet human beings are accountable for their choices. Rotimi created a central tension where the divine permeates the narrative, yet Odewale (a human character) wrestles with fate and personal flaws. From the very beginning, divine authority is introduced as an inescapable force. The diviner interprets the oracle's words over the newborn Odewale: "This boy, he will kill his father and marry his mother" (p. 9).

This prophecy echoes the original Greek myth, yet its Yoruba inflection makes the gods' decree part of a living cultural framework. The audience, familiar with divination rituals, knows that the pronouncement of the oracle is not to be taken lightly. Yet the decision by Odewale's parents to abandon him to die only for him to be raised elsewhere already reveals human intervention in the face of divine will. Here, the dramaturgical burden of 'playing god' is deflected onto the diviner's words rather than onto a divine character. The gods never enter the stage - they speak only through prophecy. This allows Rotimi to sustain the mystery and inevitability of divine will without burdening an actor with embodying a god.

Despite the prophecy, Odewale's downfall is not depicted as purely mechanical. Rotimi emphasises human agency and character flaws. Odewale's temper and pride (*hamartia*) repeatedly accelerate his tragic course. When confronted with his role in the kingdom's misfortunes, Odewale exclaims bitterly: "The gods have nailed my destiny to the wall. What man can fight his chi?" (p. 52).

This lament crystallises the paradox at the heart of the play: Odewale blames the gods, but his downfall is also the direct result of his choices. Earlier in the play, his rash temper is made clear when he recounts how he killed a man in a quarrel over farmland: "A man insulted me on the road, and my anger rose like fire in harmattan. Before I could think, my cutlass had spoken!" (p. 27).

Unknown to him, the man was his father, thus fulfilling part of the prophecy. This episode dramatises how Odewale's character accelerates fate's decree. The gods may set the framework, but human flaws propel the narrative. Another dimension of Rotimi's dramaturgy is his use of collective voice, echoing the role of the Greek chorus. In moments of crisis, the people lament: "The world is a market. We meet, we trade, and we part. Who can quarrel with the will of the gods?" (p. 44).

This proverbial chorus situates Odewale's fate within a wider communal philosophy: the will of gods being inscrutable and human beings must endure it. Yet the community also critiques Odewale's stubbornness, reminding the audience that human responsibility is not erased by divine decree. The most striking symbol of Odewale's fate is his blindness, both metaphorically and literally. Throughout the play, he refuses to see the truth of his origins, dismissing those who suggest otherwise. When the truth is revealed, he blinds himself, declaring: "Eyes that have looked upon such shame must never see again" (p. 89). This act is a turning point: it is simultaneously an acknowledgment of divine prophecy and a punishment he inflicts upon himself. The gods decreed his fate, but Odewale's blindness is a human response - a choice made in despair and self-condemnation.

By refusing to stage a literal god-figure, Rotimi avoids the dramatic stagnation that could follow from embodying an infallible, omniscient being. Had a deity appeared to pronounce Odewale's guilt, the play's central conflict would have collapsed into obedience versus rebellion. Instead, by leaving the gods off-stage, Rotimi sustains ambiguity and tension. The gods are thus a structuring absence. They are present in the prophecy, in proverbial speech, in Odewale's lamentations, but never as active characters. The dramatic action belongs entirely to humans, whose flaws, choices, and blindness/insensitivity bring the prophecy to fulfilment.

Contextually, the burden of 'playing god' is displaced onto Odewale himself. Though he is not divine, he acts with kingly authority, makes judgments, and lashes out as though he could control his destiny. His tragedy lies in discovering that he is not God, but a man bound by forces beyond his control. This inversion reflects Rotimi's thematic innovation: rather than staging God as a character, he stages humanity's vain attempt to be God. Odewale's struggle dramatises the futility of human efforts to outwit fate, while also underscoring the consequences of pride and rashness.

In the second play, *Once Upon Four Robbers* by Femi Osofisan, the role of 'God' is metaphorically played by the State, which claims the right to execute, moralise, and dictate truth. Yet, this authority is always undercut by hypocrisy. For instance, the

'Voice of Authority' proclaims: "There is only one law: obey the State, or perish. Order is God" (p. 12). This line crystallises the dramaturgical problem. If the State equates itself with God, then disobedience is blasphemy. Yet, the very act of watching the play exposes the cracks in this equation: the people's dissent, the robbers' humanity, and the corruption of leaders all show that the State cannot convincingly embody infallible divinity. The play demonstrates that when human institutions attempt to 'play God', they risk becoming theatrical caricatures as symbols of oppression rather than believable agents of justice.

