

# Samuel Beckett, Wole Soyinka, and the Theatre of Desolate Reality

John Nkemngong Nkengasong  
Department of English  
UNIVERSITY OF YAOUNDE 1

IT IS OFTEN asserted that African Literature was born in the cradle of adversity as an instrument of protest against colonial exploitation and cultural domination. This was in a bid to enforce African nationalism and to protect African culture from being completely obliterated by the overriding Western cultures. Writers on the continent and in the Diaspora therefore, sought to incorporate indigenous African values in their works to the effect that critics of African descent and some foreign scholars find interest mainly in works which treat such subject matter. This, a priori, is not objectionable. However, the slavish search for norms reflecting rudimentary African life, thought and culture in the varied works of African authors might have serious setbacks, the main one being the disregard for some masterpieces which might not after all lay stress on the desired tastes of indigenous African customs.

The critic of Soyinka, for example, is most often infatuated with the playwright's abstruse incorporation of ritual, myth lore and idiom in his works. This is the tendency with Ulli Beier and Gerald Moore, eminent connoisseurs of Soyinka's creative art, who have so earnestly belaboured such themes in volumes of criticism. It is however questionable, if the supposed rich texture in plays like

Soyinka's *A Dance of the Forests* and *The Strong Breed* offer more for thought than some of his "simpler" plays like *The Swamp Dwellers*. The resentment is against Moore's use of the expression "least substantial" to obliterate the latter work. He justifies this with the claim that the play offers "none of the extra devices that Soyinka usually employs to enrich his dramatic texture, ranging from verse and song, to dance, masquerade and pantomime" (16). This is certainly misleading because the quest for works which offer the "extra devices" may lead to the obliteration of works which although do not possess these devices may echo more important universal concerns which *The Swamp Dwellers* does.

From another perspective, the tendency in critical thinking is also always to associate the artistic excellence of a writer with the influence of another major writer before him, obliterating the fact that the human consciousness is a residual of archetypal patterns experienced in different epochs and in different geographical spheres. Good examples of archetypal patterns in literature are found in myths. When approached from Carl Gustav Jung's "collective unconscious myths", Maud Bodkin's, Northrop Frye's and Clyde Kluckhohn's postulations one understands myths to be recurrent patterns of beliefs and spiritual concepts in Literature and human history, dealing with themes, experiences and situations, which cut across cultural and geographical boundaries. Clyde Kluckhohn in particular, in his article "Recurrent Themes in Myths and Mythmaking" is quite explicit about

certain features of mythology that are apparently universal or that have such wide distribution in space and time that result from recurrent reactions of the human psyche to situations and stimuli of the same general order (46).

When one reads the plays of Samuel Beckett and Wole Soyinka against the background of the presumptions of myth criticism cited above, he is compelled to dismiss arguments by critics like Chinweizu et al that Soyinka is one of those “euromodernists, who have assiduously aped” the modes of the 20<sup>th</sup> century European writers (163); or of Catherine O. Acholonu who states of the playwright in a more specific manner: “Soyinka's themes are echoes of those of Samuel Beckett. His characters are gripped by the same hopelessness in which Beckett's characters find themselves” (15). The fundamental logic applied by Chinweizu and Acholonu in assessing the works of Beckett and Soyinka is based on the premise that Beckett wrote before Soyinka and this therefore, creates the problem of determining the degree of the latter's artistic originality.

If Soyinka truly “aped” Western models, to what extent can one therefore, establish that he was influenced by any of them in the delineation of African customs, belief systems and worldviews? To what extent was he influenced by Western writers to project the absurdity of the human condition on the African continent? Is the question about human desolation and the quest for a veritable spiritual essence exclusively a European experience? It is only in an attempt to answer these questions that one comes to an understanding that writers of different continents, epochs and religions are confronted with similar situations of desolation and project similar spiritual visions which they demonstrate in literature. A close reading of Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* and Soyinka's *The Swamp Dwellers* from the perspective of myth critics like Jung, Frye and Kluckhohn shows a striking similarity in the playwrights' delineation of the human condition of desolate reality and the quest for salvation, yet remarkable contrasts in

cultural and spiritual concepts and worldviews. With specific reference to religious opposition, Godwin Sogolo notes that:

Anthropological speculations on the nature of African religious beliefs give the impression that religions in these cultures were of a peculiar sort, that is, that they were distinct in character from religions elsewhere in the world (52).

