Beyond Aristotle: Re-Theorizing Tragedy through the *Ozidi Saga* in Dialogue with Hamlet

[1]AKINYEYE, Clara Olajumoke., [2]OKOROAFOR, Philomena Ayenoya

[1]Department of English, University of Ilesa, Ilesa, Osun State, Nigeria

[2]Obafemi Awolowo University, Ile-Ife, Osun State, Nigeria

DOI: https://doi.org/10.47772/IJRISS.2026.100400598

Received: 20 April 2026; Accepted: 26 April 2026; Published: 20 May 2026

ABSTRACT

This study interrogates the adequacy of Aristotle's Classical theory of tragedy through a comparative analysis of *Hamlet* and the *Ozidi Saga*. While Aristotelian Poetics locates tragedy in individual error (hamartia) and its cathartic resolution, this paper argues that such framework is insufficient for interpreting non-western dramatic traditions. Drawing on the Roman tragic model associated with Seneca the Younger and the African metaphysical perspective articulated by Wole Soyinka, the study develops a four-layer theoretical framework that re-conceptualizes tragedy as an evolving and culturally contingent form. Through close textual and comparative analysis, it demonstrates that *Hamlet* reflects a hybrid tragic structure shaped by Aristotelian and Senecan elements, particularly in its emphasis on psychological conflict, revenge, and moral hesitation. In contrast, the *Ozidi Saga* redefines tragedy through communal obligation, ritual enactment, and supernatural determinism, where the hero's actions are governed less by personal flaw than by ancestral and cosmic necessity. The study concludes that tragedy should be understood not as a universal genre grounded in individual experience, but as a dynamic continuum shaped by cultural, philosophical, and metaphysical forces. This reconceptualization contributes to ongoing efforts to decolonize literary theory and to develop more inclusive frameworks for the study of world drama.

Keywords: Revenge Tragedy, African Oral Literature, Comparative Literature, Tragic Heroism, Supernatural Determinism, Communal Tragedy, Aristotle.

INTRODUCTION

Tragedy is the imitation (mimesis) of an action that is serious, complete, and of a certain magnitude… in the form of action, not of narrative; through pity and fear effecting the proper catharsis of these emotions. (Aristotle 23)

Aristotle, a classical Greek philosopher and writer, is the founder of the Aristotelian tradition of tragedy as expressed in his monumental work, *Poetics.* According to him,

Aristotle further posits that tragedy consists of six elements-plot, character, thought, diction, melody and spectacle-arranged in order of importance (24). Of these, plot is the most crucial, as it is the "soul" of tragedy. Tragedy, therefore is not an imitation of persons but of action and life, and its end is a mode of activity rather than a mere quality of character (Aristotle 25). Since tragedy is rooted in the fundamentals of how the human life works, its aim is to arouse pity and fear through a change in the fortune of the central character, the tragic hero must be a figure with whom the audience can identify and whose fate evokes these emotions.

The emphasis placed by this Greek philosopher on the development of plot and action over character, and the relative lack of interest in psychological motivation, mark a major distinction between ancient and modern drama. Aristotle maintains that "pity is aroused by unmerited misfortune, and fear by the misfortune of a man like ourselves" (27). He further defines the ideal tragic hero as: a man of high renown and prosperity… whose misfortune is brought about not by vice or depravity but by some error of judgment or frailty (hamartia). (28). This error of frailty, often interpreted as the tragic flaw, is evident in classical and Shakespearean figures such

as Lear, Macbeth, Julius Caesar and Sophocle's *Oedipus the King.* Aristotle also identifies key structural components of tragedy, including reversal (peripeteia) and recognition (anagnorisis) (30).

Although, he discusses these elements of tragedy in *Poetics,* this study moves beyond his emphasis on individual flaw to examine tragedy within a broader cultural and metaphysical framework. It engages the ideas of Wole Soyinka, particularly his concept of the "Fourth Stage" in *Myth, Literature and the African World,* to incorporate ritual, communal destiny, and supernatural determinism into the understanding of tragedy (Soyinka 38). In addition, Friedrich Nietzche's *The Birth of Tragedy* emphasizes the metaphysical and aesthetic dimensions of tragic experience beyond rational structure (36). In doing so, this study argues for a necessary re-theorization of tragedy that accommodates both Western and African dramatic traditions.

Hamlet by William Shakespeare is one of the foremost Elizabethan tragedies and among the most widely studied and frequently quoted works in English literature. One established way of appraising Shakespeare's work is through the methods of classical critics, particularly the theory of tragedy formulated by Aristotle, in order to determine the extent to which such works conform to or deviate from classical models (Aristotle 23). However, a critical question arises: does Aristotle's theory of tragedy adequately accommodate the structure and vision of revenge tragedy, especially as reflected in J.P. Clark – Bekederemo's adaptation of the *Ozidi Saga* from the traditional oral literature of the Ijaw people of Nigeria?

Both plays are rooted in historical and cultural narratives: *Hamlet* draws on the twelfth-century history of the Danes, later popularized in a Sixteenth-Century French tale originating from *History Danicare, or History of the Danes* by (Saxo Grammaricus 45) while *Ozidi Saga* emerges from the oral tradition of the Ijaw people (Clark - Bekederemo xii). Despite their different cultural origins, both texts engage with themes of revenge, justice and the supernatural, thereby inviting comparative analysis within the framework of tragic theory.

Although his concept of tragedy remains influential and intellectually robust, later thinkers such as Friedrich Nietzsche and Wole Soyinka argue that tragedy cannot be confined solely to the experience or flaw of an individual hero. Nietzsche emphasizes the metaphysical and aesthetic dimensions of tragedy (40), while Soyinka foregrounds ritual, myth, and communal experience in his theory of the "fourth stage" (42). Furthermore, even in Shakespeare's time tragic drama had already been shaped by the revival of Roman tragedy, particularly the works of Seneca, during the Renaissance, and this did not always conform strictly to Aristotelian principles.

