

YORUBA CULTURE AND THE IDENTITY OF THE POST-COLONIAL  
AFRICANISM

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*Abstract: An important question confronting the African world and thought has been and continues to be how to preserve the quality of being African, at the same time "universalizing" the African mind, opening it to the Western answers. In order to shape its new identity, it must return to its basic tenets, from which it should proceed to a work of translation. It is imperious not merely to remember but to interiorize the Western worldview. In this act of creating a new Africanism, credit must be given to African mythos and to the oral tradition on which the first African writings were constructed, but at Barry Hallen, *op. cit.* the same time, the anticolonial subjectivity, with its blindness to the fluidity of a changing world, must learn how to accept the influences of the colonial period. No society can exist alone, interactions create influences, and these influences contribute in shaping ever changing identities. In the land of Yorùbá people, the vast folk literature converts itself in other, meaningful forms in order to allow the implantation of new forms of expression. Our study aims to highlight the novel African literary identity, with a Western „touch”, an openness to the Other, embedded in the awareness of the Yorùbá people, as an inseparable element of their mental universe.*

*Keywords:* African philosophy, Yorùbá culture, literary influences, African rituals, contemporary drama

As Henry James observed, in order to develop and "speak", literature needs the seed of cultural history, and the great leverage African literature has on the other "new literatures" (such as the Canadian, the Australian writings), is that such a work has been already done by the autochthonous civilizations, with autochthonous expressive means, oral tradition, visual artistry and the gesture as the archetypal language.

The great achievement of the African literary space is that it created a new literary fabric, intertwining the English tradition thread not passively assumed, but actively transforming it in a second voice of the African literary space.

Yorùbá culture fulfilled a major role in shaping the identity of post-colonial Africanism, an integrative role in an alienating acculturation transformed in a process of adaptation, the result of which is "the adjustment of the native culture with the foreign, the harmonization of two ways of life into a new entity."<sup>1</sup>

The aforementioned phenomenon is to be observed in the works of modern African writers, this flowing shift between Western expression and the indigenous one. Such a "shape-shifter" is Wole Soyinka, the Nobel winner of 1986, a weaver of languages and aesthetic provocations "who has absorbed such variety into his own rituals of transformation. (...) Soyinka's plays take up with relish so many theatrical styles and paradigms that they elude assessment from any narrow point of view."<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Abiola Irele, *op. cit.*, p. 46.

<sup>2</sup> Thomas R. Whitaker, *Mirrors of Our Playing. Paradigms and Presences in Modern Drama*, in Bruce King (ed.), *Post-Colonial English Drama: Commonwealth Drama Since 1960*, New York: St. Martin's Press Inc., 1992. p. 186.

In our attempt, we will exemplify on the case of Soyinka as a merger between two dramatic systems and strategies of coping with the world: the Western one, internalized during his studies in Great Britain, and visible, among others, in his *A Dance of the Forest*, a version of Shakespeare's *The Tempest*, and his absurdist play *The Road*, with its endless waiting for destiny or human decision to happen, which bears the same mark of pointlessness as Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*, and the Nigerian one, embedded through his birth amidst Yorùbá culture, which penetrates all the strata of his multi-layered dramaturgy.

The fruitful core of Soyinka's most plays "is a multiform «abyss» or field of transformation"<sup>3</sup> at the border of our prosaic experience, an in-between state that could equally trigger destruction and creation. As Nietzsche prescribed the spiritual death of the myth, reducing them to non-engaged knowledge, Soyinka was determined to give life to the African dying myths.

And to this end, he approached dramatic forms of bridging communities in a quest for identity which would destroy and reinvent "our inner world of transition, the vortex of archetypes and kiln of primal images."<sup>4</sup>

As Rosa Figueiredo underlined, the implications of choosing the theatrical medium as a "dictionary" for translating man's journey through the abyss of meaning in order to recreate his post-colonial deities are

[...] metaphysical, as well as aesthetic (...). It (the journey) centred on a conception of the medium as ritual, the only means whereby societal or the collective consciousness could be impacted. Soyinka shared a Jungian concept of myth and ritual as the natural effluence of man's yearning for spiritual meaning in life. He understood ritual to denote the communicative aspect of culturally defined sets of behaviour or customs, a much wider interpretation of the term than that of Aristotle or Nietzsche"<sup>5</sup>.

