

## **I am Ìyálóde of tì still: A Yoruba Duchess of Malfi**

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## **I am Ìyálóde of Ètì still: a Yoruba *Duchess of Malfi***

Débò Olúwatùmínú's *Ìyálóde of Ètì* (*An Original Adaptation of The Duchess of Malfi By John Webster*), produced by Utopia Theatre in Leeds, Sheffield and Doncaster in autumn 2016, takes the story of *The Duchess of Malfi* and transposes it to the territory of the precolonial Yoruba (the text of the script is preceded by a 'Map of Yorùbáland in the 1800s, showing the fictional towns of Aró and Ètì').<sup>1</sup> More specifically, we appear to be in the first half of the nineteenth century, when 'The Yoruba chiefdoms were united under the supreme authority of the powerful *Alaḥín*, king of *Oyo*' (Leroy, Olaleye-Oruene, Koeppen-Schomerus, and Bryan 2002: 132), since Èsùbíyí, the Bosola figure, tells Làbáké, the equivalent of Julia, that he wants to know what is preying on the mind of Olúawo (the Cardinal; here 'head of the Ògbóni Cult') because 'Rumours have it that the Alaḥín of Oyo is currently displeased with him. I must know which way to bend my loyalty'. There is, however, no sense of the Alaḥín's writ running in either Aró or Ètì; this is a world in which Olúawo and his brother Olóyè Olórogún (Ferdinand) are in effect all-powerful, just as the Aragonian brethren in *The Duchess of Malfi* exercise a stranglehold over both sacred and secular spheres.

As well as specifying the historical setting, the writer also indicates how he would like the set to appear:

There are trees of different heights and widths around the space, some of which have holes in their trunks like doorways. These of course will be stylised as no attempt is made at naturalism. All furniture, chairs, stools, footrests, mats, utensils, etc. should be as organic as feasible – hewn tree trunks, stones, etc. Inspiration for the space could be taken from the cross section of a termites' nest, or a beehive. But these are suggestions only...

The suggestions were acted upon in the autumn 2016 productions, where a round set of slanting totem poles created a surprisingly effective sense of a self-contained space and also of circularity, accentuated at the end when Òṣùnkémi (Golda John) spoke of time moving on and prosperity following suffering; as Peter Kirwan observes in his review of one of the Sheffield Studio performances, ‘A simple set of carved posts lit from different angles creates a range of formal and informal spaces, and the place where they meet serves as confined quarters for the prison’ (Kirwan 2016). Kirwan was right to note the lighting, because it was carefully designed and important at a number of points, especially when Ìyálóde was illuminated to an uncanny green just before resolving on death. (In the Sheffield performances at least, some of the lights were concealed in a rock placed on the floor of the stage and in front of the main playing area.) However, it is also worth noting Olúwatùmínú’s suggestion that ‘Inspiration for the space could be taken from the cross section of a termites’ nest, or a beehive’, especially when this is read in conjunction with the fact that the Preliminary Notes begin, ‘The entire piece is conceived to run without breaks, except after Act three. There should be a sense that there is constant activity, at least in the background; nothing happens in isolation’. This sense of interdependence - indeed in some cases almost of symbiosis - is central to *Ìyálóde of Ètì*. The most famous work of modern Nigerian literature is called *Things Fall Apart*; in Olúwatùmínú’s play, however, it is clear that things are very tightly bonded together, and that this is a story not only about the Ìyálóde but about a whole society.

The most striking thing about the adaptation is how fully it has been realised, and how well it works not only as a version of *Malfi* but also in its own terms. I must shamefacedly confess that I bought tickets only out of an overdeveloped sense of duty, and that the announcement that we were turning out on a wet Wednesday after work to watch a Nigerian version of *The*

*Duchess of Malfi* was greeted by my long-suffering family with stunned disbelief. In fact, we were all hooked from the moment that the entire cast filed into the performance space, ritually escorting the Ìyálóde to the prescribed period of seclusion for the death of her first husband. This opening procession set the tone for the evening, because as well as being solemn it was also strangely joyous, showing us as it did a community absolutely secure in its own customs and identity, for whom even death could be safely assimilated within the rhythms and fabric of life. This sounded the keynote, for the adaptation as a whole is shot through with tenderness, charm and humour, as when Ìyálóde bears her first child:

### ÒGÚNTÁDÉ

Our ancestors were roused tonight and spirits walked amongst us. Did you hear a sound?