In light of these considerations, the assumption of the universality of Aristotle's concept of tragedy becomes problematic. This study, therefore, seeks to challenge that assumption by examining *Ozidi Saga* as an example of African oral drama that operates outside the boundaries of Western classical theory. By placing it in dialogue with *Hamlet,* the study aims to demonstrate the need for a broader, more inclusive understanding of tragedy that accommodates non-western aesthetic and cultural frameworks.

LITERATURE REVIEW AND RESEARCH GAP

The study of tragedy has historically been anchored in the classical formulation of Aristotle, whose *Poetics* provides the earliest systematic theory of tragic drama. His emphasis on plot, character, and hamartia establishes tragedy as a representation of individual moral error leading to catharsis (Aristotle 10-11). This model has remained foundational in Western literary criticism and continues to inform interpretations of canonical works such as *Hamlet, Oedipus Rex,* and *King Lear*. However, the universality of this framework has been increasingly questioned, particularly when applied to non-western texts. A significant development in contemporary classical scholarship is highlighted by Rosa Andujar, whose work on Greek tragedy and performance demonstrates the emergence of performance studies as a major subfield. Andujar traces how early scholarship focused on reconstructing what Aristotle termed opsis (spectacle), but has since expanded into a broader concern with embodiment, staging sound and audience reception (2). This shift marks a decisive movement away from tragedy as a fixed literary structure toward tragedy as a dynamic, experiential event. By foregrounding performance and affect, this approach implicitly challenges Aristotle's prioritization of plot, suggesting instead that tragic meaning is co-produced through interaction between text, performance, and audience. In this sense, contemporary scholarship reflects a transition from text-based tragedy to performance

– based tragedy, thereby destabilizing the hierarchical ordering of elements established in the *Poetics*. Recent scholarship has increasingly shifted from Aristotelian structuralism to cognitive, affective, and ritual approaches which Nugent (2021) validates.

This orientation is reinforced by developments in affect theory. Studies such as Affect, Belief, and the Arts (2021) argue that artistic forms generate "affective knowledge", in which meaning is produced through emotional and sensory engagement rather than purely structural coherence. Such perspectives challenge Aristotelian catharsis as a narrowly defined emotional response and instead position tragedy as an embodied and participatory experience, aligning closely with performance-oriented approaches. In a related vein, Kimberly J. Babcock's comparative study of modern dramatic tragedy and Aristotelian theory argues that traditional tragedy no longer exists in its classical form. Babcock attributes this transformation to shifts in modern worldviews, particularly the decline in belief in fate, divine order and metaphysical casualty. As a result, modern tragedy often lacks the structural inevitability and moral coherence central to Aristotle's model, instead emphasizing fragmentation, ambiguity, and existential uncertainty. This argument underscores the historical conditioning of Aristotelian tragedy and supports the view that tragic form is culturally and temporally contingent rather than universal.

The Roman tragic tradition, especially as developed by Seneca the Younger, extends the Aristotelian model by foregrounding revenge, violence, and rhetorical intensity (23 – 25). Senecan tragedy shifts the focus from moral error to emotional excess and retributive justice. These features profoundly influenced Renaissance drama, including Shakespearean tragedy. In *Hamlet,* the presence of the Ghost and the centrality of revenge reflect this Senecan inheritance (*Hamlet,* Act 1, Scene 5). Modern criticism of *Hamlet* has largely been shaped by character-based and historicist approaches. A.C. Bradley situates the tragedy within the internal conflict of the protagonist, arguing that Hamlet's downfall arises from a defect in his character (95-97). While this provides insight into psychological dimensions, it reinforces an individualistic model. By contrast, Stephen Greenblatt interprets the Ghost as reflecting early modern anxieties about purgatory and the afterlife (30-32), thus situating the play within a specific historical context.

A significant departure from these traditions is found in Friedrich Nietzsche, who re-conceptualizes tragedy as rooted in ritual and collective experience (36–40). This perspective is extended by Wole Soyinka, whose "fourth stage" presents tragedy as a metaphysical transition between worlds (140–141). The study of African oral literature further complicates conventional theories of tragedy. Isidore Okpewho emphasizes the performative and communal nature of African epic traditions (12-15), suggesting that tragedy in *Ozidi Saga* is not located within individual consciousness but within collective cultural experience. The *Ozidi Saga,* as rendered by J.P. Clark-Bekederemo, exemplifies these characteristics. Similarly, John William Johnson highlights the social and functional aspects of oral epics (6 – 8) while seeing Ozidi's story as didactic ritualistic and social, *Hamlet* is primarily aesthetic and psychological.

Myth criticism also provides insight. Northrop Frye situates literature within recurring mythic cycles of death and renewal (206-210). In the context of revenge tragedy, Fredson Bowers identifies structural features such as delay and revenge motivation (15-18), which are evident in *Hamlet* but transformed in the *Ozidi Saga.* On these notes, post colonial critics such as Abiola Irele and Abiodun Jeyifo argue that African texts must be interpreted within their own cultural frameworks (Irele 10-12; Jeyifo 25-27). Their work illuminates the need to rethink tragedy beyond Eurocentric models.

In recent studies, process-oriented approaches re-conceptualize tragedy as a transformation of perception and internal conflict (Roberts and Qahri – Saremi 2023). At the same time, a removal of ritual and myth – based criticism has foregrounded the communal and metaphysical dimensions of tragedy. Ihidero argues that African mythic structures, as seen in the *Ozidi Saga,* transcend Aristotelian limitations by situating tragedy within a cosmic framework of restoration (18). Contemporary studies on grief rituals further reinforce this perspective, showing that ritual practices sustain connections between the living and the dead while providing emotional and cultural continuity (Phan et al. 2025; Seeber and Ndung'u 2024). Together, these developments suggest that tragedy is better understood as a dynamic interplay of cognition, affect, and ritual rather than a fixed formal structure.