This is quite evident in the oppositional cultural elements of which religion is an embodiment in Wole Soyinka's *The Swamp Dwellers* and Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*.

The issue that possibly motivates the link of Soyinka with Beckett is perhaps both playwrights' projection, in their different settings, of the casual link between human suffering and the possibilities of divine salvation which in the twentieth century was an issue of crucial importance. Both playwrights point to the fact that the excruciating human condition is a universal reality and that once created by his God no matter what form He takes, man is rendered desolate, abandoned to the fate of pain, hopelessness and languor. Commenting, for example, on the historical setting of *Waiting for Godot*, Declan Kiberd evokes the excruciating conditions of humanity represented by the tramps who,

are presented as characters without much history, who are driven to locate themselves in the world with reference to geography. But the world in which they live has no overall structure, it is a dreadful place in which every moment is like the next.... Lacking an assured past, the tramps can have no clear sense of their own future.... They are waiting without hope for a deliverance from a being in whom they do not really believe (538-9).

Such a condition as described by Kiberd above expresses humanity's expedient need for salvation and this certainly is the dominant concern in Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* and *Endgame* and in Soyinka's *Swamp Dwellers* and *The Road*. Soyinka on his part succeeds through the incorporation of the African idiom, myth and ritual from which perspective he explores the absurdity of the human condition against the background of African belief systems, while Beckett employs the modernist avant-garde theatrical techniques and Christian concepts to project the absurdity of human existence. In his most obscure plays Soyinka delineates life in complex textural frames, with equivalent complicated themes but in his simple works he is plain and lucid, in the manner of Beckett in *Waiting for Godot* which paradoxically have profound prophetic visions. The substance of *The Swamp Dwellers* can be evaluated within these realms. Because the play is almost devoid of an abstruse texture, un-native to Soyinka's art, its bare surface realism suggests almost nothing to a connoisseur with a voracious appetite for surface complexity. Apart from its apparent themes of the decay of a rural society the play above all reflects man's ultimate search for a veritable source of salvation for man. Since human life presents constant problems and contradictions, symbolised for example, by the setting of *The Swamp Dwellers*, the playwright finds the individual and the society in continual need of salvation for itself. This can be achieved either by mass act or through the dedication of earthly messiahs like Demoke in *A Dance of the Forests*, Eman in *The Strong Breed*, and Igwezu in *The Swamp Dwellers*.

Although there are perceptible differences in terms of regions, cultures and techniques between *Waiting for Godot* and *The Swamp Dwellers*, Beckett and Soyinka re-enact the situation of human

predicament with artistic similitude. The similarity in terms of setting, characterisation, and themes among all others are quite evident in the two plays. The arid setting of *Waiting for Godot* which as Harold Hobson observes in the opening paragraph of his review “has nothing at all to seduce the senses” because its “drab bare scene is dominated by a withered tree” (93). This is evocative of the rotting swamps and the dry North in *The Swamp Dwellers*, all of which are symbolic representations of the inexplicable and hazardous universe in which man finds himself. Beckett's indiscernible Godot represents Christian themes as James Acheson admits in his book, *Samuel Beckett's Artistic Theory and Practice*, while Soyinka's unappeasable Serpent is the spiritual essence in the swamps, an aspect of animism in African traditional religion. Beckett's desolate tramps Vladimir and Estragon who depend entirely on the arrival of Godot for salvation without whom they contemplate suicide echo in Soyinka's disillusioned Igwezu whose efforts to appease the Serpent to procure a happier life rather frustrates him. The wealthy Pozzo parallels the capitalist Awuchike who takes advantage of man's wretchedness to exploit others. The uncompromising Lucky who is Pozzo's slave and the despised Beggar from the North are Sisyphean archetypes who readily submit themselves to their fates and who are determined to survive against all odds.

