

Symbolic Representations as an Impetus to Conflict Development in Ola Rotimi's *Kurunmi*

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Abstract

Specific themes and features of Ola Rotimi's *Kurunmi* such as tradition, history, proverbs, characterization and generic classification have enjoyed much criticism. But little or no critical attention has been given to the exploration of symbolism in the play. Therefore, this study examines how symbolic representations of certain (Yoruba) objects and rituals contribute to the development of conflict in the play. The study adopts Northrop Frye's mythical symbolism. The findings of the study show that three symbolic meanings of these objects and rituals contribute to the development of conflict in the play as well as reflect certain realities in modern Nigeria. These include communion for protection or victory, diplomatic support or allegiance, and coded message as a symbol of disdain. Finally, the study concludes that Ola Rotimi deploys symbols sourced from Yoruba tradition to contribute to the development of conflict in *Kurunmi*, to decry the prevalence of religious deceit, corruption, and conflicts in contemporary Nigeria, and recommends avoidance of rituals or messages that are symbolic of hostility or war.

Keywords: symbolism, Yoruba rituals, conflict, communion

Symbolism is a common literary device used by writers to conceal meanings or interpretations of their works. Gazala Qadri defines symbolism as a “practice of representing things by means of symbols or by investing things with a symbolic meaning or character” (154). She further clarifies that “in literature, a symbol is an object that has meaning beyond itself” (154). That is, symbolism comprises images that have meanings beyond the literal. “Symbols,” in the words of Rajkumar Lakhadive, “are a means of complex communication that often times can have multiple levels of meaning” (1). Writers often use symbols to spice up the meaning of literary works. Not only do symbols enhance the meaning and complexity of a literary work, they also add to its aesthetics (Kadhim et al. 798). This suggests that writers use symbols for both thematic and aesthetic purposes. The reader's ability to decipher the symbols in context will further expose the work to different possible interpretations. Lakhadive affirms that “[t]he meaning of a symbol is not inherent in the symbol itself, but is culturally



learned” (1). The fact is that symbols are closely related to culture (Kadhim et al. 799). A good example is the symbolic representation of the snake in Yoruba culture. Conventionally, a snake is a symbol of fear and danger, but it amazingly has other positive meanings in Yoruba culture. Besides its iconic meaning, a snake, in Yoruba culture, is “regarded as the king of all animals. And as its kingly posture symbolizes greatness and dominance, the Yorùbá people associate with it as a way of coveting its kingly attribute” (Akande 148).

Moreover, literary scholars from Plato, Aristotle, Kant to Blake have propounded theories of symbolism (Bhatnagar and Kumar 5891). One of such is the nineteenth-century French symbolist movement (Abdulwahid et al. 45). Initiated by some rebellious French poets like Paul Verlaine, Stephan Mallarme, and Jules Laforgue, the movement, which later spread to other European countries like Belgium, Russia, “came to be as an opposition to the new materialist and industrialized society” (45). Another theory of symbolism was founded by the American philosopher Susanne Langer who differentiates between sign and symbol, emphasizing that the former relates solely to the environment while the latter creates imagery outside of the real world (Sandamali 126). Alfred North Whitehead perceives symbolism as fallible in representing the human imaginations and thoughts (126). He claims that direct knowledge is superior to symbolism which is open to incorrect interpretations and mistakes. Similarly, the Swiss linguist Ferdinand de Saussure propounded semiotics: the study of signs, symbols and their interpretations. He “described semiotics as connection between an object (the signified) and its linguistic representation (the signifier) and how the two are interconnected” (126). Frye’s theory of symbols is an attempt to synthesize the elements of different theories (Bhatnagar and Kumar 5892). Therefore, his mythical symbolism, which primarily focuses on ritual and dream as underlying patterns in myth, is adopted for this study.

