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WOLE SOYINKA'S CONCEPTS OF THEATRE: A STUDY OF A DANCE OF THE FORESTS, THE ROAD, AND KONGI'S HARVEST

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WOLE SOYINKA'S CONCEPTS OF THEATRE: A STUDY OF A DANCE OF THE FORESTS, THE ROAD, AND KONGI'S HARVEST

By

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ABSTRACT

WOLE SOYINKA'S CONCEPTS OF THEATRE: A STUDY OF A DANCE OF THE FORESTS, THE ROAD, AND KONGI'S HARVEST

By

Inih Akpan Ebong

This is a study of Wole Soyinka's concepts of theatre, namely: the meaning of theatre; the correspondences of time, space and scenery; and the musical idiom of theatre. Chapter I states and explains Soyinka's definition of theatre--a microscopic duplicate of the "man-cosmos organisation"--and then examines Soyinka's application of the definition to A Dance of the Forests. Chapter II examines the mutual intersection of time, space and scenery as it applies to The Road. Chapter III examines Soyinka's concept of music--a "communicant" and catalytic matrix of transition and a "solvent"--and its application to Kongi's Harvest. Chapter IV concludes the study with an appraisal of Wole Soyinka as artist, and his importance and significance to the rapidly growing contemporary African theatre. This study maintains that the coterminous transitional world--a coeval world of the living, the dead and unborn--is the key to Soyinka's total vision of theatre.

DEDICATION

To my University of Calabar Students

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This study was financed with a grant from the University of Calabar Staff Development Programme. I am grateful to my Faculty Adviser, Professor Farley P. Richmond, for his useful advice and supervision of my work. I am also grateful to Professors Frank C. Rutledge and Jon E. Baisch for accepting to serve on my Guidance Committee and for the interest they have shown in my work. To my good friend and colleague, Mr. Paul Kofi Egbo, with whom I have had many lively, and sometimes turbulent, discussions and debates which have, in many ways, helped the final product of my work. Mr. E. James Nsima, Miss Ella Jones, Messrs. George Wilson, Mark Frank, and Jim Veenstra, Mr. and Mrs. Soba Fawunmi, Ms. Nanette Marc,and Miss Angela Logan--our family friends--for their immense contributions in many other ways during our sojourn here in the United States. To my mother, for her unqualified moral and financial support and the anguish of separation these past years. My relations and friends in Nigeria and elsewhere for their understanding and patience. My typist, Mrs. Nancy Heath, for a job well done. And, last but not the least, my wife Stella and my three children for their moral support, love, patience and understanding throughout the period of my study and research.

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INTRODUCTION

Wole Soyinka is, perhaps, the most prolific and best known African writer throughout the world. Since the first appearance of his work in the late 1950s, the study of his drama has been largely informed by two critical approaches, namely, the literary and the literary-theatrical. The former views his drama purely as literature, and emphasizes mainly the style, themes, language, plot, etc. The latter approach tries to discuss his drama partly as literature and partly as theatre scripts, but lays more emphasis on the literature of the drama. The reason, perhaps, is that a majority of Soyinka's critics are men with a stronger background in literature than theatre. However, both critical approaches have been largely and equally influenced to date by three principal critical attitudes, namely, the referentialist, evolutionist, and mythic or folkloristic.

The referentialist attitude is a selectivist approach: it selects sections or parts of the drama, and tries to establish an intimate correspondence or correspondences between the playwright's mythic, and sometimes fictive, imagination and the socio-political realities, institutions and personages of his time. The evolutionist attitude tries to trace the development of Soyinka's drama from Yoruba ritual archetypes through Western dramatic and theatrical traditions. The evolutionist critics agree that Soyinka is (1) an

African writer with a stronger Western than African style, (2) a writer with a stronger African than Western theatrical bias, and (3) midway between African and European traditions; that is, his drama is a perfect synthesis of both traditions. The mythic perspective focuses mainly on the traditional Yoruba mythological, theatrical, and cosmological precepts that best inform all of Soyinka's work.

In view of these, comparisons between Soyinka and Western dramatists such as Beckett, Arthur Miller, Brecht, Shakespeare, the Jacobeans and Victorian writers, are frequently made by Soyinka's critics. References to traditional Yoruba theatre, rituals and mythologies such as those of the Alarinjo theatre, the Egungun cult, and the gods Obatala, Sango, Esu, and especially Ogun, are also frequently made about Soyinka's drama.

While these critical stances are valid and just, and are germane matrices for understanding Soyinka's work, none of them has given any considerable and sustained attention to Soyinka's concepts of theatre and the dramatic arts. The importance of these concepts can no longer be ignored, because they provide a vital and significant basis for a better understanding of Soyinka's work.

Statement of Purpose

The purpose of this study is to fulfill this need by first, identifying Soyinka's definition of theatre and two of his theatre concepts and, secondly, to apply both the definition and the two

theatre concepts to three of Soyinka's published plays with the sole purpose of establishing their cognitive and aesthetic potentials.

Justification and Significance

Since Wole Soyinka began his career as a writer about the mid-1950s, several books and articles on his work have been published. Of these, three books, Wole Soyinka,[1] The Writing of Wole Soyinka[2] and The Movement of Transition,[3] by Gerald Moore, Eldred Durosimi Jones and Oyin Ogunba, respectively, are exclusive publications on Soyinka's works--drama, poetry and novel. Other books such as A Dance of Masks[4] by Jonathan Peters, African Literature: A Critical View[5] by David Cook, Long Drums and Cannons[6] and Mother is Gold,[7] by

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[1]Gerald Moore, Wole Soyinka (New York: Africana Publishing Corporation, 1971).

[2]Eldred Durosimi Jones, The Writing of Wole Soyinka (London: Hienemann Educational Books, Ltd., 1973).

[3]Oyin Ogunba, The Movement of Transition: The Study of the Plays of Wole Soyinka (Ibadan: Ibadan University Press, 1975).

[4]Jonathan Peters, A Dance of Masks: Senghor, Achebe, Soyinka (Washington, D.C.: Three Continents Press, 1978).

[5]David Cook, African Literature: A Critical View (London: Longman, 1977).

[6]Margaret Laurence, Long Drums and Cannons: Nigerian Dramatists and Novelists 1952-1966 (London: Longman, 1968.

[7]Adrian Roscoe, Mother is Gold: A Study in West African Literature (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1971).

Margaret Laurence and Adrian Roscoe, respectively, contain valuable chapters and information about various aspects of Soyinka's works. However, none of these sources either develops or examines Soyinka's definition and concepts of theatre.

Gerald Moore's Wole Soyinka is a valuable book: it examines some of Soyinka's plays especially the tragedies, some poems, and Soyinka's novel The Interpreters. Gerald Moore focuses attention on Soyinka's themes, structure and meanings. Besides the biographical information he provides about Soyinka and his early work in the theatre, particularly at the Royal Court Theatre, London, Gerald Moore's book provides some of the important philosophical and metaphysical grounds for serious interpretation and understanding of Soyinka's works. He writes, for instance, apropos of Soyinka's tragedy: "Soyinka restores to the word 'tragic' its proper weight of meaning."[8] Moore bases his conclusions, which later critics and scholars have acknowledged, elaborated and explained, on his investigations of Soyinka's works and essays, on the actual performances of the plays and the critical responses and reactions that followed the performances, and on his personal knowledge of, and acquaintance with, the playwright.

The Movement of Transition by Oyin Ogunba is the first (and perhaps the only) publication to examine the plays exclusively. Ogunba undertakes a more detailed, multi-directional study of Soyinka's plays, and by so doing accomplishes at greater depth one of Eldred

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[8]Gerald Moore, p. 46.

Jones' objectives in The Writing of Wole Soyinka: the thematic and structural study of eight of Soyinka's published plays. In A Dance of Masks, a comparative study of the poetry of Leopold Senghor, the novels of Chinua Achebe, and the poetry, novel and drama of Wole Soyinka, Jonathan Peters examines some of Soyinka's vital contributions to the socio-cultural "awareness in post-independence Africa."[9] A considerable chapter of Roscoe's Mother is Gold examines Soyinka's satire and language and the playwright's fusion of European and African "literary" traditions to create the modern "African" theatre. Roscoe also makes an attempt to establish Soyinka's ritual and cathartic process of re-unification and re-integration of man with the enduring and imperishable strands of primordial beginnings.

Amongst the most valuable articles on Soyinka's work are Dan Izevbaye's "Language and Meaning in Soyinka's The Road,"[10] Nick Wilkinson's "Demoke's Choice in Soyinka's A Dance of the Forests,"[11] and Femi Osofisan's "Tiger on Stage: Wole Soyinka and Nigerian Theatre."[12] Izevbaye critically examines the use and the dynamics of language, as well as the depth and meaning of the poetry, in

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[9]Jonathan Peters, p. 225.

[10]D. S. Izevbaye, "Language and Meaning in Soyinka's The Road," African Literature Today 8: 52-65.

[11]Nick Wilkinson, "Demoke's Choice in Soyinka's A Dance of the Forests," The Journal of Commonwealth Literature 10 (3): 22-27.

[12]Femi Osofisan, "Tiger on Stage: Wole Soyinka and Nigerian Theatre," Oyin Ogunba and Abiola Irele (eds.), Theatre in Africa (Ibadan: Ibadan University Press, 1978), pp. 151-175.

The Road. Wilkinson is particularly concerned with the interpretation of the symbolism of the Half-Child in A Dance of the Forests, and finding the moral equation that most informs Soyinka's work. Osofisan is concerned with the "self-exploration and self-mystification" of Soyinka's metaphysical world,[13] his "metaphysical . . . cathartic exploration of communal chaos [which] invariable concludes on a tragic tone,"[14] and, in part, Soyinka's importance and significance to the Nigerian stage. Two other important articles, "The Origin's of A Dance and the Forests"[15] and "Tragedy--Greek and Yoruba: A Cross-Cultural Perspective,"[16] by James Gibbs and Robert Plant Armstrong, respectively, provide valuable insights into Soyinka's drama. While Gibbs traces the origins and development of, and the influences that moulded Soyinka's A Dance of the Forests, Armstrong undertakes a comparative study both of Yoruba and Greek tragedy from a psychocultural and anthropological perspective. Claiming that tragedy is the enactment of the dialectics of synthesis gone awry, Armstrong advocates a "cultural" and an "anthropologically probable definition of tragedy" as

> a work of affecting presence which enacts at the substantive level a perversion or a denial of the cultural myth, doing

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[13]Femi Osofisan, p. 152.

[14]Ibid., p. 157.

[15]James Gibbs, "The Origins of A Dance of the Forests," African Literature Today 8: 66-71.

[16]Robert Plant Armstrong, "Tragedy--Greek and Yoruba: A Cross-Cultural Perspective," Research in African Literatures 7 (1): 23-43.

> so in such a way that with the defeat of the tragic protagonist a paradoxical terminal situation prevails, taking the protagonist down but the audience up.[17]

James Gibbs, on the other hand, identifies Soyinka's tragedy with the Nietzschean parallel of the struggles between Dionysus and Apollo.

Very few dissertations have been written on Soyinka in the United States and Canada, according to the Humanities International Dissertations Index in the fields of linguistics, speech, literature, and theatre. Three doctoral dissertations pertain to the socio-political and cultural concerns of Soyinka, his dramaturgy, and the traditional Yoruba theatrical elements that inform his work. "From Swamp Dwellers to Madmen and Specialists: The Drama of Wole Soyinka" by Joseph Okpaku[18] is a chronological study in the development of Soyinka's dramaturgy and thematic vision. "The World in Search of Viable Leadership: A Study of Structure and Communication in Soyinka's Scripts" by Oluropo Sekoni[19] is principally concerned with the intrinsic relationship between structure and meaning in Soyinka's drama, and in the socio-political and cultural concerns of the playwright. June Balistreri examines the elements of the traditional Yoruba Alarinjo Theatre and how they have influenced Soyinka's drama in

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[17]Armstrong, p. 43.

[18]Joseph O. O. Okpaku, Sr., "From Swamp Dwellers to Madmen and Specialists: The Drama of Wole Soyinka" (Ph.D. Dissertation: Stanford University, 1978).

[19]Oluropo Johnson Sekoni, "The World in Search of Viable Leadership: A Study of Structure and Communication in Soyinka's Scripts" (Ph.D. Dissertation: The University of Wiscosnin, Madison, 1977).

"The traditional Elements of the Yoruba Alarinjo Theatre in Wole Soyinka's Plays."[20] Twenty other theses and dissertations pertain to Soyinka and his African contemporaries--poets, novelists and playwrights--grouped into thematic, structural and other studies.

After reviewing the relevant sources, this study, it is hoped, will be of significant interest to theatre critics and practitioners, to scholars and ordinary readers of Soyinka's plays. The study proposes to identify the cognitive implications of Soyinka's theatre concepts, which will be significantly useful to theatre directors and actors who invariably need to know and understand the playwright's vision of theatre in order to interpret and produce his plays. The objective also is to contribute to a knowledge of Soyinka's theatre and drama, and to aid the interpretation and better understanding and appreciation of his plays. It is hoped that this study will also give some insights into the current trends in African, especially Nigerian, theatre.

This is the first study in the United States and Canada (and, perhaps, elsewhere) on Soyinka's concepts and definition of theatre.

Scope, Organization and Methodology of Study

This is a study of Soyinka's definition of theatre and two of his ideas or concepts of theatre, namely: his concept of time,

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[20]June Clara Balistreri, "The Traditional Elements of the Yoruba Alarinjo Theatre in Wole Soyinka's Plays" (Ph.D. Dissertation: University of Colorado at Boulder, 1978).

space, and scenery, and his concept of theatrical music and dance. The study examines and analyzes Soyinka's application of his theatre definition and two concepts to his plays, namely: A Dance of the Forests (1960), The Road (1964)[21] and Kongi's Harvest (1965).[22] The study concludes on an appraisal of Wole Soyinka as artist, and of his importance and significance to contemporary African theatre.

The approach to this study is basically cultural, and is based on extensive library research of published and unpublished materials. The principal culture of reference is the Yoruba culture, which is adopted in this study against a general background of the African culture. The choice of this approach has been greatly influenced by a desire to comprehend the cultural roots to and basis of Soyinka's perception of theatre, and to show how those roots have served his creative efforts.

The study is divided into four chapters: Chapter I states and explains Soyinka's definition of theatre, and its application to A Dance of the Forests. Chapter II examines and discusses Soyinka's concept of time, space, and scenery, as it applies to The Road. The musical heritage which is at the heart of Soyinka's theatre, is examined as it applies to Kongi's Harvest in Chapter III. Chapter IV concludes the study with an appraisal of Soyinka as artist, and of his importance and signficance to contemporary African theatre.

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[21]Published in Wole Soyinka, Collected Plays 1 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1973).

[22]Wole Soyinka, Death and the King's Horseman (London: Eyre Methuen, 1975).

Each chapter opens with introductory comments, followed by a statement of the problem or subject matter of the chapter. The cultural background to the problem is then presented, and followed by an explanation or examination of the problem against its background. This is then applied to a detailed study of the plays, for the sole purpose of discovering and delineating the playwright's application of the concepts in the writing of the plays, as outlined above. The plot of each play is examined before a discussion on it follows.

A Biographical Sketch of Wole Soyinka

More familiarly and internationally known as Wole Soyinka, Akinwande Oluwole Soyinka was born on July 13, 1934, in Abeokuta, Nigeria. The Yourba town, Abeokuta, literally means the city "under the rock," and derives its name from two Yoruba words: "abe" meaning "under" and "okuta" meaning "rock." Geographically, the town of Abeokuta is surrounded by rocks, the most significant (and a tourist center) being the Olumo Rocks. River Ogun also runs through the town. The river is important to this study because its name (Ogun) links directly with Soyinka's chosen patron and god--Ogun. "One of the master images of all his writings," says Gerald Moore, "is a swift, rocky river-bed bridged by the striding and reckless road of man's modernity, or by the effort necessary to pass from one phase of existence to another."[23] As a poet, novelist, critic, and playwright, whose plays have been successfully performed in London, New York City, Washington, Chicago, Paris, and elsewhere besides

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[23]Gerald Moore, Wole Soyinka, p. 4.

Nigeria and other African states, Soyinka writes with a profound tragic sense of the obstacles to human progress.

Having completed his primary school education in Abeokuta, Soyinka went to Ibadan (about 50 miles from Abeokuta) where he attended the Government College, a leading secondary school in Nigeria at that time. Later, he worked for eighteen months as stores assistant in the Government Medical Stores in Lagos. At the age of eighteen, he entered the newly completed University College of Ibadan (the first University College in Nigeria) in 1952. He left Ibadan to read English at the University of Leeds (England), where he had studied under the distinguished literary critic G. Wilson Knight. He graduated from Leeds in 1958.

His career as a writer probably began about 1950-51. While "in school," he had begun to write

> the usual little sketches for production, the occasional verse, you know, the short story, etc., and I think about 1951 I had the greatest excitement, of having a short story of mine broadcast on the Nigerian Broadcasting Service and that was sort of my first public performance.[24]

Ever since than, Soyinka has continued to write and publish poems, novels, plays, and essays. In spite of the high quality and sophistication of his other works, he is better remembered as a playwright--a compliment which is justified by his many and brilliant contributions to the rapidly growing contemporary African theatre.

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[24]Wole Soyinka in an interview with Lewis Nkosi, August, 1962. See Cosmo Pieterse and Dennis Duerden, eds., African Writers Talking (New York: Africana Publishing Corporation, 1972), p. 172.