### ÈSÙBÍYÌ

Apart from the beating drums, singing and the rituals, no, not a sound. Did you? Another line that got a big laugh in performance was Ìyálóde's 'Rise, dear Ògúntádé, quickly, quickly before your manhood roots to the ground like the mighty Ìrókò!'. Patrice Naimbana's Olóyè Olórogún also imparted a delicious relish into lines such as 'I could have them all roasted alive like festival goats, dripping fat into the fires that feed on them, or bury them in a termites' nest to be eaten alive; or even cook their bastard in vegetables and serve him up to his own father!', with every syllable of 'vegetables' given its full weight.

The opening also introduced another motif, which was the considerable use of song and of traditional Nigerian instruments, including a thumb piano, and very effective use was also made of costumes, particularly hats: Olúawo's hat was poised halfway between that of a religious man and that of a fool, while Olóyè Olórogún crossly folded his and then put it back on again when rebuked by his brother, as if donning his public role. No attempt was made to

comment on or explain the use of costume, music or ceremony either in the opening or later, as for instance in the scene with the masqueraders; as in *Things Fall Apart*, that most inexplicit of novels, the audience had simply to keep up, and in so doing to acknowledge the fact that they were dealing with a culture which was expressing itself entirely on its own terms. This might be a version of *The Duchess of Malfi*, but it is also, and more fundamentally, *Ìyálóde of Ètì*, and within its world, readers and audience members already familiar with Webster are introduced to characters who are simultaneously old and new. The character list gives considerable detail, such as for the equivalent of Delio, who is much more fully fleshed out than in the original:

**Àkànbí** - Ògúntádé's best friend and physician. Mid 30s. He lives in Aró, but visits Ètì on the behest of OlóyèTáiyéwò, either to deliver messages or gifts to the Olóyè's twin. He's a man comfortable in the company of royalty, and though not from one of the ruling houses, his family holds one of the important chieftaincy titles in Aró. He's also versed in the use of herbs and such medicinal components for curing varying maladies, from high fevers to temporary insanity.

Èsùbìyî, the Bosola figure, describes the equivalents of the Cardinal and Ferdinand in terms which show how thoroughly the story has been transposed to Yorùbá culture:

Olúawo and Olórogún are the mice who, because they cannot feed on the *sèsé* bean, choose to waste it! Men like them cut open the bowels of gratitude, and the unwary stumble on the carcasses of peace!

Later, Èsùbìyî will give Ìyálóde not apricots but Àgbálùmós, which also contribute to the play's recurrent food imagery. We are explicitly told that 'The Yorùbá know that the world is like a calabash made up of two halves, the world of the gods and world of men', with the leading of one's life figured as a calabash whose contents may be spilled, and Làbáké (the Julia figure) tropes her relationship with Olúawo in terms of food when he tells her not to

muddy the waters: ‘But it is in those muddy depths that catfish are found. You like catfish, do you not, Olúawo?’.

Most notably, the rise and fall of Èsùbíyí is charted by recurrent use of a Yoruba proverb about eating (which is also important in *Things Fall Apart*: Olofunwa 2000: 69). Olúawo says ‘The young who will eat with elders must learn to wash their hands!’; Olóyè Olórogún tells Èsùbíyí, ‘In carrying out my wishes without question, you will learn quickly how to wash your hands and eat with elders’, and finally after the murder of Ìyálóde Olúawo fully acknowledges Èsùbíyí: ‘You have learned to wash your hands. You will now eat with elders. There is a secret passage into my inner chambers. This is evidence of trust’. This use of proverbs is central to Yoruba culture. There are said to be 1,600 sayings in the *Ifa* oracle (Leroy, Olaleye-Oruene, Koeppen-Schomerus, and Bryan 2002: 134), and as Chinua Achebe has it in *Things Fall Apart*, ‘Having spoken plainly so far, Okoye said the next half a dozen sentences in proverbs. Among the Ibo the art of conversation is regarded very highly, and proverbs are the palm-oil with which words are eaten’ (Achebe 1996: 5). However, the dependence on proverbs also parallels Webster’s use of *sententiae*, pithy moral phrases whose force is often emphasised by the fact that they appear in italics, as when Antonio in his first speech says to Delio ‘*Death and diseases through the whole land spread*’ (Webster 1997: I.i.15; see also Hopkins 1995). What is particularly suggestive is that in the case of both *sententiae* and *Ifa* oracle sayings, it is for the hearer to make and apply the meaning, and here it is not simply a question of the reader or audience member merely keeping up but of them actively applying their moral intelligence to the play. Ìyálóde of Ètì, like *The Duchess of Malfi* before it, demands that we take notice and think for ourselves.

