

Review

Theatre of the oppressor: A reading of Butake's play, "Family Saga"

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This article argues that theatre as an apparatus of change has for long time privileged the transformation of the oppressed people by inciting their conscience and consciousness. This incitement is meant to make them take action, leading to some kind of social and political agency. However, this article argues that the oppressor equally needs to be changed. Therefore theatre/drama as a tool of intervention should be framed in such a way that it provides possibilities for the oppressor to change instead of acting as an imaginary that only privileges the vanquishing of the oppressor. The article takes recourse in John O'Toole's experiment with theatre in education process to advance its arguments in regard to Bole Butake's drama and specifically his play 'Family Saga'.

Key words: Educational drama, theatre of the oppressor, consciousness, dramatic imaginary.

INTRODUCTION

In an article, "The Mouse under the Floorboards" John O'Toole (1998) explores the role of educational drama in bringing about transformation in individuals and societies. He points out in this article that:

"...the most memorable dramatic moment of my own life happened fifteen years ago...I was teaching in South Africa with an adolescent class in a role play drama about drugs, observed by eighty teachers. The students were role playing doctors, cops and social workers, and we needed somebody to play drug addicts. I persuaded the students to bring the teachers to play the criminal junkies... Afterwards both groups expressed elation at the experience. How often in schools do young people have the opportunity to exercise power and status over adults especially their teachers? (...) The drama permitted this taboo to be broken, and made it innocent (1998: 53-4)."

What is profound in all this is the deduction that O'Toole (1998) makes in regard to this experience. His assertion that this experience made him to begin thinking of a 'Theatre of the Oppressor' is significant especially when he declares that: "If Theatre of the Oppressed can help those oppressed to learn ways of breaking out of their oppression, maybe the oppressors too can be helped to learn to stop oppressing (1998: 54). Indeed, for me this

declaration brought forth completely new ways of thinking and engaging with theatre practice framed for intervention. It provided me with new insights with which to engage with Bole Butake's (2005) latest play 'Family Saga':

Butake's Dramatic imaginary on Oppression and its Paradigmatic shifts.

Butake's Dramatic imaginary on Oppression and its Paradigmatic shifts.

Thus reading, 'Family Saga', with O'Toole's assumption of a theatre of the oppressor in mind, one senses, the radical shift in Butake's vision and ideology of change presented in his previous works in relation to the latest one. To appreciate this shift, however, requires a critical engagement with his entire literary and theatre biography. Butake's (2005) literary and theatre biography goes back a long way, beginning with his ambitious effort to redress what was then perceived as 'literary barrenness', to echo Taban Lo Liyong, in the Anglophone Cameroon literary landscape.

Reading a paper, "Home and Exile: The African Writer's Dilemma", one gets a feeling that Butake is an artist anxiously preoccupied with a search for an audience: A desire and drive that eventually catalyzed him to start a creative writers' journal, 'The Mould'. But

'The Mould', he later realized, would never lead him to the audience he so desired. He explains,

"...The Mould ceased publishing in 1982. By this time I had discovered that drama and theatre were the more likely to satisfy my search for audience than poetry and prose had done for the simple reason that a play can be watched by a large number of people at the same time a form of publishing (4)".

With this new insight, Butake begun scripting and producing plays for the proscenium arch stage. But a twist of fate (as will be revealed later in this article) led him to the audience that he had all along been searching for; the grassroots people. This he found through his own encounter with theatre for development. He explains:

"The astounding success with the women participants at the workshop, as evidenced by the discovery that they could actually create a play on their own problems, cast, rehearse and perform it at an audience of two thousand people in a total of three days, proved to me beyond reasonable doubt, that the participatory methodology was a very effective tool of informal education at any level. Ever since, I have either been asked by some non governmental organizations to submit projects on given themes or I have written projects and submitted them for possible funding (9)."

Butake's literary and theatre biography is not dissimilar to that of most other creative writers in post-colonial Africa. It reveals the anxieties and tensions underlying the relationship (s) between the wielders of political power and the artist, who is ever suspected of subversive activities. Like Ngugi wa Thiong'o of Kenya, Butake has also been denied creative space for what the authorities termed subversive productions. He describes this experience thus:

"In March 1991, I directed Bate Besong's *Beast of No Nation*. The play was performed on the University campus and it was highly applauded by the more than one thousand spectators. A few days later, a University official made a very damaging report about how subversive the play was to the Chancellor of the University who forwarded it to the Minister of Higher education who in turn distributed it to the Ministers of Territorial Administration, Information and Culture, the Delegate General for National Security and GENDER, the Secret Police. The playwright was arrested and detained for a day. Surprisingly, I was neither interrogated nor arrested... (p8)."