While in Leeds, Soyinka was "particularly active in university theatre, offering many productions of classical and modern European plays, often in their original languages."[25] Late in 1958, Soyinka worked for the Royal Court Theatre, London, as a script-reader; a position that gave him the opportunity not only to watch at first hand the direction and stage-management of a variety of modern and classical European plays, but also to meet and associate with such versatile writers as Samuel Beckett, Ionesco, Osborne and others. According to Gerald Moore, it was at the Royal Court theatre,

> in the years between 1956 and 1960, that the early plays of John Osborne, Arnold Wesker, John Arden, Ann Jellicoe, Samuel Beckett, and a number of other rising dramatists were first performed. Players like Joan Plowright, Mary Ure, Frank Finlay, Kenneth Haigh and Alan Bates all founded their reputations there during the same period . . . Soyinka, who also joined their writers' group, was able to take part in presenting an evening of dramatic improvisation during the summer of 1959, whose cast included the newly-arrived South African actor Bloke Modisane and the West African Johnnie Saker, as well as Soyinka himself.[26]

Upon his return to Nigeria, Soyinka founded "The 1960 Masks" and later the Orishun Theatre, both of which were professional theatre companies. He then wrote A Dance of the Forests for the October 1, 1960, Nigerian Independence celebrations. The only production of the play so far, directed by Soyinka himself and performed by "The 1960 Masks," satirizes the nation's euphoria for independence by stripping it of all its romantic legends and showing that the present is no more glorious and golden than the past or the

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[25]Gerald Moore, Wole Soyinka, p. 5.

[26]Ibid., p. 7.

yet unknown future. Among his published works are The Lion and the Jewel (first performed in Ibadan in 1959 under the direction of Geoffrey Axworthy, and published in 1963), The Trials of Brother Jero (1960), Jero's Metamorphasis (1972), Madmen and Specialists (1971), and The Bacchae of Euripides (1973), an adaptation of Euripides' The Bacchae, commissioned by the National Theatre of Great Britain and first performed in London in 1973. In his plays,

> Western elements are skillfully fused with a subject matter deeply rooted in Yoruba tradition. His use of symbolism and flashback sometimes makes his plays, though they are ingeniously plotted, hard to understand. His best works exhibit humour and fine poetic style as well as a gift for irony and satire and for accurately matching the language of his complex characters to their social position and moral qualities.[27]

Among his poems are Idanre and Other Poems (1967), Poems from Prison (1969), republished as A Shuttle in the Crypt (1972). He has also published two novels, The Interpreters (1965) and Season of Anomy (1973), and a documentary, The Man Died (1972), written in prison about Nigeria's military officers, the Nigeria-Biafra war, and his imprisonment. At the beginning of the Nigeria-Biafra war in 1967, Soyinka was imprisoned "without trial" by the Federal authorities of Nigeria. He was released two years later in 1969.

Between 1960 and 1964, Soyinka co-edited and published Black Orpheus, an important literary journal. He also edited and published Transition, another literary journal, in the early 70s. Besides his book, Myth, Literature and the African World, Soyinka has published many leading articles in journals and anthologies. He has lectured

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[27] Encyclopaedia Britannica, Vol. IX, 15th Ed. (1974), p. 391.

world-wide: in Britain, the United States, Africa, and France, and is currently a Professor and Head of Drama at the University of Ife, Nigeria. His play, The Road, won first prize at the Dakar Festival of Negro Arts (1966). He also recieved one of the two Arts Council John Whiting Awards for 1966/67 for his work as playwright.

Soyinka sees the artist as the "visionary" of and for his society and time. The artist's function is to record and transmit the values and experiences of his society and time, as well as provide a historical perspective on his time.[28]

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[28]See Wole Soyinka, "And After the Narcissist?" African Forum 1 (4): 53-64; "The Writer in a Modern African State," in The Writer in Modern Africa, ed. Per Wastberg (Uppsala: The Scandinavian Institute of African Studies, 1968): 14-21; "The Choice and Use of Language," Cultural Events in Africa 75: 3-6.

CHAPTER I

SOYINKA'S MAN-COSMOS THEATRE

This chapter states Soyinka's definition of theatre, provides the cultural background to the definition, and then explains the definition in perspective of its cultural determinants. The chapter then examines in detail Soyinka's application of his definition of theatre to the writing of A Dance of the Forests. The plot of the play precedes the discussion on the application of the definition to the play. The chapter concludes with observations and comments on Soyinka's theatre definition, and suggests the implication and value of the definition to the history both of god and man.

Soyinka's Definition

In an important book on the African literary and theatrical world, in which he makes known some of his key ideas about theatre, the arts and the tragic concomitance between human and divine actions, Wole Soyinka states:

> Theatre then is one arena, one of the earliest that we know of, in which man has attempted to come to terms with the spatial phenomenon of his being . . . in speaking of space, let us recognise first of all that with the advancement of technology and the evolution . . . of the technical sensibility, the spatial vision of theatre has become steadily contracted into purely physical acting areas on a stage

as opposed to a symbolic arena for metaphysical contests (my emphasis).[29]

This definition of theatre of Soyinka has much deeper meanings and implications than the limited understanding the words and phrases may, at first hand, provide.

The Fundamental Defining Concept

Soyinka's definition (and concept) of theatre is predicated on a "man-cosmos organisation"[30] in which man is the primary centre. Thus he states, as his "fundamental defining concept," that "the stage is brought into being by a communal presence . . . [and] becomes the affective, rational and intuitive milieu of the total communal experience, historic, race-formative, cosmogonic" (my emphasis).[31] Both the definition and Soyinka's "fundamental defining concept" of theatre can best be understood in terms of the cultural determinants or precepts that gave them birth.

Cultural Background to Soyinka's Theatre

The culture of reference is specifically Yoruba, and generally African. Soyinka draws extensively from the Yoruba world of myth and metaphysics. The Yoruba world dates back to the very origin both of god and man.

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[29]Wole Soyinka, Myth, Literature and the African World (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1976), p. 40.

[30]Ibid., p. 8.

[31]Ibid., p. 43.

According to Yoruba mythology, the godhead was one in the beginning, and was attended by the god's personal slave, Atunda. The latter's ancestry is, however, obscure and subject only to speculation. But it is generally conceded that Atunda was the first lesser being (not necessarily a mortal being) to co-exist with the godhead. He is also believed to be the first iconoclast and revolutionary in history: the myth relates that out of jealousy, anger, dissatisfaction, or some other unknown cause, Atunda disturbed the balance in the cosmos and then caused an eruption within the cosmic dome by fragmenting the godhead into an uncountable number of pieces:

> The cause of the gods' spiritual unrest dated from their own origin. Once, there was only the solitary being, the primogenitor of god and man, attended only by his slave, Atunda . . . perhaps the original one moulded him from earth to assist him with domestic chores . . . the slave rebelled . . . rolled a huge boulder on the god as he tended his garden on a hillside, sent him hurtling into the abyss in a thousand and one fragments.[32]

The fragmentation of the godhead by Atunda led naturally to three significant developments, namely: the multiplicity of Yoruba gods, the severance of man from god and god from man, and the creation of a gulf between man and god or between the mortal and the immortal worlds. The gulf or "abyss" became a thick, impenetrable growth--a no-man's land. The reunion of man with god and god with man was, therefore, sealed off and made impossible. Nevertheless, both man and god were intimately aware of

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[32]Ibid., p. 27. Also see Wole Soyinka, Idanre in Idanre and Other Poems (London: Eyre Methuen, 1967; reprinted 1977), pp. 57-85.

the anguish of loneliness caused by the severance of one from the other. They were also very conscious of their inseparable (and indestructible) essences; thus they sought reunion through their conquest of the abyss.

Man sought to gather up or re-unite with his cosmos and divine essence by bridging the gulf with rituals and sacrifices offered to the gods. Ogun, Soyinka's patron god, led the gods through the "chaotic growth" of the abyss to re-unite the gods with their human essence, and to make it possible for man to more intimately re-unite with his divine essence. In Soyinka's brilliant account of this vertical re-assemblage of essences,

> This gulf is what must be constantly diminished by the sacrifices, the rituals, the ceremonies of appeasement to those cosmic powers which lie guardian to the gulf. Spiritually, the primordial disquiet of the Yoruba psyche may be expressed as the existence in collective memory of a primal severance in transitional ether, whose first effective defiance is symbolised in the myth of the gods' descent to earth and the battle with immense chaotic growth which had sealed off reunion with man. For they were coming down, not simply to be acknowledge but to be re-united with human essence, to reassume that portion of re-creative transient awareness which the first deity Orisa-nla possessed and expressed through his continuous activation of man images--brief reflections of divine facets--just as man is grieved by a consciousness of the loss of the external essence of his being and must indulge in symbolic transactions to recover his totality of being.[33]

The myth invariably accounts for the origins of Yoruba rituals and drama (a detailed account of those origins is beyond the scope of this study).

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[33]Myth, Literature and the African World, pp. 144-145.

The Yoruba world, it is important to note, comprises various levels or planes, namely: the world of the living, the dead, the unborn and the gods. It also comprises the mineral, animal, and vegetable worlds or kingdoms. Each plane of the Yoruba world lies very close to and overlaps the other; they are mutually co-existent and are held together by the gulf or abyss. The abyss also serves as or provides the passage from one world to the other; for example, it provides the passage from the world of the living to the world of the dead, and vice versa. Thus, it has come to be identified with transition and then called the "abyss of transition" or the "transitional gulf." Soyinka has identified the transitional abyss as "the fourth stage" which lies between two areas of existence.[34] He, therefore, describes it as

> the "chthonic realm," the seething cauldron of the dark world will and psyche, the transitional yet inchoate matrix of death and becoming. Into this universal womb once plunged and emerged Ogun, the first actor, disintegrating within the abyss.[35]

In the African world, there is a mutual correspondence between man and the gods and all of phenomena. Each is a close neighbour to the other, and it is believed that they are all present during, and participate in, traditional festivals. The festival is, like ritual, the commemoration of historic and communal events such

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[34]See Wole Soyinka, "The Fourth Stage," in The Morality of Art, ed.: D. W. Jefferson (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1969), pp. 119-134. Re-written and published in Myth, Literature and the African World, pp. 140-160.

[35]Myth, Literature and the African World, p. 142.

as the coming of a new season or harvest. Traditional festivals involve, among other things, music, dance and masquerade, and the communal presence both of man and his cosmic neighbours. Thus the festival is generally regarded as the great artistic institution of the African world. Ritual is at the heart of every performance. The performance itself is not merely for entertainment, but an integral part of life itself. It could be concluded from the foregoing that theatre (that is, the traditional artistic institution) constitutes a significant reality upon which the traditional African bases most of his perceptions of life. Therefore, a symbolic action or ritual enactment is to the African mind not merely "symbolic" but real. Implicit in this perception of reality is the fact or understanding that symbolism per se has, perhaps, far more greater meaning and implication to the African mind than it may have to the Western mind.

This background of the Yoruba and African world constitutes, therefore, a germane ground matrix for a better understanding of Soyinka's definition of theatre, and of his other concepts or ideas about theatre and the dramatic arts.

Explanation of Soyinka's Definition

Soyinka's definition of theatre deals principally with man and the space that surrounds him. Within this space man must "come to terms" with, comprehend, and then master "the spatial phenomenon of his being." The spatial definition of being, that is, man's quest for the comprehension and mastery of his miniscule self within

and in terms of the immensity of the macrocosmos, is in itself a ritual and metaphysical process towards the regeneration of life. It is in essence a rite de passage which derives from the myth of the primordial godhead and his slave Atunda, and involves the mutual process of death and birth.

The myth is a study in the fragmentation of the man-cosmos essence and the process of its re-assemblage--the gods seeking reunion with man and man with god. The spatial definition of being, therefore, is the metaphysical reunion or re-assemblage of the fragmented man-cosmos essence. It is a process which involves the protagonist in a daring act of will and disintegration within the abyss, at the perils of his own life. The protagonist combats the abyss for the sole purpose of re-uniting with his fragmented man-cosmos essence and being resorbed in phenomena, and of reaching out to new areas of awareness and becoming wiser.

The "arena" for this "metaphysical" act of will is the Yoruba world of man, the gods and phenomena. The world of man comprises principally the living, the dead, and the unborn. The world of phenomena comprises the animal, mineral, and vegetable kingdoms. But the African does not make such clear-cut distinctions between these worlds, since each is believed to exist in the other, or, at least, to lie very close to and overlap the other. They are, however, held together by the transitional abyss--a domain belonging neither to man nor gods, but carefully and jealously guarded by the gods who

were the first to forge a passage through it as well as bridge it with knowledge of the arts and sciences.[36]

Soyinka observes that the

> Commonly recognised in most African metaphysics are the three worlds . . . the world of the ancestor, the living, and the unborn. Less understood or explored is the fourth space, the dark continuum of transition where occurs the inter-transmutation of essence-ideal and materiality. It houses the ultimate expression of the cosmic will.[37]

His "arena," therefore, refers more specifically to this "fourth space," the transitional abyss which he has described, as quoted inter alia, as

> the "chthonic realm," the seething cauldron of the dark world will and psyche, the transitional yet inchoate matrix of death and becoming. Into this universal womb once plunged and emerged Ogun, the first actor, disintegrating within the abyss.[38]

Thus, Soyinka maintains the "stage" is or should be a "symbolic" portrayal of the gulf of transition. The "symbolic" portrayal inevitably presumes that all the other worlds of the Yoruba are mutually correspondent and co-existent in the transitional abyss. The conceptualization of space has, therefore, come to mean for Soyinka an inter-transmutational "continuum," having neither dimensions nor boundaries and constantly suggesting a multiplicity of ideas and meanings.

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[36]Ibid., p. 158.

[37]Ibid., p. 26.

[38]Ibid., p. 142.

Soyinka maintains that the stage is a "man-cosmos organisation"[39] or "cosmic envelope"[40] which is "brought into being by a communal presence."[41] The "communal presence" comprises the living, the dead, the unborn, the gods and their gnomic agencies, and presences drawn from the mineral, animal, and vegetable kingdoms. Thus are to be found in Soyinka's drama human and non-human characters, the dead, gods and the unborn; trees, rocks, rivers, birds, ants, frogs, and spirits, all of whom possess a cognitive life-force and speak the common language of the living. When they are not physically present on stage, they are presumed to be present but invisible--a view which derives from the African conception of the great artistic institution (the festival) as a communal event in which all phenomena are believed to participate.

Soyinka also sees the arena as a "constant battleground"[42] which provides "a multi-level experience of the mystical and the mundane."[43] Thus, he adds, the stage becomes "the affective, rational and intuitive milieu of the total communal experience, historic, race-formative, cosmogonic."[44] The stage is a "battleground" primarily because of its exploration of "metaphysical contests." The

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[39]Ibid., p. 8.

[40]Ibid., p. 41.

[41]Ibid., p. 43.

[42]Ibid.

[43]Ibid., p. 2.

[44]Ibid., p. 43.

arena is "affective" because of the complete immersion and total absorption of the protagonist in the ritual and communal experience, and because of how that experience affects the community or audience. It is a "rational" milieu because the conception of the arena as a "man-cosmos organisation" belongs to what the people consider to be real and cognitive to them. Stanley Macebuh makes the point that the "rationalist African universe" is believed to be "organically integrated, its components interrelated by virtue of a cosmogonic intention that preceded human existence."[45] And, according to Rev. Mbiti,

> The spirit world is very close to that of the physical human life, and people are very much aware of it, articulating it in their oral literature, in rituals, in ceremonies and as part of the mystique of the universe without which, perhaps, human life itself would be dull and boring.[46]

Soyinka's view of the theatre as an "intuitive milieu" derives from the traditional African view of festival as a ritual commemoration of a people's total history and cosmology. Intuition, therefore, relates more directly to the collective memory which recalls and re-enacts the historic, race-formative and cosmogonic experiences of the community. The "total communal experience," however, derives from the myth of the godhead and Atunda, the fragmentation of essence from being, the daring combat of the gods with the

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[45]Stanley Macebuh, "African Aesthetics in Traditional African Art," Okike 5: 14

[46]Rev. John Mbiti, "African Cosmology," in FESTAC '77 (London & Nigeria: African Journal Limited & The Internal Festival Committee, 1977), p. 49.

"chaotic growth" of the abyss, and the events and experiences that were sequel to that combat. The "Mysteries" of Ogun, Obatala and Sango (which lie beyond the scope of this study) are the traditional examples and re-creations of the collective memory both of god and man.

What Soyinka does then with his theatre (as his plays will illustrate) is to take these ideas from his traditional African world, re-interpret them in contemporary terms (and at the same time retain their primary essence), and apply the concepts or ideas to an interpretation of contemporary and modern themes. He finds the stage a germane symbolic vehicle for the exploration of mytho-history; that is, the man-cosmos history which begins with the myth of the godhead and continues to the yet unknown future--the past belongs to the dead, the present to the living and the future to the unborn.

Application of Definition to A Dance of the Forests

Soyinka's application of his definition of theatre to the writing of his plays varies from play to play. The fundamental essence of his definition, however, remains the same in nearly all his plays.

The Plot

The human community has, as a gesture of acknowledgment and respect, extended its invitation to the "illustrious ancestors" of the community to be present at the community's independence celebration. The celebration is known in the play as the "Gathering of the Tribes."

By inviting the "illustrious ancestors," the human community hopes to add grandeur and excellence, and to give profound meaning, to their celebration of independence or "Gathering of the Tribes." But Aroni, the Lame One and lieutenant to Forest Head, in whose power it is to fulfill the request of the human community, sends them "accusers" instead to represent the "illustrious ancestors" at the feast of independence. The "accusers," also labelled "obscenities," are Dead Man and his pregnant wife Dead Woman. They are chosen to represent the dead at the feast of the living because, in their "previous life they were linked in violence and blood with four of the living generation,"[47] namely: Demoke (the carver), Rola (the whore; known also as Madame Tortoise), Adenebi (council Orator), and Agboreko (soothsayer).

The play opens on an "empty clearing in the forest," amidst the distant drums and joyous atmosphere of the human celebration. Dead Man and Dead Woman break open the earth and arrive for the human celebration. But they are immediately rejected by representatives of the human community--Demoke, Rola and Adenebi. Meanwhile, Forest Head (the supreme deity), in mortal disguise as Obaneji, watches from a safe distance the unabashed rejection of the dead by the three representatives of the human community. As the dead wander into another part of the forest, Obaneji (Forest Head) joins the three representatives of the human community. He searchingly interrogates them, and then leads them into the innermost part of the forest for the sole purpose of letting the human community judge itself by the very path of its history.

