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## Towards an Indigenization of Theatre: Appropriation of African Myths, Rituals and Beliefs in the Plays of Wole Soyinka

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### **Abstract:**

Wole Soyinka's literary corpus reveals his unmistakable creative and critical mooring in African traditions, myths and history. He observed inherent theatrical qualities in many rituals, beliefs, festivals and ceremonies of West Africa which might be stretched in the direction of theatre. This study focuses on Soyinka's dexterous appropriation of African myths, rituals, beliefs and festivals for the construction of his dramaturgy. Although Soyinka incorporates various African customs and beliefs, his main source of inspiration is Yoruba cultural tradition. His plays are also replete with Yoruba songs, dance, performance traditions, proverbs etc. Thus, the playwright attempts at an indigenization of Western dramatic form. In his plays, marginalized native cultures and artistic traditions are revitalized and brought to the centre through reclamation and affirmation of precolonial indigenous theatrical forms and performance idioms. Nevertheless, the playwright does not disregard influences from other cultural traditions.

### **Keywords: Wole Soyinka, Yoruba, African tradition, Ogun**

Acknowledged as one of the foremost living playwrights of the world, Wole Soyinka is the first African Nobel laureate who was awarded the coveted Nobel Prize for literature in 1986. As a playwright, Wole Soyinka has basically operated within two categories – the tragic and the satiric. Although the dramatic form itself and the Western generic categories are Western import, Soyinka has injected fresh energies into every genre by the incorporation of traditional Yoruba elements. Soyinka's dramas are informed by both indigenous and European forms and elements. Soyinka observed inherent theatrical qualities in many rituals, festivals and ceremonies of West Africa which might be stretched in the direction of theatre. Yoruba worldview, Yoruba myths, Yoruba festivals, Yoruba rites, elements of Yoruba oral prose and poetry etc. offer his plays local colour.

Nigeria, officially the Federal Republic of Nigeria, is located in West Africa. It is a federal constitutional republic comprising 36 states and its Federal Capital Territory, Abuja. Formerly a British dependency, Nigeria became an independent member of the Commonwealth of Nations in 1960. The Yoruba people constitute one of the largest ethnic groups of Nigeria. Approximately fifteen million Yoruba people reside in south-west Nigeria and the neighbouring Benin and Togo. Nigeria is a country of rich ethnic diversity which has more than 250 ethnic groups who speak in different languages and practice various customs. The largest ethnic groups of Nigeria like the Hausa, Yoruba, Igbo and Fulani constitute more than 70% of its population. While the ethnic groups like Edo, Ijaw, Kanuri, Ibibio, Epira, Nupe, Gwari etc. contribute to 25-30% of the country's population, other minorities make up the remaining 5%. More than 500 languages are prevalent among the inhabitants of Nigeria. In some areas of the country, ethnic groups speak more than one language. English was

chosen the official language of Nigeriato bolster the cultural and linguistic unity of the country.

Wole Soyinka was born into a Yoruba family on 13th July in 1934 at Abeokuta, western Nigeria. Soyinka's childhood was spent at Ake, a part of Abeokuta. Abeokuta was the Yoruba town where the Christian missionaries appeared first for preaching Christianity and consequently the town came into close contact with European civilization and its influences. Soyinka's parents sought to offer him a Christian upbringing at home. His regular playmates and classmates offered him an awareness of a host of pagan spirits and their specialties. In Isara, Soyinka's grandfather lived among his Ijebu relatives. Little Soyinka during his occasional holiday escapades to Isara developed intimacy with the undefiled indigenous traditions of Ijebu culture. Soyinka got exposure to colonial education in both Nigeria and England. Soyinka's attachment with the Royal court theatre in England as a play reader, where he tried out some of his early plays offered him the access to the whole range of the traditional as well as modern avant-garde European playwrights' works. However, it was his tour after his return from England across different parts of West Africa as a Rockefeller Research fellow, which offered him the requisite access to different aspects of indigenous theatre and performance idioms. Soyinka's research at the University of Ibadan on dramatic elements in Yoruba ritual nourished his knowledge of the theatrical qualities of indigenous rituals. In Ake, Soyinka acquired a thorough acquaintance with numerous Nigerian deities, festivals and specific rites performed during such festivals. The passion play of Obatala, the Oshun Festival at Oshogbo, the New Year Festival etc. proved a source of inspiration to him. In Soyinka's paternal hometown Isara, *Agemo* was worshipped as a major deity. Ideas and conventions relating to *Agemo* and his festivals underpin the background and structure of *The Road*. In Ake, Soyinka witnessed native *egungun* masquerades and their processions. The sensitive playwright was deeply fascinated by the immense theatrical possibilities of the dramatic qualities, idioms, meanings and ideas connected with such deities and their festivals.