The central issue in both plays is on the question of salvation as stated above. Soyinka raises the problem as to whether or not the swamp dwellers should continue to depend on the Serpent for salvation in spite of the interminable calamities that confront them. *The Swamp Dwellers* projects this theme at a more individual level. It treats the story of a youth whose dependence on supernal assistance comes to no avail. His naivety, even leads him into terrible casualties which prompt him to question in the face of

adversity, the authenticity of the god he worships. A closer appreciation of the play suggests the pertinence of the following question: Should man continue to grope through an absurd existence with blind hope for divine salvation or should he seek other ways of saving himself? This appears to be the playwright's obsession in the play. The protagonist of the play, Igwezu, an ideal son of the Swamps who is loyal to tradition, has performed all the necessary rites required by the deity to ensure a good harvest and a happy life with his wife. The impotence of this god gradually creeps into his awareness from several inexplicable mishaps that confront him, both in the city and the Swamps. In his short stay in the city to try his hands at making money, his twin brother, Awuchike, seduces his wife, contrary to the spiritual values of the Swamp. Much frustrating, he fails in his commercial enterprise. His misery is recalled later on his return to the Swamps when he tells the Kadiye: "I'm afraid I have had my turn already. I lost everything, my savings, even my standing as a man. I went into debt" (35). Igwezu's tragedy is more severe when he returns to the Swamps with the hope of recovering from his despair by harvesting his crops: "I came back with hope, with consolation in my heart. I came back with the assurance of one who has lived his land and tilled it faithfully (32). He discovers with utter disappointment and disbelief that the floods had ruined his farm and "the beans and the corn had made an everlasting pottage with the mud." Makuri's consolatory plea: "It is the will of the god," is least appealing to a man against whom fortune has turned her back. His reliance on the omnipotence of the Serpent begins to abate on being puzzled why he should be so righteous yet so forsaken. His contempt is explicit when he requires the Priest of the Serpent - the Kadiye, to give meaning to what seems "dark and sour." He achieves this through a series of clarification questions:

- Igwezu: Did I not offer my goats to the Priest? ...  
And made it clear - that the offering was from me? That I demanded the protection of the heavens on me and my house, on my father and on my mother, on my wife, land and chattels?
- Kadiye: All prayers were repeated.
- Igwezu: And ever since I began to till the soil did I not give his due? Did I not bring the first lentils to the shrine, and pour the first oil upon the altar?
- Kadiye: Regularly.
- Igwezu: And when the Kadiye blessed my marriage and tied the heaven-made knot, did he not promise long life, did he not promise happiness?....
- Kadiye: [*Does not reply this time*] (Soyinka 38).

Igwezu's fate is the quintessence of man's misery in a world which offers no hopes of divine protection or signs of a promised land. His experience shows that dependence on divine assistance leads to more terrible adversity in life. On the other hand, Awuchike is the ungodly rewarded. Although he is physically absent in the play we gather from other characters that he denounces his parents, tradition and the Swamps with all its spiritual ramifications, commits a taboo and immerses himself in the rough city ways in which he thrives as a wealthy timber merchant. One gets obsessed at this point, why Igwezu should be forsaken and Awuchike rewarded.

We find this pattern of nihilism or the degenerating spiritual consciousness in Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* which as James Acheson suggests, "raises the question whether the modern man should or should not believe in divine salvation," although

Acheson goes further to conclude that “Godot's non-arrival, strongly hints that he should not”(5). For Acheson, *Waiting for Godot* is an invective against Christian hope since the modern man, like Didi and Gogo wait endlessly for Godot who does not come. Although the tramps, Estragon and Vladimir, do not make any such effort as Igwezu does, they are victims of a scathing existence which they are unable to understand.