Each of the human representatives carries a load of guilt: Demoke the artist has carved the "totem" for the celebration of the Gathering of the Tribes. In carving the "totem," he had maliciously caused the death of Oremole, his apprentice and ward to Oro. Rola has been instrumental to the death of three of her lovers; and Adenebi has used his position as council Orator to cause the death of many innocent users of the road. The three human representatives are fleeing the Gathering of the Tribes. It is during this flight that they meet Dead Man and Dead Woman, and are confronted and led away by Forest Head.

Structurally, the play is divided into three principal segments or movements in a manner that suggests the present, the past and the future. The living (Demoke, Rola and Adenebi), their world and the feast of the tribes represent or suggest the present. The dead (Dead Woman and Dead Man) represent the past; and the unborn child of Dead Woman (Half-Child) represents the future. The journey into the forest, led by Forest Head, begins with the present (in the "empty clearing in the forest") and moves retrospectively through the past (in the Court of Mata Kharibu) into the future (in the innermost part of the forest). The journey itself--a ritual process of exploration--is divided into the "Welcoming of the Dead" in which Dead Man and Dead Woman give account of their action during their time in the legendry empire of Mata Kharibu; the "Dance of the Half-Child" during which Dead Woman's suspended pregnancy is relieved of the unborn child (Half-Child)--a symbolic creation of the future; and

the "Dance of the Unwilling Sacrifice" in which Demoke pays dearly for his daring moral act to save the Half-Child from imminent destruction.

Meanwhile, two gods, Eshuoro[48] and Ogun, are engaged in what may be described as a bayonet-to-bayonet confrontation with each other. While Ogun seeks to justify Demoke's act, and to retain his human essence in Demoke, Eshuoro demands justice through vengeance for the malicious murder of his ward, Oremole. In carving the totem for the celebration of the "Gathering of the Tribes," and under possession by Ogun,

> Demoke chose, unwisely to carve Oro's sacred tree, araba. Even this might have passed unnoticed by Oro if Demoke had left araba's height undiminished. But Demoke is a victim of giddiness and cannot gain araba's heights. He would shorten the tree, but apprentice to him is one OREMOLE, a follower of Oro who fought against this sacrilege to his god. And Oremole won support with his mockery of the carver who was tied to earth. The apprentice began to work above his master's head; Demoke reached a hand and plucked him down [dead] . . . the final link was complete.[49]

The play ends with the triumph of Eshuoro over Ogun, followed by the ritual sacrifice of Demoke by Eshuoro.

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[48]Eshuoro is Soyinka's ingenious creation by grafting two personalities, Esu (Eshu) and Oro. In Yoruba cosmology, Oro is the "god of punishment and death" (Gerald Moore, Wole Soyinka, pp. 32, 35), and Esu the god of mischief, trickery, confusion and fate. By syndesizing Esu and Oro--Eshuoro--Soyinka gives a new meaning to both gods. "Eshuoro," he writes, "is the wayward flesh of ORO--Oro whose agency serves much of the bestial human, whom they invoke for terror." A Dance of the Forests, p. 5.

[49]A Dance of the Forests, p. 6.

Applying the Definition to the Play

In A Dance of the Forests, Soyinka is deeply committed to the portrayal of the "total communal experience"--the historic, race-formative and cosmogonic. The play opens on the human community amidst a communal celebration. Dead Man and Dead Woman travel "a long way" through "the understreams" to represent the dead at the feast of the living. They carry with them the unborn. Gods and demons also appear on the human scene. Murete (the tree-demon), for instance, leaves his dwelling "to drink millet wine at the feast of the living."[50] And Forest Head appears as Obaneji on the human scene and leads the human protagonists into the forest. Inside the forest, the principal gods (Ogun and Eshuoro) and their agencies, the dead, the living, the unborn, and all of phenomena, are brought together for the ritual re-creation of history.

The first phase of the history takes us to the ancient Court of Mata Kharibu. The human representatives (Rola, Demoke, Adenebi and Agboreko) and the dead (Dead Man and Dead Woman) are in this scene portrayed as they were in Mata Kharibu's Court more than "eight centuries" ago:

FOREST HEAD: . . . Well, is everything prepared?

ARONI: We are ready.

FOREST HEAD: Remind me, how far back are we?

ARONI: About eight centuries. Possibly more. One of their great empires. I forget which.

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[50]Ibid., p. 12.

FOREST HEAD: It matters nothing. . . .

> (Aroni waves his hand in a circle. The court of Mata Kharibu lights up gradually. Two thrones. One contains Mata Kharibu, the other, his queen, Madame Tortoise, both surrounded by splendour. A page plucks an African guitar. Mata Kharibu is angry; his eyes roll terribly; the court cowers. His queen, on the other hand, is very gay and cruel in her coquetry. She seems quite oblivious of the King's condition. The court poet (Demoke) stands a few feet from her. Behind him stands his scribe, a young boy, pen and scroll at the ready. Those not involved in the action at any time, freeze in one position.)[51]

We find in this scene that Demoke the Carver was, more than eight centuries ago, the court poet in Mata Kharibu's palace. Rola is the Madame Tortoise of this court; Adenebi the Court Historian; Agboreko, now as then the Soothsayer; Dead Man the Warrior, and Dead Woman his pregnant wife.

Mata Kharibu is angry because the Warrior (Dead Man) has refused to fight an unjust war, "the war of the queen's wardrobe."[52] Mata Kharibu has stolen a neighbouring King's wife, Madame Tortoise (Rola). Madame Tortoise's "rightful husband," from whom she was stolen by Mata Kharibu, does not consider her worth any battle. But Mata Kharibu,

> So bent on bloodshed . . . sends him a new message. Release the goods of this woman I took from you if there will be peace between us.[53]

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[51] Ibid., p. 46.

[52] Ibid., p. 48.

[53] Ibid., p. 49.

Warrior's refusal to "lead" his men "into battle merely to recover the trousseau of any women,"[54] coupled with his unresponsiveness to Madame Tortoise's overtures, earn him both castration and trade into slavery. His wife (Dead Woman), under the strain of pregnancy and grief, collapses and dies. The ultimate fate of Warrior is in large measure facilitated by the unabashed corruptness of Historian (Adenebi). It is he who negotiates the enslavement of Warrior with Slave-Dealer. Bribed by the latter, the deal is struck; Warrior is sold into slavery. The Court Physician (of whom Soyinka provides no counterpart among the human representatives) participates in the slave deal and is later invited to Historian's house "for some sherbert" and discussion on "the historical implications" of wars "fought . . . over nothing."[55] Meanwhile, Court Poet (Demoke) lets his Novice (Oremole) fall from the roof-top and break an arm while trying to get Madame Tortoise's canary. We also learn that "two days ago," a soldier had fallen from the same roof and died while trying to get Madame Tortoise's canary.

What Soyinka has done with the Mata Kharibu scene is to provide the vital historical link between the past and the present, and by it forewarn of the future. According to the Warrior,

> Unborn generations will be cannibals. . . . Unborn generations will, as we have done, eat up one another. . . . I took up soldiering to defend my country, but those to whom I gave the power to command my life abuse my trust in them.[56]

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[54]Ibid., p. 49.

[55]Ibid., pp. 54-55.

[56]Ibid., p. 49.

In their present lives, Rola is, now as before, a whore and has already unashamedly sent three of her lovers to their graves. Adenebi is, now as before, actively engaged in the corrupt and dangerous manipulation of the lives of others: he takes a substantial bribe from the owner of a passenger lorry named "Incinerator," and changes its certified capacity from "forty" to "seventy." On its way to the "Gathering of the Tribes" the lorry overturns, and sixty-five of its seventy passengers die. A further link between the past and the present is the totem itself. The past dominated Demoke's thought as he carved the totem:

> ADENEBI: Bestial. Yes, just the sort of thing you would carve, isn't it? Like your totem. Bestial it was. Utterly bestial.
>
> DEMOKE: Actually, that is what I mean. Madame Tortoise is the totem--most of it anyway. In fact, you might almost say she dominated my thoughts--she, and something else. About equally.[57]

Obaneji (Forest Head) acknowledges the totem as "the work of ten generations."[58] The totem is the symbol of the "accumulated heritage"[59] of the people. Adenebi tells us that it is the "accumulated heritage" of their foregone empires which they celebrate in the Gathering of the tribes:

> The accumulated heritage--that is what we celebrate. Mali. Chaka. Songhai. Glory. Empires.[60]

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[57] Ibid., p. 23.

[58] Ibid., p. 10.

[59] Ibid., p. 11.

[60] Ibid.

And they envision the invited ancestors to be

> The builders of empires. The descendants of our great nobility. . . . Let them symbolize all that is noble in our nation. Let them be our historical link for the reason of rejoicing. Warriors. Sages. Conquerors. Builders. Philosophers. Mystics. Let us assemble them round the totem of the nation and we will drink from their resurrected glory.[61]

But, ironically, these turn out to be accusers (Dead Woman, for instance, is still burdened with the load of pregnancy, for "it is a hard thing to carry this child for a hundred generations."[62]); and the journey into the forest (under Forest Head's spell), via the court of Mata Kharibu, is, indeed, the trial of history, both past, present, and future.

The historic vision persists in A Dance of the Forests, and Soyinka uses it to interpret modern themes. Amidst the jocund atmosphere of celebrations the predominant images are those of bloody violence, war, and death. The principal characters are in various ways blood-guilty and everything they have set their hands at doing, such as the totem carved by Demoke, bears the stigma of violence, blood, and death. Historian advises that "war is the only consistency that past ages afford us" and a "legacy which new nations seek to perpetuate," because "war is the destiny" of mankind. Thus, he justifies as "honourable" the "war of the queen's wardrobe" proclaimed by Mata Kharibu, by comparing it to the Trojan war:

> I have here the whole history of Troy. If you were not the swillage of pigs and could read the writings of wiser men, I

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[61] Ibid., p. 31.

[62] Ibid., p. 8.

> would show you the magnificence of the destruction of a beautiful city. I would reveal to you the attainments of men which lifted mankind to the ranks of gods and demi-gods. And who was the inspiration of this divine carnage? Helen of Troy, a woman whose honour became as rare a conception as her beauty. Would Troy, if it were standing today lay claim to perservation in the annals of history if a thousand valiant Greeks had not been slaughtered before its gates and a hundred thousand Trojans within her walls?[63]

The two wars in question--"war of the queen's wardrobe" and the Trojan war--are evidently unmatched in circumstance, importance and significance. First and foremost, Madame Tortoise is a "whore" whose legitimate husband does not consider worth a verbal war let alone a bloody war. But Mata Karibu, having stolen and usurped her, is bent on waging a bloody war to recover her "wardrobe" from her legal husband. By using the Trojan War as a reference point to justify the lesser war of Mata Kharibu, Soyinka is sharply contrasting and at the same time closely comparing both wars--and all wars in general. One war is examined against the background of the other and vice versa. The principal actors--humanity in general--in both wars are similarly compared and contrasted. By close analysis, the "war of the queen's wardrobe" is to the Trojan War a bestial diminutive beneath the latter's bestriding legs. The effect of the sharp contrast is Soyinka's emphasis on the absurdity and crass senselessness of the war of Mata Kharibu. More than merely emphasizing the absurdity of war, Soyinka uses it as a device to comment on his characters. Their personalities and moral dispositions assume shapes and forms before our eyes as we listen to Historian's oratory.

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[63]Ibid., p. 51.

But beyond that, Soyinka is making a larger statement about humanity. The comparison between both wars and the juxtapositon of opposite images in Historian's speech become, therefore, a matrix to Soyinka's visceral questioning and denunciation of classical values and the integrity of poets, essayists, historians, philosophers, etc., who have not only eulogized but have immortalized and deified the greatest carnage in human history--the Trojan War. By holding one mirror against another, Soyinka is iconoclastically debunking the classical values symbolized by Helen of Troy and epitomized in the Trojan War itself. By comparing Helen of Troy to Madame Tortoise, all the values the former symbolizes collapse and become one with the values the latter represents. Besides being a "whore," Madame Tortoise symbolizes all the "accumulated" filth of history. Demoke's bestial totem, a symbol of the "accumulated heritage" of history, is dominated by the personality and qualities of Madame Tortoise and, by indirection, of Helen of Troy. The very totem is also the symbol for both wars: it is the "accumulated heritage" of Troy as well as of all humanity. It stands for violence, blood-shed, corruption, and all the crimes and filth that history has bequeathed mankind. Therefore, by placing side by side opposite images--"pigs" against "wiser men," "destruction" against "attainments," divinity against "carnage," and the slaughtered valiants of history--Soyinka calls to question the integrity and sanity of poets, historians, philosophers, etc., who have deified history's most remembered "carnage" and offered it as a model of values for all ages. In effect, therefore, Soyinka

envisons "carnage"--divine or human--as the only "legacy" history has left for man. It is recurrent and cyclic, a "historic vision" which, he says,

> exists now, this moment, it is co-existent in present awareness. It clarifies the present and explains the future, . . . it is not a fleshpot for escapist indulgence, and it is vitally dependent on the sensibility that recalls it. This is not to deny the dangers which attend the development of this historic vision--a convenient term for the total acceptance of the human heritage. A historic vision is of necessity universal and any pretence to it must first accept the demand for a total re-examination of the whole phenomenon of humanity . . . the total collapse of ideals, the collapse of humanity itself.[64]

The counsel of the "historic vision" presumes that "the future [will] judge [humanity] by reversal of its path or by stubborn continuation."[65]

The psycho-historic journey in which Forest Head leads representatives of the human community into the womb of the forest is a process towards the spatial definition of being in phenomena through the "re-assemblage" of essences. In carving the totem for the "gathering of the tribes," Demoke destroys (severs) the human essence of Oro by reducing "araba's height," and causing the death of Oremole, Oro's ward. Demoke is himself Ogun's ward. (Both Oremole and Demoke represent the human essence both of Oro and Ogun.) Representatives of the human community flee the gathering of the tribes because of their individual and collective sense of guilt; a sense of guilt which

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[64]Wole Soyinka, "The Writer in a Modern African State," p. 19.

[65]A Dance of the Forests, p. 59.

rises from legend as well as from the present. Their flight from their guilt, collective or individual, and their refusal even to talk about it, can best be seen as a statement of their quest, however unconsiously, for higher values and essences which can only be found in the divine. Consider, for instance, the ensuing dialogue of the opening scene between the human representatives and Forest Head masquerading as Obaneji:

ROLA: No. Demoke stay here.

OBANEJI: You really think they are the people your father spoke of?

DEMOKE: I do. Anyway, what does it matter? I still don't know what brought me here.

ADENEBI: Well, don't be over-anxious to find out. At least not from those . . .

DEMOKE: I know we're bound to meet somewhere.

ADENEBI: For heaven's sake let's change the subject.

ROLA: For once I agree with you.

DEMOKE: The man who fell to his death--from the tree--I wonder if he was the other one . . .

ROLA: Dressed like that? For God's sake . . .

ADENEBI: I'm going back if you don't stop this.

OBANEJI: But you said you thought they were the ones Agboreko invoked--at your father's request.

DEMOKE: They say Aroni has taken control. That is when the guilty become afraid.

ROLA: Can't we talk of something else . . .

. . . .

ADENEBI (hurriedly.): Look, somehow we all seem to be keeping together. So why don't we forget all about unpleasantness?[66]

The gods, on the other hand, struggle to re-assemble and retain their human essence. While Ogun fights to retain his human essence in Demoke by defending the acts of the latter against Oremole, Eshuoro fights to re-claim the human essence of Oro by demanding justice through vengeance. Forest Head on his part wants to re-establish order and harmony through the union of flesh and its divine counterpart. He grieves, however, about its futility and acknowledges the guilt of fashioning man after the divinity of the gods:

> Trouble me no further. The fooleries of beings whom I have fashioned closer to me weary and distress me. Yet I must persist, knowing that nothing is ever altered. My secret is my eternal burden--to pierce the encrustations of soul-deadening habit, and bare the mirror of original nakedness--knowing full well, it is all futility. Yet I must do this alone, and no more, since to intervene is to be guilty of contradiction, and yet to remain altogether unfelt is to make my long-rumoured ineffectuality complete; hoping that when I have tortured awareness from their souls, that perhaps, only perhaps, in new beginnings . . .[67]

Prior to this scene, Forest Head remarks to the feuding Eshuoro and Ogun: "Soon, I will not tell you from the humans, so closely have their habits grown on you."[68] The divided godhead, which needs to be gathered up, is embodied principally in the Ogun-Eshuoro antagonism and in the Ogun-Murete-Eshuoro and Eshuoro-Forest Head antagonistic relationships. While the gods seek reunion with

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[66]Ibid., p. 16.

[67]Ibid., p. 71.

[68]Ibid., p. 59.

man and man with the gods, Forest Head also strives to ensure the reunion of the gods with each other. According to Gerald Moore,

> The harmony for which Forest Father strives is both vertical and lateral. On the vertical plane, man and god yearn towards one another: on the lateral plane, the several aspects of a once united godhead also yearn to be gathered up once more.[69]

Even the dead also seek reunion with man in much the same way as man seeks reunion with the dead. The invitation of the dead by the living to the gathering of the tribes is a potent statement of this yearning by the living to reunite also with the dead. Dead Man is unequivocal about this yearning of the dead to reunite with their human essence as he grieves:

> I always did want to come here. This is my home. I have always yearned to come back. Over there, nothing held me. I owned nothing, had not desire to. But the dark trees and the thick earth drew me. When I died, I fell into the understreams, and the great summons found me ready. I travelled the understreams beneath the great ocean; I travelled the understreams beneath the great seas. I flowed through the hardened crust of this oldest of the original vomits of Forest Father . . .[70]

The onerous task of this reunion of essences rests on Forest Head. Its futility is, however, summed up by Dead Woman: "The World is big and the dead [and gods] are bigger. We've been dying since the beginning; the living try <u>but the gap always widens</u>" (my emphasis).[71] Everyone, including the gods, tries, "but the gap always widens" between man, the gods and the dead, even though their various

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[69]Gerald Moore, <u>Wole Soyinka</u>, p. 43.