Above all, *The Duchess of Malfi* bears on a topic central to Yoruba history and culture, for two of its characters are twins. Ferdinand says,

She and I were twins;  
And, should I die this instant, I had lived  
Her time to a minute.

(Webster 1997: IV.ii.266-8).

Although it is only mentioned on this one occasion, Louise Powell argues that ‘the fact that the Duchess and Ferdinand ... once shared a womb with each other is suggested to be so influential that it does not only affect them as adults, but also beyond death’; for Powell, ‘the Duchess and Ferdinand suggest that twinship is such a key component of identity that there is no peace for either when one is alive and the other is dead’ (Powell 2017). It may also be the case that the Duchess’s own two youngest children are twins. Antonio says to Delio,

She’s an excellent  
Feeder of pedigrees; since you last saw her,  
She hath had two children more, a son and daughter.

(Webster 1997: III.i.5-7)

These two children could have been singletons, but equally it is obviously possible that they are twins, and that the family the Duchess produces thus mirrors that into which she was born.

It is certainly hinted that Ìyálóde’s two younger children are twins:

ÒGÚNTÁDÉ  
(Tightens his grip lovingly)  
I will sleep with you tonight.

ÌYÁLÓDE  
Beside me, my lord?

## ÒGÚNTÁDÉ

First on one side, and then the other.

## ÒŞÛNKÉMI

(Laughing)

Ah, such games produce nothing but twins and triplets!

In the transposition of *Duchess* to pre-colonial Yoruba culture, the idea of twinship gains new importance. The Yoruba have the world's highest rate of twinning; Anthony White notes that 'twin births are relatively common among Yoruba peoples, with almost 5% of births resulting in twins, compared to just over 1% in Western Europe' (White 2010: 10), and that 'twins in Yoruba culture have a special power reserved to them; they are thought to be especially dangerous, even while alive. Although in recent times twins have come to be looked upon more as a cause for rejoicing than of fear, for the Yoruba, the phenomenon of twins remains a source of ambivalence, accompanied by equal amounts of anxiety and celebration' (White 2010: 3).

There are a number of beliefs about twins in Yoruba culture. White observes that 'The rituals incorporating the dangerous power of the twins into a meaningful sphere of human activity chiefly take place through the sacrifice of food and substances offered to the twins' (White 2010: 11), and he also notes that 'The birth of Yoruba twins is itself a special event, marked in ritual. It is normal practice in Yoruba societies to take all infants to a diviner who determines the baby's nature, its name, and its impact on the family. These events will often prescribe certain actions for the parents' (White 2010: 4). There are separate names for the first-born ('Taiwo', the leader) and second-born ('Kehinde', the follower). The real name of the actress who played Ìyálóde, Kehinde Bankole, identifies her as a second-born twin, and

Ìyálóde the character is introduced in terms which stress her Africanness but also alert us to the importance of twinship:

ÀKÀNBÍ (CONT'D)

I have heard much good about Ìyálóde - that she is popular among the women and the townspeople, and that she is kind and generous -

ÒGÚNTÁDÉ

Ahhh, my dear friend! What you have heard does not even begin to describe her true nature! Of royal birth, but a servant of her subjects. Men grudgingly call her '*obirin bi okunrin*' - a woman with the strength of a man! Yet she's as gentle as a bird and as wise as *Orunmila*, the father of the Ifá oracle! She is a beautiful and delicate flower that thrives in the midst of thorn bushes!

ÀKÀNBÍ

Not many who work for their masters sing such praises! And she is their full sister?

