

# Soyinka as satirist: the trials of brother jero

[Family](#)



**ASSIGN  
BUSTER**

To what extent does Soyinka present Jeroboam and his gullible congregation firstly as victims of social forces and secondly, as victims of their own greed and opportunism in *The Trials of Brother Jero*? " Human life cannot be represented in a fully or truthful manner without taking account of the pressures brought to bear upon the individual by his milieu, by the particularity of social situation and historical circumstance" John Cruickshank (1969)

I have chosen the quote above as a starting point for my essay because I believe that Africa as a continent has seen such extremes of political and social upheaval that to overlook the importance of history, and its affects down the evolutionary scale on the people of Africa, in African literature and particularly in Soyinka's *The Trials of Brother Jero* would be very wrong.

But how far can you make allowances for greed, selfishness and opportunism (which almost every character in the play attributes to) under the assumption that they are just products of the greed, selfishness and opportunism inflicted on the people when colonisation reared its ugly head? by the same token I feel that it is easy for an audience or reader of a play to put characters good or bad points purely down to their 'character'. When a play write presents you with characters that are so easy to interpret then you have to ask yourself, why?

Jero is a prophet, " by birth and inclination" and this is indeed the first thing we learn about him. The way Soyinka presents him to us is initially set out in the stage directions where Jero is described as " suave". Jero's opening line " I am a prophet", I feel, encourages the audience to think that maybe a real

prophet would be more modest. Jero's direct speech to the audience employs a traditional African style of address that forces an audience to actively analyse Jero's speeches.

That said Soyinka does not make it difficult for us to see that Jero is far from being a religious man as he informs us of his betrayal of his previous master for his own personal gain. So why would Soyinka use such a style of address if he did not want to us to analyse something more in the apparent openness of his characters speech? I feel that Soyinka has used this literary tool in order to encourage an audience not to see the truth in the characters (as this is very easy to see) but to think about why they have come to be the way they are.

G. N. Ofor (1991) in his essay entitled *The Urban Novel: A Historical Experience* tells us about social realities of the time prior to colonisation: "African villagers were noted for their homogeneity and were guided by traditional beliefs and values. Members of the community were very closely bound together and the primacy of the community over the individual was emphasised" I think it is very important that G. N.

Ofor chooses to specify that this state was what Africa was like before colonisation as this suggests that things have changed because of colonisation. Certainly in *The Trials of Brother Jero* the people are guided by traditional beliefs with the characters attending church regularly and Jero being something of an advisor (certainly to Chume anyway) but Jero himself is not guided by the hope of enlightenment or saviour after death, nor is he compelled to help people for the sake of being a kind and generous person.

Everything he does, in some way, contributes to his own personal gain, gain of money or respect or personal favours. In the quotation below which is an excerpt from the play Jero finds out that Chume's wife is in fact also his creditor who he has been trying to avoid, and so allows him finally to beat her despite forbidding him not to up until this point. Jero says " he wants to beat his wife, but I won't let him. If I do, he will become contented, and then that's another of my flock gone for ever. Jero: Ah. That is the only way. But er... I wonder really what the will of god would be in this matter. After all, Christ himself was not averse to using the whip when occasion demanded it. Chume (eagerly. ): No. He did not hesitate. Jero: In that case, since, brother Chume, your wife seems such a wicked, wilful sinner, I think... Chume: Yes, Holy One...? Jero: You must take her home tonight... Chume: Yes... Jero: And beat her.

You could easily conclude from this that Jero is presented as a victim of his own opportunism or that Jero is an opportunist, I suppose that to consider a character as a victim of anything suggests that we cannot or do not blame them for it; that, from a humanitarian point of view we can empathise with Jero's course of action. But Soyinka does not present to us any signal that Jero has suffered any sort of moral dilemma as he recurrently exploits his congregation. So we need to consider the social forces that might shape the attitudes of the characters in *The Trials of Brother Jero* The ideological view points detailed in the quotation by G.

N. Ofer. Do not apply to the character Jero so Maybe Soyinka chooses not to present Jero in this idyllic image as a remark against such opinions saying that he does not agree that Colonisation is a reason that people in Africa  
<https://assignbuster.com/soyinka-as-satirist-the-trials-of-brother-jero/>

have become more of a capitalist nation like in European society and is making the point that the image of Africans as a tight knit, un-selfish communism never completely existed. In the same essay I quoted from earlier and on the subject of the effects of colonisation, G. N. Ofer goes on to say that: Factors like taxation, a common portable currency, the desire for European goods, the need and the opportunity to make profits contributed immensely to the historic shift from a subsistence economy to a monetary economy. This loosened the co-operative ties binding the individual to his clan and lineage members. "

If you read the above quote with reference to Soyinka's character Jero you could certainly see how, perhaps, Soyinka's character Jeroboam is presented as a victim of this new found ethic, catalysed by the influence of Africa's capitalist colonisers.

In fact in Soyinka's own words, from an essay entitled from a common backcloth: A reassessment of the African literary Image he writes of " the European observer" that: " He still fights a rearguard today. It has grown subtler. Accommodation is his new weapon, not dictation" Soyinka (1988) Accommodation of the African continent or of the minds of the African masses perchance? Chume is another of Soyinka's main characters in the play, an un-educated, naive, gullible, hen-pecked man who relies completely on the 'help' he gets from Jero. Looking at the play it is easy perceive that Soyinka has presented Chume as a victim.

