

Politics of Betrayal in Henry L. Bell-Gam's *The Hidden Treasure*

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores the politics of betrayal in Henry L. Bell-Gam's *The Hidden Treasure*, situating the dramatic text within the socio-political and cultural landscape of the Niger Delta. Anchored in conflict theory, the study critiques how betrayal by political elites and traditional authorities erodes communal cohesion, stalls development, and undermines justice in postcolonial African societies. Bell-Gam's work is analyzed alongside related Nigerian plays such as Ola Rotimi's *Our Husband Has Gone Mad Again*, Femi Osofisan's *Once Upon Four Robbers*, and Ojaide's Niger Delta poetry to illuminate how drama mirrors the persistent disillusionment with leadership in the region. The paper affirms that through betrayal, greed, and foreign collusion, communal wealth becomes a source of disintegration rather than empowerment.

Keywords: Betrayal, Niger Delta, African drama, conflict theory, corruption, postcolonial politics

INTRODUCTION

African drama has historically served as a mirror of society, a space for cultural expression, and a forum for social criticism. From the ritual dramas of precolonial festivals to the nationalist and revolutionary plays of modern writers, drama in Africa has retained a collective and communal function. As Ogunba observes, "Traditional festivals are staged from time to time" (3), reinforcing the performative and participatory character of African theatre.

In this context, Henry L. Bell-Gam's *The Hidden Treasure* engages with the political betrayal of trust, the abuse of power, and the tragic exploitation of natural resources. The Kohia kingdom becomes an allegorical representation of the Niger Delta, and the titular "treasure" alludes to oil—the very resource that fuels both wealth and conflict. The paper argues that Bell-Gam's drama reveals betrayal as not merely personal disloyalty, but a systemic issue intricately linked to political ambition, capitalist greed, and spiritual disconnection. The play raises urgent questions about leadership, accountability, and the future of marginalized communities.

Theoretical Framework

The analysis is situated within the framework of conflict theory, which emphasizes power struggles, class antagonism, and competition over scarce resources. Originating from Karl Marx's critique of capitalism, conflict theory suggests that society is in a perpetual state of conflict due to the unequal distribution of wealth and power. As Hayes (2022) notes, conflict theory "focuses on the negative, conflicted, and ever-changing nature of society."

In *The Hidden Treasure*, the discovery of oil in Kohia incites a scramble for control between traditional authorities and foreign corporations, facilitated by internal collaborators. Betrayal thus becomes a political tool wielded by elites to gain wealth and influence, with devastating consequences for communal life.

Synopsis of The Hidden Treasure

Henry L. Bell-Gam's *The Hidden Treasure* is a compelling political drama that explores betrayal, greed, and the struggle for justice in a fictional Niger Delta community, Kohia land. The play centers around the arrival of an oil exploration company—Schepetrolina Research Company Ltd. which seeks access to the region's rich mineral resources.

King Kohia, the custodian of the land's tradition and moral integrity, is approached by the company through its representatives—a geologist, a surveyor, and an administrator. Although the company offers a large sum of money in exchange for the land, the king refuses, placing the welfare of his people and the sanctity of ancestral land above monetary gain.

However, betrayal comes from within. Deputy Eze Omasi, the king's second-in-command, driven by selfish ambition and greed, secretly accepts the bribe and plots to unseat the king. He deceives both the people and the company into believing that King Kohia has accepted the money in secret. This conspiracy leads to the king being publicly disgraced and accused of embezzlement.

As the company proceeds with exploration, Omasi continues to collect payments while marginalizing the king and undermining the traditional governance structure. In a desperate attempt to eliminate the king entirely, Omasi sends thugs disguised as police officers to abduct and kill him. However, through the intervention of the Chief Priest and loyal council members, King Kohia is rescued, and the truth is revealed. Omasi and his collaborators are arrested, restoring moral order to the land.

METHODOLOGY

The paper adopts a qualitative approach, utilizing textual analysis and comparative literature techniques. It draws parallels with other Nigerian and African plays where betrayal and political sabotage feature prominently.

Political Betrayal and Corruption in The Hidden Treasure

Henry L. Bell-Gam's *The Hidden Treasure* interrogates political betrayal within the socio-political context of Nigeria's Niger Delta. The play dramatizes the internal decay of leadership, the commodification of land and culture, and the exploitative complicity between local elites and foreign interests. Political betrayal here is not merely a personal moral failing but a manifestation of a broader structural and ideological crisis endemic to postcolonial African governance.

Central to the drama is King Kohia, whose steadfast commitment to communal welfare and ancestral land positions him as a moral and spiritual anchor of the Kohia community. In refusing to sell sacred land to Schepetrolina Research Company Ltd., he asserts: "I shall never allow this land, given to our ancestors by the gods, to be desecrated by men who know nothing of its value" (Bell-Gam 25). In contrast, Eze Omasi, the deputy, betrays the king and the people by negotiating with the oil company: "The king is old and rigid... but I can smooth the way. For the right price, even sacred land can be negotiated" (Bell-Gam 27). These lines reveal Omasi's commodification of tradition and collective values for personal gain—an act of betrayal that undermines the authority and integrity of traditional governance.