Synthesis and Research Gap

Taken together, these scholarly point of views reveal both the richness and the limitations of existing theories of tragedy. While Aristotelian and Senecan models provide valuable insights into the structure and themes of Western drama, they fall short when applied to texts such as the *Ozidi Saga*, which operate within fundamentally different cultural and metaphysical frameworks. Although scholars have explored individual aspects of *Hamlet* and African oral narratives, there remains a significant gap in comparative studies that bring these traditions into sustained dialogue.

This study addresses this gap by integrating classical Roman, and African theories of tragedy into a unified analytical framework. By examining *Hamlet* and the *Ozidi Saga* together, it seeks to demonstrate that tragedy is not a fixed or universal form but a dynamic and culturally contingent phenomenon, shaped by the interplay of individual agency, communal values, and cosmic forces.

Re-theorizing Tragedy: A Four-layer Framework (Aristotle, Seneca, Soyinka, African Oral-Epistemic Model)

A comparative reading of *Hamlet* by William Shakespeare and the *Ozidi Saga* by J.P. Clark-Bekederemo reveals that tragedy cannot be adequately explained within a single theoretical model. Rather, it evolves across multiple traditions, each adding new dimensions to the tragic experience. This study therefore proposes a four-layer framework of tragedy, moving from the classical model of Aristotle through the Roman tragic mode of Seneca the Younger, to the African metaphysical theory of Wole Soyinka, and culminating in the *Ozidi Saga* as a practical embodiment of a re-theorized tragic form.

Aristotle: Tragedy as Individual Moral Error

At its foundation, tragedy is defined by Aristotle as the imitation of a serious and complete action that evokes pity and fear, leading to Catharsis. Central to this model is the concept of hamartia, the tragic flaw or error of judgement that brings about the hero's downfall.

In *Hamlet,* this framework finds clear expression. Hamlet's noble status, intellectual depth, and moral sensitivity align with Aristotelian expectations of the tragic hero. His inability to act decisively – stemming from excessive reflection – functions as his hamartia, leading to a chain of fatal consequences. The tragedy, therefore, is rooted in individual psychology and moral hesitation, making *Hamlet* a near-classical example of Aristotelian tragedy. However, this model begins to show limitations when applied beyond the Western canon, as it privileges individual agency over other determining forces.

Seneca: Tragedy as Revenge and Violent Excess

The Roman tragedian Seneca the Younger expands the scope of tragedy by shifting emphasis from moral error to revenge, violence, and emotional extremity. Senecan tragedy introduces key elements such as: revenge as the central motive; supernatural intervention; rhetorical intensity; and graphic violence and psychological torment. These elements are clearly present in *Hamlet*, which is structurally a revenge tragedy. The Ghost's demand for vengeance (*Hamlet,* Acts 1, Scene 5). Hamlet's moral struggle (*Hamlet,* Act 2, Scene 2; Act 3, Scene 2), and the pervasive atmosphere of death and corruption all reflect strong Senecan influence. However, Shakespeare complicates this model by internalizing the conflict, transforming revenge into a psychological burden rather than a straightforward act of retribution.

More importantly, the Senecan model provides a crucial bridge to the *Ozidi Saga,* where revenge is also central (*Ozidi* Act 1, Scene 9). However, unlike Senecan tragedy, where revenge is often personal and destructive, in *Ozidi Saga*, it becomes culturally sanctioned and spiritually necessary as Oreame is rightly prepared by an old woman, "Do not wail more, do not seek to take your life / or don't you know you are heavy with another life, yes a son who Oyin Almighty Herself is sending forth to put to right / This terrible wrong done to his father?" (*Ozidi Saga*, Act 1, Scene 9). The violence in Senecan tragedy performs a crucial transitional function : it externalizes inner conflict and renders moral disorder visible through dramatic action. This is evident in *Hamlet,* where revenge, ghostly apparitions and psychological tension foreground a world of

ethical instability. However, despite these supernatural elements, the play lacks a fully developed ritual or cosmological framework that situates violence within a broader metaphysical order. It is precisely this limitation that creates the conditions for Wole Soyinka's reconceptualization of tragedy, in which violence is transformed from an expression of moral disorder into a ritual act of cosmic mediation.

Soyinka: Tragedy as Ritual and Metaphysical Transition

A more radical rethinking of tragedy emerges in the work of Wole Soyinka, whose concept of the "fourth stage" situates tragedy within a metaphysical continuum linking the living, the dead, and the unborn (101).

In this framework, tragedy is not merely the fall of an individual but a ritual process of transition and cosmic mediation. This perspective challenges both Aristotelian and Senecan models by: shifting focus from individual to communal experience; emphasizing ritual enactment over plot structure; and integrating the supernatural as a fundamental reality.

While traces of this metaphysical dimension can be seen in *Hamlet,* particularly in the presence of the Ghost, it is not fully realized within the play's framework. The supernatural remains ambiguous and contested. Soyinka's theory, therefore, opens up a broader understanding of tragedy that is more fully actualized in African dramatic forms.

African Oral-Epistemic Model as Theoretical Expansion

The *Ozidi Saga* represents the culmination of this expanded tragic framework. Here tragedy is no longer centred on individual flaw or even personal revenge but is embedded in a system of ancestral obligation, communal destiny, and supernatural determinism. Ozidi's actions are driven by the need to avenge his father so that his spirit may attain rest among the ancestors (*Ozidi Saga* Act 4, Scene 1). His struggle is not merely against human enemies but also against supernatural forces such as the smallpox king. The repeated invocation of divine authority (Tamara) underscores the extent to which human action is intertwined with spiritual will. Unlike *Hamlet,* whose tragedy lies in failure to act, Ozidi's tragedy emerges from compelled action, he must act regardless of the consequences. His violence, though excessive, is culturally sanctioned, and his suffering reflects the burden of fulfilling a collective mandate. Moreover, while Aristotelian and Senecan tragedies often end in total destruction, the *Ozidi Saga* moves toward communal restoration, suggesting a different tragic resolution – one that integrates suffering into a larger cosmic balance.