Furthermore, the adoption of mythical symbolism in this study is born out of the curiosity to analyze African drama using a theory of symbolism. Many a critic has examined the use of symbols in African drama without recourse to any theoretical lens. Obyerodhyambo establishes that John Ruganda’s plays like *Black Mamba* and *The Burdens* are dominated by symbols mainly derived from African folklore and African post-independent politics to address sociopolitical realities of the continent (62). Olaniyan studies how John Pepper Clark and Femi Osofisan employ common symbols in *The Raft* and *Another Raft* respectively to reflect the post-independent socio-political situation in Nigeria (71). In a similar vein, Yusuf identifies traditional and modernist symbols used in Wole Soyinka’s *The Lion and the Jewel* to show the detrimental effects of modernity on African traditions (3).

To add, critical studies on Ola Rotimi's *Kurunmi* have extensively explored how certain features like history, genre, proverbs, and Greek tragic conception contribute to the development of characterization or conflict in the play (Azeez 102; Sonde 117). Other critics have dissected traditional and satirical themes in the play (Ayodabo 68; Chukwu-Okoronkwo 11). However, critical attention is least paid to the exploration of symbolic representations of (Yoruba) objects and rituals in the play. Azeez's paper, for example, is concerned with the misclassification of *Kurunmi*, which is based on the 19th-century Yoruba war between Ijaye and Ibadan armies, as tragedy, historical play, or satire instead of delineating it as "Factual Historical War Drama" (102). Sonde studies the contextual use of proverbs to project themes and characters in *Kurunmi* (177). He argues that it is through proverbs that the eponymous hero, Kurunmi, realizes the destruction his rash decision has caused his people (178). Sonde's study hardly differs from Jegede and Eniola's (92) work which is also focused on the contextual interpretation of proverbs used in *Kurunmi*. Likewise, Adeoti examines the use of proverbs as a communicative tool to establish themes and develop characterization in *Kurunmi* (95).

Kehinde probes into Kurunmi's act of suicide and altruism, arguing that his suicidal decision is a direct result of his egocentric personality trait (197). Olu Obafemi holds a similar view of Kurunmi when he posits that his tragic flaw lies in his supreme belief in his powers and military astuteness (45). Not even Oso, who reflects on Kurunmi's overzealous struggle for power (43), could be said to have exonerated him from this egocentric allegation. Adade-Yeboah and Edward are more subtle in their depiction of the fluctuating traditionalist and egocentric personality of Kurumi (43). This inflexibility as the tragic flaw of Kurunmi is also at the center of Chukwu-Okoronkwo's study (11). Ayodabo, on the contrary, appreciates Kurunmi's obstinacy, seeing it as an impetus to the preservation of African/Yoruba tradition (76). Like Chukwu-Okoronkwo (1), Ayodabo relates the events in the play to those of the contemporary Nigeria (74) – a thread which the present paper also discusses.

As already noted, previous studies on Rotimi's *Kurunmi* fail to pay critical attention to symbolic representations of objects and rituals in the play. So, this study examines how symbolic representations of certain objects and rituals used by Rotimi contribute to the development of conflict in the play. Through the use of Northrop Frye's mythical symbolism, the study also shows how such symbols reflect certain realities of modern Nigeria.

Considered as one of the great literary critics of the twentieth century, the Canadian scholar Northrop Frye is mostly remembered for his book, *Anatomy of Criticism*. Frye claims that the book, which is divided into four essays, was

fueled by his interest in, and an attempt to make sense of, the words such as myth, symbol, ritual, and archetype which he came across in the course of his reading (1). The second essay of *Anatomy of Criticism* is titled “Ethical Criticism: Theory of Symbols.” In this essay, Frye asserts that we can arrive at the literary meaning through an understanding of the complex structure of symbolism. For him, a symbol is “any unit of any literary structure that can be isolated for critical attention” (71). In his postulation, a symbol does not exist in isolation, but operates within a larger literary structure. A symbol, Frye perceives, could be construed in five different contexts or phases, namely: the literal (motif), descriptive (sign), formal (image), mythical (archetype) and anagogic (monad) (64).