Osofisan further complicates the burden of divine authority by employing the Brechtian technique of alienation. Songs interrupt the action, reminding the audience that they are watching a play and must critically assess its moral claims. One chorus chant: "Today they die for stealing bread. Tomorrow the rich will feast on stolen oil. Who is the thief, who is the judge?" (p. 37).

By forcing the audience into critical reflection, Osofisan ensures that no single voice, including the State's, is accepted as absolute. This reinforces the idea that god-like authority cannot be convincingly dramatised by fallible humans. On stage, *Once Upon Four Robbers* thrives on contrasts: the rigid authority of the State versus the vibrant defiance of the robbers; the chorus' shifting loyalties; the ritualised execution juxtaposed with comic banter. These dynamics would collapse if a literal God-character appears, because it would impose a single, unchallengeable truth. Instead, Osofisan makes absence into presence: God is not staged, but the State aspires to fill that role. The dramatic power comes from exposing the impossibility of that aspiration. The State's attempt to embody divine justice only reveals its corruption and fallibility, while the robbers' flawed humanity sparks empathy and moral complexity.

Once Upon Four Robbers demonstrates that the burden of playing God in Nigerian theatre is often displaced onto the State, which assumes divine authority over life and death. Yet, Osofisan's play exposes the hollowness of this authority. The robbers' voices, the people's doubts, and the songs of dissent destabilise the State's moral absolutism. By embedding divine-like authority within political structures rather than literal gods, Osofisan creates a vibrant theatre that resists rigidity. The play shows that while 'playing God' on stage risks moral didacticism and dramatic stagnation - embedding divine authority within flawed human institutions creates dynamism, contradiction, and audience engagement.

Soyinka's *Death and the King's Horseman* remains one of the most profound dramatisations of ritual, fate, and human agency in African theatre. Soyinka makes clear in his author's note that this is not merely a 'clash of cultures' between the coloniser and the colonised but a tragedy of metaphysical disjunction. According to Soyinka, "[t]he play concerns the transition of the individual to the ancestral world, and the collective metaphysical imperatives of the Yoruba cosmos" (1975, Preface). The burden of 'playing God' here lies in Elesin's responsibility to enact divine order through his own body. He is not a literal god, but he embodies cosmic law, standing

at the threshold between life and eternity. Unlike Rotimi and Osofisan, Soyinka situates divine will, not in State authority, but in ritual necessity that transcends human choice. From the beginning, Elesin is introduced not as a mere man but as one whose role carries sacred responsibility. In the marketplace, the Praise-Singer reminds him of his cosmic duty: "Elesin, we placed the reins of the world in your hands, yet you let the horse stray into the bush" (Soyinka, 1975, p. 15). This metaphor positions Elesin as the custodian of cosmic order.

To falter is not simply a personal failure but a rupture of divine law. Elesin himself, however, revels in life's pleasures, music, dance, and sensuality. He boasts in the market: "My whole life has been a pursuit of the flawless moment. Tonight, I shall sit in the lap of death and put my lips to her mouth" (p. 18). At the climax, Elesin laments his weakness after hearing of his son's death: "I saw the world and could not look away. My will was soft. The hand of the gods pressed me, yet I faltered" (p. 56). His confession crystallises Soyinka's central paradox: the divine order demands a human vessel, but human weakness makes perfect obedience impossible.
Elesin is neither wholly guilty nor wholly innocent - he is tragic precisely because he fails at trying to be more than human. Soyinka deliberately avoids staging a literal god. Instead, divinity is everywhere implied in the ritual, in Iyaloja's wisdom, and in Olunde's sacrifice. The gods are never seen and never speak, but their presence permeates the play as cosmic necessity. By keeping divinity offstage, Soyinka heightens the dramatic tension. The conflict is not between man and a visible deity, but between human frailty and the invisible, an inescapable weight of metaphysical law. If Soyinka had staged a god to pronounce Elesin's guilt, the play would collapse into didacticism. Instead, the absence of a god forces the audience to grapple with Elesin's failure as profoundly human and tragic, not because he disobeyed but because he could not measure up to the impossible burden of embodying divine inevitability.

Ukala, on his part, insists that folk theatre must integrate "the collective rituals, music, and proverbs of the people, such that performance becomes communal history-making" (Ukala, 1994). His *Iredi War* embodies this by presenting the uprising as not merely political but spiritual; a war sanctioned by ancestors and gods to defend cosmic balance. In *Iredi War*, the Oba (king) and his council are placed at the centre of a divine burden to lead their people into a war against imperial forces whose guns and laws undermine ancestral authority. Unlike Elesin in Soyinka's play, the Oba is not asked to sacrifice his life but to embody the will of the ancestors in action. Ukala dramatises the Oba's burden through ritual invocation. When the British threaten the land, the OBA invokes the ancestors: "Ancestors of our fathers, spirits of the land, do not abandon us. The white man's feet are heavy on our soil; his hand weighs down our people. Give us the courage to rise.*" (*p. 22). Here, the Oba positions himself as mediator between the divine and the community. His authority is not merely political but cosmic. He must 'play God' by voicing the will of unseen forces. But like the echoes in Elesin's hesitation in *Death and the King's Horseman*, humans fear the consequence of embodying divine order. Yet the counter-argument from ANOTHER CHIEF affirms ancestral mandate: "Do we tell our children we

watched while strangers plucked the kola from our tree? No! The land is not ours alone—it belongs to those before us and those yet unborn. We dare not betray them." (p. 29).