Textual Background

Synopsis of *Hamlet*

William Shakespeare's *Hamlet* centres on Prince Hamlet of Denmark, who returns home after the death of his father, King Hamlet, to find that his uncle, Claudius, has seized the throne and married his mother. The appearance of his father's ghost reveals that the king was murdered by Claudius charging Hamlet with the duty of revenge (*Hamlet* Act 1, Scene 5). *Hamlet's* philosophical nature leads to hesitation and internal conflict as he questions the morality of revenge and the authenticity of the ghost's claim. To confirm Claudius guilt, he stages a play that reenacts the murder, provoking a guilty re-action from the King (*Hamlet,* Act 3, Scene 2). However, his delay results in unintended consequences, including the accidental killing of Polonius and Ophelia's subsequent descent into madness and death (*Hamlet* Act 3, Scene 4; 4.7). Claudius plots Hamlet's death, leading to a final duel between Hamlet and Laertes, who seeks revenge for his father and sister. The duel results in multiple deaths, including Gertrude, Laertes, Claudius, and Hamlet himself. Before dying, Hamlet names Fortinbas as his successor, restoring political order (*Hamlet* Act 5, Scene 2).

Synopsis of *Ozidi Saga*

The *Ozidi Saga*, adapted by J.P. Clark-Bekederemo from Ijaw oral tradition, narrates the story of a heroic figure destined to avenge his father's unjust death. The elder Ozidi is treacherously murdered, and his severed head is presented as tribute to legitimize his brother's kingship (Clark – Bekederemo xii). His posthumous son raised by his grandmother Oreame, is trained and supernaturally empowered to fulfill this revenge mission.

Equipped with magical weapons and guided by spiritual forces, the younger Ozidi embarks on a series of battles, defeating his father's killers and restoring honour to his lineage (*Ozidi Saga,* Act 3, Scene 8).

However, the violation of spiritual laws by Oreame leads to Ozidi's affliction with smallpox, symbolizing the consequences of disrupting cosmic balance. Through divine intervention and ritual cleansing, he is healed, and peace is restored to the community. The Saga concludes with communal renewal and celebration, emphasizing the integration of revenge, destiny, and spiritual order within the Ijaw worldview (Clark-Bekederemo 89).

Tragic Heroism in Context

Hamlet as a Tragic Hero

Laurence Oliver, in his film adaptation of *Hamlet,* famously describes the play as "the story of a man who could not make up his mind". While this observation captures Hamlet's hesitation, his tragic flaw is far from singular. The play ultimately dramatizes Hamlet's suffering and inevitable downfall. Like other Shakespearean tragic heroes, Prince Hamlet belongs to the aristocratic class, thus aligning with Aristotle's definition of the tragic hero as a person of high status. He possesses admirable qualities – intelligence, eloquence, and popularity among his countrymen – which make his suffering evoke pity, fear, and awe. His intellectual depth is reflected in his rich and varied use of language, drawing from law, falconry, classical mythology, and theatrical imagery. However, Hamlet's heroism is complicated by his introspective and sensitive nature, which entangles him in a web of doubt, moral conflict, and indecision.

As Samuel Taylor Coleridge observes, "his enormous intellectual activity prevents him from instant action, and the result is delay and irresolution". While many critics agree with this view, others argue that Hamlet's downfall cannot be attributed solely to indecision. Rather, it emerges from a combination of psychological, moral, and situational factors. At the core of Hamlet's tragedy is his inability to act decisively in avenging his father's murder. His tendency toward excessive reflection is evident in his famous "To be or not to be" soliloquy, where he contemplates existence and inaction. In this sense, his tragic flaw, over-deliberation, would ordinarily be a virtue, but under the pressing demands of revenge, it becomes destructive. Had Hamlet acted swiftly, he might have prevented the deaths of Polonius, Ophelia, Laertes, Gertrude and even himself.

Closely related to this flaw is Hamlet's inconsistency in action. In situations that require decisive action, he hesitates as seen in Act iii, Scene iii, when he refrains from killing Claudius at prayer. Conversely, in moments that demand caution, he acts impulsively. For instance, in Act iii, Scene iv, he rashly kills Polonius, mistaking him for Claudius. Similarly, in Act i, Scene iv, he follows the ghost despite the warnings of his companions, demonstrating a sudden disregard for reasoned judgement. This oscillation between hesitation and impulsiveness deepens his tragic predicament.

Furthermore, Hamlet exhibits a form of moral over reach, particularly in his refusal to kill Claudius while he is praying. Hamlet rationalizes that killing Claudius in a state of repentance would send his soul to heaven, and thus delays the act in order to ensure more damning fate (Act 3, Scene iii). This assumption of divine prerogative borders on hubris, as Hamlet attempts to control not only life and death but also the spiritual destiny of his enemy. In doing so, he oversteps human limitations and contributes to his own downfall.

Hamlet himself recognizes the burden of his role when he laments "O cursed spite, that ever I was born to set it right!" (*Hamlet* Act I, Scene V). This acknowledgement suggests that his tragedy is not only personal but also fated, as he is caught in circumstances beyond his control. His emotional attachment to his mother and his revulsion at her remarriage further complicate his motivations, intensifying his delay and internal conflict. His rebuke of his mother reveals his deep anguish over her moral transgression, "A bloody deed, almost as bad, good mother, as kill a king, and marry with his brother" (*Hamlet* Act 3, Scene 4).