[70]<u>A Dance of the Forests</u>, p. 25.

[71]Ibid., p. 8.

planes of existence lie close to each other. Gerald Moore observes that

> The gods to whom appeal is made in sacrifice and ceremonies of appeasement are not indifferent and aloof, but are themselves filled with the anguish of that severance and continually yearning towards reunification with men. This is the real meaning of that moment when the celebrant is possessed by his god, so central to all African religious observance, and this moment can be realized only in music, the true language of tragedy, with its concomitants of dance, mime and masquerade.[72]

Preceding the Court of Mata Kharibu scene, the Forest Crier unrolls his scroll, strikes his gong, and announces:

> To all such as dwell in these Forests; Rock devils,
> Earth imps, tree demons, ghommids, dewilds, genie
> Incubi, sucubi, windhorls, bits and halves and such
> Sons and subjects of Forest Father, and all
> That dwell in his domain, take note, this night
> Is the welcome of the dead. When spells are cast
> And the dead invoked by the living, only such
> May resume their body corporeal as are summoned
> When the understreams that whirl them endlessly
> Complete a circle. Only such may regain
> Voice auditorial as are summoned when their link
> With the living has fully repeated its nature, has
> Re-impressed fully on the tapestry of Igbehinadun
> In approximate duplicate of actions, be they
> Of good, or of evil, of violence or carelessness;
> In approximate duplicate of motives, be they
> Illusory, tangible, commendable or damnable.
> Take note, this selection, is by the living.
> We hold these rites, at human insistence.
> By procalmation, let the mist of generations
> Be now dispersed.[73]

These personages invoked by Forest Crier, together with the human community, constitute the communal presence which, as Soyinka states, brings the stage into being. They are here both as witnesses and as

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[72]Gerald Moore, Wole Soyinka, p. 41.

[73]A Dance of the Forests, p. 45.

participants. The timing of the invocation, and the fact that history is about to be re-created, makes us draw the inference that some of these personages are resurrecting into Mata Kharibu, Physician, Slave-Dealer, and others who form part of the historic empire: they "resume" their "corporeal" forms, "voice," "approximate duplicate of actions" and "motives." And, like Dead Man and Dead Woman, the resumption of their "corporeal" forms takes them through the "understreams." In the scenes immediately following the Mata Kharibu scene, these personages manifest in various other forms: they are the various spirits in the play--Spirits of the Palm, Darkness, Precious Stones, Volcanoes, etc., and also the ants, the triplets and Eshuoro's jester.

Soyinka uses the forest in A Dance of the Forests as the metaphysical abyss both of god, man and phenomena. The entire forest is a statement, a message; it is the "chaotic growth" of the transitional abyss which must be bridged in other to reach new areas of awareness. Gerald Moore observes that

> In modern Nigeria, as in Medieval Europe and Colonial America, the forest is the realm of all those spiritual energies which surround and watch our lives. In this play Soyinka employs both the concepts of the forest as the abode of secret forces always interacting with mortal life, and that of the music as the visible expression of an interplay between one plane of reality and another . . . both the forest and the dance motifs upon which this play is based are drawn from a deep layer of African spiritual experience.[74]

The forest becomes, therefore, the "symbolic arena" for the exploration of man-cosmos confrontations. The "understreams" through which

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[74]Gerald Moore, Wole Soyinka, p. 30.

the dead and the spirits have journeyed, and the path through which Forest Head leads the Human Community into the forest, become in the play Soyinka's symbolic presentation of the transitional abyss, the "fourth space."

Conclusion

From his application of his definition of theatre to the writing of A Dance of the Forests, Soyinka presents his vision of theatre as an intersection of planes. Each plane is a reflection of the other, and represents a moment in the history of man and gods. The past belongs to the dead; the present to the living; and the future to the unborn. The past, present, and future are co-existent. The gods belong to all three planes; and Soyinka uses the various planes to interpret and portray the unending cycle of history. Thus, he writes,

> the past exists now, this moment, it is co-existent in present awareness. It clarifies the present and explains the future, but it is not a fleshpot for escapist indulgence, and it is vitally dependent on the sensibility that recalls it. This is not to deny the dangers which attend the development of this historic vision--a convenient term for the total acceptance of the human heritage. A historic vision is of necessity universal and any pretence to it must first accept the demand for a total re-examination of the whole phenomenon of humanity.[75]

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[75]Wole Soyinka, "The Writer in a Modern African State," p. 19.

CHAPTER II

TIME AND THE MAGNETISM OF SPACE AND SCENERY

Introductory Comments

This chapter examines Soyinka's concept of time, space, and scenery, their interrelationship, and Soyinka's application of the concept to The Road. The chapter states and explains the concept, and then provides the background upon which the concept is based as well as asks to be understood. The rest of the chapter is devoted to a detailed study of the application of the concepts to The Road. The chapter concludes on an appraisal of the total theatrical effect of the concept.

Statement of the Concept

The essence of Soyinka's time-space-scenery concept is contained in the following statement by Wole Soyinka:

> The setting of Ritual, of the drama of the gods, is the cosmic entirety, and our approach to this drama might usefully be made through the comparable example of the Epic. . . . We may speculate that it is the reality of this undented vastness which created the need to challenge, confront and at least initiate a rapport with the realm of infinity. It was--there being no other conceivable place--the natural home of the unseen deities, a resting-place for the departed, and a staging-house for the unborn. . . . The stage, the ritual arena of confrontation, came to represent the smybolic chthonic space and the presence of the challenger within it is the earliest physical expression of man's fearful awareness of the cosmic context of his existence.

> Its magic microcosm is created by the communal presence, and in this charged space the chthonic inhabitants are challenged.[76]

Soyinka's statement suggests that scenery is a symbolic representation of the "cosmic totality." Space, it maintains, is an "undented vastness," a cosmic "infinity" which is the home of deities, the resting place of the dead, and staging house of the unborn. The dead and the unborn represent the past and the future; the living who fearfully challenge the cosmic space represent the present. It follows, therefore, that space, time and scenery ("setting") are mutually correspondent: one is a reflection of, and dependent on, the other. Time itself is "cyclic"; it is, like space and scenery, an infinite totality, "undented" and vast. The mutual correspondence and affinity of time, space and scenery

> contains within it manifestations of the ancestral, the living and the unborn. All are vitally within the intimations and affectiveness of life, beyond mere abstract conceptualisation.[77]

Therefore, perhaps, one of the many approaches to understanding Soyinka's concept of time, space and scenery, is to consider the three ideas as a mutual correspondence. This approach, which is adopted in this chapter, makes it possible to examine more closely the inter-correspondence between time, space and scenery in Soyinka's drama. The preference of this approach to others is also based in part on the traditional African perception of the mutuality and inseparability of time, space and scenery.

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[76] Myth, Literature and the African World, pp. 2-3.

[77] Ibid., p. 144.

Background to Soyinka's Concept of Time, Space and Scenery

In the traditional African imagination, there is a symbiotic relationship or affinity between time, space and scenery or the setting for the event. The perception derives from a presence-environment symbiosis. Presence here refers to the "communal presence," which we have explained in Chapter I. The environment refers to the "arena," also explained in Chapter I. The composition of the communal presence stretches from the past (the dead) through the present (the living) to the future (the unborn). It also includes the gods, demons, and the timeless inhabitants of the spirit world, the animal, mineral and vegetable kingdoms, as we have seen in A Dance of the Forests. Each of these presences symbolically carries his world with him as he ventures an appearance in and interaction with another world. The gods, for example, carry with them to the human community the mystique of their own world. The collective presence of the various mystiques defines and charges the environment. It is within this "charged space," as Soyinka states, that "the chthonic inhabitants are challenged."

The traditional concept of time, space and scenery, presumes that all nature and phenomena are in a state of perpetual continuity. For example, "Continuity for the Yoruba operates both through the cyclic concept of time and the animist interfusion of all matter and consciousness."[78] Soyinka's application of his concept to

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[78]Ibid., p. 145.

The Road portrays a graphic and symbolic interpretation of the traditional concept of time, space and scenery.

Application of Concept to The Road

The Plot

The Road, Soyinka's most successful play by all critical acclaim,[79] opens on a triple setting--a roadside shack where most of the action takes place and past events are recreated in mime and music, a church adjoining the shack, and a cemetery which lies between the church and the shack.[80] In the play, Soyinka is very concerned with the metaphysical essence of death, which takes him into a deeper exploration of the abyss of transition, the "numinous world."

Having been excommunicated from the church, Professor sets up a consultancy for forgery, and a "road-side shack" to trade in motor spare parts salvaged from road accidents. The shack serves as a

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[79]Margaret Laurence acclaims The Road as a work "of a very high order" and "Soyinka's most mature work so far": Long Drums and Cannons, pp. 63, 64. Gerald Moore writes, it is "the finest of Soyinka's published plays": Wole Soyinka, p. 56. Dan Izevbaye sees it as "one of Soyinka's most exciting plays": "Language and Meaning in Soyinka's The Road," African Literature Today (8): 52. To Eldred Jones, The Road is not only "an extraordinary achievement" but is "without a doubt a most exciting piece of theatre": The Writing of Wole Soyinka (London: Heinemann Educational Books, 1973), p. 7. Joseph Okpaku observes that "Soyinka himself considers this play to be more precious to him and once remarked that there were only two or three people so far whom he could permit to direct it": "From Swamp Dwellers to Madmen and Specialists: The Drama of Wole Soyinka" (Ph.D. dissertation, Stanford University, 1978), p. 156.

[80]Oyin Ogunba believes that The Road has a "dual setting"--the shack and the church. See The Movement of Transiton: The Study of the Plays of Wole Soyinka (Ibadan: Ibadan University Press, 1975), p. 148.

rallying point and provides shelter and resting place for all the "rejects of the road"--drivers, conductors, and touts--with Professor as their spiritual and temporal leader: he provides them protection and guarantees their daily bread through forgery. The shack also serves both as an altar or shrine for the daily "evening communion;" as a cell or prison for a god; and as Professor's study for his "part psychic, part intellectual grope . . . towards the essence of death."[81] Between the shack and the church overlooking it lies the cemetery used for the "mass burial" of the daily victims of the road.

After a gruesome motor accident, in which he knocked down a god masquerading as Murano, Kotonu retires from driving and vows never to return to the road again. He remains unyielding to his mate's (Samson's) passionate pleas for his return to the road. Meanwhile, Professor has secretly salvaged Murano from the truck he was hidden in. He has repaired and revived Murano back to life, and retained him as his communion server and as evidence to attest to the veracity of the "Word." The Word is itself the object of Professor's investigation. The Word is the key to the meaning and essence of life and death. Murano is "the one person in this world in whom the Word reposes."[82] But Murano is "mute," dumb! Very little can be gleaned from him regarding the meaning or essence of the Word. Professor directs the rest of his efforts towards removing traffic

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[81]Soyinka's note, "For the Producer" prefaced to The Road in Collected Plays 1, p. 149. All page references to The Road are taken from Collected Plays 1.

[82]Ibid., p. 159.

signs from the road as a step towards hastening more accidents and deaths. He then ravages accident scenes for clues to the Word. He searches among rubble, useless pieces of paper, and the cemetery for clues to unlock the chest of "the elusive Word." His quest is fraught with dangers; and after an endless search, he reaches an important and very revealing conclusion about the Word:

> There are dangers in the Quest I know, but the Word may be found companion not to life, but death.[83]

During the course of the play, Professor invokes the Word as a curse on the lay-abouts--Kotonu, Samson, Salubi, and the touts. During the inter-change between him and Salubi, who approaches Professor to have a forged driving license made for him, Professor invokes the "pestilence" of the Word on Salubi: "May the elusive Word crack your bones in a hundred splinters!"[84] The power of the Word is again invoked during the evening communion. And the result?: The emergence of a god masquerading as Murano and the subsequent death of Professor by Say Tokyo Kid, thus bringing the plan to an end.

The scene of action is the "AKSIDENT STORE" and its environs--the church and cemetery--and the central image, "the road," which dominates the play. The central confrontation in the play is psychic and metaphysical: it is a confrontation between the living and the dead on the one hand, and between the living and a god on the other.

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[83]Ibid., p. 159.

[84]Ibid., p. 184.

It is a confrontation also between the living and their environment, which, in this case, assumes the propensities of a god, and between the living and death itself.

In the opening scene of the play, Samson "cannot understand" why Professor goes daily "to sleep in the churchyard with all that dead-body" (my emphasis).[85] Professor, on the other hand, is startled to learn that Samson buries (saves) his money in a tin in the cemetery, thus appointing the dead as his "bank managers." Kotonu is gripped by the fear of death, first of his father and, secondly, of the high probability that if he takes to the road again he could be the next victim of death. Sergeant Burma is dead. In the re-creation of one of Sergeant Burma's moments, Samson wears the dead Sergeant's uniform, and realizes, too late, the implications of his act. As Soyinka's stage directions show,

> (. . . Samson's face begins to show horror and he gasps as he realizes what he has been doing.)
>
> SAMSON (tearing off the clothes.): God forgive me! Oh God, forgive me. Just see, I have been fooling around pretending to be a dead man. Oh God I was only playing I hope you realize. I was only playing.[86]

Professor admonishes the lay-abouts to be "careful" because the dead (and death itself) "weave a strong spell over human eyes."[87] Samson's admonition to Kotonu during the days both of them frequented the road

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[85] Ibid., 154.

[86] Ibid., 218.

[87] Ibid., 207.

was that Kotonu should "kill" a dog as sacrifice to the road in order to avert the anger of the god who lies "guardian" to the road:

> Serve Ogun his tit-bit so the road won't look at us one day and say Ho ho you two boys you look juicy to me. . . . The one who won't give Ogun willingly will yield heavier meat by Ogun's designing.[88]

The fear of this confrontation is so real that all the lay-abouts adopt both as a prayer and as a motto the creed "May we never walk when the road waits, famished."[89]

The characters in the play, including Professor, are confronted with transcendental forces with which they interact and commune daily. Right inside the "AKSIDENT STORE" is the Egungun[90] costume, Ogun's outfit. Murano, the Egungun that Kotonu knocked down, is more than merely human: while masquerading he was knocked down by Kotonu's lorry and has since then not regained his full mortal consciousness. As Professor explains, Murano is "Silent but deep" because he has "slept beyond the portals of the secrets . . . [and] pierced the guard of eternity and unearthed the Word."[91] Consequently, "Murano has one leg longer than the other,"[92] with the left foot resting "on the slumbering chrysalis of the Word."[93] In another

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[88]Ibid., pp. 198-199.

[89]Ibid., p. 199.

[90]A masquerade.

[91]The Road, p. 186.

[92]Ibid.

[93]Ibid., p. 187.

reference to Murano, Professor calls him a "child."[94] Thus, Soyinka presents Murano as an embodiment of the world of living, the dead, the gods and the unborn (symbolized in the "child" image). He is part of the community, and the wine served at the evening communion is the "blessings" of his "daily pilgrimage" to the forest. He is the "god-apparent" trapped or made "captive" by Professor. Murano is the dramatic embodiment of death or the transitional world, because it is during his resurrection as god and death that Professor meets his own death. The road itself, upon which much has happened to focus our attention on it, is "an endless stretch" which rises whenever it pleases to strike the unwary traveler.

Murano is an agent of the god, Ogun. He serves the communicants (Professor and lay-abouts) the "blessings" of his "daily pilgrimage"--wine (Ogun is himself the Captain of Wine, for it was during his bacchanal inebriation that he slew both his own men and foes). As Egungun, Murano is both god and the ancestor (Egungun being the cult of the dead and of Ogun). The eternal presence of the Egungun mask on stage, the evening communion of wine, and the inevitable resurrection of the god and ancestor in Murano, transform the stage into a sacred, religious and metaphysical arena. In other words, Soyinka transforms the stage into a cosmic totality, or "cosmic envelope," where the living, the dead and gods interact and commune. Professor's death during this communion phase is the final link and completion of the cosmic totality and of another phase of the man-cosmos cyclic confrontation.

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[94]Ibid., p. 223.

Applying the Concept to the Play

In an interview with the South African playwright, Lewis Nkosi, Wole Soyinka declared that his theatre is "very much conscious of all the potentialities of existing theatrical idioms in Nigeria."[95] These "idioms" could be categorized as visual, auditory and abstract, and they include the interplay of colours, forms, shapes, design, music, song, mime and dance. They also include the symbolic and metaphysical propensities of these idioms, the arena and the surrounding nature. Soyinka's statement is a suggestion of his fusion of these "idioms" to define time, space and scenery, as The Road makes evident.

Scenery

In The Road, a "ragged fence" separates the church and the cemetery from the shack. The "stained-glass window" of the church, above which "a cross-surmounted steeple tapers out of sight," remains "closed" for most part of the play. And rising above the church's roof in Baroquean reminiscence is the spire and "tower clock." The back of a wheelless, lop-sided "bolekaja" (mammy-waggon) thrusts downstage from a corner of the shack and bears the inscription "AKSIDENT STORE--ALL PART AVAILEBUL." Inside the store are to be found the debris of fatal motor accidents which occur daily on the road. Perhaps the most important and most significant single object

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[95]Cosmo Pieterse and Dennis Duerden, eds., African Writers Talking (New York: Africana Publishing Corporation, 1972), p. 173.

in the store is the Egungun mask, salvaged from the road after a "god" masquerading as Murano was knocked down by Kotonu's "bolekaja." Another object of corresponding importance to the mask, also salvaged from the road and brought into the store, is dead Sergeant Burma's army uniform.

Outside, the immediate surroundings of the store is strewn with wrecked and assorted motor parts varying from hubs, worn tires to bumpers, etc. Benches, empty beer-cases, a table and chair, cups, etc., are thrown about the place in sharply "contrasting tidiness." On and beneath these props and on the bare grounds the "motor-park lay-abouts" sprawl, sleep, relax, and "wait." In an apparently inconspicuous corner, there is a seemingly insignificant item of scenery--a "spider's web"--which engages our attention throughout the play.