ÒGÚNTÁDÉ

They slept in the same womb - the seed of the loins of their father, the former King of Aró!

Unlike *The Duchess of Malfi*, where the Duchess was born before Ferdinand, Ìyálóde is the second-born twin; she addresses Olóyè Olórogún as 'Táiyéwò', and he occasionally calls her 'Kehinde'. However, White explains that 'The Yoruba also register the anomalous nature of twin birth by inverting the expected order of first and second born. The first born is called Taiwo, who is considered to be younger than Kehinde, the second-born. Kehinde will be the first to inherit from the siblings of his parents when they die, and Taiwo will inherit from Kehinde' (White 2010: 11). Thus Olúawo tells Olóyè Olórogún, 'you as a twin served your sister's will by coming first into the world', and even in death she has ascendancy over him:

Tell Táiyéwò that I sent him into the world to taste it, and to tell me if it was sweet so I could follow. But he deceived me and broke our covenant. The earth will not forget, nor will the heavens hide his guilt.

Olóyè Olórogún confirms her words: ‘Cover her face, her wounded throat mocks me. I am Táiyéwò, she was Kehinde - she sent me into the world to taste it’. Despite the seeming difference, therefore, *Ìyálóde of Ètì* actually echoes Webster in this respect.

There is however a more significant change in that Olúawo, the Cardinal figure, is identified as ‘Older brother to Ìyálóde and Olórogún’. Although it is never explicitly stated in *The Duchess of Malfi* that the Cardinal is younger than the Duchess and Ferdinand, it would have been obvious to Webster’s audience that it must have been so, because it would always be the elder son who inherited the dukedom while the second traditionally went into the church. Making Olúawo the oldest sibling is a change with far-reaching implications. T. J. H. Chappel notes ‘the importance attached to the birth of an Idowu, the single child born after twins. Yoruba say that unless an Idowu is born after twins the consequences for the parents may be serious. The twins will be unhappy, for Idowu is the “*Eshu* of twins” and all twins must have their *Eshu*’ (Chappel 1974: 260). (I shall come shortly to the importance of the *Eshu* figure.) Instead of being an *Idowu*, a bringer of peace, Olúawo is a genuinely menacing figure who sits in a chair made of skull and bones and can perform magic, since as well as being High Chief, Olúawo is also described as ‘head of the Ògbóni Cult’, which worships Earth (Westcott 1962: 342). However Òṣûnkémi (Cariola) and Ìyálóde represent a challenge to his powers as Òṣûnkémi uses the idea of a connection to the earth to give Ìyálóde strength to withstand Olóyè Olórogún’s persecution:

The scene grows slowly dark and mysterious. Masquerade masks appear to engulf the stage and impossibly, we catch glimpses of worlds within worlds. Both women are

bathed seemingly in red and orange fire. Unearthly and guttural voices seem to have a conversation with each other. A FIGURE darts in shadow, eerie and grotesque, as if stalking the women.

ÒŞÛNKÉMI

Say after me - the rocks of the earth are a part of the earth -

ÌYÁLÓDE

(Frightened)

- The rocks of the earth are a part of the earth -

ÒŞÛNKÉMI

Water of the river is part of the river -

ÌYÁLÓDE

Water of the river is part of the river -

ÒŞÛNKÉMI

I am a part of the powers that uphold the earth -

ÌYÁLÓDE

I am a part of the powers that uphold the earth -

The ritual is broken off when Ìyálóde hears her babies cry, but it has lasted long enough to strengthen her and to prepare her for death. Ìyálóde dies, but like her counterpart, she is Ìyálóde of Ètì still. It is her killer Èsùbíyî who says ‘You are, after all, the Ìyálóde of Ètì’, but soon she herself is declaring, ‘Take my lands, my possessions, my treasures, my family, take even my life! But you cannot take away my *Ori*, my head, my destiny. I am Ìyálóde of Ètì! And my ancestors await me!’.