In the excerpt I have quoted below we can see how Chume goes to see brother Jero, desperate to find help for the mental torture he suffers by his

nagging wife, Amope; Chume: My life is hell... Jero: Forgive him, father, forgive him. Chume: This woman will kill me... Jero: Forgive him, father, forgive him. Chume: Only this morning I... Jero: Forgive him, father, forgive him. Chume: All the way on my bicycle... Jero: Forgive... Chume: And not a word of thanks... Jero: Out Ashtoreth. Out Baal... Chume: All she gave me was abuse, abuse, abuse...

All Chume wants is for Jero to allow him to beat her, just once, but Jero keeps him hanging on saying it is not the will of god. All Chume wants out of life is to have a peaceful relationship with his wife and to gain a better job. Chume is actually under a great deal of pressure to conform to the expectations of his wife and his peer. Amope says " A chief messenger in the local Government Office - do you call that work? Your old schools friends are now ministers, riding in long cars... " while Jero mocks Chume for his " animal jabber" he goes on to say that he is " too crude, but then that is to my advantage.

It means he would never set himself up as my equal. " you could argue that any characters desire for monetary gain or a materialistic attitude to life could be seen as a direct effect of the colonisation of Africa. As I have shown in earlier quotations and as I have read so far, it would seem that many of the people who write about the state of the African infrastructure have the opinion that colonisation has been a destructive factor because it imposed the materialistic, dog eat dog attitude of Europe. Many writers believe that the effect of Europe has caused a lack of solidarity between the African masses.

It would seem, also that there have been many literary works which satirise this idea, Claude Wauthier (1978) in *The literature and thought of modern Africa* writes; The tone is just as sarcastic about Europe in the long free-verse poem by the Ugandan Okot p'Bitek, *Song of Lawino*, the bitter-sweet lament of a black woman who is reproached by her husband for being illiterate and not knowing European social manners: My husband pours scorn On black people He behaves like a hen That eats its own eggs. Bearing this in mind it seems as though Soyinka has presented Chume as a victim of the social forces imposed by those around him.

He fits perfectly into Eustace Palmer's view (quoted by G. N. Ofor in *The essay The urban novel: a Historical Experience*) of; " The rural innocent... who is ignorant of the qualities needed to survive in the hot-house that is the city and who is quite often inadequately equipped, as far as education is concerned, to qualify for the lucrative jobs the city offers. " Palmer (1979) It is interesting to include that G. N. Ofor remarks on the above quote with: " However it is pertinent to note that without the creation of towns/cities by the colonial administration, there would have been no urban novel. "

As for Chume's own greed and opportunism, I think it would be difficult for anyone to argue that a person could be said to be greedy for wanting to live harmoniously with their wife/husband or to want equality. All we know of the rest of brother Jero's congregation is the few people he mentions that he has convinced will become prime ministers of certain states, there is a woman who badly wants children and Jero tell us that the most popular of his prophecies is to tell people they will live until they are 80.

As Jero says " if it doesn't come true, that man doesn't find out until he's on the other side. The last character we meet in the play is 'member', who aptly becomes a member of Brother Jero's congregation by the end of the play. Jero, at first, attempts to speak to him by pretending he has prophesied the meeting between them. Shockingly the member turns away saying " Go and practise your fraudulences on another person of greater gullibility" and so for a second it seems as though there may be at least one character that will not fall for the charms of Brother Jeroboam - this is not the case. All it takes is for Jero to say what he wants to hear and he is hooked.

Jero tempts him by saying " And at a desk, in a large gilt room, great men of the land awaited your decision. Emissaries of foreign nations hung on your word. And on the door leading into your office I read the words, minister for war... " Asking god or brother Jero to help people become ministers or heads of state or merely to have a better job or more money seems to go against the true usages of religion, Which I had understood to be performing the will of God (of whichever denomination) and keeping unity between all the people within the culture.

It seems to me that Soyinka may be trying to show that while every member of Jero's congregation is manipulated by him they themselves are not completely innocent in their reasons for their faith. Mineke Schipper (1982) in *Oral Literature and Total Theatre* says; " In traditional society the religious system determines the cultural unity of the people. Life forces bind man to his past, his present and his future and determine his relationships with gods, spirits, nature and natural phenomena. The unity tends to break down where western influence increases. "

<https://assignbuster.com/soyinka-as-satirist-the-trials-of-brother-jero/>



It is interesting that the subject of western influence is again considered to be the destructive factor in the lack of unity between the African people. The quotation above suggests that western influences have even meant a breaking down of the unity that religion brings. After having looked at *The Trials of Brother Jero*, and having discussed the idea of victimisation I can only conclude that human beings, from whatever culture or walk of life, all desire the same basic things - money and material possessions, respect, power and equality (though not necessarily in that order).

The idea that has cropped up so often in my essay, that the social forces which work upon the individual and the nation as a whole are a direct effect of colonisation, is probably the most interesting point of all. You can indeed find reasoning within the text to assume that Soyinka may have intended for this theme to become apparent, whether or not you regard any of the characters as victims or even if you regard them as victims and perpetrators together at the same time.

Below I have included a quotation from S. E. Ogude in his essay *African Literature and the Burden of History: Some Reflections* in which he talks about another African playwright, Chinua Achebe (1975) Saying: " He also reveals the weaknesses of the traditional society and the ease with which European capitalism and religion supported by gun powder and cannon balls successfully challenged the dominance of traditional culture. " If this is indeed true then it is a terrible, terrible shame.