These scenic details, together with "the road" as the central dominating image in the play and "the Word" as the principal "Quest," are imbued with more than physical properties and qualities. They are impregnated with more than surface, literal meanings. They are an evocation of fundamental cosmogonic acceptances, especially for the African reality, by a fusion of the metaphysical and spiritual properties of the very instrument of craft and the manifested relationship between flesh, word and the cosmogonic world.

Soyinka uses his scenery to suggest the inner world of the characters and of the play, the "chaotic growth" of the abyss, and the limitless magnitude of time and space.

The Road is a collection of phobic characters; characters whose individual and collective psyche has been irredeemably cracked

by their daily experiences and contact with the road and by their confrontation with life. Everywhere they have turned to confront life, whether in the past or present, to find a meaningful existence for themselves, they have come face to face with the necrophilic horrors of life. The result is their resort to a lackadaisical existence, scavenging whatever they can from the necrophilia which life has held out to them for so long. They grope towards, and at the same time drift away from, one another. With the possible exceptions of Professor, Murano, Particulars Joe and Chief-in-Town, they are all veterans of the Second World War as some of their pseudonyms (Sergeant Burma, Indian Charlie) allude. Back from the war, they have all taken to the road as drivers, conductors, or simply thugs who could be hired by politicians. But their post-war occupation is by close comparison similar to their occupation as soldiers: as soldiers and as drivers they have traded in death and caused the death of many innocent people. To a large extent, therefore, their souls are burdened with blood-guilt which remains a constant haunting reminder in their every thought and daily confrontation with life. In the opening scene, Samson quickly spots "blood-stain" on Salubi's uniform.[96] Later in the play, Samson is struck with horror as he discovers himself wearing dead Sergeant Burma's uniform.[97] And Kotonu who, after knocking down Murano, had gone "inside the mask" becomes possessed and "demented":

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[96]The Road, p. 152.

[87]Ibid., p. 218.

(There is a sudden violent movement against the canvas and Samson, scared, rushes there. Almost at the same time, the masquerade [Kotonu] comes through in violent throes, a figure in torment. There is a loud yell from the dancers and the whipping and chanting becomes more violent, aiding the god's seeming possession.)

KOTONU (Tearing at the clothes, demented.): It's all wet inside, I've got his blood all over me. . . . It's getting dark. Samson I can't see. His blood has got in my eyes. I can't see Samson. . . . (His struggles become truely frantic, full of violent contortions. Gradually he grows weaker and weaker, collapsing slowly on the ground until he is completely inert.)[98]

In the very opening of the play, the first event is an early morning accident from which Professor has come to take Kotonu to witness and then salvage parts:

> Come then, I have a new wonder to show you . . . a madness where a motor-car throws itself against a tree--Gbram! And showers of crystal flying on broken souls.[99]

And throughout the play, accident scenes are recounted again and again as they had happened: Kotonu's father, for instance, died from a motor accident, and Kotonu recounts that

> a lorry . . . beat his spine against a load of stockfish. . . . that day the truck was piled high with it. . . . Buried in stockfish. It was all I remembered for a long time, the smell of stockfish. Torn bodies on the road all smell of stockfish.[100]

The memory of their dead colleagues, especially of Sergeant Burma--barely a week-old victim of the road--is an intimately persistent experience which constantly reminds the characters of the horrors and meaninglessness of life:

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[98]Ibid., p. 209.

[99]Ibid., pp. 158-159.

[100]Ibid., p. 190.

KOTONU: Where is Zorro who never returned from the North without a basket of guinea-fowl eggs? Where is Akanni the Lizard? I have not seen any other tout who would stand on the lorry's roof and play the Samba at sixty miles an hour. Where is Sigidi Ope? Where is Sapele Joe who took on six policemen at the crossing and knocked them all into the river?

SAMSON: Overshot the pontoon, went down with his lorry.

KOTONU: And Saidu--Say? Indian Charlie who taught us driving? . . . Where is Humphrey Bogart? Cimarron Kid? Have you known any other driver take an oil-tanker from Port Harcourt to Kaduna non-stop since Muftau died? Where is Sergeant Burma who treated his tanker like a child's toy?

SAMSON: Just the same . . .

KOTONU: Sergeant Burma was never moved by these accidents. He told me himself how once he was stripping down a crash and found that the driver was an old comrade from the front. He took him to the mortuary but first he stopped to remove all the tyres.

SAMSON: He wasn't human.

KOTONU: But he was. He was. A man must protect himself against the indifference of comrades who desert him. Not to mention the hundred travellers whom you never really see until their faces are wiped clean by silence.[101]

In view of these, therefore, the disconcerted appearance of the scenery, first and foremost, recreates in powerfully suggestive images the common sight of the average Nigerian road-user. The scenery also goes beyond that to suggest a "battlefield": to the driver-veterans, life on the road was an ever endless war of survival --the survival of the fittest--and so they approached the road: "Like a battlefield they always say. Like a battlefield."[102] The

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[101]Ibid., p. 167.

[102]Ibid., p. 219.

scenery also goes a long way to suggest the phobia that is gnawing the characters. First, they are "lay-abouts" and the play opens with all of them sprawling and fast asleep in different parts of the stage, with Murano "coiled under Professor's table." None of them is whole again: they are the "broken souls" and "rejects of the road." Murano has one leg together with an abnormal toe longer than the other. Professor is on the precipice between insanity and sanity and makes his "bed among the dead" so that

> when the road raises a victory cry to break my sleep I hurry to a disgruntled swarm of souls full of spite for their rejected bodies. It is a market of stale meat, noisy with flies and quarrelsome with old women. The place I speak of is not far from here, if you wish to come. . . . you shall be shown this truth of my endeavours.[103]

Neither Samson nor any other character in the play understands why Professor goes "to sleep in the churchyard with all that dead-body,"[104] and moves like Sergeant Burma "round those corpses as if they didn't exist."[105] Kotonu, since knocking down a god, is a completely broken man and will never return to the road again. Samson whose existence depends entirely on Kotonu is paralyzed by Kotonu's refusal to take to the road again. Salubi is jobless and merely drifts and day-dreams of becoming a millionaire with Samson. Soyinka's scenery therefore does more than merely suggest locale by illuminating the inner world of the characters. Enthusiasm and aspirations are dead and gone in the characters. Like Estragon and Vladimir in

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[103]Ibid., p. 159.

[104]Ibid., p. 154.

[105]Ibid., p. 167.

Beckett's Waiting for Godot, the characters in The Road merely wait, sleep, and wait. What Soyinka has done in this play is very much similar to T. S. Eliot's "objective correlative":[106] he has used physical objects to reach the inner world and psyche of the characters.

Scenery and Space

Soyinka uses his scenery to describe and define the "collective inner world" of The Road. This is the world of the collective memory of the community--the community of the driver-veterans, of Professor and of Murano. It is the world of the living, the dead, the unborn and the gods; it is the "undented vastness" of the transitional abyss. Expressed differently, Soyinka uses scenery to describe and define space.

The spider's web, which Samson continually pokes and throws flies in, is a symbol closely associated with the road: "The road and the spider lie gloating, then the fly buzzes along like a happy fool."[107] The limitless stretch of the road is a symbolic representation of the "undented vastness" of the transitional abyss. The road itself belongs to the god, Ogun, who demands periodic sacrifices from users of the road. By the close comparison between the spider's

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[106]See T. S. Eliot's essay, "Hamlet and His Problems" in T. S. Eliot, Selected Essays (New York: Harcourt, Brace and World, Inc., 1960 ed.), pp. 121-126: "The only way of expressing emotion in the form of art is by finding an 'objective correlative'; in other words, a set of objects, a situation, a chain of events which shall be the formula of that particular emotion; such that when the external facts, which must terminate in sensory experience, are given, the emotion is immediately evoked," pp. 124-125.

[107]Ibid., p. 178.

web and the road, Wole Soyinka uses the spider's web to comment on and suggest that the road, or the "undented vastness" of the transi-abyss, is a trap--an intertwining design of the god, Ogun, to catch the unwary traveller who will not sacrifice willingly to the god. According to Soyinka, Ogun's road is a "mobius' orbit" or "Mobius Strip," an infinite interlocking set of rings or circles[108]--which are semblative of the spider's web--and Samson, fully aware of the nature of Ogun's road, advises Kotonu to

> Serve Ogun his tit-bit so the road won't look at us one day and say Ho ho you two boys you look juicy to me. . . . the one who won't give Ogun willingly will yield heavier meat by Ogun's designing.[109]

Thus, the spider itself symbolizes the god, and the flies which Samson throws into its web symbolize the multitude of human beings who have yielded "heavier meat" to the road.

The cemetery and the church, like the road, are centres of great focus. Their interplay with the shack and their overall significance to the play cannot be under-estimated. Both the cemetery and the church represent the deep unknown: the cemetery represents the world of the ancestors. Since the church is the Christian fundamental world of hope, salvation and judgment of, and for, a yet unknown future, it is a reasonable assumption to say that the church represents in this play the world of the unborn. Soyinka, however, makes no mistakes about the future: just as the past and the present are blasted phenomena, so too will the future be (or has been) blasted.

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[108] Idanre in Idanre and Other Poems, p. 83, 85, 87.

[109] The Road, pp. 198-199.

We learn from the play (during the confrontation between Professor and the bishop which led to Professor's excommunication from the church) that "just when the bishop was shaking the pulpit and blasting humanity to hell," the walls of the church, like the walls of Jericho, were collapsing, and have since then not been re-built.[110] Thus what we see as part of the scenery is a church with broken and collapsed walls. And Soyinka means to suggest by this detail that the future or the world of the unborn is as blasted a phenomenon as the past and the present--a suggestion which derives from Soyinka's "historic vision" as explained in Chapter I. Also, the broken walls of the church (which suggests incompleteness or an unfilled space), together with the towering spire and tower clock of the church, are a symbolic representation or suggestion of the vastness of the space within which the drama is set.

The incongruous and the disconcerted juxtaposition of the scenery and its sharply contrasting details--the church, the shack and the cemetery, each overlooking the other, and the "contrasting tidiness" of the space immediately surrounding the shack--are in structural and thematic harmony with the levels of experiences in The Road. Oyin Ogunba observes that Soyinka's scenery in The Road

> can be made into a convincing representation of the polarities of a transitional era, for adjoining each other are a physically magnificient church and a slum shack, the two juxtaposed with more than just physical intent. The incongruity of the juxtaposed sets may at first provoke laughter but the playwright is in earnest. As the meaning of the play unfolds itself, we come to see more clearly how setting

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[110] Ibid., p. 164.

> harmonizes with idea, for between the church and the shack are comprehended many of the levels of living which The Road endeavours to present.[111]

This visceral graphic probing of the "collective inner world" is not a passion towards fantasy, but a genuine effort towards the re-creation of the reality of the African world. And, according to Izevbaye in his penetrating study of The Road,

> The opening "scene" dispenses with words altogether, but it displays some of the terms on which the play asks to be understood. It communicates the mood wholly through setting and mime. The road, the corner of a church, and an old mammy waggon now used as the "Aksident Store" are not merely the physical setting but communicate, through their everyday associations, the religious and social dimensions of the play. Their constant presence on stage sustains this function: the road links the spiritual and the satirical aspects of the play by being the agent of death as well as the path along which the dead passengers are carried to their church funeral. However much we are consciously unwilling or unable to link the opening scene with death, the sprawling, motionless figures lying close by the Aksident store must appeal to our subconscious by their likeness to death before the comedy takes over. After this a mime rapidly suggests some motifs of the play: Murano the tapster disappearing into the dawn, Samson the idler prying uncertainly after him, then poking a spider's web in frustration after failing in a lonely, desperate attempt to wake his companions.[112]

The visceral and graphic probing, therefore, of the "collective inner world"--the "undented vastness" of space--is a genuine effort towards the re-creation of the reality of the African world. It is neither a passion for, nor a movement towards, the creation and portaryal of fantasy, for, according to Wole Soyinka,

> To describe a collective inner world as fantasy is not intelligible, for the nature of an inner world in a cohesive

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[111] Oyin Ogunba, The Movement of Transition, p. 148.

[112] D. S. Izevbaye, "Language and Meaning in Soyinka's The Road," African Literature Today (8): 53.

> society is the externalisation of a rational world-view, one which is elicited from the reality of social and natural experience and from the integrated reality of racial myths into a living morality. . . . What we call the mythic inner world is both the psychic sub-structure and temporal subsidence, the cumulative history and empirical observations of the community. It is nonetheless primal in that time, in its cyclic reality, is fundamental to it. The inner world is not static, being constantly enriched by the moral and historic experience of man.[113]

Time

Soyinka's sense of time is very intimately linked with the comprehensive world-view that gave it birth: the rationalist African universe which conceives of time as a "prgamatic man-centered concept,"[114] and assumes that

> The spirit world is very close to that of the physical human life, and people are very much aware of it, articulating it in their oral literature, in rituals, in ceremonies and as part of the mystique of the universe without which, perhaps, human life itself would be dull and boring.[115]

Or as Macebuh describes it, "the universe is assumed to be organically integrated, its components interrelated by virtue of a cosmogonic intention that preceded human existence."[116] According to Gerald Moore, time is conceived by the African as "a projection from living experience, rather than as an abstract sequence of fixed units

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[113] Myth, Literature and the African World, pp. 34 and 35.

[114] Gerald Moore, "Time and Experience in African Poetry," Transition 6 (26): 18.

[115] Rev. John Mbiti, "African Cosmology," in FESTAC '77 (London & Nigeria: African Journal Limited & The International Festival Committee, 1977), p. 49.

[116] Stanley Macebuh, "African Aesthetics in Traditional African Art," OKIKE (5): 14.

existing in its own right and imposing its pattern upon human activities."[117] Commenting on the same subject of time, and including space, Rev. Mbiti adds:

> In terms of geography or distance, the universe has no rim, no boundary, no ending. In terms of time, Africans do not conceive of an end of time and hence an end of the world. African concepts of time lays great emphasis on the past and the present, with little linear future dimensions of time. The future which they conceive, is a future within the context of the rhythm of individual life (birth, growth, marriage, procreation, death and joining the departed . . .), and the rhythm of nature (like day and night . . . and other rhythmic changes).[118]

Soyinka brings the metaphysical and human planes to intersect on his stage. Events are brought to the same point of intersection and, as he says, "life, present life, contains within it manifestations of the ancestral, the living and the unborn. All are vitally within the intimations and affectiveness of life, beyond mere abstract conceptualisation."[119] The juxtaposition, therefore, of the various planes of existence is Soyinka's technique to show that time is endless--has neither a beginning nor an end. Thus it is not a surprise that Professor's watch still tells the time, even though it has stopped. Because of the interrelationship between time, space and scenery, the spider's web becomes also a visual and symbolic representation of time as a cyclic, recurrent phenomenon.

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[117] Gerald Moore, "Time and Experience in African Poetry," p. 18.

[118] Rev. John Mbiti, "African Cosmology," pp. 41 and 44.

[119] Myth, Literature and the African World, p. 144.

Soyinka also conceives of time as a summons, an agency both of life and death. The dead are summoned to their "mass burial" by the chiming of the tower clock; Salubi wakes from his sleep as the clock chimes at six in the morning; and the tower clock summons all the characters, including Murano, to their daily "communion" of wine with Professor and the cosmic forces of the environment. In the opening scene, Murano, who is part man, part god, and belonging to more than one world, wakes upon the chimes of the tower clock, crosses the fence and disappears into the unknown. Samson goes to the fence and tries to follow Murano, but gives it up to poke at the spider's web and later to confide in his mate Kotonu:

> I have often thought of following that Murano you know. He sets out about five o'clock in the morning, goes in that direction. And he doesn't come back until five in the afternoon. That's a long time to tap a little wine. Have you ever considered where he goes?[120]

The Magnetism of Space and Scenery

The "affective" nature of Syoinka's theatre, that is the total effect of the theatre on both audience and performer, depends largely on the magnetism of space and scenery. Beside the total architectonic of scenery, Soyinka uses the idioms of traditional Nigerian theatre to effect a magnetism of space. These idioms include the interplay of colours, forms, design, music, song and dance (a more detailed examination of the musical idiom is the focus of Chapter III.

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[120] The Road, p. 187.

According to Wole Soyinka,

> [Music is the] means to our inner world of transition . . . [it is] the intensive language of transition and its communicant means, the catalyst and solvent of its regenerative hoard.[121]

He attributes its "source" to the "archetypal essences" of the transitional abyss. Thus, Soyinka uses music to reach the "undented vastness" of the abyss, and to define the miniscule self of the protagonist within that cosmic "vastness" of the abyss, defined here as space. Two moments in The Road will sufficiently illustrate the points we have raised.