It is also worth remembering Chappel’s declaration that Idowu is the “*Eshu* of twins” and all twins must have their *Eshu*. *Eshu-Elegba*, the Yoruba trickster god, is a figure of great importance for Ìyálóde of Ètì, for it is as *Eshu-Elegba* that Èsùbíyî, the Bosola figure, disguises himself.<sup>2</sup> Èsùbíyî first invokes the trickster god in the scene in which he is recruited by Olóyè Olórogún: ‘Just as Èsù conspired against *Obàtálá*, so can Olúawo’s suspicions of me conspire against him’. Later Olóyè Olórogún himself declares, ‘I will play

the two-faced god ÈsùElégbàrà with her!'. Finally a stage direction tells us that 'ÈSÙBÍYÎ enters disguised as ÈsùElégbàrà. He is completely red on one side and completely black on the other'. This relates to a story about how Eshu-Elegba sowed discord between two friends by walking down the boundary between their lands wearing white on one side and black on the other, so that they disagreed about what they had seen. It also has an analogue in early modern English drama, for in the anonymous play *The Fatal Marriage* we find the following exchange:

*Clown.* D'ye hear my masters, you on t'other side the way; how many has passed by since we set the watch? *Aside to his watchmen*] I would laugh if they could not tell!

*Galeas.* That's an easy question; none but the ranger.

*Clown.* Ha ha ha ha! None but the doctor, they would say!

(Duxfield, I.iii.60-3)

As Andrew Duxfield observes in his edition, this makes sense only if we postulate a costume with different sides.

When it comes to the actual killing of the Duchess, Èsùbíyî resumes his disguise. Joan Westcott, identifying him as 'a deity universally recognized and appealed to by all Yoruba regardless of their affiliation to other cults', explains that 'Eshu-Elegba is responsible for all troubles among men, and between men and gods'; 'He is also described as a homeless wandering spirit, and as one who inhabits the market-place, the crossroads, and thresholds of houses' (Westcott 1962: 337). This obviously maps onto the set, which repeatedly represents crossing places and boundaries; Westcott observes that 'his mud pillar symbol is placed wherever trouble may break out ... This symbol, never kept inside houses, is placed instead at doorways, where it serves not only as a protection but also to remind men of boundaries'

(Westcott 1962: 345). Eshu-Elegba is similar to Èsùbìyí in other ways too. Eshu-Elegba is always shown with cowries and is connected with money and the market (Westcott 1962: 339); as part of suborning him to spy on the Duchess, Olóyè Olórogún hands Èsùbìyí a bag of cowries. There are also some other possible connections. One of the myths associated with the god is that ‘with Eshu’s help ... any man may successfully seduce a woman who has refused him’ (Westcott 1962: 343). This could potentially be linked to the vexed question of Ferdinand’s motivation, for many critics have concluded that the reason he is so reluctant for his sister to remarry is that he desires her himself. Olóyè Olórogún’s decision to send a version of Eshu-Elegba to Ìyálóde thus becomes doubly suggestive, since it might imply that he sees her as a woman who has refused him and whom he is resolved to win over.

Most suggestively, Eshu-Elegba is fundamentally associated with twins; Westcott observes that ‘One of his praise names, Akinfenwa, is also the name given to the first born of twins. The name Taiwo means “tester of the world” and Akinfenwa means “bold man wants to come”. Elegba is thus identified with the first born of twins who, although the older twin, is considered to be the junior’ (Westcott 1962: 341). Èsùbìyí’s killing of Ìyálóde’s can be directly connected with twinship. T. J. H. Chappel, noting that ‘the contemporary cult of twins represents a reversal of the former practice of twin infanticide’ (Chappel 1974: 250), quotes an informant as saying:

In Oyo it was the practice to kill twins with the help of a knife at the neck for at this time people were highly distrustful of twins. They could not understand why a woman should give birth to two at a time when she was neither an animal nor a goat [i.e. neither a wild animal nor a domestic animal].