Both Butake's (2005) and Ngugi's (1991) experiences,

especially of making theatre that confronts and challenges those who perform (political) power in Africa, reveal some interesting parallels. Ngugi, on the one hand found himself in trouble with both Kenyatta's and Moi's regimes for making and producing theatre with the grassroots people at Kamiriithu, a village on the outskirts of the capital city Nairobi. This was after a long stint of making and producing plays at the University of Nairobi and Kenya National Theatre without getting into any trouble with the political establishment. Butake on the other hand, had courted trouble for making and producing plays with his students and colleagues at the Yaoundé University, yet he does not get into any trouble with the government when engaging in the more radical awareness-raising theatre with the grassroots communities. He (Butake) notes that:

"Having found the effectiveness of drama and theatre as a communication medium especially for the disadvantaged grassroots people, I have been able to continue to influence the latter through the organization of numerous theatre workshops in urban slums and villages on such diverse issues. Thus, I have been able to continue with my teaching at the university while using theatre for development techniques through what I call 'People Theatre' and 'People Cinema' to influence and awaken grassroots people to problems with which they deal on a daily basis (p. 9)".

It is notable that Butake transfers the methodology that he has been using to create consciousness in the grassroots people into the dramatic structure of the 'Family Saga'; but this time not to assist the grassroots people to break out of their oppression but indeed to help the oppressor to learn how to stop oppressing others. As such, the interesting aspect of this play, unlike his earlier plays which were more focused on conscientizing the oppressed people to break out of their oppression, this one explicitly targets the conscience of the oppressor with the express intention of evoking transformation. But before demonstrating how this particular play is an intervention targeting the oppressor, it is imperative to briefly show how his earlier plays acted as sites of learning for the oppressed to become aware of or to transcend their oppression.

In his first play, 'Betrothal without Libation', the focus is clearly on the oppressed. In this particular play, the source of oppression is ethnicity. The play dramatizes diverse ways in which different ethnic groups deploy stereotypes and myths to oppress others as the following dialogue indicates:

"1st Woman: That Nyangi, a woman? You do not know what you are talking about.

5th Woman: What is wrong with the Nyangis? Are they not omen like us?

1st Woman: I am surprised, I am really surprised you do not know the Nyangis? The Nyangis? Those people who turn themselves into all kinds of animals-elephants, monkeys, boars, - to destroy people's farms? Every Nyangi woman lives in the bush in some form of some animal. And all of them, without exception, go around with frogs in their arses. (Betrothal, 49)"

In this dramatic imaginary, the oppressed groups are helped to learn how to break out of these oppressive conditions. Thus at the end of the play, a successful marriage of individuals from two opposing ethnic groups takes place as an indication that oppressive conditions can be transcended. This marriage can therefore be construed as an allegory that imagines a nation in harmony with itself. In this play, both the originators and targets of the ethnic stereotypes are victims of oppression. This ethnic consciousness is well articulated by the play's main protagonist, who also sounds like the playwrights mouth piece when he reminds his folks from the village that:

"...I have heard what you have said, and am no longer angry. I have not seen the family for six years just because of some foolish idea that was buried deep in their heads. I am happy you now say that marriage is not a question of tribe but rather character and love. Above all, we cannot build this nation on tribalism and partisanship (Betrothal, 76)".

In this play, Butake seems to suggest that lack of education is another condition that leads to oppression. This is clearly brought out in the following dialogue between the main hero of the play Fointam and Simbong a park tout.

"Simbong: I leffam say na you one get motor? (to Fointam) Are you going with Nawain? (to Elissa) Nawain come this way and sit in front.
Fointam: She does not understand Bikom.
Simbong: Doesn't she? You mean she grew out of Kom or what? Even then, some parents must be terribly careless. Not to teach their children our language.
Fointam: She isn't Bikom at all.
Simbong: Is that true? And she is your wife? Stop deceiving me. You book people are daring. Anyhow, Madam, come sidong for front. (Betrothal, 35)."