Since the mythical phase of symbolism is adopted for this study, it is pertinent to expatiate on it. In this phase of symbolism, a symbol is taken as an archetype, that is, a recurring image. Here, a literary work is framed as an imitation of an existing work: “the new poem has a similar relation to its poetic society [T]he new poem manifests something that was already latent in the order of words” (Frye 97). As much as the new text imitates the form of the existing text, it is still original in contributing to the community. Reflecting on the social essence of literature in this phase, Frye states:

If we may use the word “civilization” for this, we may say that *our fourth phase looks at poetry as one of the techniques of civilization*. It is concerned, therefore, with the social aspect of poetry, with poetry as the focus of a community. *The symbol in this phase is the communicable unit, to which I give the name archetype: that is, a typical or recurring image. I mean by an archetype a symbol which connects one poem with another and thereby helps to unify and integrate our literary experience*. And as the archetype is the communicable symbol, archetypal criticism is primarily concerned with literature as a social fact and as a mode of communication. (99, italics added)

Though specific mention is made of poetry, some of the tenets of mythical symbolism deducible from the excerpt above can be applied to drama too. Such tenets as relevant to this study include: a symbol has a wide breadth of communicable potential; a symbol is represented by a recurring image in literature; literature is a technique of civilization insofar as it has a social function; and “[t]he union of ritual and dream in a form of verbal communication is myth” (Frye 106). That is, myth makes cyclical (ritual) and dialectical (dream) patterns communicable.

This study affirms that, notwithstanding the shortcomings of the theory, the

tenets of mythical symbolism highlighted above can be adopted to analyze Rotimi's *Kurunmi*. Consequently, this study employs mythical symbolism to examine not only how objects and rituals used as communicable symbols contribute to the development of conflict in the play but also how such symbols become a corollary of certain realities in contemporary Nigeria.

Frye avers that symbols have communicable potential (99). Added to this is his postulation that myth is based on two organizing patterns: the cyclical and the dialectical (106). The cyclical pattern, on the one hand, relates to ritual which has the quality of recurrence. This includes the recurring cycles of human life such as the season. On the other hand, the dialectical pattern is parallel to the world of dream, "a presentation of the conflict of desire and actuality" (111). Examples of these two patterns vis-à-vis the symbols used in the play are laid open in the following discussion. In a nutshell, the following is an analysis of how select objects and rituals serve as communicable symbols in *Kurunmi*. The three identifiable symbolic representations or meanings in *Kurunmi* are hereby explicated.

Myth, as seen in *Kurunmi*, is paramount to Frye's mythical symbolism which specifies that rituals usually find expression in folk plays (107). *Kurunmi* belongs in this category as it tells about Yoruba mythical figures such as gods and ancestors. Yoruba gods and ancestors are always symbolically represented with different objects (Olusegun 1-12). The compound of Kurunmi, Are Ona Kakanfo of Yoruba and hero of the play, is home to different ritual statues or objects symbolizing Yoruba gods and ancestors. The narrator says that in Kurunmi's compound, "the gods of the tribe [Yoruba] are present in varying images of earth, granite and wood. Here also exist, or believed to exist, the spirits of departed ancestors: ethereal, invisible – eternal guardians of the bodies of the living, bodies that have warmth, and blood, and sweat" (Rotimi 11). Anyone who is unfamiliar with the Yoruba culture may see these images as ordinary objects, but they actually represent powerful gods and ancestors who rule the affairs of human beings. From Frye's perspective, these objects have communicable potential. Harboring these objects (gods) in his compound, Kurunmi communicates with them easily and enjoys their protection. Eventually, he is accused by some of his warriors of being too selfish and powerful:

AMODU: You have become too powerful my lord.

FANKARA: You lord it over everybody, over everything.

EPO: You are even Chief Priest to all gods; look at them, Sango, Ogun, Oya, Orunmila. All of them, the gods of our fathers are now your personal property.