The actor becomes the researcher of the abyss and his ritualistic interpretation translates the new god by questioning the binary principle of earth and heaven, of underground and above ground and, at least in Soyinka's plays, allows their co-existence, their equally relevance as signifier and signified. The interpretation given to the myth ultimately depends on the experience of the "initiate" in its development. In the aftermath of the colonial period, the relation between myth and ritual finds itself perverted, and experience and the significance attached to it must rewrite their meanings.

The masks are endowed with the power to transform, "mesmerize" the wearer in a channel for godly will. In this state, the ritual "actor" becomes an *orisa*, possessed by the essences of the god the mask symbolizes. It is this escape that stops the flowing of time, in the Western sense of the word, suspending the transition of Ogun in-between the worlds.

The message of African theatre in general transcends the borders between myth and the realistic encounter in what Soyinka called "the fourth space". In this space, history becomes myth, and the godly figures become the judges of history, instead of their ahistorical supreme. This fourth stage, added by Soyinka to the three acknowledged African worlds – the world of the ancestors, the realm of the unborn, of the all-including possibilities, and the world of the living – is a space of coexistence, where the order of the humankind must be

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<sup>3</sup> *Idem*, p. 187.

<sup>4</sup> Wole Soyinka, *op. cit.*, 1976, p. 36.

<sup>5</sup> Rosa Figueiredo, *The Drama of Existence: Myths and Rituals in Wole Soyinka's Theatre*, *International Journal of Arts and Sciences* 4(1): 105-113 (2011), [www.InternationalJournal.org](http://www.InternationalJournal.org).

balanced on the requirement of a continuum. This continuum must be preserved in all the transitions between spiritual and material, and the signifier of this continuum and of the language of transition is the artist, who could provide one realist answer to postcolonial, and postmodernist, dilemmas.

The sum of intertwining modes employed and deployed by Soyinka as artistic expressions creates a “festival complex” which, more than their motivator, the supernatural realm, inform Soyinka’s perspective and understanding of an African postcolonial theatre. Asserting the recovery of historical and mythical patterns and their translation in the language of the modern Western theatre, Wole Soyinka maintains, in his theoretical essay on drama, *Theatre in African Traditional Cultures: Survival Patterns*, that:

Festivals [...] offer the most familiar hunting ground (for the roots of drama). What is more, they constitute in themselves *pure theatre* at its most prodigal and resourceful. [...] The level of organization involved, the integration of the sublime with the mundane, the endowment of the familiar with the properties of the unique... all indicate that it is to the heart of many African festivals that we should look for the most stirring expressions of man’s instinct and need for drama at its most comprehensive and community-involving...<sup>6</sup>

And stretching out for the social motivator of drama, modern or ancient alike, Soyinka defines contemporary drama as “the contraction of drama, necessitated by the productive order of society...”<sup>7</sup>

The “ritual problematic”<sup>8</sup> becomes, in Soyinka’s view, the only natural reaction to societal/individual crises in postcolonial Africa and, elaborating beyond, the drama of modern world.

In the aftermath of the ideological conflict triggered by the Western colonization, the first attempt of the African mind was at imposing its “individuality”, in other words, its strangeness, its Otherness. But the scholar of the modern times must go beyond the differences, in order to answer to more fundamental questions, pertinent in any cultural space. One answer to such “collective” approach is provided by myth.

In *The Structural Study of Myth*, Levi-Strauss acknowledged the universality of the myth, in its essence, if not in its behaviour. Myth does not operate at the level of language, and it transcends “any considerations of style and idiom”<sup>9</sup> and “[w]hatever our ignorance of the language and the culture of the people where it originated, a myth is still felt as a myth by any reader anywhere in the world.”<sup>10</sup> In transcending the language, myth refers only to perceptions of the world, and it assumes a mediating role, and devices, “e.g. a character in the story who enjoys mobility between mortal and immortal life, a medium of transfer from the natural to the supernatural world.”<sup>11</sup>

It is this universality of cosmic events and their impact upon humankind, and their role in maintaining a balance, even if an illusory one, between history and the people affected by them, that elicits the keen interest of Soyinka’s translation.