Ukala makes explicit that the gods/ancestors demand action. To refuse would be to rupture cosmic continuity. Unlike Rotimi or Soyinka, Ukala places heavy emphasis on the chorus-like voice of the community. The market women, the drummers, and the singers constantly remind leaders of ancestral obligation. In one scene, women chant as the men hesitate: "Cowardice is death before dying. Who hides his head leaves his children naked. Rise, men of Iredi! The spirits march with you!" (p. 34). This chorus dramatises ancestral presence. The gods do not speak directly, but the collective voice of the community becomes their mouthpiece. In performance, this is heightened by singing and drumming, making divine sanction felt without a literal apparition.

Before going to battle, the community undergoes ritual purification. The Priest performs libation, saying: "Spirits of earth and sky, drink with us. Guide our steps. If we must fall, let it be with honour. If we must rise, let it be as one people." (p. 45). This moment crystallises the impossibility of staging a god directly: instead, ritual action embodies the divine will. The libation, the chants, and the rhythmic drumming constitute the gods' presence in performance. The human actors 'play God' not by impersonation but by embodying ritual gestures that invoke the unseen. Ukala also dramatises the inevitability of sacrifice. When the British overwhelm the warriors, one elder proposes surrender, but a younger warrior refuses, declaring: "Shall we live as slaves in our father's house? Better to join the ancestors with honour than eat the white man's salt with shame." (p. 57). Here, the younger warrior voices the tragic necessity - divine order requires sacrifice. Death is not annihilation but entry into ancestral continuity. This recalls Olunde's stance in Soyinka's play - sacrifice becomes moral weapon against colonial hypocrisy. The explicit dismissal of indigenous spirituality echoes colonial strategies across Africa, substituting imperial sovereignty for divine cosmology. Ukala uses this moment to sharpen the audience's awareness of how colonisers 'play God' by erasing local metaphysics. Yet in performance, the arrogance of the Officer is juxtaposed with the community's chants and rituals, reminding us that the divine is not absent although repressed.

Iredi War dramatises the burden of 'playing God', not in an individual hero but in the collective will of a people bound by ancestral obligation. The Oba and his chiefs falter, yet the chorus and warriors sustain divine presence through song, ritual, and sacrifice. Ukala's dramaturgy shows that to 'play God' in African theatre is not to impersonate divinity but to embody ritual forms that make the unseen present. Unlike Rotimi's deterministic gods or Soyinka's metaphysical absence, Ukala insists on the communal ancestral embodiment of divinity in historical struggle and, by so doing, *Iredi War* transforms theatre into a site of resistance where the community enacts both history and cosmic order, which shows that the gods live through collective memory and enactment.

At the heart of Soyinka's *The Bacchae of Euripides: A Communion Rite* lies the question of how divinity can be embodied theatrically without lapsing into stiffness or abstraction. This is where the burden of 'playing God' becomes particularly vivid: Dionysus is depicted as both divine and fallible, majestic and petty, awe-inspiring yet dangerously capricious. For an actor, this duality provides an unusually rich palette of emotions, but it also demands navigating the thin line between sacred authority and human frailty. Soyinka's subtitle - *A Communion Rite* - foregrounds his interest in ritual as a mode of dramatising the sacred. Unlike Euripides who emphasises Dionysus as a god of wine and frenzy, Soyinka infuses the play with Yoruba ritual motifs of possession, sacrifice, and communal ecstasy. In the Chorus' descriptions of the women possessed by Dionysus, divinity is embodied not as a distant abstraction but as a kinetic and almost dangerous energy: "They move like flames on the mountain, their hair loosed to the wind, their eyes burning with madness. They strike the earth, and the ground answers with blood!" (p. 29). We see here the sacred is theatricalised through rhythm, movement, and violence, making Dionysus' presence both terrifying and electrifying. The actor playing Dionysus must, therefore, embody divinity not only through words but through physicality gestures, rhythms, and tonal shifts that merge human vulnerability with supernatural charisma. For an actor, Dionysus in Soyinka's adaptation represents perhaps the clearest example of the burden of 'playing God'. Unlike the absent gods in Rotimi's *The Gods Are Not to Blame*, or the symbolic authority figures in Osofisan's *Once Upon Four Robbers*, Dionysus is fully represented with dialogue, action, and psychological complexity. The challenge lies in reconciling his contradictory attributes: omnipotence/fragility, joy/destruction, and seduction/terror. Although declaring himself son of Zeus, yet his insecurity over human rejection drives his vengeance. He offers ecstasy, yet unleashes violence when scorned. And he lures Pentheus with charm and then engineers his brutal death. An actor must oscillate between these registers fluidly, embodying divinity not as a fixed moral stance but as a dynamic theatrical presence. This, in turn, transforms the burden of 'playing God' into an opportunity for layered performance.