Butake's second play, 'The Rape of Michelle' once again focuses on the victim of oppression. In this play, a young girl called Michelle falsely accuses a teacher, Mikindong, for attempting to rape her. The teacher, in a Kafkaesque kind of drama, becomes the victim of oppression. He is arrested and detained at the police station with no option of bail. His situation becomes complicated because the

justice system is so corrupt and as such no one wants to listen to his version of truth. The conversation below is most revealing of this oppressive judicial system.

"Mikindong: But why should a man suffer so much and lose so much money even though he is innocent?

Zende: That is the problem. Until a revolution takes place, we will continue to function through the telephone call from above and the envelope from below, as your friend, the policeman, put it. And, you know, now that you have been appointed principal, he is expecting a sizeable envelope. He knows that you have everything to lose.

Mikindong: Oh my God! I said it! However, I will do everything possible. How much do you think he will be willing to accept?

Zende: I told you before that we are friends. I have been talking to him this evening as we were driving here; and he might just accept half-a-million.

Mikindong: What?

Zende: Any time you are ready, just stop by my chambers. We must be on our way now.

Magistrate: Mr. Mikindong, again I congratulate you most heartily. In fact I do so from the bottom of my heart. That is not a job that one should lose by going to jail. Mrs. Mikindong, thank you very much for your kindness. Good night.

Mikindong: Oh God! What a life!

Akwen: What is it dear? Are you okay?

Mikindong: No. The Magistrate! The Magistrate! (Lake God, 199)."

Mbembe's examination of 'banality of power in the postcolony' perhaps, captures this scenario more accurately especially when he says that:

"The experience of the postcolony makes it clear that illegal activities are not confined to ordinary people. Enforcing regulations, manipulating the system of bribery, collecting taxes and levies, forcibly confiscating goods that have been hoarded and then selling them off; these are all characteristic of a situation where there is summary looting and extortion whether it be in the form of cash or product or forced labour (1992: 22)."

In this play, it can be argued that Butake is more concerned with the technologies of oppression than with the theatrical strategies of learning how to overcome oppression. 'Lake God' his third play, in tandem with the previous ones, also dramatizes oppression. Set in an imaginary land at the advent of colonialism, Butake shows the attempts of the oppressed people to break out of the shackles of an oppressive regime. Thus the focus in this play is the effort of the oppressed to defeat oppression. In fact, the oppressor is not accorded any opportunity to become aware of his oppressive behaviours and to change.

In this play, the strategy of confronting oppression is

very fascinating; Butake gives agency to women reminiscent of Aristophanes' play *Lysistrata*, who deny their husbands, not only sex but also food. This bold act by the women shocks, but more importantly awakens the men to the fact that the Fon (King) in collaboration with agents of colonialism have oppressed them, reducing them into zombies. The women's act jolts them back into reality and they awaken to the fact that as a result of their oppression they had abandoned their responsibilities to protect their land and family by standing up against the Fon and his gang of sycophants. To reclaim their lost power, the men revitalize their secret society, the Kwifon, which had been banished by the Fon. With the Kwifon activated, they confront the Fon to participate in a ritual to cleanse the land to avert an imminent catastrophe as a result of his oppressive ways but their action is too late as the fury of the Lake God can no longer be appeased. In an act reminiscent of the biblical story of Sodom and Gomorrah, the Lake God destroys the entire village except for an old man, middle aged man, a woman, a boy and a girl. These are the characters that we find in the sequel play-, *The Survivors*.. We meet these characters at the beginning of the play traveling to a place called Ewawa that was apparently not ruined by the wrath of the Lake God.

Once again Butake uses these characters to dramatize oppression in society and how the oppressed learn to transcend their oppression. In this play, Butake demonstrates how masculinity, symbolized by the military officer's gun is used to oppress innocent citizens and how in return the citizens learn new ways to fight back oppression. Similar to his earlier plays, the oppressor once again is not given any opportunity to learn how to stop his oppression. We see how femininity is used in this play to challenge the oppressive masculine power in an interesting way that reminds us of Foucault's (1982), ideas on the way of power over bodies and bodies own way over power.