(Chappel 1974: 253)

Èsùbíyî in his disguise as Eshu-Elegba kills Ìyálóde by cutting her throat. Babatunde Lawal observes that the Yoruba ‘regard the human head (*orí*) as the most vital part of a person’, both literally and symbolically: ‘while the Yoruba recognize the physiological importance of the head, they place a higher premium on its metaphysical significance as the source of life and the essence of human personality’ (Lawal 1995: 91). This could provide a reason for the choice of method, since cutting the throat severs the connection between the head and the rest of the body, but it seems no coincidence that this is the traditional way of killing twins, and there is also a possible link with *Malfi*, for Louise Powell argues that ‘Ferdinand chose to have the Duchess, his “stronger” twin, strangled with a cord; given their shared births, this cord could perhaps symbolise the umbilical cord, and so allow Ferdinand to play out a fantasy that the Duchess was asphyxiated in the womb’ (Powell 2017). Ìyálóde may be slaughtered like an animal, but there may be a sense in which she is also slaughtered like a twin.

In this foregrounding of twinning, *Ìyálóde of Ètì* recalls not only *Things Fall Apart* but also Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie’s *Half of a Yellow Sun* uses the non-identical twins Olanna and Kainene as a metaphor for the diverging fates of Nigeria (which, like Olanna, survives but in a weakened state) and Biafra, which like Kainene disappears without trace.<sup>3</sup> In both *Half of a Yellow Sun* and *Things Fall Apart*, the destinies both of twins and of the country and communities they figure are tragic, in a stark, classical style. The Yoruba are sometimes referred to as ‘the Hellenes of Africa’ (Leroy, Olaleye-Oruene, Koeppen-Schomerus, and Bryan 2002: 133), and Westcott argues for a similarity between Eshu-Elegba and Hermes (Westcott 1962: 350). There are obvious similarities between Greek tragedy and *Things Fall Apart*, with Okonkwo clearly identifiable as a great man undone by a *hamartia*, and as someone whose story inspires both pity and fear.<sup>4</sup> It is far less obvious that the story of Okonkwo fulfils Aristotle’s final criterion, though, because it does not provide catharsis;

Okonkwo may have been scapegoated, but he has in no way saved his society in the process, for if things are already falling apart at the end of the book, it is only too clear that they will get a whole lot worse in future, and that the Igbo way of life has gone for ever.

In one sense, *Ìyálóde of Ètì* may seem to conform to this model. Throughout the play, there are several references to libations. Ògúntádé says, 'Ìyálóde, duty is but the sacred rock on which I pay libation. In truth, I offer thanks to the gods for the privilege of serving you'.

When Ògúntádé and Ìyálóde agree to marry, Òṣùnkémi says,

A marriage is a union of two families, and the community. But to this union, we can only invite the gods and our ancestors. We did not consult the oracle because, who knows what secrets *Ifá* will reveal to the *Ifá* priest? Instead, we bring offerings and libations to honour and appease our ancestors, and ask for their blessing on this union.

It will be joyful and peaceful and fruitful by the will and power of *Èdùmàrè*.

Finally Làbáké says 'I will have Olúawo pouring libation at my shrine before the night is over'. Collectively these allusions make it clear that libations are a Yoruba custom, but they are also likely to remind readers and audience members of ancient Greece, where libations were a central component of religious practice, and it is also notable that both Òṣùnkémi and Làbáké are wrong: the marriage of Ògúntádé and Ìyálóde will by no means be peaceful, and before the night is out Làbáké will be dead. In this sense, the references to libations function not only as a parallel to Greece in general but as a direct echo of the irony and sense of nemesis so central to Greek tragedy in particular.

However, Greek tragedy is not the only cultural model at work in the play, and though individual libations may fail to help, other social and cultural practices do work to recuperative and salvific effect. Webster's Duchess famously dies in Act Four, rather than in

Act Five as the eponymous hero or heroine usually does, and *Ìyálóde of Ètì* makes powerful use both of this early death and of what comes after it. By the time she dies, *Ìyálóde* is ready for it. Indeed *Èsùbíyí* kills her almost tenderly:

It is time for the sun to set, for birdsong to yield to the chatter of crickets. The deer lies limp between the lion's jaws, just as you must now rest in the embrace of death. Draw the earth over you like a living coverlet, and ignore the hungry anticipation of greedy maggots. Divest yourself of mortal mud, and bear your *Ori*, your destiny, in both hands as you walk the path of your ancestors before you. Request an audience before *Olódùmarè*. Let the *Odídeṛe* bird sing one last time, a lullaby from which you will never awaken.