From the foregoing, it is evident that Prince Hamlet fulfills the criteria of an Aristotelian tragic hero. His downfall does not arise from vice or moral corruption but from an error of judgement – his inability to act decisively when required. His tragic end evokes pity and fear, thereby achieving the cathartic effect central to Aristotelian tragedy. In his final moments, Hamlet entrusts his story to Horatio, urging him to "report me and my cause aright" (*Hamlet* Acts V, Scene II), a plea that underscores his desire for understanding and

restoration of his "wounded name". Nonetheless, *Hamlet* is not exclusively Aristotelian but is deeply indebted to Senecan models of revenge, characterized by supernatural intervention, rhetorical introspecting, and moral ambiguity (Feingold 41)

Ozidi as a Tragic Hero

The *Ozidi Saga* belongs broadly to the tradition of revenge tragedy. Conventionally, revenge tragedy involves a hero who has been grievously wronged and is justified in seeking vengeance. The hero's antagonist is typically of comparable strength, ensuring dramatic tension rather than a simplistic sequence of victories. The action often unfolds within an atmosphere of gloom and terror, frequently incorporating supernatural elements. In many cases, a loved woman is entangled in the conflict, and a counter-plot by the antagonist complicates the hero's quest, ultimately leading to a form of poetic justice in which both avenger and victim are destroyed (Feingold 42-43).

Within this framework, the younger Ozidi may not conform perfectly to the model of the Aristotelian tragic hero, yet he emerges as a tragic figure in his own cultural and aesthetic context. Theories of tragedy have not been limited to Aristotle's formulation in *Poetics;* thinkers such as Friedrich Nietzsche in *The Birth of Tragedy* have expanded the concept to include ritual, myth, and collective experience. Even in the Renaissance period, when William Shakespeare was writing, tragedy had already absorbed elements from Roman drama and this did not always conform strictly to Aristotelean prescriptions; prominent among them are *Titus Andronicus, Macbeth* and *Hamlet* transmitted Roman drama through the works of Seneca the Younger.

J.P. Clark-Bekederemo, an erudite scholar with both Western and Indigenous influences, does not attempt to force the *Ozidi Saga* into an Aristotelian framework. To do so would risk diminishing the cultural authenticity and artistic integrity of the narrative. In the Ijaw worldview, vengeance is not merely personal but ancestral and communal: the spirit of the slain must be avenged before it can join the ancestors. This imperative drives Ozidi's mission, as reflected in his declaration: "I am Ozidi !, Ozidi ay ! Ozidi ! Who disputes it ? Who dares dispute it ? I am Ozidi ! Ozidi ! Ozidi ! (*Ozidi Saga* Act 2, Scene 6). Ozidi's repeated declaration of identity initially appears as an assertion of heroic confidence. Yet, beneath this emphatic self-naming lies a deeper psychological unrest. The insistence is not merely declarative but defensive, suggesting a subject struggling to stabilize his identity within the overwhelming weight of ancestral expectation. In the Ijaw worldview, identity is neither individual nor autonomous but profoundly ancestral and communal, and Ozidi's birth and mission is to "put to right this terrible wrong done to his father" (Act 1, Scene 9), thus Ozidi's proclamation reflects an internalization of this inherited mandate.

This burden becomes explicit when Ozidi frames his existence in terms of predestination and obligation. "… I was born with sword to hand, fists clenched firm for fight. This course I have followed without deviation doing my duty by my dead father …" (Act 4, Scene 1) Here, agency is subsumed under destiny, his life is not chosen but assigned. The language of inevitability – "born … for fight" – reveals a psyche conditioned to equate existence with violence, thereby erasing the possibility of alternative selfhood. His identity is thus constructed not as a personal achievement but as a continuation of ancestral will, a condition that already signals psychological confinement.

Oh yes, my father … sleeps well indeed, while I walk here awake, for I have only to close my eyes and heads of those I have slaughtered tumble forth, rolling and hopping about my feet like huge jiggers, screaming to suck my blood.

(*Ozidi* Act 4, Scene 1)

The tragic consequences of this inherited duty become most evident after vengeance has been accomplished. Orea's affirmation – "Your father is fully avenged, and after second burial, sleeps well in company of his compeers" – suggest the restoration of cosmic and ancestral order. However, this resolution is not shared by Ozidi. Instead, he exposes the profound psychological cost of fulfilling this obligation.

This haunting imagery transforms the heroic narrative into one of psychic disintegration. The grotesque vision of severed heads "rolling and hopping" evokes a relentless intrusion of memory, suggesting that Ozidi is

trapped in a cycle of traumatic recall. Sleep, which should offer respite, becomes impossible, as consciousness itself is invaded by the consequences of his actions. The metaphor of the heads "screaming to suck my blood" further implies a reversal of roles. The avenger is now pursued by the very violence he has unleashed. Thus, Ozidi's tragedy lies not in failure but in the unbearable aftermath of success. While his father attains peace, within the ancestral realm, Ozidi remains suspended in a state of psychological torment, alienated from both rest and community. His repeated self-assertion – "I am Ozidi" – ultimately becomes ironic, as the identity he proclaims is precisely the source of his suffering. In this sense, the play reconfigures tragedy beyond Aristotelian hamartia, presenting instead a model in which the hero is destroyed not by error but by the inescapable demands of ancestral obligation and the haunting persistence of violence within the psyche.

Unlike many Western tragic heroes, Ozidi confronts not only human antagonists but also supernatural forces. In addition to avenging his father's murderers, he must contend with the monstrous Engarandon, the smallpox king, whose devastation has thrown the community of Orua into chaos (*Ozidi Saga* Act 3, Scene 1). The presence of such forces expands the scope of tragedy beyond human conflict to include cosmic struggle, where disease, fate, and spiritual imbalance play decisive roles.