The characters in both plays, therefore, live a tragic and meaningless existence in which human experience is futile. In line with Declan Kiberd, Beryl Fletcher and John Fletcher maintain that the world of *Waiting for Godot* is “a world without divinity but a kind of malignant fate, a world in which man waits, hopes for something to give meaning to his life” (36). This is true of Vladimir and Estragon and Lucky and Pozzo, to a commendable extent. Estragon and Vladimir are trapped in the complications of life, a situation that is hopelessly unfathomable. They are unable to understand the *raison d'être* for their existence. Existence seems to be something imposed on them by some unknown force and there is absolutely no meaning to it. Their very source of hope Godot is indefinable and unpredictable imposing on them the grim reality of desolation, what Estragon describes in the play as “dreadful privation”(11).

Lucky's fate is even more pathetic than any other in *Waiting for Godot*. The luggage he carries symbolises the burdens of the world carried by humanity. The rope tied to his neck and which Pozzo pulls at will is also symbolic of humanity's inability to extricate itself from the burdens of existence. Seen from Eugene Ngezem's viewpoint the burdens portray him as a victim of “arbitrary authority” which Pozzo incarnates (115). Pozzo as well, although seems comfortable at first, discovers himself blind one day. From the inevitable adversity that confronts him, he gradually comes to

an understanding of the gruesome realities of existence in his remarks: "They gave birth astride a grave, the light gleams an instant, then it's night once more." (Beckett 89). The "grave" and "light" symbols represent death and life respectively. But the briefness in human life expressed in the symbolism reflects utter futility in human existence. Pozzo himself is symbolic of humanity that thinks itself free from the hazards of life but who sooner or later becomes a victim of fatal existence he cannot explain.

The characters in *The Swamp Dwellers* are confronted with similar ordeals as those in *Waiting for Godot*. The prime victim is Igwezu, an ideal son of the Swamps whose dependence on supernal assistance for a meaningful existence leads him to frustration. The impotence of his god gradually creeps into his awareness from several inexplicable mishaps that confront him both in the city and in the village of the Swamp. His venture in the city fails while his brother, Awuchike, who has severed all ties of family, religion and tradition, seduces his wife. His misery is recalled later on his return to the Swamps where he hopes to recover from his despair by harvesting his crops, but discovers with disappointment and anguish that the floods have ruined his farm. The idea of "loss" reflects Igwezu's inability to comprehend the complications of his existence, and therefore, questions and condemns the potency of the Serpent of the Swamps to whom he has offered enormous sacrifices:

I know that the floods can come again. That the Swamps will continue to laugh at our endeavours. I know that we can feed the Serpent of the Swamps and kiss the Kadiye's feet but the vapours will still rise and corrupt the tassels of the corn (Soyinka 39).

Doubts of divine competence to save humanity from the

vagaries of life are revoked in his question:

"If I slew the fatted calf, Kadiye, do you think the land may breathe again? If I slew all the cattle in the land and sacrificed every measure of goodness, would it make any difference to our lives, Kadiye? Would it make any difference to our fates?" (39).

The Kadiye, thus trapped and humiliated, leaves the scene threatening blood. But Igwezu's mind is now open. He has emancipated himself from the manacles of deceit, realising in a consolatory stand. "I know that we can appease the Serpent of the Swamps and kiss the Kadiye's feet, but the vapours will still rise and corrupt the tassels of the corn" (39). Igwezu's return to the city is manifest of the decision he has taken. The city symbolizes a place where a man who is aware that he is his own saviour struggles and succeeds as Awuchike does. Igwezu rejects the Swamps and all its spiritual values with the contention that, only the children and the old stay back in the village, in other words, only those who are ignorant or have not yet experienced the paradox of existence do not venture into the unknown.