AKIOLA: Like clothing, you use them to your taste; tired of one, you pass it to your brother Popoola, who now owns the Egungun cult. (39)

Sacrifice is also symbolic of celestial protection in the play. Abogunrin, one of the messengers of Kurunmi, goes to the shrine of Ogun, the Yoruba god of iron, in Kurunmi's compound to pour libation of palm wine on it. In Yoruba cosmology, each god has his favorite feast; palm wine is Ogun's. The evidence for this assertion can be found in Wole Soyinka's "Idanre" where the poet says: "Ogun is the lascivious god who takes / Seven gourdlets to war. One for gunpowder, / One for charms, *two for palm wine*" (Soyinka 72; italics added). He further warns: "A human feast / Is indifferent morsel to a god" (76). Frye maintains that a symbol is "bound to expand over many works into an archetypal symbol of literature as a whole" (100). This reference to Soyinka indicates that palm wine to Ogun is a recurring image in (Nigerian/Yoruba) literature. Also, Frye argues for critical appreciation of literature in relation to nature (95). So, palm wine is a natural product which anyone desirous of help from Ogun must bring to him to symbolize readiness for communion. This consciousness drives Abogunrin to establish communion with the god through this libation. Because palm wine is alcoholic, it may be generally considered a negative symbol, but it has a positive usage here. This is so because the receiver (Ogun) cherishes it.

Ritual has the quality of recurrence (Frye 97). Clearly, libation to Ogun is a Yoruba ritual. This fact also makes Abogunrin invoke Ogun to protect Kurunmi against his enemies. Having paid Ogun his due, Abogunrin concludes the invocative incantation involving a comparison of the deteriorating life of any would-be enemy of Kurunmi to that of a termite that will ever remain underground (Rotimi 11-12). It is also a euphemistic statement suggesting the death of such an enemy of Kurunmi through the powers of Ogun. The point is, it is the palm wine that establishes communion with Ogun. Similarly, Kurunmi offers palm wine to Ogun for protection and victory over the looming war. He reminds Ogun of his promise to him: "anytime Are Ona Kakanfo goes to war, / he must bring his body before you, / and give you drink, / in case the body of Are Ona Kakanfo has seen corruption" (31). From this, it is obvious that Kurunmi has an obligation to give drink (palm wine) to Ogun before embarking on any war. This gesture will not only symbolize a cleansing rite but will help fortify Are Ona Kakanfo against any enemy. This desire for support could be located within Frye's realm of dream.

Additionally, when the reality of imminent defeat hits Ibadan warlords, Ibikunle and Ogunmola, they call Kujenyo, an aged witch-doctor, for divine consultation. After divination, Kujenyo reveals that the Egba army joining the

army of *Kurunmi* will truly bring disaster to Ibadan warriors, but there is a solution. He says:

We shall cast a spell on them, my lord. The heads of twenty-one slaves. Entrails of three lizards. Five goats. Seven dogs. Eleven tortoises. Five pigeons. And by daybreak, if the armies of Egba and Ijaiye do not ready themselves to cross the River Ose, chop off my head, and chop off the head of everyone in my family born and yet to be born. (73)

The old man believes this sacrifice of blood to the deities will make the Ibadan army conquer their enemies. As Sawyerr writes, “[s]ince blood is a gift, which is a vehicle of the life offered to another, it not only revives the life of the recipients, but it also gives new life to the donors” (qtd. in Olowola 4). Shedding of human blood might appear to be an absurd symbol, but that is what the deities demand in order to establish communion between them and Ibadan warriors, an action believed to give the latter victory in the war. Their action enunciates, to invoke Frye (97), a “dialectic of desire” for victory. Warriors would do anything to be victorious. Greek warriors won the ten-year war against Trojans thanks to their trickery via the constructed Trojan horse (Murgatroyd 2). Here, Ibadan warriors seek support from gods by offering them a sacrifice and their wish is granted. They are able to conquer Ijaiye with *Kurunmi* himself committing suicide.