The supernatural dimension of the play is future reinforced through the constant invocation of Tamara, the supreme deity, whose will shapes the course of events. Prayers offered by characters such as Orea and Oreame highlight the interplay between human agency and divine intervention. While Tamara grants partial or full responses to these prayers, the outcomes suggest that divine providence operates according to a larger cosmic order, not merely human desire (*Ozidi Saga* Act 3, Scene 6,8). The atmosphere of the *Ozidi Saga* is undeniably one of gloom, violence, and terror, consistent with the demands of tragic from Ozidi relentless pursuit of vengeance leads to a cycle of destruction that ultimately implicates even those closest to him. Under the influence of Oreame, he commits acts that violate moral and spiritual boundaries, including the killing of innocent figures (*Ozidi Saga* Act 4, Scene 3). His growing psychological torment is evident in his expressions of exhaustion and horror at the consequences of his actions, particularly in his haunting visions of the dead.

Despite his victories over his enemies, including the smallpox king, Ozidi's journey is marked by suffering and moral burden. His triumph does not come without cost, as he becomes both agent and victim of violence, caught within a circle he cannot fully control. In this sense, his tragedy lies not in a single personal flaw but in his entrapment within a system of revenge, destiny, and supernatural obligation (*Ozidi Saga*, Act 4, Scene 3).

While Aristotle's theory of tragedy remains foundation, its applicability is limited when confronted with texts such as the *Ozidi Saga*, *The Strong Breed,* and *Death and the King's Horseman* among others. Aristotle's emphasis on individual error does not fully account for the ritual, communal, and metaphysical dimensions of African tragic experience arise from the collision between human action and overwhelming cosmic forces. This perspective finds resonance in other African texts, such as *The Gods Are Not to Blame* by Ola Rotimi, where human destiny is similarly shaped by forces beyond individual control. Thus, Ozidi stands as a tragic hero not because he fits neatly into Aristotelian categories, but because his story reveals a broader and more complex understanding of tragedy – one grounded in collective experience, spiritual reality, and inevitable consequence.

A Comparative Analysis: Hamlet and Ozidi as Tragic Heroes

A comparative examination of *Hamlet* by William Shakespeare and the *Ozidi Saga* J.P. Clark-Bekederemo reveals two distinct yet interesting models of tragic heroism. While both protagonists are driven by the imperative of revenge, their tragic trajectories are shaped by fundamentally different cultural, philosophical, and metaphysical frameworks. From an Aristotelian point of view, Hamlet appears to conform more closely to the classical model of the tragic hero. As defined by Aristotle, the tragic hero is a figure of high status whose downfall results from an error of judgement (hamartia), evoking pity and fear in the audience. Hamlet, a prince, fits into this description. His tragic flaw – variously interpreted as indecision over-reflection, or moral hesitation – leads to delay in avenging his father's murder and ultimately results in wide spread destruction, including his own death.

In contrast, Ozidi does not easily fit into the Aristotelian framework. Although he is also of noble lineage, his actions are not governed primarily by personal moral deliberation but by ancestral obligation and communal

necessity. His mission of revenge is not a matter of individual choice but a cultural imperative rooted in the belief that his father's spirit cannot rest until justice is achieved. Consequently, Ozidi's tragedy cannot be reduced to a personal flaw, rather, it emerges from his entanglement within a network of destiny, ritual, and supernatural forces.

Another major point of divergence lies in the role of the supernatural. In *Hamlet,* the ghost introduces the element of revenge, "I am thy father's spirit / Doomed for a certain term to walk the night / And for the day confin'd to fast in fires / Till the foul crimes, done in my days of nature / Are burnt and purg' away (*Hamlet,* Act 1, Scene 5) thus charging young Hamlet" "if thou hast nature in thee, bear it not / let not the royal bed of Denmark be / A couch for luxury and damned incest". (*Hamlet,* Act 1, Scene 5). The element of revenge thus introduced remains ambiguous, raising questions about its authenticity and moral authority. Critics such as Stephen Greenblatt have shown that the ghost reflects early modern anxieties about purgatory and the after life, thereby situating the play within a transitional religious context. Hamlet's hesitation is partly a response to this uncertainty. By contrast, the supernatural in the *Ozidi Saga* is neither ambiguous nor peripheral, it is central to the narrative structure. Divine forces such as Tamara, along with supernatural beings like the smallpox king, Engarando, actively shape events, reinforcing a worldview in which human actions are inseparable from cosmic order.

The nature of the tragic flaw further distinguishes the two heroes. Hamlet's downfall aligns with the Aristotelian concept of hamartia, as his excessive introspection and moral reasoning hinder decisive action. As Samuel Taylor Coleridge observes, Hamlet's intellectual depth leads to delay and irresolution (148). He confesses "the nature hue of resolution / is sicklied over with the pale cast of thought (*Hamlet,* Act 3, Scene 1). Ozidi, however, is not characterized by hesitation but by excessive action. His relentless pursuit of vengeance, often carried out under supernatural influence, results in a cycle of violence that implicates both the guilty and the innocent (*Ozidi Saga*, Act 4, Scenes 1 – 5). In this sense, his "flaw" is not indecision but an overwhelming submission to the demands of destiny and revenge.