Mboysi, the protagonist female character in the play uses her body to entice the officer, who mellows before her presence. At the initial stages of this relationship, she uses her body in exchange for goodies from the officer without realizing that this is sexual oppression and exploitation. But later on she develops critical consciousness which enables her to use her body not as a sexual object but as a site to fight against oppression. She uses her body to seduce the officer and eventually dispossess him of his gun, his symbol of oppression.

"Mboysi: (Stretching out her hand) Can I touch it?

Officer: Here, hold. Feel the weight of it and then you can begin to imagine how deadly it is.

Mboysi: It is really heavy eh? And you say all I need to do is pull this and it goes kpo! And you are dead?

Officer: Yes. Now, can I have it back?

Mboysi: (Stepping back with a lot of agility) wait a minute. I have not really tried it on you yet. Remember I asked

you to try it on me, but you wouldn't?

Officer: Look, woman! That thing is very dangerous. Don't play around with it. Hand it back immediately.

Mboysi: Wait a little. I just want to make sure it works. (She pulls the trigger and Officer dives unto the floor. Mboysi laughs mirthlessly). So it really works eh? And you crawling like warm (sic) on the ground, so you can be reduced to this? (Lake God, 83)."

Thus from the foregoing, it is obvious that oppressors in Butake's dramatic imaginary are never given a chance to learn to stop his oppression. This is replicated in his other plays: 'And Palm-wine will Flow', 'Shoes and Four Men in Arm and', and 'The Dance of the Vampire'. In all these plays, the focus is on the oppressed and how they learn ways to breaking out of their oppression. Other than 'Betrothal without Libation' and 'The Rape of Michelle', in all the other plays the oppressed learn ways and means of vanquishing oppressors. This ideology of vanquishing the oppressor by the oppressed is aptly captured by the following dialogue between an oppressor (Fon) and an oppressed (Kwengong) in the play 'And Palm-wine will Flow'.

"Kwengong:...Receive them, oh Fon, and rejoice!

And may they make your belly swell with fat!

May they make you call another feast before the sun goes to sleep!

Fon: (Looks curiously into the pot and then turns away suddenly, holding his nose.)

Urine! Urine? What is the meaning of this abomination?

Kwengong: Not urine, Chila Kintasi,

But savory juice from

The Vaginas of those upon whom

You wield power, Fon.

Drink! Oh Fon.

Drink the liquor from the vaginas

And feel the power of power! (Lake God, 109-110)."

As witnessed in his earlier plays that were largely informed by techniques of conventional literary drama, Butake never gave the oppressors any chance to learn how to stop their oppression. He seems to have been only interested in helping the oppressed to learn ways of breaking out of their oppression. However, in his last play 'Family Saga', which as noted earlier, is influenced by the methodology, ideology and philosophy of theatre for development, he seems to provide space for the oppressor to learn how to stop oppressing others. As such, in this play, he seems to revise his earlier violent vision of change and adopts a more dialogic and conciliatory approach: What one of the characters in this play- Kamala- calls 'the force of argument' ('Family Saga': 15).

'Family Saga' therefore, is different from his earlier plays in many ways. Written and produced after Butake had declared his shift from mainstream theatre to the

more interactive workshop and collaborative theatre for development, it manifests a different dramatic structure that gestures more towards audience participation as well as a vision of reconciliation and healing between the oppressor and the oppressed. In a very profound way, the play seems to target the conscience of the oppressor unlike in his earlier plays where he was driven by an obsession to help the oppressed to become aware of ways of overcoming their oppression. Though Butake still relies largely on the techniques of theatre of the oppressed in this play, his vision seems now to be more directed at the transformation and reformation of the oppressor.

It is in this regard that it can be assumed that this play seems to employ what Mbembe (Outa, 2002: 6), describes as 'simulacrum', that strategy of pretence, which the people very often adapt and engage in purely to survive or deflect the might of power.

Before engaging more fully with the possibilities, Butake offers the oppressor to recognize and change stops his oppressive behaviour, a brief synopsis of the play is helpful. This play is a political allegory dramatizing the fractured history of Cameroon structured on filial conflict between twin brothers: Kamala and Kamalo. The two brothers symbolize Cameroon's Anglophone and Francophone linguistic dichotomy. The conflict between the two brothers, the play reveals, arises because one of the brothers, Kamalo, who symbolizes the Francophone is oppressing his brother Kamala who represents the Anglophone Cameroon. Kamalo is portrayed as lazy, arrogant and exploitative.