In short, it should be noted that all the symbols in *Kurunmi* explained above revolve around religious rituals – a cyclical pattern in Frye’s thesis. *Kurunmi* gives palm wine to Ogun, the god of iron and war, for spiritual cleansing. He believes that this cleansing rite will offer him divine fortification. Another instance of ritual is the rite of crisis entailing giving a sacrifice of blood to the deities for victory by Ibadan warriors. Overall, Ola Rotimi uses ritual/sacrifice as a symbol of communion between man and gods to develop the conflict in the play. Establishing communion with Ogun, *Kurunmi* regains confidence to start the war. Perhaps if palm wine were not available, he would not dare seek Ogun’s support in the first place. His overreliance on this divine fortification or support aggravates the conflict in the play. Equally, Ibadan warriors might have quit the war and returned home as Ogunmola has suggested, but they regain confidence by offering a sacrifice to the deities. Their offering of this sacrifice leads to the continuation of the war. Besides, the dialectical pattern is exemplified by the warriors who lurk between the desire for and the reality of war/victory. Since rituals in drama primarily perform social function (Frye 107), *Kurunmi* can be better understood vis-à-vis the realities in contemporary Nigeria. Today, many adherents of Christianity and Islam in the country give exorbitant gifts (as sacrifice) to their clerics to seek divine favors and blessings. These clerics have now replaced gods who served (and, to some people, still

serve) as representatives of God on earth. All this demonstrates that a symbol possesses “the ability to communicate in time and space” (107).

For Frye, a symbol is represented by a recurring image (99). In *Kurunmi*, gift giving, which facilitates a rite of passage, is a recurring image. In Yoruba mythology, the rite of passage is an important ritual (Dunmade 182). This is illustrated by a funeral rite in *Kurunmi*: when an Alafin (king) of Oyo dies, his first son must die with him. But Alafin Atiba ensures that all important kings in Yoruba swear to make his first son, Adelu, Alafin after his demise. Only Kurunmi, who views Atiba’s action as perversion of their tradition, refuses to swear. When he hears the sound of guns in the early morning – symbolizing the crowning of Adelu, who is supposed to commit suicide after the death of his father, as a new Alafin – Kurunmi begins to strategize for war against Oyo. He sends a message to Bale Olugbode and Balogun Ibikunle of Ibadan airing his dissatisfaction with the new untraditional development. Gift giving is one of the first strategies he employs to seek support from other territories. Kurunmi parcels gifts in bags to be taken to the Emir of Ilorin to seal a diplomatic relation between Ijaiye and Ilorin during the imminent war. His action shows the importance of gifts as a symbol of communication in winning people to one’s side. He later instructs some of his warriors to journey to Ilorin to present the gifts to the Emir. With this gesture, Kurunmi hopes to get the support of the Emir in fighting king Adelu whom he metaphorically refers to as a baby lion that must not be allowed to grow old. However, there is no pointer in the play to Ilorin offering support to Ijaiye during the war. What is obvious, however, is that the Egba to whom Kurunmi personally takes some gifts for the same purpose support Ijaiye during the war.

Furthermore, gifts serve as a symbol of allegiance in *Kurunmi*. Kurunmi feels betrayed by his warriors who accuse him of lording it over them by taking a personal decision for Ijaiye to wage war against Oyo. To worsen his disappointment, he discovers the five warriors have come on the order of Balogun Ogunkoroju and Areagoro Ajayi – his two trusted warlords. Kurunmi humbly feels sorry and offers the warriors some gifts. This kind gesture cools their temper. Two of the warriors drink palm wine to stupor and stagger to the shrine of Ogun to pledge support to Kurunmi (Rotimi 42). The reaction of the warriors shows the extent to which people can be influenced by gifts. After collecting the palm wine and other gifts from Kurunmi, the warriors begin to sing his praise. They are even unconcerned about the would-be reaction of the two warlords to the gifts before they get themselves drunk. Kurunmi eventually succeeds in using the gifts as a symbol of his allegiance to the warriors and Ijaiye people as a whole. The warriors, deciphering the message, reciprocate by accepting to wage war against Ibadan.