Furthermore, the outcomes of the two tragedies reflect different conceptions of justice. In *Hamlet,* the resolution is largely catastrophic and individualistic; the deaths of the central characters restore political order, but at the cost of immense personal loss. In the *Ozidi Saga,* however, the resolution is communal and restorative. Although Ozidi's journey is marked by violence and suffering, it ultimately leads to the re-establishment of balance within the community. His struggle extends beyond personal revenge to include the defeat of destructive forces such as disease and disorder, thereby emphasizing the collective dimension of tragedy. As earlier stated, beyond the obligation to avenge his father's murder. Ozidi must confront a more expansive and terrifying antagonist in Engarandon, the smallpox king, whose ravaging presence reduces the community of Orua to desolation. The scale of this devastation is vividly recalled by Orea, who contrasts the former prosperity of the land with its present ruin : "This stretch of land more than twenty years ago was a whole section of the city … full many families of your father's line lived here … there was none among them so poor he had not a household slaves … but by one stroke of the smallpox king … this whole place … was in one season … burnt to the ground" (Act 3. Scene 1). The passage underscores not merely physical destruction but the erasure of lineage, wealth, and communal continuity thereby situating tragedy at a collective rather than individual level.

Ozidi's confrontation with Engaradon thus transcends personal vengeance and assumes the dimension of communal restoration. The terror inflicted by the smallpox king is so overwhelming that it results in total displacement, as one voice testifies: "… they have all fled, all the towns people to a man" (Act 5, A Twin Scene). This mass exodus signals the breakdown of social order and reinforces the magnitude of the threat Ozidi must overcome. Yet, the resolution of this conflict is marked by an unexpected inversion of power, Engaradon's final assault on Ozidi provokes a seemingly trivial but symbolically potent response from Orea, who reduces the dreaded affliction to "yaws", a minor childhood disease. This act of linguistic diminishment becomes a form of metaphysical defiance, wounding the pride of the smallpox king. In outraged withdrawal, he commands his entourage: "Let no member of our train set foot again on this shore where men see a royal python and call it worm of the earth …" With this departure, the cycle of devastation is broken, and the supernatural force that once terrorized the land is expelled.

The consequence of this victory is not merely the defeat of an enemy but the restoration of communal life and ancestral inheritance. The displaced people return, reclaiming their land and identity. In this sense, Ozidi's triumph over Engarandon completes a broader tragic arc in which suffering, displacement, and terror give way to renewal. However, as earlier established, this communal restoration stands in stark contrast to Ozidi's own psychological condition, reinforcing the paradox at the heart of the narrative: the hero secures collective healing at the cost of personal turmoil and enduring inner unrest.

These differences between Hamlet and Ozidi tragic ends highlight the limitations of applying a strictly Aristotelian model to non-western texts. While Aristotle's framework effectively explains the structure of *Hamlet,* it proves inadequate for capturing the complexity of Ozidi's tragic experience. The insights of Friedrich Nietzsche and Wole Soyinka offer more flexible approaches Nietzsche's emphasis on the Dionysian underscores the role of ritual and collective experience, while Soyinka's concept of the "fourth stage" situates tragedy within a metaphysical continuum that resonates strongly with the *Ozidi Saga.*

The *Ozidi Saga* fully embodies Soyinka's "fourth stage". The murder of Ozidi's father disrupts the balance between the living and the dead, necessitating ritual redress. Ozidi's mission is not merely revenge but a cosmic obligation to restore order and enable the father's passage into the ancestral realm. The unborn are equally significant, as the continuity of lineage ensures the persistence of the cycle, linking past, present, and future. Thus, Ozidi operates as a ritual agent within the "fourth stage", mediating between human and divine forces. The invocation of Tamara and the presence of supernatural beings such as the smallpox king illustrate the integration of cosmic elements into the narrative. His psychological torment further reflects his liminal position between worlds. Unlike *Hamlet,* the *Ozidi Saga* culminates in restoration, the defeat of destructive forces and the healing of the community signify the re-establishment of cosmic balance, aligning with Soyinka's conception of tragedy as a regenerative process.

Ultimately, this comparison shows more clearly that tragedy is not a universal form governed by a single set of principles but a culturally contingent phenomenon. *Hamlet* embodies a model of tragedy grounded in individual psychology and moral conflict, whereas Ozidi represents a form of tragedy rooted in communal destiny, ritual enactment and supernatural determinism. In the *Ozidi Saga,* determinism does not operate as an inflexible fatalism but as a culturally embedded system of obligatory destiny. Although characters may engage the divine through prayer, ritual, and mediation, such interaction shape only the mode of fulfillment rather than the necessity of the tragic mandate. *Ozidi's* mission, therefore, is not a matter of personal choice but a cosmic imperative rooted in ancestral continuity and communal restoration. By placing the *Hamlet* and *Ozidi Saga* in dialogue, this study not only exposes the limitations of Aristotelian theory but also advances a more inclusive understanding of tragic heroism – one that accommodates the diversity of human experience across cultures thus establishing that revenge in *Ozidi Saga* is not an individual moral burden, as in *Hamlet,* but a culturally sanctioned obligation rooted in ancestral continuity.

Synthesis: Toward a Re-theorized Concept of Tragedy

When these four layers are considered together, it becomes evident that tragedy cannot be confined to a single theoretical model. The progression from Aristotle's conception of tragedy as individual moral error, through Seneca's emphasis on revenge and violent excess, to Wole Soyinka's view of tragedy as ritual and metaphysical transition, and finally to the African Oral-Epistemic Model's understanding of tragedy as a communal and cosmic necessity, acutely reveals a historical and philosophical evolution. This trajectory highlights a shift from the hybrid position of *Hamlet* – where Aristotelian and Senecan intertwined, to the African Oral-Epistemic Models, in which tragedy is fully realized within a cultural, communal, and metaphysical domain.

On this note, tragedy is best understood not as a fixed genre but as a dynamic continuum, shaped by the interaction between individual agency, cultural obligation, and cosmic order. Suffice it to say that the *Ozidi Saga* is not a theoretical treatise but a literary text whose structure and worldview embody an alternative conception of tragedy, thereby serving as a basis for re-theorizing tragic form beyond Aristotelian, Soyinka and Senecan models.