His departure from the Swamps reflects that of his bondsman, the blind beggar who faces similar gruesome adversities: "I headed away from my home and set my face towards the river." The dry North from where he comes has undergone lengthy periods of draught, and later, a devastation of a crop-flourish by locusts, seems to show Soyinka's characteristic manner of presenting the poignant edges of life on which man is staked.

The plight of the blind Beggar from the North is even more severe than that of Igwezu, even though the latter is the protagonist

of the play. Like Lucky, the blind Beggar undergoes all sorts of excruciating humiliation from people who show no sympathy for the afflicted, from natural hazards in the desert North including the “fly sickness” which eventually renders him blind, the severe droughts and the destruction of a rare flourishing of crops by locusts. As the Beggar narrates his ordeal to Makuri and his wife, Alu, at the initial stage of his blindness he believes that he can be rescued by his faith in Muhammad: “My faith promises paradise in the company of Muhammad and all the Prophets.... and then slowly the truth came to me, and I knew that I was living but blind” (15). The reality then is of the harrowing existence. Existence seems then to be imposed on the Beggar by a mysterious force which the Beggar identifies as Mohammad. The Beggar suffers for it because the paradise which Mohammad is supposed to procure for all believers is not attainable. The Beggar's southward journey is therefore, a rejection of his faith and a determination to till the soil wherever he finds fertile grounds. Makuri and Alu, in whose hut the action of *The Swamp* takes place, are also victims of circumstances beyond their control. They understand that the destruction of the crops by floods and the disappearance of their sons, Igwezu and Awuchike, are the will of the Serpent who must not be questioned.

The understanding that things happen in both plays by chance and not by divine will as many other characters observe, is another source of grief for the characters. The issue of arbitrariness is explicit in *The Swamp* where Igwezu and the Beggar, although righteous in conduct, are forsaken while Awuchike, Igwezu's twin brother who is full of impious actions, is rewarded. The situation of the two brothers Igwezu and Awuchike, as stated above is reminiscent of the fate of the thieves in the *Bible* whom Vladimir alludes to. Just as Igwezu questions the criterion for which divine

competence punishes the righteous, and rewards the impious ones like Awuchike, the tramps impugn the basis for one of the thieves being saved and the other condemned:

Vladimir: Ah yes, the two thieves. Do you remember  
the story?

Estragon: No.

Vladimir: Shall I tell you?

Estragon: No.

Vladimir: It'll pass time. (*Pause.*) Two thieves,  
crucified at the same time as our Saviour. One

Estragon: Our what?

Vladimir: Our Saviour. Two thieves. One is supposed  
to have been saved and the other... (*he  
searches for the contrary of saved*)  
...damned. (12).

The inability to understand divine manifestation is the main source of despair in Beckett's *Godot*. Commenting on *Waiting for Godot* Eugene Webb states that,

The fate of the thieves, one of whom was saved and the other damned according to one of the four accounts that everybody believes, becomes as the play progresses a symbol of a condition of man in an unpredictable and arbitrary universe" (32).

The situation of arbitrariness or chance presupposes the silence or the absence of God, which provides more grounds for human misery. The characters in both plays find themselves in the face of misery, an uncompromising situation without any defined pattern, highlighting chaos as the dominating force in the world with no question to be asked and no where to go.

From an understanding of the gruesome realities of human

existence, Samuel Beckett and Wole Soyinka see humanity in continual need for salvation. There are therefore, suggestions in Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* and Soyinka's *The Swamp Dwellers* that while in existence which origin is obscure, essence can be determined by individual choice and freewill, hence individual salvation. Salvation can also be attained through the benevolence of other persons; that is interpersonal or collective salvation. Furthermore, both playwrights do not completely ignore the presence of some spiritual essence in determining the fate of humanity. The fact that human action, thought and vision in both plays are directed towards some ultimate reality is indicative of the possibility that divine salvation has a place in their being. Even if God's existence is doubtful as existentialists like Nietzsche and Jean-Paul Sartre show, man has indubitably created Him to give meaning to his own existence. This is reflected in man's eternal quest for some supernal being whom he thinks must be responsible for the existence of the marvels of the universe. Consequently, Beckett's Godot must be such a God created by Vladimir and Estragon, while the Serpent of the Swamps and Mohammad of the Muslim North must be patterns of beliefs created by people. The three religions may differ in concept and stature but they represent universal concerns and the verdict that all beliefs in the world culminate in a single search for the unknown. Through that quest, human life is patterned in more meaningful panoply of realities.