Omasi's betrayal is motivated by unrestrained materialism. In dialogue with an accomplice, he rationalizes his actions: "What is loyalty when wealth knocks at your door? The king sits on a fortune and refuses to harvest it. Let others call it betrayal; I call it vision" (Bell-Gam 28). This rationalization encapsulates the moral relativism that typifies postcolonial corruption: loyalty becomes negotiable when confronted with financial opportunity. Omasi's betrayal reflects real-world patterns of political collusion, where leaders abandon communal trust for private enrichment.

Bell-Gam further explores betrayal through the abuse of power. Omasi authorizes a staged arrest of the king under false pretext:

Guard: “By order of the Council and under suspicion of conspiracy, you are to be taken into custody.”

Kohia: “So this is how justice dies—in the hands of men without honour” (Bell-Gam 45).

This sequence underscores how betrayal becomes entrenched when institutional structures are commandeered for partisan interests, aligning with similar critiques in postcolonial African drama. The removal of King Kohia triggers not only political but spiritual disruption. As the Chief Priest proclaims: “When the gods are silenced and their stewards cast out, darkness shall cover the land” (Bell-Gam 50).

The betrayal thus signifies cosmic imbalance and underscores the holistic devastation caused when traditional custodians are subverted. Despite the depth of betrayal, order is reinstated through communal resistance. Chief Karibo publicly indicts Omasi: “Let it be known that those who sell their people shall reap only shame. The land remembers” (Bell-Gam 62). With the conspirators exposed and King Kohia restored, the narrative affirms the resilience of indigenous justice systems and reinforces communal memory as a corrective force against betrayal.

African Spirituality and Justice

In *The Hidden Treasure*, Henry L. Bell-Gam explores African spirituality and justice not as abstract philosophical ideals but as tangible cultural forces that structure communal life, governance, and morality. These twin concepts are woven into the fabric of the play's narrative and serve as instruments of resistance against betrayal, corruption, and the erosion of traditional authority. Through characters such as King Kohia, the Chief Priest, and Chief Karibo, Bell-Gam dramatizes the enduring relevance of African cosmology and indigenous jurisprudence in addressing moral crises and restoring communal balance.

King Kohia's kingship is rooted in African spiritual tradition, where leadership is both political and metaphysical. His refusal to lease ancestral land to Schepetrolina Research Company is framed not merely as political defiance but as spiritual guardianship. He asserts, “The gods gave this land to our ancestors. I am only their custodian. To sell it is to betray both the living and the dead” (Bell-Gam 25). This statement reflects the African belief in a tripartite cosmology where the living, the dead (ancestors), and the unborn form a moral and spiritual continuum. Kohia's decisions are guided by his accountability to this continuum, revealing that African justice is not restricted to the legal or temporal realm but includes divine and ancestral mandates.

The Chief Priest functions as the spiritual conscience of the community and a key custodian of indigenous justice. When King Kohia is abducted and falsely accused, the Chief Priest warns the conspirators: “The gods are not mocked. When the sacred order is defiled, the land itself will rise in anger” (Bell-Gam 47). This pronouncement affirms the belief that justice, in African cosmology, is spiritually enforced. The desecration of moral codes—such as betrayal, greed, or sacrilege—will inevitably provoke divine retribution, often manifested through communal misfortune, environmental disruption, or personal calamity.

African justice, as portrayed in the play, is restorative rather than retributive. When the conspiracy is uncovered, the goal is not revenge but the restoration of balance and truth. As Chief Karibo declares during the final reckoning: “Justice is not the shedding of blood, but the return to order. Let those who strayed be judged, but let the land be healed” (Bell-Gam 63).

Another spiritual dimension of justice is seen in the treatment of land. The land is not merely economic capital but a sacred entity tied to lineage, identity, and spiritual continuity. Omasi's betrayal is not only political but sacrilegious, as he seeks to commodify what is spiritually inviolable: “He who sells the land sells the soul of his people. The gods will not be silent forever” (Bell-Gam 51).

Comparative Context in African Drama

The theme of betrayal cuts across modern African drama. In Femi Osofisan's *Once Upon Four Robbers*, revolutionary ideals are compromised by opportunism. Characters who claim to fight injustice become tools of repression. Similarly, in Zulu Sofola's *Wedlock of the Gods*, betrayal disrupts both personal lives and communal stability. Bell-Gam's play belongs to this tradition of resistance literature that critiques internal

collusion and leadership failure. His use of allegory, symbolism, and traditional forms aligns with the stylistic choices of dramatists like Rotimi, Soyinka, and Osofisan.

CONCLUSION

The Hidden Treasure dramatizes betrayal not merely as a personal flaw but as a political condition embedded in postcolonial governance. Through the betrayal of trust, mismanagement of resources, and abandonment of spiritual principles, the Kohia community mirrors the Niger Delta's real-life tragedy. The play offers a powerful indictment of greed and a call for ethical leadership grounded in African communal and spiritual values. Bell-Gam's use of African oral aesthetics and communal dramaturgy underscores the need for a reimagined leadership paradigm. Justice, he suggests, must come not from foreign interventions or corrupt institutions, but from a return to cultural integrity and collective accountability.

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