CONCLUSION

This study has re-examined the concept of tragedy through a comparative analysis of *Hamlet* and *Ozidi Saga*, demonstrating the limitations of a strictly Aristotelian framework. While Aristotle's theory remains foundational in its emphasis on plot, character, and moral error, its focus on individual agency proves insufficient for interpreting texts grounded in non-western cosmologies. Through the incorporation of the Roman tragic tradition associated with Seneca the Younger, this study has shown that tragedy extends beyond moral failure to include revenge, violence, and emotional extremity. *Hamlet*, situated between Aristotelian structure and Senecan influence reveals a tragic force derives from the tension between thought and action, as well as the ambiguity of the supernatural.

However, the *Ozidi Saga*, as rendered by J.P. Clark-Bekederemo, challenges both Aristotelian and Senecan paradigms by foregrounding a conception of tragedy rooted in communal obligation, ritual enactment, and supernatural determinism. Here, the tragic experience is not confined to the downfall of an individual hero but is embedded in a larger cultural and metaphysical system. Ozidi's action are compelled by ancestral necessity, and his suffering reflects the burden of fulfilling a collective destiny rather than the consequences of personal error.

The study further demonstrates that the theoretical insights of Wole Soyinka, particularly his concept of the "fourth stage", provide a more expansive framework for understanding tragedy in African contexts. By situating tragic action within a continuum that connects the living, the dead and the unborn, Soyinka's model account for the ritual and cosmological dimensions that are central to the *Ozidi Saga* but largely absent in Aristotelian theory. Ultimately, this study proposes that tragedy should be understood not as a fixed or universal genre but as a dynamic and culturally contingent continuum. The four-layer framework – Aristotle, Seneca, Soyinka, and the African Oral-Epistemic Model – reveals an evolution from individual moral error to communal and cosmic necessity. While *Hamlet* exemplifies a hybrid tragic form that negotiates between classical and early modern influences, the *Ozidi Saga* represents a re-theorization of tragedy that expands its scope to include ritual, myth, and collective experience.

This re-conceptualization has significant implications for comparative literary studies. It calls for a critical approach that moves beyond Eurocentric models and recognizes the plurality of tragic forms across cultures. By placing Western and African traditions in dialogue, the study not only bridges a significant gap in scholarship but also affirms the need for more inclusive and context – sensitive framework in the study of tragedy in world literature. While Aristotle, Seneca, and Soyinka provide theoretical frameworks for understanding tragedy, the *Ozidi Saga* functions as a cultural text that enacts and materializes these theoretical possibilities thereby demonstrating that tragedy is not merely conceptual but also experiential and performative.

WORKS CITED

1. Andujar, Rosa. "Greek Tragedy and Perforance". The Classical Review, Vol. 73, no.1, 2023.
2. Aristotle. Poetics. Translated by Malcolm Heath, Penguim Books, 1996.
3. Babcock, Kimberly J. Modern Dramatic Tragedy and Aristotle's Poetics : A Comparison. College of William & Mary, 1987.
4. Bowers, Fredson. Elizabethan Revenge Tragedy 1587 – 1642. Princeton UP, 1940.
5. Bradley, A.C. Shakespearean Tragedy. Macmillan, 1904.
6. Clark, J.P. The Collected Plays 1962-2000. University Press, Plc, 2009.
7. Clark-Bekederemo, J.P. The Ozidi Saga. University Press PLC. 2009.
8. Coleridge, Samuel Taylor. Shakespearean Criticism, Volume I. Edited by Thomas Middleton Raysor, J.M. Dent, 1961.
9. Feingold, Michael, and Spring, Michael. William Shakespeare's Hamlet. Barron's Educational Series, Inc., 1984.
10. Frye, Northrop. Anatomy of Criticism: Four Essays. Princeton UP, 2001.
11. Greenblatt, Stephen. Hamlet in Purgatory. Princeton UP, 2001.

12. Ihidero, Victor. “Ijaw Mythology and New Humanist Tragedy: Theorizing Drama from the Delta”. Journal of African cultural studies, 2018.
13. Irele, Abiola. The African Imagination: Literature in Africa and the Black Diaspora. Oxford UP, 2001.
14. Jeyifo, Biodun. The Truthful Lie: Essays in a Sociology of African Drama. New Beacon Books, 1985.
15. Johnson, John William. The Epic of Son – Jara: A West African Tradition. Indiana UP, 1986.
16. Nietzsche, Friedrich. The Birth of Tragedy. Translated by Walter Kanfmann, Vintage Books, 1967.
17. Nugent, Louise, et al., editors. Affect, Belief, and the Arts. Routledge, 2021.
18. Okpewho, Isidore. The Epic in Africa : Toward a Poetics of the Oral Performance. Columbia UP, 1979.
19. Rhan, Thi T.H., et al. “Rituals, Grief, and Meaning – Making : Cultural Perspectives on Bereavement”. Frontiers in Sociology, Vol. 10, 2025, article 1620016.
20. Roberts, Nicholas, and Ali Qahri – Saremi. “Tragedy, Truth, and Technology : A Cognitive Process Perspective”. Journal of Information Technology, Vol. 38, no.2, 2023.
21. Saxo Grammaticus. The History of the Danes. Translated by Peter Fisher, edited by Hilda Ellis Davidson, D.S. Brewer, 1979.
22. Seember, T.S. and J. Ndung’u. “Impact of Bereavement Rituals on Psychological Wellbeing among the Tiv People of Benue State, Nigeria”. International Journal of Research and Innovation in Social Science, Vol. 8, no.3, 2024.
23. Seneca. Seneca’s Tragedies. Translated by Emily Wilson, Oxford UP, 2010.
24. Shakespeare, William. Hamlet. Edited by Ann Thompson and Neil Taylor, Arden Shakespeare, 2006.
25. Soyinka, Wole. Myth, Literature and the African World. Cambridge University Press, 1976.