Yoruba religion is marked by a number of conflicting and confusing elements. The same deity may be male in one village and female in another. The pantheon of deities is called the *Orisha*. Olorun/Olodumare is the supreme deity who is "regarded as the creator of everything – he created all the other gods, and the earth was created on his initiative, though not by him personally" (Larsen 21). Olorun breathes life into creation. Obatala is the god of creation and at the command of Olorun he created the earth. Entrusted on Obatala is the responsibility of shaping human bodies. It is believed that "all the other divinities ('orisha') originated from Obatala" (Larsen 23). Orunmila, regarded as Olorun's deputy, is the "Yoruba god of divination and oracles" (25). Ogun, Soyinka's favourite god, is the god of war, poetry and hunters. He is the patron deity of all who use metal in their work. Eshu is the messenger and trickster god who is feared for his potential for causing harm. Oko is the god of agriculture. "Shango is the god of thunder and lightning" (Larsen 27). Yoruba people also worship numerous forest deities like Oro, Aroni, and Erinle. Not only these gods but festivals also are an integral part of Yoruba life. The Yoruba New Year takes place in March, when the villagers and town dwellers participate in communal purification rites, helping each other to confess their sins and starting the New Year afresh together. Soyinka's drama *A Dance of the Forests*, which was conceived on the grand occasion of the independence of the nation in 1960, is set against the backdrop of this New Year Festival and has many of the deities of Yoruba pantheon as its *dramatis personae* who strive for the spiritual regeneration of the chosen individuals in course of the dramatic action.

Although Soyinka incorporates different African customs and beliefs, his main source of inspiration is Yoruba cultural tradition. Soyinka's plays are replete with Yoruba mythological figures, myths, rituals and festivals. Soyinka's dramatic theory is based on Ogun myth. He traced the origin of Yoruba tragedy in Yoruba ritual or in the "Mysteries of Ogun" (Soyinka, "The Fourth" 142). Soyinka's tragic vision as embodied in his dramas is imbued with his patron deity Ogun's act of sacrifice and the related myth. Soyinka's tragic protagonists like Eman, Demoke, Olunde etc. are modelled on Ogun and his act of self-sacrifice for communal well-being. According to Yoruba metaphysics, the entire Yoruba pantheon and humans were born due to the fragmentation of Orisa-nla, the primal deity. A transitional gulf isolated the deities from the mortals. Man is constantly haunted by the awareness of the loss of the eternal essence of his being and strives to recover the totality of his being. "Tragedy, in Yoruba traditional drama, is the anguish of this severance, the fragmentation of essence from self" (Soyinka, "The Fourth" 145). In his endeavor to unite gods with men, among all the deities, it was Ogun who "with the aid of the artifacts of his science" led other deities through the impenetrable primordial void, experienced disintegration in the process, and again reassembled himself by "harnessing the untouched part of himself, the will" (Soyinka, "Myth" 30). Soyinka noticed a semblance between the action of the protagonist actor of the ritual drama and the heroic feat of Ogun. Like Ogun, the actor in ritual drama undertakes action for the community. Like Ogun, the actor "prepares mentally and physically for his disintegration and re-assembly within the universal womb of origin, experiences the transitional yet inchoate matrix of death and being. . . . Tragic feeling in Yoruba drama stems from sympathetic knowledge of the protagonist's foray into this psychic abyss of the re-creative energies" (Soyinka, "Myth" 30-31). However, Soyinka's comedies are to a great extent inspired by Yoruba satiric song traditions.