At the level of individual salvation, some of the characters in the plays come to an understanding of their fates and in spite of the humiliation, to which they are subjected, make commendable efforts to survive in the face of adversity. Lucky in *Godot* and the blind Beggar in *Swamp Dwellers* stand out distinctly as representations of individual salvation. Lucky, Pozzo's slave, unconditionally submits himself to the burdens of existence. He is

certain however, that the residuals from his master's healthy existence are his. Pozzo tells Estragon who, like his friend Vladimir, is unable to do anything to save himself and who shows uncontrollable greed for the chicken bones thrown on the ground by Pozzo that, "in theory the bones go to the carrier" and the carrier of course is Lucky (Beckett 27). When asked why Lucky does not put down his luggage, Pozzo replies that "he wants to impress me so that I can keep him" (31). Similarly, Igwezu's bondsman, the Beggar from the dry North whose plight is even more severe because of his blindness is more conscious of the need to save himself rather than rely on external forces for salvation. His journey from the dry North to the swampy south is in search of a means of surviving. As a guest in Makuri's hut he indicates, against all entreaties by his host to beg like the others, his intention to till the soil where the earth is moist: "I wish to work on the soil. I wish to knead it between my fingers" (13). This therefore, means that in the absence of a divine force that should take care of a desperate humanity, life is in the individual's own hands and he or she is responsible for it by the pattern of choices he or she makes. He is thrown to the dictates of chance but he must first show proof that he is directly responsible for his own life in an existence whose origin can hardly be satisfactorily explained. This is reflected in the Beggar's determination to till the soil though blind. All he needs is a patch of fertile ground by which means he can save himself. A noticeable link between the downtrodden Lucky and the Beggar is the element of revolt that does not necessarily tie them to their bondage, the kind of stubbornness which G.W.F. Hegel suggests "is that freedom which makes itself secure in a solid singleness, and keeps *within* the sphere of bondage" ( 244). Lucky does not execute every command given by his master, Pozzo and even Pozzo understands that Lucky has his own temperaments which

must not be undermined. In the same light, the Beggar, in spite of the hospitality accorded him by Makuri and Alu, does not totally subject himself to their whims and caprices. He has his convictions and must pursue them to the end without giving the impression that he is completely helpless and cannot express his feelings freely. This way the two characters assert their freedom to act as a means of saving their own lives not necessarily as acts of subjugation to bondage.

Soyinka's philosophy toes the line of Beckett's. The main difference, putting aside other factors, is in the psychological presentation of characters. Soyinka's hero makes considerable personal efforts to survive and all he seeks is the protection of the heavens over his achievements. On the contrary, Beckett's tramps are unable to do anything for themselves but wait for an illusory Godot to deliver salvation to them. In the end Godot does not come and tramps remain where they started, contemplating suicide as an alternative solution to their misery:

Vladimir: We'll hang ourselves tomorrow (pause).

Unless Godot comes.

Estragon: And if he comes?

Vladimir: We'll be saved. (Beckett 94)

Both works further demonstrate the fact that in addition to attempts by the individual to save himself, people can rely on the resources of each other for a more meaningful existence. The problem of Estragon's hunger is temporarily solved when Vladimir offers him a carrot. At the instant, Estragon realises that their salvation does not necessarily depend on Godot:

Estragon: (*his mouth full, vacuously*) We're not tied!....

Vladimir: How do you mean tied?

Estragon: Down.