By contrast, *Olóyè Olórogún*'s conviction that he is a donkey, rather than the werewolf of Webster's original, is both bathetic and at the same time oddly menacing. *Ìyálóde* becomes *like* an animal, but not actually an animal; *Olóyè Olórogún*, however, suffers a complete descent into animal status, and here too there is a significant change to Webster's play. Noting that 'in *A Dialogue Concerning Witches and Witchcraftes* (London, 1593), George Gifford writes that the Devil can "make the witches in some places believe that they are turned into the likeness of wolves"', Brett D. Hirsch argues that Webster's choice of a werewolf had multiple resonances: in the first place, 'it is a border creature', on the edge between the human and the animal; secondly, the wolf also figures Catholicism, and in particular is 'emblematic of the Jesuits'; and finally he argues that rather than being supernatural 'Ferdinand's lycanthropy is clearly treated in medical, natural terms' (Hirsch 2005). All three of these factors have potential resonance within the world of *Ìyálóde of Ètì*. White notes that 'For the Yoruba, only animals are supposed to have multiple births. This is another sense in which twins are a challenge to Yoruba modes of classification: the twins somehow seem part of the animal world as well as the human' (White 2010: 11). When

Olúawo tells Olóyè Olórogún, ‘you as a twin served your sister’s will by coming first into the world’, he goes on immediately to castigate his brother, ‘You are so wild, so uncontrolled that even a child can drive you like a shepherd drives his goats’; later, when Olóyè Olórogún has lost his reason, he does indeed have to be ‘tethered like a goat for fear he will escape into the market’. Hirsch’s other two suggested associations, with Jesuits and with the question of whether Ferdinand’s delusion is natural or supernatural in origin, both bear on the question of religion, and in *Ìyálóde of Ètì* the change to a donkey evokes the biblical narrative of Nebuchadnezzar grazing like an ass, an echo which is stressed by Olóyè Olórogún’s explicit declaration that he too wants to eat grass.

In Webster’s play, religion may well appear to be a dying force. Although it is set in Italy, a country which never underwent a Reformation, it presents us with a landscape visibly riven by the consequences of the struggle between Protestantism and Catholicism. Antonio declares,

I do love these ancient ruins:

We never tread upon them but we set  
Our foot upon some reverend history.  
And questionless, here in this open court,  
Which now lies naked to the injuries  
Of stormy weather, some men lie interr’d  
Lov’d the church so well, and gave so largely to’t,  
They thought it should have canopy’d their bones  
Till doomsday; but all things have their end:  
Churches and cities, which have diseases like to men,  
Must have like death that we have.

*Echo.*

*Like death that we have.*

(Webster 1997: V.iii.9-19)

This is a distinctively post-Reformation landscape, which would in fact be much more at home in an England pitted with the ‘bare ruined choirs’ (Shakespeare 1977: 64) that had once borne testimony to a now lost faith than in any part of Italy. Moreover, at a late stage of the play, the Cardinal muses,

I am puzzled in a question about hell:

He says, in hell there’s one material fire,

And yet it shall not burn all men alike.

Lay him by:-how tedious is a guilty conscience!

When I look into the fish-ponds, in my garden,

Methinks I see a thing, arm’d with a rake

That seems to strike at me

(Webster 1997: V.v.1-7)

The Cardinal is a prince of the church; ostensibly he should be the source of theological doctrine and be able to point the way to heaven, and yet he is not only puzzled in a question about hell but is also, by clear implication, bound for hell himself. When even a prelate is in such a parlous state it is not surprising that the Duchess thinks nothing of feigning a pilgrimage to the shine at Loreto, to which the house of the Blessed Virgin Mary had supposedly been miraculously transported by angels, and though she does return as an echo, suggesting that consciousness continues in some form after death, it would have been noticeable to Webster’s original audience that she is very far from the fully visible ghosts of earlier plays such as *Hamlet*, who also seem to have retained rather more of their own personality.