The traditional Yoruba world derives its sustenance from the Yoruba worldview and the accompanying rituals. Yoruba metaphysics espouses a belief in the four arenas of existence. Yoruba cosmology comprises the world of the living, the world of the dead and the world of the unborn – all of which are linked with the numinous passage of transition (Figure 1). Yoruba cosmology reflects a conviction in the continuity among these three states of being. Thus, a human being can have three states of existence and in order to move from one state of existence to another one requires crossing the transitional gulf. Ancestors are greatly revered by the Yoruba and with physical death in the world of the living, a person joins the ancestors in the world of the dead. "The world of the unborn, in the Yoruba world-view, is as evidently older than the world of the living as the world of the living is older than the ancestor-world" (Soyinka, "Myth" 10). During *egungun* rituals, selected persons of the community who wear *egungun* masks bring back the dead ancestors physically into the world of the living. Soyinka's dramas like *A Dance of the Forest*, *The Road*, *Death and the King's Horseman* etc. have their thematic anchorage in this metaphysical idea.

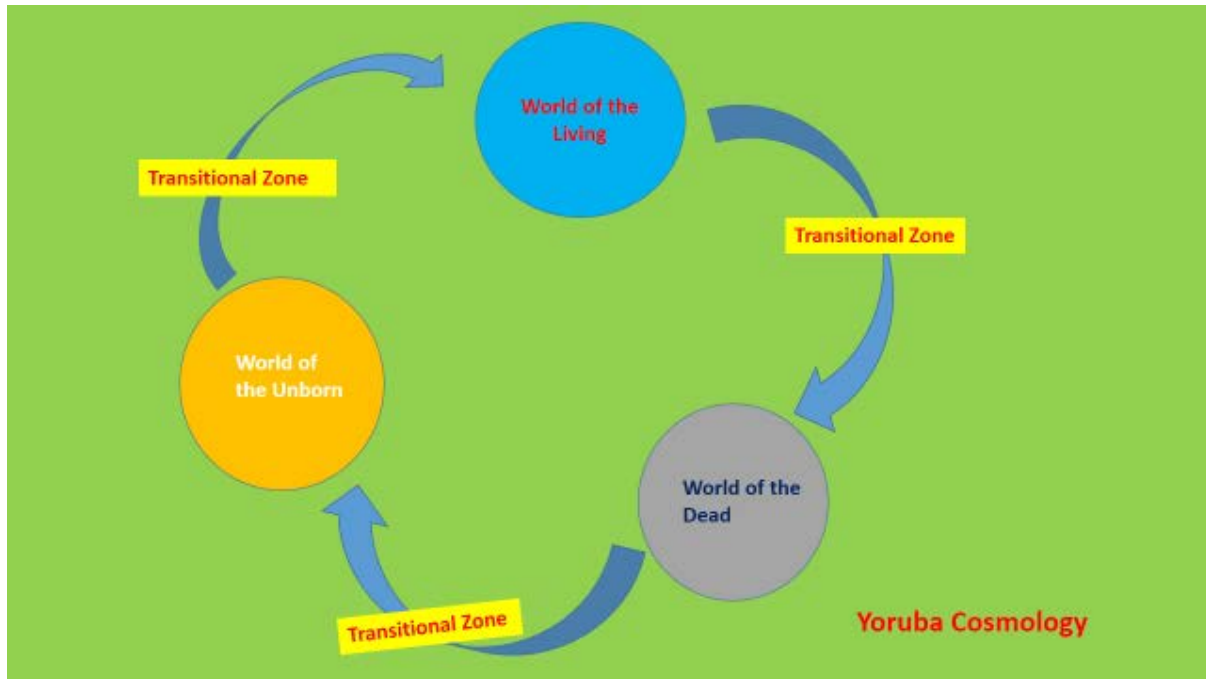


Figure 1

An *abiku* is a child who, according to Yoruba traditional religion, is predestined to pass through cycles of repeated births and deaths. Soyinka exploits the traditional concept of 'Abiku' in the formation of the 'Half-Child' in *A Dance of the Forest*. The Half-Child articulates apprehension about the impending tragic doom which might overwhelm him: "I who yet await a mother/Feel this dread . . . I'll be born dead" (Soyinka, *CPI* 64). In Una Maclean's view, the Half-Child which seems to be appalled by the possibility of passing through the unbreakable pattern of repeated births as stillborn symbolizes 'the new nation' of Nigeria at Independence (qtd. in Wilkinson 69). Soyinka's prophetic apprehension about the new nation's future propelled him to metaphorically suggest the impending difficulties the new nation is going to encounter in its postcolonial journey through the demonstration of the peril in which the Half-Child is put in the drama. Jeopardizing his own life, Demoke, one of Soyinka's Ogun-heroes strives to break the *abiku* doom on the Half-Child by rescuing him from the cruel clutches of Eshuoro.

Soyinka's play *The Swamp Dwellers* deals with individuals dwelling in the delta region of Nigeria and belonging to Ijaw culture. The land is affected by heavy rainfall and flood marring the possibility of good harvest. Soyinka depicts the culture of a traditional society underpinned by an exploitative and decadent religion. This society harbours a belief in the Serpent and its priest as the guardian of the folk. It also believes in the uncultivability of the good land of the Serpent. Inhabitants of the swamp are engaged in continuous appeasement of the Serpent of the swamp through ritual offerings for good fortune and prosperity. Kadiye is a false prophet. Religion, in the hands of the Kadiye, has become an effective means of exploitation and source of corruption. When Igwezu, a young member of the society questions the authority of the Kadiye and exposes the inadequacy of the benedictions of the Priest and his Serpent to avert peoples' misfortunes and the vagaries of nature, the malevolent Priest retaliates. Igwezu's challenge of the Priest results in his social ostracism.