Kamala on the other hand is humble but highly industrious. He does all the work but Kamalo takes all the produce of his sweat and his two children, the son Ngong and the daughter Sawa. The plotline is complicated with Kamala's family's quest for truth regarding their heritage as well as the nature of their relationship with Kamalo. This quest takes a backward glance into their history right from the pre-colonial to the post-colonial period. This journey through memory eventually reveals the truth behind their relationship with Kamalo. They find that the oppressive and exploitative relationship is a result of the falsification of their origin as a family by imperial powers, France and Britain, to cause division between the two brothers.

This play can be conceived structurally as being in three broad parts: Part one is an exposition of Kamalo's oppression and exploitation of his brother Kamala and his two children; part two is the quest to find out the conflictual nature of the relation between Kamala and Kamalo and also the reasons that legitimize Kamalo's oppression and exploitation of his brother and his children; part three is an interesting re-construction of the findings into a performance to be presented to Kamalo by Kamala and his two children.

As already mentioned, the first part of this play presents the exploitation of Kamala and Kamalo. The play kamala is complaining bitterly about kamalo's laziness,

aptly captured in their dialogue below:

Kamala: Kamalo, why can not you try to be reasonable by being useful to yourself and both of us? What do you ever do in this estate except lazy around in a three piece suit, drinking and smoking and...

"Kamalo: Redone is there to ensure the security of the estate. He, my other offspring and I, are already too busy working for the community. You think it is easy to think? And do I need to remind you that there is division of labour in this estate? I conceive, you execute. Period.

Kamala: 'I conceive, you execute. Period'. Who made that rule? Who gave you the right to conceive thereby transforming me into your slave? You take what is mine and I have to do the cleaning and repair work? Who gave you the right to take what is mine? (Family Saga: 9)."

Thus it is clear from the beginning of the play that Kamala is already aware of his oppression and exploitation by Kamalo but he cannot do much other than lament. This is because the two had signed a deed in which Kamala believes that he signed for brotherhood while Kamalo insists that Kamala actually signed for bondagehood.

"Kamala: All right. I don't like it here. I am taking my things and going elsewhere. Where is the deed of brotherhood that we both signed? I need my share of the resources.

Kamalo: you mean the deed of bondagehood? My papa is keeping it.

Kamalo: Keeping what? Your papa is keeping what?

Kamalo: The deed of bondagehood which you signed.

Kamala: Brotherhood!

Kamalo: Bondagehood!

Kamala: Brotherhood!

Kamalo: Bondagehood! (Family Saga, 13)"

Admittedly, the conflict and tension in the play is based on the way that the two brothers interpret the meaning of the accord/deed that they had signed. As such, this part of the play dramatizes with intensity of the oppression and exploitation of Kamala and his children. This oppressive and exploitative relationship is well captured when Sawa, Kamala's daughter, asks Kamalo

"... Who made such an unjust rule na? You made that master and slave rule na, uncle? That's why you are living in a very beautiful house only eating and drinking and smoking and dancing while we are toiling in the fields for your enjoyment na? (Family Saga, 29 - 30)."

The sentiments expressed by Sawa resonate with Mbembe's observation of how power is performed in the post colony, when he notes that:

"Beyond this concern specifically with the mouth,

belly and phallus, the body itself is the principal locale of the idioms and fantasies used in depicting power. But if, as we have suggested, it is the festivities and celebrations that are the vehicles par excellence, for giving expression to the commandment and staging its displays of magnificence and prodigality, then the body in question is firstly that eats and drinks, and secondly a body that is open both ways (1992: 7). “

There are number of other instances in the play where Kamalo is portrayed performing power over the oppressed: The rape of Sawa, the detention of Kamala and the dispossession of his family.

Having dramatized how power is performed by the oppressor, Butake, in the second part of the play, simulates a research, such as is always conducted in theatre for development.

It is usually at this stage in theatre for development that the facilitators gather information about the target community as a way of identifying the structural problem facing the oppressed. In this play, this is done through the backward glance that Kamala and his children make into their history right from the pre-colonial to the post-colonial period. Through this research, they discover a number of problems facing them which interestingly originate from the mysterious relationship between Kamalo and Kamala. Through role-play, they manage to reconstruct their past, and in the process discover the underlying causes of their conflict with Kamalo, as well as the oppression and exploitation that he directs at them. They also find out that Kamalo and Kamala are real blood brothers, indeed twins. With this realization, they decide to create a play that would prick Kamalo's conscience and make him stop his acts of oppression and exploitation and also to remind him that they are one family.