In *Ìyálóde of Ètì*, by contrast, religion is alive and well. The Prologue is described as being set in a ‘Mysterious place in between worlds - dark, shadowy and ghostly (Possibly scary)’. The supernatural is a real force, though what is important is less an abstract notion of a god or gods than ancestors: Èsùbíyî confesses to Olóyè Olórogún, ‘I am drawn to your bait as surely as a bush rat is summoned to the cooking pot. Our ancestors will turn their backs on us if we pursue this course, and deny us access into the afterlife -’. Pleading with Èsùbíyî to kill her, Ìyálóde says, ‘Let me join my family on their journey home. They have not yet travelled far’. The charivari scene becomes not madmen but spirits, who address Ìyálóde as ‘Bag of blood and piss’ but are unable to crawl across the edge of the wooden stage, which has now become the boundary between the living and the dead. There has also been a subtle but significant change to Ìyálóde’s dying words:

ÌYÁLÓDE

(Croaky whisper)

Ògúntádé, my beloved, where are you?

ÈSÙBÍYÎ

Safe in Ilorin, Ìyálóde, with your son, Adérópò. The screams you heard of their murder, were but pretences to increase your suffering.

The Duchess asks no questions; she merely says ‘Antonio!’, but Bosola replies as if it were a question: ‘Yes, madam, he is living’ (Webster 1997: IV.ii.348). Many years ago when I was teaching the play a student suggested that the Duchess had reached heaven, not found Antonio there, and come back to enquire after him. Perhaps, but equally perhaps not. In *Ìyálóde of Ètì*, however, a stage direction spells out without any doubt that the family is reunited after death, because once he has been killed ‘ÒGÚNTÁDÉ rises slowly, turns and sees the waiting ÌYÁLÓDE. He joins her, and together, they all leave’. When Èsùbíyî observes ‘The road to our ancestors will be crowded tonight’, we have no reason to doubt that this is the literal truth.

Finally an Epilogue further mutes the sense of tragedy:

EPILOGUE

ÌlúẸ̀tì

Outer Courtyard

Morning

ÒŞÛNKÉMI

And so it was, the calabash of the world righted itself,

ÀKÀNBÍ

But not before spilling some of its contents.

ORÍYOMÍ

But that is part of the cycle of life.

ÒGÚNTÁDÉ

One cannot fetch water from the stream and expect to return home completely dry.

LÀBÁKÉ

And so the cycle of life turns,

ÀDÛNNÍ

And the ancestors watch eagerly on the boundary,

ÀKÀNBÍ

Urging each generation forward, to do better, to build, to gather, to unite.

ÌYÁLÓDE

The brooms of the women will purify the land. The men will strengthen our borders,  
and will renew their covenant of brotherhood and fidelity to each other.

ÒGÚNTÁDÉ

Then a season of peace and prosperity will return.

It is of course one of the many ironies of *Things Fall Apart* that this story, where the white man brings the tragedy, takes its title from a work by a white man, W. B. Yeats. *Ìyálóde of Ètì*, though, works differently. It may take its inspiration from Webster, but it, like its heroine, is itself, and even if it knows that the precolonial Yoruba land it shows us is trembling on the edge of extinction, it also shows us that the customs and stories of that land still have vibrancy and force. *Ìyálóde of Ètì* may be Kehinde to *The Duchess of Malfi's* Taiwo, but it is a second-born with power, and it is *Ìyálóde of Ètì* still.

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## Notes

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<sup>1</sup> I am extremely grateful to Débò Olúwatûmínú for supplying me with the working draft of his script. It is not available for purchase at the time of writing and he did not consider the version he sent me to be final. I cite from that version, which I received on 3.10.2016.

Thanks too to Moji Kareem for approaching the playwright for me. For further information on Utopia Theatre, see their website: <http://www.utopiatheatre.co.uk/>

<sup>2</sup> The trickster figure is also, of course, important in *Things Fall Apart*. See Lynn, who argues that the story of how Tortoise tricked the birds 'serves as a significant commentary on the central story in *Things Fall Apart* through its allegorical links to that story' (56).

<sup>3</sup> In *Half of a Yellow Sun* too food is very important, and so also is the power of literature: though the pencil sketches of Shakespeare on Susan's walls guarantee nothing beyond her own survival and Ugwu gets no further than the cover of *The Pickwick Papers* (Adichie 2014:

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265), the *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass* becomes a template for Ugwu's own personal testimony (Adichie 2014: 175).

<sup>4</sup> See also McMillan 1993 on classical parallels more generally.