The human voices in the play are constantly reaching out to the vast space of the abyss of transition. Music then becomes the natural complement to the human voices which constantly strain into the world of the dead. Death itself stalks every move of the characters and, as a result, an atmosphere of fear looms large in the play. Consider, for example, the scene between Samson and Salubi in which both are discussing Professor's past life in the Church, and the confrontation between Professor and the Bishop which led to the collapse of the church walls. Having talked about it for a long time Salubi, apparently bored by Samson's "cinema show" and apprehensive that he has wasted the whole morning ("De whole morning done vanish for your cinema show"), decides to leave Samson alone and go to "find work" for himself. Samson, who has found Salubi a vulnerable accomplice and victim of idling antics, is disappointed that Salubi has left him, preferring a job to good company. He "ambles

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[121] Myth, Literature and the African World, p. 36.

restlessly round the room" cursing, complaining and dejected, blaming his fate on his mate Kotonu:

> If he [Salubi] gets a job before Kotonu puts us back on the road the man will become simply intolerable. All the fault of that Kotonu. What use am I, a tout without his driver. I should have known it would come sooner or later. He's never acted like a normal person. When other drivers go out of the way to kill a dog, Kotonu nearly somersaults the lorry trying to avoid a flea-racked mongrel. Why, I ask him, why? Don't you know a dog is Ogun's meat? Take warning Kotonu. Before it's too late take warning and kill us a dog.[122]

As Samson's grumbling gets in stride, Kotonu returns from the "harvest" of dawn's "showers of crystal" (to which Professor had taken him) with handfuls of salvage, and slips into the mammy-waggon through a hidden entrance. Almost simultaneously one of the lay-abouts plucks a tune from his guitar and begins to sing. Other lay-abouts hanging by the fence join in idly:

> Ona orun jim o eeeee
> Ona orun jin dereba rora
> E e dereba rora
> E e dereba rora
> Ona orun jin o eeeee
> Eleda mi ma ma buru
> Esin baba Bandele je l'odan
> Won o gbefun o
> Eleda mi ma ma buru
> Esin baba Bandele je l'odan
> Won o gbefun o.[123]
>
> (It's a long long road to heaven
> It's a long long road to heaven, Driver
> Go easy a-ah go easy driver
> It's a long long road to heaven
> My Creator, be not harsh on me
> Bandele's horse galloped home a winner
> But the race eluded him.)
> Soyinka's translation, p. 230.

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[122] The Road, p. 165.

[123] Ibid.

The timing of the song is important and significant. Following Samson's speech and Kotonu's return from an accident scene very closely, the song emphasizes the immensity of space and cautions about death. It is also a dirge for the dead in absentia; the dead whose belongings Kotonu has just brought into the mammy-wagon which, apart from being a store, is also a grave for the dead (belongings salvaged from the dead are rested in the mammy-waggon). The song is a contrast as well as a complement to Samson's speech, and is a revelation of the fear of death. For example, Samson turns angrily on the lay-abouts, especially on the lead singer, and yells at them to stop the song or get out with it:

> Get out get out. Is that the kind of song to be singing at this time of the morning? Why don't you go and look for work?[124]

An atmosphere of fear looms large in the play: all of them are "rejects" both of war and the road. They are afraid of death and the dead. This fear becomes real and is made manifest later in the play when Samson, wearing dead Sergeant Burma's uniform and pretending to be the dead Sergeant, comes face to face with the "horror" both of death and the dead:

> (Samson's face begins to show horror and he gasps as he realizes what he has been doing.)
>
> SAMSON (tearing off the clothes.): God forgive me! Oh God, forgive me. Just see, I have been fooling around pretending to be a dead man. Oh God I was only playing I hope you realize. I was only playing.[125]

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[124] Ibid., p. 166.

[125] Ibid., p. 218.

The fear and reality of death reach a climacteric crescendo in the final scene when Murano becomes god and death in one freezing moment of time and space--a moment achieved almost exclusively by the rhythmic cadencial cues of drums, song and movement.

Our second example relates to the use of the same musical idiom for the spatial definition of man's miniscule self within the macrocosmic immensity of the abyss. Names are an important theatrical device for defining character in terms of space. This is because names in Africa, especially in Nigeria, have profound meanings and significance, and they are used to measure man in terms of space. Names have ontological significance in the thinking of traditional Africa. And when chanted to the accompaniment of drums and other musical accompaniments, they become an effective means to understanding the relationship between character and space. Praise names in particular are means of achieving that effect. Robert Armstrong emphasizes the importance of praise names and their use for such portrayals both in real life and drama in Africa:

> Praise names with their litany of attributes, are clearly syndetic (additive) means to achieving the constitution of character. They represent an effective way, as does the careful delineation of psychological and historical "causes," to bring a dramatic or a fictive character into existence. The number of attributions accorded a man tends to be an index of his power and importance.[126]

Therefore, Soyinka's use of praise names in his drama comes within the tradition described by Armstrong. Professor's praise song, for

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[126]Robert Plant Armstrong, "Tragedy--Greek and Yoruba: A Cross-Cultural Perspective," Research in African Literature 17 (1): 34-35.

instance, crystallizes the point and sets the standards or criteria for understanding the relationship between character and space:

> Professor, our being like demon
> Professor, our being like demon
> The elder above us
> The elder below
> The hand that thinks to smash me, let it pause awhile
> I have one behind me, coiled snake on Mysteries
> He mounts in season, coiled snake on Mysteries
> The foe cannot pound the head of a Father's son like yam
> Who holds discourse with spirits, who dines with the Ruler of Forests
> He is the elder above us
> He is our elder below. . . .[127]
>
> (Soyinka's translation, pp. 231-232.

The musical idiom creates visual forms and shpaes which incorporate colours and design. For example, the Egungun display of the drivers, and that of Murano in the final scene. It involves patterned ritualistic movements as well. It is the metaphysical and religious associations of the visual forms and shapes (such as the outfit of the Egungun masquerade and the mask itself), and of the music itself, which change both space and scenery and make them magnetic. Femi Osofisan's account of one of Soyinka's productions is a further illustration of Soyinka's magentism of space and the spatial conception in ritual drama.

Osofisan recounts that Soyinka's Paris production in 1972 of excerpts from his already translated play, La danse de la fôrét, was an exercise in and illustration of the magnetism of space and the spatial conception in ritual drama. The production was designed to articulate Soyinka's conception that the theatre is

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[127] The Road, p. 220.

> a medium in the communicative sense and, like any other medium, it is one that is best defined through the process of interruption. In theatrical terms, this interruption is effected principally by the human apparatus. Sound, light, motion, even smell, can all be used just as vividly to define space, and ritual theatre uses all these instruments of definition to control and render concrete, to parallel . . . the experiences or institutions of man in that far more disturbing environment which he defines variously as void, emptiness or infinity.[128]

In Osofisan's postmortem of the Paris production of excerpts from A Dance of the Forests, Soyinka opened the show in darkness as a demonstration of the dark void from which the dead resurrect to join the living:

> Soon, the stage is plunged in darkness. Then the Crier somes forward beating on an agogo, and chants the invocation. In response, from three directions within the audience, emerge the protagonists, led by the Chorus in procession, all bearing lighted atupa (mud lamps). When they are installed, in separate circles delineated by coloured lights, the Crier steps into each circle and, as Master of Ceremony, makes up the faces of the protogonists --who are immediately "entombed" by new chorus formations.
>
> Now the play properly begins . . . dead ancestors reincarnating break through their "graves" to meet the living at the Gathering of the Tribes . . .
>
> Brief as it was, the extract was . . . an uninterrupted link of good moments: the ancestors' spectacular reincarnation and the dance of rejection; the "duel" between the Half-Child and Death, backed by the incantative chants of the Chorus; the Dead Woman's lamentation; plus the play of coloured lights [and] physical stylizations . . .
>
> As a demonstration of space exploitation, the play had been well done, in both physical and temporal terms. The creative use of scenic effects has always been Soyinka's major talent as a director--and is the other little-acknowledged area of his contribution ot the development of African theatre. . . . It is the means by which his theatre, so woven with complex meanings and mythology normally vaults the huddle of comprehension [and] traps the audience . . .[129]

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[128] Myth, Literature and the African World, pp. 39-40.

[129] Femi Osofisan, "Soyinka in Paris," West Africa (21 July 1972), p. 935. Also "Thèâtre des Nations," in Cultural Events in Africa (88): 2-3.

The climatic moment of the production was the physical reunion of ancestors with the living and the unborn; a "ritual fusion of three temporal planes of entity: historical, actual, and nascent,"[130] which is, in Dathorne's words, "the intersection of time and event and the simultaneity of the legendry, the immediate past and the present [and the future]."[131] And "to a traditional Yoruba consciousness, such reification was a palpable religious fact, celebrated in quotidian rites."[132]

Conclusion

From the foregoing analysis in this chapter, it is a germane conclusion to state that the metaphysical and religious associations of the stage, scenery and space, are of far greater importance to Soyinka's theatre than the physical details of construction of the stage and scenery, and of the precise dimensions of the acting space. It is the metaphysical and religious associations, and the reality of these associations which the stage, scenery and space, call up in the mind both of the performer and audience, which are of utmost importance to Soyinka's theatre.

Soyinka leaves us in doubt about his passion towards translating the theatre into a cognitive symbolic language; a language that gives form and shape to his circumcentric world. He declared in an interview with Lewis Nkosi:

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[130] Ibid.

[131] O. R. Dathorne, The Black Mind (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1974), p. 411.

[132] Femi Osofisan, "Soyinka in Paris," p. 935.

"my prime duty as a playwright is to provide excellent theatre . . . I have only one commitment to the public, and that is to my audience . . . to make sure they do not leave the theatre bored."[133] Thus, he uses his scenery and the stage as a microscopic duplicate of the macrocosmos. He charges the stage with visual, sensory and auditory charms and, as he says, the

> Encapsulation of these exclusivist spheres of existence within which all action is unravelled appears to be the first prerequisite of all profound drama, and tragedy most especially. Its internal cogency makes it impervious to the accident of place and time.[134]

The depth therefore of his vision, the profundity of his meanings, and the esoteric charm of his drama, are marked by a striking imaginative power which aims at impressing an acceptance by effecting creative entertainment and communication at various levels. According to Stanley Macebuh, "where you have a metaphysical framework in which past, present and future are intrinsically interrelated and penetrate one another, the cultural, and therefore, artistic consequences are going to be far-reaching indeed."[135]

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[133]Cosmo Pieterse and Dennis Duerden, eds., pp. 172-173.

[134]Myth, Literature and the African World, p. 50.

[135]Stanley Macebuh, p. 19.

CHAPTER III

THE MUSICAL HERITAGE AND ITS THEATRICAL RESTORATION

Introduction

This chapter examines the musical heritage of Soyinka's theatre. The chapter begins by stating, and then explaining, Soyinka's idea or definition of the musical idiom as it relates to theatre. This is followed by the cultural background to the idiom. The chapter then examines Soyinka's application of the musical idiom to Kongi's Harvest. The plot of the play precedes our examination of Soyinka's application of the concept to the play. The chapter concludes with an appraisal of Soyinka's theatrical application and restoration of the idiom.

Statement of the Concept

During an interview in August 1962, which took place between him and the South African playwright, Lewis Nkosi, Wole Soyinka declared: "my prime duty as a playwright is to provide excellent theatre . . . [that is] very much conscious of all the potentialities of existing theatrical idioms in Nigeria."[136] These "idioms" which belong to festival, the great artistic institution and highest art form in traditional Nigeria, include music, dance, song, ritual,

[136]Cosmo Pieterse and Dennis Duerden, eds., pp. 172-173.

mime, masquerade and mask. Soyinka also added that he was to use these "idioms" to interpret "modern themes," even though the themes may be "quite completely remote from the source of [their] particular idiom."[137]

Fourteen years later (1976), Soyinka was to more precisely state his ideas about the "idioms" as they relate or apply to theatre. Thus he defines music as the "means to our inner world of transition," and emphasizes that "Music is the intensive language of transition and its communicant means, the catalyst and solvent of its regenerative hoard."[138] Soyinka attributes the "source" of music to the source of mask, especially of the tragic mask. Music, he says, belongs to the "archetypal essences" of the transitional abyss. The "tragic mask," he writes,

> functions from the same source as its music--from the archetypal essences whose language derives not from the plane of physical reality or ancestral memory (the ancestor is no more than agent or medium), but from the numinous territory of transition into which the artist obtains fleeting glimpses by ritual, sacrifice and a patient submission of rational awareness to the moment when fingers and voice relate the symbolic language of the cosmos.[139]

Explanation of the Concept

Soyinka's concept of music underscores four major points, namely: that music is (1) a vehicle or "communicant medium" to the "undented vastness" of transition; (2) the "intensive language" of the cosmic abyss; (3) a "catalyst" and capable of reversing the

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[137] Ibid., p. 170.

[138] Myth, Literature and the African World, p. 36.

[139] Ibid., p. 155.

process or progress of the spatial definition of being in phenomena; and (4) a "solvent" and has the capacity to absorb and dissolve or merge and harmonize the antithetical "essences" of the "man-cosmos organization." Besides these, however, music is also the medium of entertainment in Soyinka's theatre.

Generally, music is a common human experience, and a compulsive force in human life. Musicologists such as J. H. Nketia, Meki Nzewi and Chinyere Nwachukwu, as well as anthropologists such as Merriam, maintain that music "has got a special language of its own,"[140] which "differs from that of ordinary discourse."[141] Meki Nzewi contends that music is "the expression of ultra speech sensations in sound and theatre."[142] And, according to Nketia, music is "an outlet for emotion," and "a vehicle of verbal expressions and a special means of action or means of communication."[143] These views about music explain the characteristic use of music in Soyinka's theatre. And we hasten to add that Soyinka's music combines

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[140]Chinyere T. Nwachukwu, "Folk Music in Culture: A Calabar Study" (B.A. Thesis, University of Nigeria, 1972), p. 44.

[141]A. M. Merriam, The Anthropology of Music (Illinois: North Western University Press, 1964), p. 187.

[142]Meki Nzewi, "Folk Music in Southeastern Nigeria: An Appraisal" (Unpublished workshop paper on the "Peoples of Southeastern Nigeria," held at the University of Nigeria, Nsukka, December 5-8, 1972), p. 1.

[143]J. H. K. Nketia, "Unity and Diversity in African Music: A Problem of Synthesis," First International Congress of Africanist (1962), p. 1.

instrumentation, verbalization and symbolic signification in a way that only the well-informed can best understand it.

Background to the Concept

Music in Soyinka's theatre is not merely "music" per se, but a combination or integration of various related idioms. That is, music to Soyinka is not merely the combination and interplay of words (songs) and instrumentation, but a combination and integration of forms and idioms which include ritual, song, dance, mime, the mask and masquerade. This heritage and its application to the modern theatre derives from the great artistic institution (festival) of traditional Africa.

To the African, the festival is an important and great occasion for ritual displays in masks and archetypal movements to the accompaniment of musical instrumentations and songs. Although the various idioms--ritual, music, dance, song, mime, masquerade and mask--may appear to be individual art forms, they are, nevertheless, not autonomous. That is, the African does not regard music to be separate and distinct from mime or masquerade. The idioms, therefore, constitute a complex artistic totality which could variously be designated (based on the knowledge of its interconnectedness) as music, masquerade or ritual. This is because there can be, for instance, neither music nor dance nor song without one of the other idioms or both, nor can there be masquerade without the proper union of all the other idioms. Thus they have the potentialities for far-reaching theatrical effects and consequences. According to J. H. Nketia, music is "a dominant

form of artistic expression in African social [and religious] life . . . [it is] an outlet for emotion . . . a vehicle of verbal [and non-verbal] expressions and a special means of action or means of communications."[144]

Music, including song, drumming and dance, is in traditional Africa a vital link between the living, the dead and the unborn, and the gods. It is a language of its own; a vehicle of much symbolic content and meaning.[145] Lee Warren defines the African musical heritage as a "text in motion."[146] The "drum literature," says Ruth Finnegan, "is a relatively esoteric and specialized form of expression, understood by many . . . but probably only fully mastered and appreciated by the few."[147] By the "evocation of music from the abyss of transition," a link between the various planes of existence is established. The music brings to the arena the "communal presence" that is so vital to the establishment of the locale. The dance which accompanies the music is a "movement of transition" into the deeper metaphysical world of conflicts.

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[144]Ibid.

[145]See Inih A. Ebong, "Traditional Dance-Drama in Ibibioland" (B.A. Thesis, University of Nigeria, 1976).

[146]Lee Warren, The African Dance (New York: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1972), p. 1.

[147]Ruth Finnegan, Oral Literature in Africa (Nairobi: Oxford University Press, 1976), p. 498. See also pp. 481-499.

According to the Nigerian playwright, Ola Rotimi, "mime is the essential index" of traditional Nigerian theatre,[148] and dance "the medium through which mimetic impulses are carried."[149] John Pepper Clark, a Nigerian poet and playwright, adds that

> music, dance, and poetry have been the constants of true Nigerian drama from the earliest birth-marriage-and-death cycle ceremonies and rituals to our own current exercises and experiments . . . [In] this "closely unified combination of the arts" . . . the ascendant elements are those of music, dance, ritual and mime, that of speech being subdued to a minimum.[150]

Rotimi further states that

> The dance is an advance on mime. Varied in form and tempo, it is not only a visible expression of rapport between rhythm (music) and movement, but a manifestation of a state of mind whose farthest stretch is trance.[151]

The mimetic movements of dance, however varied in form and tempo, are conceived in traditional imagination as iconic symbols assigned meanings through social and cultural conventions, and through psychological and metaphysical mechanisms. The theatrical idioms codify in iconic symbols sets of values, ideas and thought; they are a body of concepts and feelings, and a vehicle of much symbolic content and meaning.

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[148]Ola Rotimi, "Traditional Nigerian Drama," in Introduction to Nigerian Literature, ed.: Bruce King (Lagos: Africana Publishing Corporation, 1971), p. 36.

[149]Ibid., p. 41.

[150]J. P. Clark, "Aspects of Nigerian Drama," in The Example of Shakespeare, by J. P. Clark (London: Longman, 1970), p. 85.

[151]Ola Rotimi, p. 40.

It is against this background of "festival" (as it is known and practised in traditional Africa, especially among the Yoruba) that Soyinka's concept and application of the musical idiom to Kongi's Harvest asks to be understood.

Application of Concept to Kongi's Harvest

The Plot

Set in the fictitious Republic of Isma, Kongi's Harvest directs attention to the forces of change in a transitional era. President Kongi has set up a personality cult around himself, and then deified himself. To commemorate the occasion of his deification, as well as consumate his stranglehold on traditional politics and values, Kongi orders the traditional ruler, Oba Danlola, to appear before him at the Festival of the New Yam and, in full view of the public, present the new yam to him (Kongi). According to the Organising Secretary, through whom Kongi's orders are communicated to Danlola,

> Kongi desires that the king perform all his customary spiritual functions, only this time, that he perform them to him, our Leader. Kongi must preside as the Spirit of Harvest, in pursuance of the Five-Year Development Plan.[152]

But Kongi's dictatorial demand for "a total, absolute submission [of Danlola]--in full view of the people,"[153] is both an insult and a sacrilege to traditional ethos. It amounts to the total extinction of Danlola's spiritual cum political powers. Danlola and his

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[152] Kongi's Harvest in Collected Plays 2 (London: Oxford University Press, 1974), p. 77. All page references to Kongi's Harvest are taken from Collected Plays 2.