Rituals are often associated with festivals. Soyinka in his writings refers to the Oshun festival performed annually at Oshogbo. It is the festival of Oshun, the river goddess. The

festival brings the community together and also purges it of all the evils of the passing year. At the centre of this festival, there exists the performance of a ritual during the course of which the chief who himself becomes the manifestation of good qualities like patience, tolerance, forgiveness etc. is symbolically captured and subsequently redeemed. The chief through his behavior offers a moral lesson to the rest of the community. He drives away the evils of the old year and prepares the community for a new journey in the New Year through his self-sacrificing gesture. Certain Yoruba festivals lured Soyinka tremendously with their underlying far-reaching implications to employ them as the setting of his plays. There is the annual New Yam festival with a lot of rituals attached to it. Yam is one of the staple crops produced by the Yoruba in family farms. Often competitions are arranged to award the producer of the biggest yam. During this festival, a new yam is symbolically eaten only after the proper performance of certain rituals. In such festivals, everybody is brought together in mutual, communal participation (Gibbs, "Soyinka" 65-6). New Yam festival is also economically significant for the community as it encourages the farmers to produce better crops to be involved in competition.

Soyinka appropriates the New Yam festival as the setting of a political upheaval in his tragicomedy *Kongi's Harvest* which was directed by the playwright in 1965 in Lagos. Soyinka's play ridicules the corrupt dictatorship which dominates African political sphere in postcolonial period. In the Yoruba society, the Oba operates as the head; he possesses both secular and spiritual authority. Kongi, the corrupt dictator and President of Ismaland, has dethroned the traditional Oba as the new modern ruler. But his usurpation of political power fails to offer him the spiritual authority of a traditional king. Kongi, who longs for the Oba's spiritual authority, tyrannizes over the Oba in order to persuade him to make an act of public surrender of power by ceremonially presenting the symbolic new yam to him. Kongi seeks to employ the traditional New Yam Festival as a platform for demonstration of his supremacy over the Oba. However, Daodua a young revolutionary plans with her beloved Segi to use the same festival as an occasion to challenge Kongi's regime. During the festival, Segi offers Kongi the severed head of her assassinated father on a copper salver instead of the symbolic new yam. Kongi fails to achieve the desired admiration from the people as the 'Spirit of the Harvest'. The festival ends in utter chaos and confusion; the coup fails to depose Kongi.