After identifying the causes of oppression, by using possibilities of interactive theatre where dialogue between the oppressor and the oppressed can take place, Butake creates a site which enables the oppressor to become aware of and change his oppressive behaviors and relationships.

Thus adopting the techniques of Boal's (1979) 'The Theatre of the Oppressed', the play initiates a conversation on the theme of oppression that would eventually expiate and humanize the oppressor signified in the play in the grotesque body of the oppressor character, Kamalo. This is revealed through the moralizing statement of Kamala the oppressed, when he informs his children that:

“...Kamalo cannot get away with this...this...fraud and immorality. The other day he told me that might is right. You know what I told him? We will prevail through the force of argument; not the argument of force” (Family Saga, 38-9).

Therefore, unlike in the earlier plays where the oppressed reverted to violence to break out of their oppression, in this play Butake pursues dialogue and reconciliation as a strategy of transforming and reforming the oppressor.”

Thus in this last part of the play, Butake employs Brecht's epic theatre techniques and Boal's (1996) forum theatre methods to provide learning opportunities for the oppressor to change his ways. Kamala and his children create and present a performance depicting Kamalo's oppressive nature. Through the dramatic possibilities of the play within a play performed by Kamala and his children, Kamalo is not only confronted with his oppressive actions but is also invited to take a role. It is through participating in this performance that his conscience is pricked, and he is eventually made to re-examine his past deeds especially his oppressive actions. He painfully learns that he has been an oppressor. The play within a play technique that is used to reveal to him his history, which had all along been concealed from him enables him to discover that agents of imperialism have been manipulating him to believe that the accord that he signed with Kamala legitimated his oppression. Thus the encounter with his history of origin, in this performance helps him, to overcome his oppressive nature and eventually learns that oppression is evil.

It is in this regard therefore that it can be argued that Butake subverts the techniques of the Theatre of the Oppressed to provide opportunity for the oppressor to learn how to stop acting oppressively, instead of the received notion that it is the oppressed who always needs to learn through possibilities offered by the processes of Theatre of the Oppressed how to overcome oppression. Right from the outset, this play focuses on the oppressor more than the oppressed. In fact, the oppressed in this play are presented as already conscientized when we meet them; throughout the play they strive to transfer the same consciousness to Kamalo, the oppressor, as a way of ameliorating him. Unlike in his earlier mainstream plays, where characters who symbolize oppression are destroyed or publicly humiliated, in this play, the symbol of oppression is assisted to change and, then to be rehabilitated and re-integrated into the society. The dialogue between Kamala and his son clearly reflects this new vision:

“Ngong: How do we proceed? How are we to solve the problem? Is it possible to cure the baboon of his red buttock?

Kamala: Very good question. How do you cure the baboon of his red buttock without killing him? But there is still a better question: what is the problem?

Ngong: The sun shines in the day and the moon in the night, father. We know what the problem is. (Family Saga, 40)”

It is notable that this play does not anticipate change in

the consciousness of the oppressed; it is in fact the oppressed people who are the agents of intervention. In the play, theatre games are deployed by the actors on stage as a way of involving the spectators in the auditorium thus converting them in a Boalian sense into 'spec-actors.' This is aptly captured by Kamala's direct address to the spectators as follows:

"Good people, this is only the beginning, but a very promising one. We will be practicing here every day until Kamalo comes to see what we have prepared for his entertainment and the amusement of his papa. Will you, please, kindly join us every day for the practice sessions? As you can see, dancing and play are very good for the heart and the soul; for the body and the mind... (Family Saga, 47)."

CONCLUSION

Though this play deploys the strategies of theatre of the oppressed, it actually gestures towards what O'Toole' suggests as a theatre of the oppressor, clearly targeting the conscience of the oppressor; Kamala who is the oppressed character in the play puts it quite aptly thus:

"We will dance for them. As slaves it is our duty. To entertain our masters and owners, but it is also an occasion to dialogue with Kamalo through dance and song..." (Family Saga, 159)."

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