[153] Ibid., p. 94.

council of traditional chieftains refuse to give in to Kongi, for which they are imprisoned at Kongi's orders.

The play which employs the simultaneous staging device, opens on the prison with Oba Danlola and his royal retinue. It then shifts to Kongi's retreat on the mountain, with members of his Reformed Aweri Fraternity fasting at the foot of the mountain. Next, the scene shifts to Segi's Night Club, and then to Danlola's royal palace. And, finally, to an open arena where the feast to commenorate the Harvest of the New Yam takes place.

The play opens on Danlola's desecration both of the national flag and anthem. Having been deprived of his agbada trousers, Danlola has used the national flag as trousers under his agbada (a large, flowing traditional dress). In addition to desecrating the national flag, Danlola and his retinue distort and burlesque the national anthem as they sing:

> Ism to ism for ism is ism
> Of isms and isms an absolute-ism
> To demonstrate the tree of life
> Is sprung from broken peat
> And we the rooted bark, spurned
> When the tree swells its pot
> The mucus that is snorted out
> When Kongi's new race blows
> And more, oh there's a harvest of words
> In a penny newspaper.[154]

They are, however, interrupted by the Superintendent. And following this interruption, the royal retinue break into a traditional song and dance, with Oba Danlola and Oba Sarumi engaged in a dance of farewell and mourning.

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[154]Ibid., p. 61.

Following this scene is Kongi's retreat on the mountain, where his Reformed Aweri Fraternity (as well as Kongi himself) is observing a period of fasting. In preparation for their first public appearance beside the "Leader" (Kongi) at the festival, members of the Reformed Aweri Fraternity (Kongi's spiritual disciples) engage in a dialectic process of finding an "image" for themselves--a semantic process in which they seek to find the right word that will conjure up the image they need:

SECOND AWERI: Isn't it enough just to go in as Kongi's disciples?

FOURTH: Magi is more dignified. We hold after all the position of the wise ones. From the recognition of us as the Magi, it is one step to his inevitable apotheosis.

. . . .

FIRST: The emphasis of our generation is--youth. Our image therefore should be a kind of youthful elders of the state. A conclave of modern patriarchs.

THIRD: Yes, yes. Nice word patriarch, I'm glad you used it. Has a nice reverent tone about it. Very nice indeed, very nice.

SECOND: I agree. Conjures up quite an idyllic scene.

. . . .

FOURTH: We might consider a scientific image. This would be a positive stamp and one very much in tune with our contemporary situation. Our pronouncements should be dominated by a positive scientificism.

THIRD: A brilliant conception. I move we adopt it at once.

SIXTH: What image exactly is positive scientificism?

THIRD: Whatever it is, it is not long-winded proverbs and senile pronouncements. In fact we could say a step has already been taken in that direction. If you've read our Leader's last publication. . . .

FIFTH: Ah yes. Nor proverbs nor verse, only ideograms in algebraic quantums. If the square of XQY(2bc) equals QA into the square root of X, then the progressive forces must prevail over the reactionary in the span of .32 of a single generation.[155]

Meanwhile, Organising Secretary consults with Kongi in his mountain retreat. Plans are reviewed, amended, and new ones made for the success of the festival. Strategies are also being worked out to compel Oba Danlola (if he will not be convinced) to humble himself before Kongi at the festival. One of such strategies is to grant the release of the Oba and his retinue from prison, as well as persuade him with the promise, not the assurance, of the release of other political prisoners, including Segi's father, who are awaiting execution.

Danlola and his royal retinue are released; but their release does not change Danlola's mind, nor does it alter the strategy Daodu and Segi have been hatching up at the Night Club--the overthrow of President Kongi and the release of all political prisoners. Under Daodu's persuasive pressure and assurance, and to aid the Daodu-Segi strategy (which Kongi's secret intelligence service, the Big Ears of State, could not detect), Danlola agrees to attend the festival but not to present the new yam to Kongi. Amidst the festive atmospehre of the celebration, Segi's father (Kongi's prisoner) is shot and killed on Kongi's order. Kongi becomes possessed; and Segi serves him with her father's head, instead of the new yam, in a bowl; thus bringing the festival to an abrupt and confused end with

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[155]Ibid., pp. 70-72.

everybody fleeing the arena, except President Kongi who has now become one with the dead. In the filmed version of the play, Kongi is shot and killed by a snipper at this point of the play.

Applying the Concept to the Play

Kongi's Harvest profoundly justifies Soyinka's four-point definition or concept of music, as the musical idiom relates to theatre. As already stated, Soyinka conceives of music as a "communicant" vehicle, a language, catalyst, and solvent--all of which play significant roles in the regenerative process of life, the process towards the spatial definition of being in phenomena.

Music as a Communicant Medium and Language

There is a profound sense in which music as a "communicant medium" and music as an "intensive language" are closely related. As a "communicant medium," music becomes the means both of communication and communion on the social or physical and metaphysical planes. Communication per se may not necessarily involve an "intensive" (as opposed to "ordinary") language, but communion involves intense experience of the mystical which fundamentally uses an "intense" language--a language which profoundly affects the emotions, and whose images are primarily drawn from the metaphysical world of myth.

Kongi's Harvest deals with the forces of change in a transitional era: the spiritual and the temporal, the one trying to change the other. The former (spiritual power), represented by the

traditional politics of Oba Danlola which places the spiritual power of government in the hands of traditionally elected chieftains, is forcefully being ousted by the latter (temporal power), represented by Kongi's passion for the "absolutism" of modern dictatorship. The power struggle is also a symbolic representation of the regenerative process of life, the process of death and birth--the death of one era, and the birth of another--which is celebrated in the festival. Festival in Africa, as already noted, is a celebration of the end of one season and the beginning of another. It is an occasion during which, it is believed, all the forces of nature, including the living, the dead, the gods and the unborn, come together for a common "communion" to mark the end of one era and the beginning of another.

In the early scene of the play, Danlola and Sarumi are engaged in a dance of mourning and farewell. The song they sing to the accompaniment of drum music is more or less an invocation to the cosmic forces of misfortune and disaster embodied in Ogun, Esu and Sango--the three gods which they invoked:

SARUMI: Soon the head swelled
Too big for pillow
And it swelled too big
For the mother's head
Was nowhere to be seen
And the child's slight belly
Was strangely distended.

DANLOLA (comes forward, dancing softly.):
This is the last
Our feet shall touch together
We thought the tune
Obeyed us to the soul
But the drums are newly shaped
And stiff arms strain
On stubborn crooks, to
Delve with the left foot

For ill-luck; with the left
Again for ill-luck; once more
With the left alone, for disaster
Is the only certainty we know.

(The bugles join in royal cadences, the two kings dance slow, mournful steps, accompanied by their retinue. Coming down on the scene, a cage of prison bars separating Danlola from Sarumi and the other visitors who go out backwards herded off by the Superintendent.)[156]

Earlier in the play, it is Sarumi and the royal drummers who sing and dance, and are joined later by the dejected Danlola:

SARUMI: Ah, Danlola, my father,
Even so did I
Wish your frown of thunder away
When the Aweri were driven from
Their ancient conclave. Then you said . . .

DRUMMER: This is the last
That we shall dance together
They say we took too much silk
For the royal canopy
But the dead will witness
We never ate the silkworm.

SARUMI: They complained because
The first of the new yams
Melted first in an Oba's mouth
But the dead will witness
We drew the poison from the root.

(As the King's men begin a dirge of "ege," Danlola sits down slowly onto a chair, withdrawing more and more into himself.)

DRUMMER: I saw a strange sight
In the market this day
The day of the feast of Agemo
The sun was high
And the King's umbrella
Beneath it . . .

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[156]Ibid., pp. 68-69.

SARUMI: We lift the King's umbrella
Higher than men
But it never pushes
The sun in the face.

DRUMMER: I saw a strange sight
In the market this day
The sun was high
But I saw no shade
From the King's umbrella.

OGBO AWERI: This is the last
That we shall dance together
This is the last the hairs
Will lift on our skin
And draw together
When the gbedu rouses
The dead in Oshugbo. . . .[157]

SARUMI: This is the last our feet
Shall speak to feet of the dead
And the unborn cling
To the Hem of our robes. . . . (my emphasis)[158]

Both traditional rulers and their retinue use their dance as a means of communicating with the gods, the dead and the unborn, as well as sounding a note of warning to the living. Their invocation to the cosmic forces of disaster, and the communion of their feet with the feet of the dead and the unborn, involve a process of intense communication. The metaphysical nature of the communion naturally calls for the use of some "intensive language," for the sole purpose of reaching a meaningful rapport with all the forces involved in the process. The intensity of the language derives in part from the proverbial nature of the language of the song, and the

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[157]Soyinka's footnote: Oshugbo is the "Shrine of Oro (Cult of the dead)."

[158]Kongi's Harvest, pp. 66-67.

allusions to the Yoruba metaphysical world. The allusions to Oro ("oshugbo") and "Agemo" are thematic evocations of death. Both allusions belong to the Yoruba metaphysical world.

Historically, the Agemo is a politico-religious and judiciary cult and had the absolute power to give and take life.[159] In his prefatory notes to The Road and Madmen and Specialists, respectively, Soyinka states that the "Agemo is simply a religious cult of flesh dissolution"[160] and (referring to it as "AS") "the universal triumph of expediency and power lust, which makes dehumanisation possible, even in wars . . . [and] wear[s] a hundred masks and a thousand outward forms."[161] Oro and Agemo are invariably synonymous and, together, they constitute "the first step to power. . . . Power in its purest [absolute] sense. The end of inhibitions. The conquest of the weakness of your too human flesh with all its sentiment."[162]

It is evident, based on the foregoing argument, that Soyinka uses music as a symbolic vehicle to reach the "inner world" both of the characters and the play; to communicate with and then interpret that "inner world," and therefore, establish a correspondence between that inner world of the play with the world of the living. Consider, for instance, the epithets which Daodu uses to describe Segi in Segi's praise song:

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[159]Oyin Ogunba, "The Agemo Cult in Ijebuland," Nigeria Magazine 86: 176-186.

[160]"For the Producer," The Road, p. 149.

[161]Wole Soyinka, Publisher's preface to Madmen and Specialists (Ibadan: Oxford University Press, 1971).

[162]Madmen and Specialists, p. 36.

Fame, is a flippant lover
But Segi you made him a slave
And no poet now can rival
His devotedness

. . . . . .

But Segi
You are the stubborn strand
Of meat, lodged
Between my teeth.[163]

. . . . . .

A coiled snake
Is beautiful asleep
A velvet bolster
Laid on flowers

If the snake would
Welcome me, I do not wish
A softer pillow than
This lady's breasts

But do not fool with one
Whose bosom ripples
As a python coiled
In wait for rabbits.[164]

Segi, Kongi's former consort, is the brain behind the plot to overthrow President Kongi. She, like President Kongi, has become the "Spirit of Harvest." She is the "Queen of the Harvest night."[165] And Daodu's epithets drawn from the Yoruba world of archetypes, establish the correspondence between Segi and the metaphysical inner world of the play in which death looms large.

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[163] Kongi's Harvest, p. 75.

[164] Ibid., p. 88.

[165] IBid., p. 97.

Music as Catalyst

What we are witnessing in Kongi's Harvest is the struggle for absolute power. Inevitably, the balance of power must tilt to one side. Kongi has already declared himself "the SPIRIT of Harvest." The harvest itself is "the feast of Agemo," and Agemo means death. Kongi himself is the Agemo--for the festival of the new yam is itself "Kongi's Harvest" or the "feast of Agemo." The atmosphere of death looms large in the play; and it is imminent that the "spirit of harvest"--death--will make its appearance at the harvest, either to win over the living and take control of power or to claim one of its own kind. Soyinka uses music to bring about this catalytic finale of the play.

The festival song proper, whose images are also drawn from the archetypal world, sets the stage for the catalytic finale of the play. While the yam is being pounded for the celebration proper, the women break into a song sung in Yoruba (Soyinka provides the translation of the song at the end of the text). The song, reproduced here in part, echoes the arrival of the dead:

> I have borne the thorned crown
> Shed tears as the sea
> I was spat upon
> A leper's spittle
> A burden of logs
> Climbed the hunchback hill
> There was no dearth of yam
> But the head of the first born
> Was pounded for yam
> There was no dearth of wood
> Yet the thigh of the first born
> Lost its bone for fuel.[166]

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[166]Ibid., pp. 140-141 (English translation); pp. 130-131. (Yoruba text.)

During the pounding of the yam, Segi's father is shot and killed on Kongi's orders. For Kongi's share of the yam, Segi serves him her father's freshly killed head in a bowl. Soyinka's stage-directions to the scene crystalize the point:

> The rhythm of pounding emerges triumphant, the dance grows frenzied. Above it all on the dais, Kongi, getting progressively inspired harangues his audience in words drowned in the bacchanal. He exhorts, declaims, reviles, cajoles, damns, curses, vilifies, excommunicates, execrates until he is a demonic mass of sweat and foam at the lips. Segi returns, disappears into the area of pestles. A copper salver is raised suddenly high; it passes from hands to hands above the women's heads; they dance with it on their heads; it is thrown from one to the other until at last it reaches Kongi's table and Segi throws open the lid. In it, the head of an old man. In the ensuing scramble, no one is left but Kongi and the head, Kongi's mouth wide open in speechless horror. A sudden blackout on both.[167]

The women's song and dance, their yam-pounding and the ritual act of passing the bowl to Kongi's table, and the total effect of their rhythmic action on Kongi, become therefore a catalytic process and moment in the play. At this point in the play, Kongi has bridged the gap between the living and the dead, as he confronts and communes with the "terror" of the "numinous world of transition," symbolized by the blood-clogged head in the bowl before him. Thus with the carefully plotted destruction of Kongi by Segi and Daodu, which is aided and speeded up by the sudden and unexpected death of Segi's father, comes the end of an era of tyrannical dictatorship.

This scene also illustrates the points we have already examined in this chapter: Soyinka's use of music as a "communicant medium" and as the "intensive language of transition." Amidst the

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[167]Ibid., pp. 131-132.

rhythm of pounding the yam, the song and the dance which "grows frenzied," President Kongi reaches the state of possession which makes it possible for him to reach a rapport with the "dangerous" "demonic" forces of the transitional abyss. As the stage-directions show, his language becomes as intense as, and in harmony with, the intensity of the language of the music. The language of the music underscores a secret masonic correspondence with the symbolism of the play. According to Wole Soyinka, the intensive language of theatrical music, especially of tragic music,

> undergoes transformation through myth into a secret (masonic) correspondence with the symbolism of tragedy, a symbolic medium of spiritual emotions within the heart of the choric union. It transcends particularisation (of meaning) to tap the tragic source whence spring the familiar weird disruptive melodies. This masonic union of sign and melody, the true tragic music, unearths cosmic uncertainties which pervade human existence, reveals the magnitude and power of creation, but above all creates a harrowing sense of omnidirectional vastness where the creative intelligence resides and prompts the soul to futile exploration. The senses do not at such moments interpret myth in their particular concretions; we are left only with the emotional and spiritual values, the essential experience of cosmic reality. The forms of music are not correspondences at such moments to the physical world, not at this nor at any other moment. The singer is a mouthpiece of the chthonic forces of the matrix and his somnambulist "improvisations"--a simultaneity of musical and poetic forms--are not representations of the ancestor, recognitions of the living or unborn, but of the no man's land of transition between and around these temporal definitions of experience. The past is the ancestors', the present belongs to the living, and the future to the unborn. The deities stand in the same situation to the living as do the ancestors and the unborn, obeying the same laws, suffering the same agonies and uncertainties, employing the same masonic intelligence of rituals for the perilous plunge into the fourth area of experience, the immeasurable gulf of transition. Its dialogue is liturgy, its music takes form from man's uncomprehending immersion in the area of existence, buried wholly from rational recognition. The source of the possessed lyricist, chanting hitherto unknown mythopoeic strains whose antiphonal refrain is, however, instantly caught and thrust

> with all its terror and awesomeness into the night by swaying votaries, this source is residual in the numinous area of transition[168] (my emphasis).

Music as Solvent

The solvency of music in Soyinka's theatre derives from the capacity of the music to bring together, unify and harmonize several factors of theatre production. It also derives from the fact that music, as a "communicant medium," is a ritual act of affirmation and solidarity among the living, and between the living and the dead, the unborn and the gods.

Music harmonizes several factors in theatre production. The festival atmosphere which dominates Kongi's Harvest provides the basis for such harmonization. According to Ogungbesan,

> Soyinka's usual theatrical effects, both visual (dance and mime) and auditory (bells, drums, song, etc.) are those most commonly used during festivals among his people, the Yoruba who are very conscious of their cultural past which they celebrate publicly and lavishly. As an expression of cultural continuity, the dead and the gods are understood to be present and to rejoice with the living.[169]

The festival atmosphere, therefore, permits as well as enhances the general fluidity of action in Kongi's Harvest. Consider, for instance, the simultaneity of action at the festival in which the music becomes the vital link between the event off-stage and the activity on stage: The women's festival song, quoted inter alia,

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[168] Myth, Literature and the African World, pp. 148-149.