According to Frye, the cyclical pattern is mediated by ritual (97). This is manifest in the preceding analysis where conflict over the rite of passage informs gift giving and the journey motif. Characters transit from one place to another to deliver gifts (messages). Kurunmi sends his warriors to Ilorin for the same purpose. On their way home, all of them but one are attacked and murdered by Ibadan warriors. Kurunmi himself travels on his horse all the way to Egba to give some gift items to the warriors as a symbol of the need for their support. It may be concluded that the warriors of Egba endorse Kurunmi because of the gifts. Apparently, Frye's mythical symbolism views literature as a technique of civilization because of its social function (99). Although this play alludes to events in pre-colonial Nigeria, its symbolic representation of gifts still finds relevance in contemporary Nigeria. Nigeria has established diplomatic relations with various countries of the world through giving and receiving aid. It has also been sanctioned by some of these countries for human rights violation (Eshiet 49). The fact remains that aid or assistance to and from foreign countries are means of cementing diplomatic allegiances. Related to this is the prevalence of bribery and corruption in Nigeria today. Many Nigerians give bribes (disguised as gifts sometimes) to get what they want, whether good or bad – consequently espousing Frye's notion of “the conflict of desire and actuality” (111). This idea of giving gifts to curry favor is what, Ola Rotimi suggests, should be discouraged.

In mythical symbolism, a literary work is considered as “an imitation of nature” (Frye 95). Aroko (coded message) is a Yoruba communication code mostly made of/from plants and/or animals. Aroko is “an ancient non-verbal communicative strategy in Yoruba culture” which “involves sending an item or a combinable number of items to a person from which the decoder is expected to infer a piece of information” (Abdullahi-Idiagbon 116-125). It is the tradition of the Yoruba to send warning on an impending war to the other party through Aroko: “If the recipient community embraces peace, the matter will be settled amicably, but not without payment of tribute. However, the recipient community may decline in sending message of peace, which may eventually lead to both communities engaging in war fare” (Ojo 49). The latter case is evident in *Kurunmi*. In the play, three coded messages are exchanged among characters and they all symbolize negative meaning. The exchange of coded messages between Adelu and Kurunmi climaxes their enmity and officially marks the beginning of the war in the play. King Adelu has sent two messengers, Kutenlo and Obagbori, to Kurunmi to present to him some items concealed inside two separate calabashes. But before the messengers could reveal the contents in the calabashes, the angry Kurunmi contrives a coded message for Adelu in a dramatic and symbolic manner:

KURUNMI: Take this message to your new king, Adelu.

[He leans back relaxedly in his chair, dips the ladle into the bowl of stew, scoops the contents: okro [sic] stew. He lifts the spoonful towards his mouth, repeatedly, letting much of the sauce slaver sloppily from his mouth down on to the white cloth, smirching it. The messengers are shocked.]

KUTENLO: Contempt!

[Kurunmi ends the act by wiping his mouth clean with the unsoiled part of the cloth, then casually he undoes the knot behind his neck, folds up the cloth in a crude bundle, and holds it out to the messengers.] (Rotimi 26-27)

Obagbori reluctantly takes the cloth from Kurunmi after much threat. The messengers know that the stained cloth symbolizes a stain on the king's honor and Kurunmi's total rejection of his kingship. Ordinarily, white cloth symbolizes purity, but it is transformed into a negative symbol by Kurunmi.

Later, Obagbori and Kutenlo reveal the contents in the calabashes sent by Alafin Adelu to Kurunmi. In one bowl are gunpowder and bullets, and in the second "are the sacred twins of the Ogboni Cult – the symbols of peace" (27). That is, the objects symbolize war and peace respectively. Kurunmi chooses the bowl containing gunpowder and bullets, which means he has chosen war over peace. He immediately leaves for the shrine of Ogun to deposit the bowl there and thus inform the god about the impending war. Ogun is the god of war to whom those items belong, so it is expected that Kurunmi will seek his support for victory in the war. Again, Rotimi shows how this exchange of Aroko between the duo helps advance the conflict in the play.