The daily life in African society is marked by observance of varied rituals and customs. Performance of certain rituals is concerned with purification of the society through expulsion of evil to ensure communal wellbeing. Although both carrier and scapegoat are used in African society for exclusion of evil, Derek Wright offers a useful distinction between these two ritual performers. While the carrier simply transports the evil, usually in the form of an effigy, the scapegoat absorbs evil into his living being. The carrier customarily removes the year's ills and misfortunes. The scapegoat bears away the sins of the community in a purely expiatory rite. While the carrier appears only in calendrical communion rites at the year's turning and has to do specifically with time and its removal, scapegoats have always been used irregularly and for a variety of public and private purposes as need arose. The carrier is an ordinary member of the community who freely chooses his role. The carrier departs from the community only temporarily to deposit its burden either in water or on waste ground and returns to be reincorporated into the collectivity. The scapegoat, on the other hand, is sometimes an innocent slave victim or "sickly person" specially purchased for the rite. The scapegoat is rarely banished and usually slain, helping his society to escape its sins without himself escaping (87-93).

The Ijo rite, the Amagba, is possibly the source of Soyinka's Delta rite in his tragedy *The Strong Breed* (Wright 87). Derek Wright claims that 'the carrier ritual' corresponding to

Eman's murder in Jaguna's village as represented in *The Strong Breed* is actually a perverted ritual since the humiliations and the ultimate butchery which Eman encounters are actually reserved not for the carrier but for the scapegoat (87). Initially, as it occurs in the case of a scapegoat, Ifada, a reluctant mentally retarded outsider is recruited for the observance of purification ritual in the village. But Eman, who in his native village disowned the inherited role of a carrier at an early age, now steps in to save the child in a foreign land and willingly substitutes himself for Ifada as the carrier. Eman is prepared, disgraced, whipped, and chased through the streets in a way which indicates that the villagers have supposed him to be an embodiment of evil like a scapegoat and not a dignified carrier of evil. And finally like a scapegoat, Eman is desisted from returning to community and gets butchered through the conspiracy of the village head and his followers. Syncretism of native religious practices and imported alien religious culture is a recurring phenomenon in Soyinka's works. "In *The Strong Breed*, for instance, there is a mingling and contrasting of Yoruba purification rites and deliberate references to Christian doctrines; the play stresses similarities between Yoruba concepts of self-sacrifice and Judeo-Christian ideas" (Gibbs, *Wole* 21).

The celebration of native curative practice as opposed to Western medical science has become one of the key strategies of resistance to imperial culture in the writings of the postcolonial writers. In *Madmen and Specialists*, Soyinka introduces the concept of *babalawo* or traditional healers who treat patients with the help of herbs and enjoy immense popularity in African society. After Dr. Bero's departure from the house to the dehumanising battlefield, his sister Si Bero with the help of Iya Mate and Iya Agba, two traditional herbalists has acquired knowledge about the medicinal values of different herbs and twigs. These old women, Iya Mate and Iya Agba are called the "Earth Mothers" who "represent an earthed, age-old wisdom" (Gibbs, *Wole* 101). Soyinka's idolization of life-nourishing elements of indigenous tradition is perceptible in his introduction of the Earth Mothers and their traditional practice of healing through herbs and twigs. The humanitarian, revitalizing tradition of Si Bero and the Earth Mothers is contrasted with the dehumanizing, destructive modernity of Dr. Bero who undergoes a conversion from a life-saving doctor into a tyrannical political force during the war. In contrast to her tyrant brother, Si Bero is filled with valuable human qualities like selfless love, care, and affection. With Dr. Bero, Si Bero has "the power of a mother" (Soyinka, *CP2* 274). Iya Mate and Iya Agba have their "origin in the Yoruba Ogboni cult" (Akoh 134). With the Ogboni lies the spiritual authority for exacting the costly rites of purification and atonement to appease the Earth Goddess, Onile infuriated at the earth's defilement through human bloodshed except in sacrifice (David 82). Iya Mate and Iya Agba are quite aware of their responsibility of not allowing the traditional knowledge and practice of healing to be vitiated by letting it fall a prey to human avarice. And finally like the true guardians of tradition, recognizing the perversity of Dr. Bero's intention and to avert the prospective misuse of their accumulated herbs and wisdom, they proceed to destroy their store through the application of fire which, as David claims, perhaps will purify the contaminated place (84).