Vladimir: But to whom, by whom?

Estragon: To your man.

Vladimir: To Godot? Tied to Godot? What idea!

No question of it. (Pause) For the moment  
(Beckett 20-21).

Estragon's and Vladimir's worldview here illustrates that God represented by Godot in this sense is important only when humanity is in trouble. Estragon realises at this point the importance of another fellow human in solving problems. Godot instantly becomes insignificant to Estragon when his mouth is full with carrots, when he is sure of his survival even if it were temporarily so. Estragon in particular is an archetype of the hypocritical Christian who looks for God only to solve his immediate personal problems and once that problem is solved the notion of God is obliterated. He represents the Western man who Nietzsche lambastes in the parable of the mad man who declared the death of God. Nietzsche's startling statement that God was dead meant that humankind no longer believed in God. Humankind had destroyed his faith in God, in other words, they killed God (Nietzsche 95-96). In the same way, Estragon's faith in Godot abates as soon as he achieves his basic needs. Vladimir however realises that their extrication from Godot is just a temporary matter. In the same way, Lucky essentially depends on Pozzo for survival. Put in another way, there exists a mutual dependence between Pozzo and Lucky that is advantageous to the developing consciousness of Lucky. The antithetical natures of Pozzo and Lucky manifestly become a synthesis of master and slave. He carries his burden uncomplaining in order to benefit from the chicken bones thrown on the ground by Pozzo. Lucky is aware of

Pozzo's dependency on a slave and this illustrates why he does not execute all instructions. His salvation is dependent on Pozzo but also on his self-consciousness and although Pozzo subjects him to the most excruciating humiliation, Lucky's helplessness is not as manifest as that of the idle Vladimir and Estragon. Alexandre Kojève puts us in the existential mind of Lucky to demonstrate that the contradictions within him are phenomenal, for as he writes, "in *this world everything* is slavery, and the master is as much a slave here as he is" (55).

In *The Swamp Dwellers*, the Beggar's Christlike presence stands as symbol of expiation and enlightenment. His brilliant suggestions about land reclamation are intended to guide the indigenes on how to solve the problem of flood without relying on external forces. As Igwezu's mentor, he prompts him to discover the venality of the Kadiye and also his own naivety. The Beggar's ideas in the play represent Soyinka's ideals of individual lone-act-of-courage in the effort of saving humanity whenever such an individual possesses the will and the resources. Eldred Jones writes that:

this act of salvation is not a mass act; it comes about through the vision and the dedication of individuals who doggedly pursue their vision in spite of the opposition of the very society they seek to save (12).

This is the essential role of the Beggar in the play. Although Makuri considers his insistent propositions of land reclamation as "profanities," the Beggar goes on to enforce the idea and as Igwezu's mentor prompts him to denounce the spirituality of the Swamps and come to self-awareness of survival by individual effort. The Beggar's intervention rescues Igwezu and the rest of the

dwellers from hopeless dependence on the Serpent, although not without meeting with resistance from Igwezu's parents, Makuri and his wife Alu, who have committed themselves to an unflinching reverence of the Serpent.

The hospitality shown towards the Beggar by Makuri and his wife, when he arrives in their hut in the Swamps reflects another dimension of interpersonal salvation which is often rooted in what is commonly referred to as "African hospitality," whereby the sorrows and joys of an individual are shared by other members of the community. Makuri's sympathy towards the stranger is quite explicit. He calls him the "afflicted of the gods" and his wife washes the mud on the Beggar's feet, dries them then rubs with ointment, an action borrowed from the anointing of the feet of Jesus by the Magdalene.