[169] Kolawole Ogungbesan, "Wole Soyinka: The Past and the Visionary Writer," in A Celebration of Black and African Writing, ed.: Bruce King and Kolawole Ogungbesan (Zaria: Ahmadu Bello University Press, 1975), p. 176.

and their yam-pounding constitute a vital link between the simultaneous events on- and off-stage. Soyinka's stage-directions, also quoted inter alia, show that the shooting and killing of Segi's father has a simultaneous correspondence with the "progressively" demonic transformation of President Kongi. The music becomes the symbolic vehicle of this transformation, and also the means whereby the dead journey to the living. For example, it is during this moment that the copper salver is "raised suddenly high; it passes from hands to hands above the women's heads; they dance with it on their heads; it is thrown from one to the other until at last it reaches Kongi's table and Segi throws open the lid. In it, the head of an old man."[170] The act or process of passing the copper salver "from hands to hands" until "it reaches Kongi's table," could be regarded as a mimed representation or portrayal of the passage through the "undented" cosmic "vastness" which the dead frequently make to reach the living and vice versa.

The solvency of the idiom also provides for the attainment of a rapport by the performer with the cosmos. This is a moment in the life of a performance when all the planes of existence--historical, temporal and nascent--and when the living, the dead, the gods and the unborn, come together in a frozen moment of time and space. President Kongi attains this moment of "possession" or rapport during which he gets "progressively inspired" towards becoming a "demonic mass," and finally confronts the dead (represented by the old man's head).

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[170] Kongi's Harvest, pp. 131-132.

The performer or character, Soyinka maintains is a mouthpiece of the gods. And since characters are double-cast to reflect their man-cosmos essence (as mentioned in Chapter I), the incidence of rapport or possession becomes, therefore, a metaphysical state of absolute freedom, a profound state of harmony with the cosmos, and a state in which the performer completely identifies himself with his role. During this moment of possession, says the Nigerian playwright, Ola Rotimi, "self-identification" by the performer with cosmic forces

> becomes total, and the caution of self-regard is submerged. Sometimes, further stimulated by sounds of rhythm (music), this feeling of mystical eminence is heightened and stretched beyond the level of the purely physical to affect the psyche, precipitating a state of trance.[171]

According to J. P. Clark, a Nigerian poet and playwright,

> the incidence of "possession" . . . is the attainment by actors in the heat of performance of "actual freedom of spirit from this material world," a state of transformation which has been given the rather sniggering name of "possession" or "auto-intoxication" by those outside its sphere of influence and sympathy . . . when [in] this state of complete identification with his role . . . at that point when . . . "things unseen enter the man," the actor may become a medium, a votary of some ancestor spirits or divine powers filling him with the gift of prophecy.[172]

And, adds Eldred Jones, "in this state of possession the humans present a double image."[173]

Finally, the solvency of the musical idiom provides for the natural and uncued transition from dialogue to song and dance. In

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[171]Ola Rotimi, "Traditional Nigerian Drama," p. 44.

[172]J. P. Clark, p. 87.

[173]Eldred Jones, "Wole Soyinka: Critical Approaches," p. 59.

the examples cited inter alia, there are no cues for the beginning and end of the songs. The characters sing and dance when they must, and stop when they please or when interrupted by extenuating circumstances. The occasions and situations create their own music, for example, the women's festival song. The occasions also provide the essential facilities for celebrating every situation or event within the framework of music, dance and mime, for example, Segi's praise song which marks the satisfactory completion of the plans to overthrow President Kongi. This device--the fluidity of action through the uncued interplay of music--demonstrates Soyinka's ability to change the character of a scene by suddenly charging it with the secret, masonic energy and power of the musical idiom. Herbert Kretzner, theatre critic of the Daily Express (London), made a similar observation of Soyinka's comedy, The Lion and the Jewel, during its 1966 production in London. Thus he wrote about the play:

> With its almost causal shifts into song, dance, and mime, this novel and entertaining Nigerian comedy achieves a cohesion that has so often eluded the makers of musical comedies on the stages of Broadway and the West End. There are no obvious prepared cues for song, no sudden or inopportune dance numbers to show off the chorus. People in this show sing when they have to, dance when they must, deriving their motivation for these activities from the real life, rich with ritual of the African village in which the Nigerian playwright Wole Soyinka has set his little fable.[174]

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[174]Herbert Kretzner's review in Daily Express (13 December 1966) of a London production of The Lion and the Jewel by Wole Soyinka; quoted in Eldred Jones, "Wole Soyinka: Critical Approaches," p. 54.

Conclusion

From the foregoing analysis, it is evident that, apart from its entertainment function and its capacity for spectacle, the musical heritage is in Soyinka's theatre a vehicle of much symbolic meaning and content, a set of ideas, concepts and feelings, a multifaceted phenomenon which represents and symbolizes a multiplicity of ideas because, perhaps, of its psycho-biological as well as cultural levels. It involves the symbolic transformation of thought and experiences in a manner similar to that usually postulated for myth: translating experiences into visual and recognizable action. The music is evidently part of the people's life-style, nothing added to it.

The musical heritage has provided Soyinka's "excellent theatre" a tremendous amount of flexibility and the integration both of form, character and content. Soyinka has applied the musical idiom as a mode of instinctive response, and as a device for externalizing the internal inner world, both of character and transition. The occasions and situations have created their own music, and provided the essential facilities for celebrating every situation or event within the framework of music, mime and dance. The framework is carefully structured and worked out within the context of the play, so as to achieve smooth and natural transitions from the present into the past and future, from dialogue to song, dance and mime, and from the world of the living to the world of the dead.

In view of the foregoing analysis, it is germane to suggest and believe that Wole Soyinka has re-interpreted, and given new

meaning and significance to the traditional idiom of music. He has restored it to its original status, garbed it with new significance, and used it to interpret modern themes. Thus he has not only saved the musical idiom from an ineluctable collapse and fossilization, but has transformed it into a more viable art form whose infinite capacity and value for the theatre have not yet been fully explored and exhausted.

CHAPTER IV

CONCLUSION

An Appraisal

This is not an exhaustive appraisal of Wole Soyinka as artist, and his importance and significance to the rapidly growing comtemporary African theatre. This chapter is divided into three parts: the first re-states the playwright's basic positions as contined in this study; the second part is an appraisal of Wole Soyinka as artist, based on his application of his fundamental concepts to the plays discussed in this study. The third part of the chapter examines Soyinka's importance and significance to contemporary African theatre, based principally on the observations made in this study.

Re-stating the Concepts

The world of Soyinka's theatre is the coterminous world of transition in which are coeval and consanguineous the living, the dead, the unborn and the gods. In Chapter I of this study, therefore, Soyinka defines theatre as the microscopic duplicate of the macrocosmic world of transition. Theatre, he says, is a "metaphysical" and "symbolic arena" for the living, the dead, the unborn and the gods. In Chapter II of the study, Soyinka conceives of time, space and scenery to be mutually correspondent--one being the

reflection of, as well as defining the other. Scenery is the symbolic re-creation of the totality of the macrocosmic world--the "cosmic entirety;" space is the symbolic encapsulation of the magnitude and vastness of the macrocosmic world; and time is fundamentally "cyclic" and, like space and scenery, limitless and vast. The mutual correspondence between time, space and scenery, Soyinka maintains, "contains within it manifestations of the ancestral, the living and the unborn."[175] Soyinka maintains in Chapter III that music is a symbolic medium of communication between the living and their cosmic neighbours. Music is the "intensive language of transition," a "catalyst" and a "solvent," he says.

In these three fundamental positions, Soyinka's vision of theatre insists upon the transitional abyss as a constant theatrical factor for the better understanding of his work.

Wole Soyinka, the Artist

"The writer," says Wole Soyinka, "must impress an acceptance."[176] That is, he must not only entertain and please his audience, but must creatively communicate with them at various levels, through his mastery and application of the very instruments and mechanics of craft. Therefore, says Soyinka, "my prime duty as a playwright is to provide excellent theatre,"[177] by reinterpreting

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[175] Myth, Literature and the African World, p. 144.

[176] Wole Soyinka, "From A Common Back Cloth: A Reassessment of the African Literary Image," The American Scholar 32(3): 392.

[177] Cosmo Pieterse and Dennis Duerden, eds., pp. 172-173.

or transforming and then applying all the "existing theatrical idioms in Nigeria" to redefine the human phenomenon.

Because of his metaphysical and symbolic approach to the theatre, Soyinka's work is informed largely by two modes of symbolism, namely: visual and auditory symbolism. Soyinka's visual symbolism is a profound attempt to imagistically recapture on stage the more abstract and metaphysical ideas about his "man-cosmos" world. The image of the spider's web, and of the road itself in The Road, for instance, portray the "man-cosmos" orbit as an endless orbit of interlocking rings and circles, within which man is essentially trapped. The density of the forest in A Dance of the Forests is a visual portrayal of the mystique of the transitional abyss. Soyinka's stage-directions describe the forest as follows:

> (Back-Scene lights up gradually to reveal a dark, wet, atmosphere, dripping moisture, and soft, moist soil. A palm-tree sways at a low angle, broken but still alive. Seemingly lightning-reduced stumps. Rotting wood all over the ground. A mound or two here and there. Footfalls are muffled. First, there is total stillness, emphasized by the sound of moisture dripping to the ground. Forest Head is sitting on a large stone, statuesque, the Questioner stands beside him. Aroni is no longer to be seen. The Dead Woman enters, dead as on first appearance. She behaves exactly as before, hesitant, seemingly lost.)[178]

The details of the scenery have more than literal meanings. Some of the details are to a large extent reminiscent of the scenery of The Road (see Chapter II, pp. 52-53): the low-angled and broken, but still living palm-tree, the "lightning-reduced stumps," and the "rotting wood all over the ground," are reminiscent of the wrecked

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[178] A Dance of the Forests, p. 60.

motor parts which form a significant background to The Road. In both plays, therefore, the visual or pictorial details of scenery become powerful symbolic statements about the "man-cosmos" world, its metaphysics, and about the inner world of the characters.

Dance and mime are used also to visually create and sustain the movement towards transition, to bring together the various planes of the "man-cosmos" correspondence, and to release into one frozen moment of time and space all the physical and psychic forces within the play. Consider, for instance, Samson's mimed re-creation of dead Sergeant Burma, and the mimed re-creation of the drivers' festival of Ogun during which Murano was knocked down by Kotonu, both of which are in The Road (see Chapter II, pp. 67 and 55, respectively). Both the physical and psychic forces of the re-created moments are released into the present, and their effects are visually registered by the character's confrontation with, and reaction to the forces.

Auditory symbolism in Soyinka's theatre derives principally from the musical accompaniments to the songs, and from the poetry and tonal quality of the songs. Consider, for instance, Professor's praise song and the song of the lay-abouts in The Road (see Chapter II), and Danlola-Sarumi song and the women's song in Kongi's Harvest. All the songs, together with the dance and the instrumentation which accompany them, have profound auditory effects, and they are also profound symbolic statements about the play. Drumming is an art, and its music a language in traditional Africa. The drummer usually

directs his energies towards the perfection of his art because, says Echezona, "it is in the drumming that all elements--melodic, harmonic, and rhythmic--are exhibited."[179] Writing about the Gelede dance of the Yoruba, Margaret and Henry Drewal come to the conclusion that "a drum phrase . . . imitates the tonal patterns of the Yoruba language to communicate movement direction and social commentary."[180]

Wole Soyinka has, therefore, distinguished himself as a master craftsman by his creative application of the idioms of the traditional theatre to create his "excellent theatre." Registering his reaction to a sterile production given sometime ago in Cuba, Wole Soyinka states that "Every event in the theatre, every genuine effort at creative communication, entertainment, escapism, is for me, entirely valid. . . . What one must regret is the atmosphere of sterility and truely pathetic preciosity that it seems to breed."[181] As an artist he seizes upon every idea and idiom that have profound theatrical values and effects. John Ferguson, for instance, wrote about Wole Soyinka's drama:

> His restless intellectualism seizes on ideas and themes, and his characters tend to become symbols for conveying these ideas. It is a sober judgment that he has the creative capacity and

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[179]W. E. Echezona, "Ibo Musical Instruments" (Ann Arbor: University Microfilms Inc., 1970). Quoted in Meki Nzewi, "Folk Music in Southeastern Nigeria: An Appraisal," p. 6.

[180]Margaret Thompson Drewal and Henry John Drewal, "Gelede Dance of the Western Yoruba," African Arts VIII (2): 38.

[181]Wole Soyinka, "Towards a True Theatre," Transition 3(8): 21.

> technical equipment to take his place amongst the very few dramatists who overstride the boundaries of continents and centuries (my emphasis).[182]

Therefore, says David Cook, Soyinka's drama continues to echo

> through our minds long after we have watched or read it, returning to us unawares at unexpected moments, when we find ourselves wrestling with its implications. As we perceive that the familiar psychological and religious dilemmas are being re-examined, we may be tempted into symbolic interpretations with fixed relationships between the items, but this is certainly to limit our dramatic experience, which should cut across formulas and categories. The patterns are compelling, endlessly suggestive and relevant, but neither fixed nor prescribed (my emphasis).[183]

As a highly sophisticated writer, Wole Soyinka takes his place amongst leading world dramatists. The freedom and flexibility of his theatre is reminiscent of Brecht's epic theatre.[184] It is this freedom of his medium which gives him the facilities to play and juggle with ideas. According to Osofisan, Soyinka "plays with ideas with the facility of a master juggler."[185] And, says Margaret Laurence, his

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[182]John Ferguson, "Nigerian Drama in English," p. 26.

[183]David Cook, African Literature: A Critical View, p. 126.

[184]In an interview with Lewis Nkosi (a South African playwright) in 1962, Soyinka acknowledged his admiration for the "liveliness and freedom" of Brecht's theatre: "What I like in Brecht is his sort of theatre, its liveliness and freedom, not so much his purpose or intentions." Cosmo Pieterse and Dennis Duerden, eds., African Writers Talking (New York: Africana Publishing Corporation, 1972), p. 173.

[185]Femi Osofisan, "Tiger on Stage: Wole Soyinka and Nigerian Theatre," p. 151.

> Writing often seems like a juggling act. He can keep any number of plates--and valuable plates, at that--spinning in the air at the same time. . . . He is a volatile writer, and he achieves in his work an almost unbelievable amount of vitality.[186]

Hence, what is not said in Soyinka's drama, as David Cook observes,

> becomes as important as the spoken word. . . . Frequently the gap between what is uttered in conventionally grouped words and what is meant in the complexity of the human heart provides an upper layer of [meanings and] gentle humour. This tier of meaning is not just a matter of the structures of separate sentences and speeches; it has more to do with the eddying movement of the human mind, circling round its private pre-occupations while it is carried forward publicly by the stream of a situation.[187]

It is for these reasons that the distinguished critic of the "theatre of the absurd," Martin Esslin, acknowledged: "Wole Soyinka is a highly accomplished playwright . . . a master craftsman of the theatre and a major dramatic poet."[188] As a "master-craftsman," Wole Soyinka is in perfect command and control of his artistic medium. His medium responds with instantaneous ease to his restless, but active imagination.

Soyinka and Contemporary African Theatre

In the wake, perhaps, of a profoundly disturbing feeling that the artistic institution of traditional Africa was faced with the threat of total collapse and extinction or fossilization from today's

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[186] Long Drums and Cannons: Nigerian Dramatists and Novelists 1952-1966 (London: Macmillan, 1968), p. 11.

[187] David Cook, "Of the Strong Breed," p. 38.

[188] See Martin Esslin, "Two African Playwrights," Black Orpheus (19): 33-39.

civilization, the Ghanaian playwright, J. C. de Graft, raised a cry of anguish and alarm, saying:

> What we are witnessing is not merely a change but a collapse, the cumulative result of over five hundred years (in some places) of the subjugation of African cultural systems to the most ruthless forms of domination and exploitation. And it is a collapse not only of systems of belief and worship, but also of systems of political, social, and economic organization and practice, systems of technology (no matter how elementary), and systems of linguistic and non-linguistic communication.[189]

J. C. de Graft's outcry came at a time when many African writers were still more Western than African in their approach to literature and theatre.

Soyinka's primary importance to the African theatre derives principally from his demystification of the African metaphysical world. He has explored the metaphysical world of transition, the dead, the unborn, and the gods; and he has used his findings about these dark areas of existence to interpret and understand today's world of the living. Other African writers such as J. P. Clark, Tsegaye Gabre Medhin, and Sarif Easmond, have become more aware of the artistic potentialities of the traditional idioms, and their capacity to be used for the theatrical exploration of the man-cosmic world.

Soyinka also brings to the African theatre a high degree of professionalism and extensive theatre experience, both of which were nurtured by the Royal Court Theatre, London. He is the most successful and the most imaginatively liberated of African writers. According to Oyin Ogunba,

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[189]J. C. de Graft, "Roots in African Drama and Theatre," African Literature Today (8): 13.

> the dominant figure in West African drama is Wole Soyinka. There are obvious reasons for his pre-eminence. First, there is hardly any feeling of provincialism in his work--the fear, in fact, is that he is already sophisticated to a fault, unlike many others who tend to be mere local men. He is an accomplished actor and producer, unlike some others who are simply armchair playwrights. This seems to have given him a more pointed sense of theatrical effect than the others, for he is able to see the clash of ideas with the eye of a professional. . . . (my emphasis).[190]

It is, however, doubtful whether any single volume of work (unless such a work is encyclopaedic) devoted entirely to the study and analysis of Soyinka's work can justifiably encompass the breadth and depth of his vision and craftsmanship. It is no hyperbolic conclusion to emphatically assert that Wole Soyinka is to contemporary Africa what Shakespeare was to Elizabethan England, W. B. Yeats to Ireland, Henrik Ibsen to Norway and the Renaissance man to Europe. A restless, active intelligence and prototype of the Renaissance man--poet, novelist, playwright, actor, director-producer, critic, publisher, teacher, politician, and more--Soyinka pre-eminently bestrides the African literary and theatrical stage like a mortal incarnate of a god.

He will be remembered as the African promethean who, with a bold and decisive stride, liberated contemporary African creativity from provincialism, self-deification and cultural nostalgia. He has brought to it a new sense of direction and sophisticated sensitivity. He has given it a new form, texture and colour, in subject matter and in the handling of it, in language and in all the functional and aesthetic logistics of the artistic media, especially in drama and theatre.

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[190]Oyin Ogunba, The Movement of Transition, p. 105.

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