Soyinka makes extensive exploitation of the traditional Yoruba ideas, beliefs and rituals in *The Road*. This is instantiated in his employment of the religious cult of flesh dissolution or 'Agemo', the concept of spiritual possession represented by the *egungun* masquerade, and the traditional *Oro* festival where Ogun is worshipped – all of which are very much organic to the structure of the play. Professor takes the assistance of Murano, who in his 'agemo' phase embodies the suspension of death, in his quest for unravelling the essence of death. For the producer, Soyinka's note on Murano and *agemo* runs thus: "He functions as an arrest of time or death, since it was in his *agemo* phase that the lorry knocks him down. *Agemo*, the mere phase, includes the passage of transition from the human to the

divine essence . . .” (CPI 149). Only Murano, who exists at a transitional realm between life and death, is capable of unearthing the mystery of death. Now to create an ‘*agemo*’ figure in Murano, Soyinka appropriates the traditional *Oro* festival as the background in which Murano is knocked down by a lorry and reaches his ‘*agemo*’ phase just when he is masquerading as the Yoruba god Ogun. One of the fundamental beliefs of the folk tradition is that the spirit of a deceased forefather or a god possesses the masquerader during the dance of *egungun*. Professor forces Murano to perform the dance of the *egungun* wearing the mask of Ogun and during the performance Murano is completely possessed by the spirit of god. This endeavor proves disastrous for Professor and brings about his horrendous end.

*Death and the King’s Horseman* draws its African inspiration from an actual historical event that occurred in December, 1944 in Oyo, an ancient Yoruba city in Nigeria. Soyinka’s *Death and the King’s Horseman* introduces us to a traditional custom of Oyo society which demands that after the death of the Alafin (king), his Horseman would escort him in his perilous journey through the transitional abyss to the world of the ancestors, by committing willing suicide in a ritualistic manner. According to the traditional beliefs, contingent upon the proper performance of this ritual suicide by the king’s horseman Elesin Oba is the maintenance of the cosmic harmony and survival of the Yoruba world. However, for both lack of willpower and colonial intervention, the Elesin fails to commit ritual suicide. The consequence is disastrous: “The world is set adrift and its inhabitants are lost” (Soyinka, *DKH* 69). The intended as well as interrupted ritual suicide, around which Soyinka’s plot revolves, has its metaphysical mooring in traditional Yoruba worldview which views death not as the cessation of existence but as a passage to another mode of existence in the world of the ancestors. Cognizant of the king’s death and anticipating his father’s imminent death, Elesin’s son Olunde returns to his land from England for the prospective burial ceremony of his father. Tremendously shocked at his father’s betrayal of the trust of the community, Olunde sacrifices himself as his father’s substitute assuming his traditional responsibility to secure the equilibrium of the Yoruba world. Severely humiliated by the community, an ashamed and penitent Elesin Oba is motivated by the heart-rending spectacle of his son’s dead body and kills himself through strangulation with chains.

Soyinka’s literary corpus reveals his unmistakable creative and critical mooring in African traditions, myths and history. His plays are also replete with Yoruba songs, dance, performance traditions, proverbs etc. Yet the playwright does not disregard influences from other cultural traditions. Soyinka’s dramas are product, from a postcolonial writer, of his dual inheritance of indigenous and European cultural and intellectual traditions. The playwright has freely drawn upon both European and African elements for the construction of his dramaturgy. Christopher Balme in the postcolonial dramatic practice of “creative combination” of elements borrowed from both indigenous and European cultures notices a very effective way of “decolonizing” the stage(5). Soyinka advocates valorization of only those elements of native tradition which are inspirational and beneficial for the construction of a progressive and just society. His portrayal evinces African culture to be filled not only with valuable myths, traditions and mores but with injurious and retrogressive elements which are denigrated. Insertion of indigenous dramatic devices contributes to the deconstruction of the authority of European dramatic norms. On the other hand, marginalized native cultures and artistic traditions are revitalized and brought to the centre through reclamation and affirmation of precolonial indigenous theatrical forms and performance idioms. Again, such kind of drama might be viewed as a part of nationalistic cultural renaissance which aims at promotion of native culture and performance traditions.



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