The examples above, of interpersonal salvation illustrate the existentialist idea that man is the future of man in the sense that man's problems in an ailing universe can partly be solved through the initiative and the benevolence of his fellow man. But once humanity is conscious of its commitment to individual, interpersonal or collective efforts to make existence tolerable, there is also a need to impose a spiritual pattern on its existence, whether it is traditional African, Christian or Islamic. To a critic like John Leeland Kundert-Gibbs, "hope or expectation springs from a sense of lack, emptiness or insecurity" (58). He consequently identifies Godot with the void at the centre of being in his Zen Buddhism and Chaos theory. Following his theory therefore, it is neither the Zen Buddhism, nor Godot, nor the Serpent of the Swamps, nor Muhammad that imposes its essence on humanity but humanity's yearning to fill a void by imposing a spiritual pattern on itself. By imposing a divine pattern on themselves, Vladimir and Estragon achieve some degree of meaning, what Eugene Webb describes as

“an illusory, but desperately defended pattern” (26). In *The Swamp Dwellers*, Makuri and Alu also impose a spiritual prototype on themselves. They are die-hard worshippers of the Serpent and the Beggar's brilliant idea on land reclamation would hardly shaken their faith in the Serpent because their dependence on the Serpent, even with the accompanying casualties, is what still gives meaning to their lives. They confirm John Mbiti's claim that

in their traditional life African peoples are deeply religious. It is religion, more than anything else, which colours their understanding of the universe and their empirical participation in that universe, making life a profoundly religious phenomenon (262).

If Beckett disavows God in conformity with the philosophical theorising of Friedrich Nietzsche, Jean-Paul Sartre and even James Acheson, there is evidence that there is a possibility of the existence of divine essence whose nature is unpredictable and whose ways are inexplicit. This God either exists and does not care or is the invention of man to give pattern and meaning to his life. Beckett and Soyinka therefore, share in thinking with Martin Heidegger, Nietzsche and Jean-Paul Sartre that without depending on external sources man's life should be determined by the pattern of choices he makes; with Husserl and Søren Kierkegaard that man cannot completely dismiss the possibility of supernal assistance in the determination of human fate. Religion, in all regions and in all epochs, tends to have an organic life of its own which recognises the existence of divine activity and man's response to it no matter what form it takes (Idowu 203). However, such existence placed entirely on divine benevolence renders it more excruciating, like in the case of Vladimir and Estragon because Godot does not come in the end and they are unable to do anything to help themselves.

Although Gunter Andres argues that the waiting in the case of Vladimir and Estragon, is just an incessant attempt to make time pass which is so characteristic, and which reflects the specific misery and absurdity of their life” the fact that Beckett pits them against Lucky who finds meaning in his life by subjecting himself to Pozzo is self explicit (147-148).

Critics like Gerald Moore and Ulli Beier who see African theatre only in terms of texture and its peculiarity to the African continent miss the point. The straightforward nature of *The Swamp Dwellers* is more complex than one would expect. The play is more substantial in terms of the overall philosophical vision than some of the abstruse volumes which have conferred upon its author all his excellence. Attempts should be made to link patterns and situations with universal human experience as this study of Beckett and Soyinka demonstrates. As Simon Gikandi argues, African writers do not have social functions or responsibilities which are different from their counterparts elsewhere in the world. Gerald Moore's assessment of *The Swamp Dwellers* as “least substantial” (16) is, therefore, inadequate. David Cook's opinion is that the ideas in the play are “dramatically projected with great simplicity but with great force” (118). Joel Adedeji states that “Soyinka uses the theatre to make statements of human needs and values” such as *The Swamp Dwellers* illustrates (127). These needs and values are not limited to the Nigerian or African experience but to the universal human experience. Soyinka achieves this in some of his very revealing plays like *The Road, Madmen and Specialists*, and *The Swamp Dwellers* which, in the opinion of Acholonu, “often call to mind the language, style and themes of the plays of Albert Camus, Jean-Paul Sartre and above all those of Samuel Beckett” (14).

It is however evident from this analysis that while Beckett in his

own region and era saw the human condition from a purely Western perspective and belief pattern, Soyinka projects same from an African domain. Both playwrights converge at a point where, as Clyde Kluckhohn thinks, the “same general order” is reached.

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