The characters of Balogun Ibikunle and Ogunmola also exemplify the use of coded message as a symbol of disdain. Rancor breaks out between the two great Ibadan warlords over whether or not to wage war against Ijaiye in support of Oyo. While the former is trying to persuade the elders and other warriors to avoid the war, the latter is bent on waging war majorly because of his personal vendetta with Kurunmi. Ogunmola calls the much older Ibikunle a coward, leaves the venue angrily only to return some minutes later with a coded message for the now-departed Ibikunle. He calls him out: "that warrior of yester-years, now turned weakling with the bearing of too many children. Where is Ibikunle? I have brought him a present" (51). Ogunmola asks Latosisa, one of his warriors, to lead other warriors to Ibikunle's house to "tell the old warrior I send him this present" (51): a dead crow. The dead crow symbolizes death of Ibikunle's bravery. The receipt of the coded message contributes to Ibikunle supporting the war eventually. He makes this known at the warfront when Ogunmola tries to

leave for Ibadan, fearing that Ijaiye would win the war with the support of the Egbas. Ibikunle dares him to run away:

When it's time to talk about war, the clamour of voices is loudest. This now is war, brother. We stand and fight. Fight to the end. Remember, seven months ago, you, Ogunmola, called me a coward. Not only that, you got your boys to deface my front porch with the symbol of cowardice – a black crow. A dead, black crow. Now Ibikunle has come to fight. And brave Ogunmola is on the run. Why is that? (69)

This portends the right time for Ibikunle to get back at Ogunmola. Now, neither of them wants to accept the tag of cowardice. In the long run, they agree to seek a solution to the looming defeat. The main argument here is that the coded message influenced Ibikunle's decision to support the war. Being the most senior warlord in Ibadan, he would not like to be seen as cowardly. Ibikunle's action could be likened to that of Boko Haram terrorists in contemporary Nigeria who are often emotionally induced and financially sponsored to destroy their country. For instance, in Ahmed Yerima's *Heart of Stone* (2013), Musa, apart from being handsomely paid to perpetrate terrorist acts, is encouraged by his accomplice, Ali (Yerima 24). Relating the ritual of Aroko in *Kurunmi* to the happenings in modern Nigeria underscores the social function of literature which Frye stresses (99).

On the whole, Frye's perspective of cyclical pattern is prevalent in the ritual of Aroko and rite of passage. Here, natural items like calabashes and crow, symbolic of coded messages, are taken to different places in *Kurunmi*. For instance, Adelu's messengers travel from Oyo to Ijaiye to deliver Aroko to Kurunmi. In addition, the dialectical pattern here can be explained in terms of the conflict between desire (for war) and reality (of war) as explicated by Frye (111). The coded messages Adelu sends to Kurunmi symbolize peace and war. Kurunmi has the option of choosing either, but he does not only choose war, he sends a coded message symbolic of war to Adelu. This symbolic exchange of coded messages elicits the desire for war. Ogunmola's coded message to Ibikunle is intended to excite him to have such desire for war too. Yet, ironically, when the reality of war sets in, Ogunmola tries to run away from the battlefield while Kurunmi commits suicide to avoid being captured by the rampaging Ibadan warriors. In the long run, the two strong warlords who send messages symbolic of disdain (and desire for war) learn in a hard way the necessity of peace in our world. Finally, analyzed through the lens of Frye's mythical symbolism, *Kurunmi* illustrates that rituals such as sacrifice, Aroko and rite of passage are symbolic representations of desire for war and victory, which is relatable to the reality of contemporary Nigeria.

Critical studies on Rotimi's *Kurunmi* have broadly explored how certain features like history, genre, proverbs, and Greek tragic conception contribute to the development of characterization or conflict in the play. Other critics have dissected traditional and satirical themes in the play. However, previous studies on the play fail to give critical attention to the symbolic representations of objects and rituals in the play. This study employs Frye's mythical symbolism to examine how symbols contribute to the development of conflict in the play. It also shows how such symbolic representations reflect certain realities of modern Nigeria. Three symbolic meanings of such objects and rituals are identified in *Kurunmi*, viz. communion for protection or victory, diplomatic support or allegiance, and coded message as a symbol of disdain. Finally, the study concludes that the symbolic meanings of these objects and rituals in *Kurunmi* contribute to the development of conflict in the play and simultaneously reflect the prevalence of bribery, corruption and terrorism in contemporary Nigeria. The study, thus, recommends that avoiding rituals and messages that are symbolic of disdain or war is a good requisite of humanity.

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