The climax of the play - the death of Pentheus at the hands of the frenzied Bacchants, including his own mother - underscores the terrifying cost of divine-human conflict. When Agave (possessed by Dionysus), enters with Pentheus' severed head, the line between sacred ecstasy and human horror collapses when he boastfully declares: "Look, sisters! A lion I have slain! His mane still warm, his blood still sweet!" (p. 67). Her words dramatise the devastating power of divine possession: she believes she has killed a beast, only to discover later that she has murdered her own son. Dionysus, unmoved, reminds the audience of divine justice: "You mocked my rites. Now learn reverence in grief. Know that gods are not denied" (p. 70).

The Bacchae of Euripedes: A Communion Rite powerfully demonstrates how the dramaturgical burden of 'playing God' can be transformed into theatrical vitality. By crafting Dionysus as a god who is simultaneously majestic and insecure, joyous and cruel, seductive and terrifying, Soyinka creates a character that avoids the stiffness of

static divinity. Instead of alienating the audience, the god becomes a source of both fascination and dread, keeping the drama alive. For actors, the challenge lies in embodying this duality with precision - projecting divinity not as moral perfection but as dynamic contradiction. In this way, Soyinka's adaptation reveals that the stage can sustain the representation of gods, providing that they are written with human depth and theatrical flexibility.

In summary, the burden of 'playing God' in Nigerian theatre is less about literal impersonation of the divine than about dramatising the impossibility of embodying divine will within human limitations. Osofisan shows how political authority corrupts divine prerogative; Soyinka stages the tragic consequences of human failure and colonial arrogance in ritual; and Ukala insists on communal resistance sustained by ancestral sanction. In all the five plays, the stage becomes a site where the question of divinity collides with history, politics, and culture. The gods do not walk onto the stage as characters, but their presence or absence provide the structure for the action, shaping the moral horizon against which human characters falter, resist, or sacrifice. Ultimately, the Nigerian dramatist does not seek to 'play God', but to reveal the tragic weight of those who must. In this sense, the burden of 'playing God' is also the burden of theatre itself: to make visible the unseen, to embody the disembodied, and to remind society of its helplessness in negotiating between the worlds of humans and divinities.

Implications

This research suggests that Nigerian theatre should reconsider its approach to creating and portraying divine or morally ideal characters. Over-reliance on rigid moral authority risks disengaging audiences who are accustomed to characters that reflect societal complexities (Barber, 1997). Integrating god-characters into African cosmological traditions where deities possess both virtues and flaws could meet audiences' expectations for nuanced storytelling (Abimbola, 1975).

From a performance perspective, Stanislavski's principle of emotional truth implies that even symbolic divine roles require internal goals and conflicts (Stanislavski, 1989). Culturally, Ukala's folkism offers narrative devices such as dream sequences or storytelling frames to portray divinity with respect and adaptability (Ukala, 2001). Philosophically, postmodern African dramaturgy challenges binary moral structures, encouraging richer and more layered depictions of moral authority (Awunor, 2021).

Conclusion

The challenge of 'playing God' highlights a tension between lofty moral ideals and the evolving demands of compelling storytelling. Nigerian theatre's tradition of moral instruction must coexist with the need for transformative and engaging characters. Villains captivate audiences precisely because they grow, contradict themselves, and invite unpredictability. If god-characters are portrayed as rigid moral figures, such portrayal stands the risk becoming uninteresting. However, reimagining those characters as compassionate, multifaceted, and dynamic entities allows moral authority to coexist with audience engagement. This requires dramaturgical

innovation that is grounded in African performance traditions, ritual aesthetics, and postmodern influences.

Recommendations

The study recommends a reimagining of the 'god-role' in a bid to balance the dual objective of reflection and transformation in the theatre, through the following.

i. Indigenous performance techniques such as chants, ritual movement, and invocations in actor training for divine roles should be creatively incorporated in works.

ii. God-characters should be creatively situated within narratives where they face moral challenges or transformation.

iii. Creative use of fragmented or reflexive dramaturgy should be adopted to humanise divine authority.

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