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<sup>6</sup> Wole Soyinka, *Art, Dialogue and Outrage: Essays on Literature and Culture*, London: Methuen, 1993, p. 138.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>8</sup> Biodun Jeyifo, *op. cit.*, 2004, p. 126.

<sup>9</sup> Isidore Okpewho, *Myth in Africa*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983, p. 45.

<sup>10</sup> Claude Lévi-Strauss, *The Structural Study of the Myth*, cited in Isidore Okpewho, *Myth in Africa*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983, p. 45.

<sup>11</sup> Isidore Okpewho, *op. cit.*, 46.

As Mircea Eliade wrote, “in festivals the participants recover the sacred dimension of existence, by learning again how the gods or the mystical ancestors created man and taught him the various kinds of social behavior and of practical work.”<sup>12</sup>

And this is, in its essence, the manifesto translated by Soyinka’s engagement of Yorùbá gods, rituals and worldview. The theatrical representation should be, and it is, in our author’s understanding, a medium for sharing a common experience, an experience older than any denominated religion.

Without proposing the African mythos as the basic or as the unique source of ancient wisdom, Soyinka adheres to Eliade’s unifying vision, professing:

First, it was Christianity, but lately, and more assertively, Islam, that claims to be a total way of life, encompassing every aspect of human enterprise – ethics, aesthetics, jurisprudence, economics, engineering, healing sciences, etc. nothing is left to secular intelligence, no human development unforeseen, no attribute unregistered within the provenance of either faith.<sup>13</sup>

Myths are the voicing of wonder, the quests for what remains “sacred and eternal,” to use Eliade’s description, in the meaning of man’s life and death. And theatre is the most adequate medium to channeling a rite of communion which serves, as Soyinka tried to demonstrate through his plays, as a “dictionary” translating the abstract answers.

The corpus studied proves that, in the context of “the cosmic totality,” as Soyinka underlined, “myths arise from man’s attempt to externalize and communicate his inner intuitions.”<sup>14</sup> His works stand witness for the universality of an Ogun, Obatala or Shango, in their quest for informing humankind.

The principle we have tried to highlight and prove right based on Soyinka’s deific plays is the principle of construction through deconstruction, a principle put to work in Soyinka’s mythification-de-mythification of the ancient Yoruba myth of origin, indeed of any myth of origin. This principle gained universality, based on an acknowledgement of its prominence as a philosophy of being, from Euripides and Shakespeare to the modern era of Eugene O’Neill and Samuel Beckett.

The involvement of ancestral beings in the everyday life of the Yoruba motivates the circularity of time flow in African space. Here, Soyinka departs from the Western worldview, which assimilates time, therefore, history, with a linear flow. But in the mythic times, as in *The Bacchae of Euripides*, these perspectives coalesce in the shared experience of Ogun’s ritual, egungun.

The language as a myth gives birth to a multivariate experience, so exhaustive or so “mystical,” in Soyinka’s approach, that the only means to achieve its understanding is to die, like the Old Man (*Madmen and Specialists*), because, as our author suggests, gods ate the only ones entitled to universality. Under the punishment of a stolen egungun and by the hands of a masked translator, dies the Professor (*The Road*), guilty of trying to find the unique answer into a unique religion: the attempt to arrest time.

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<sup>12</sup> Mircea Eliade, *The Sacred and the Profane. The Nature of Religion*, New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, Inc., 1987, p. 51.

<sup>13</sup> Wole Soyinka, *Not a “Way of Life,” But a Guide to Existence*, in Wole Soyinka, *Of Africa*, New Haven-London: Yale University Press, 2012, p. 104.

<sup>14</sup> Wole Soyinka, *Myth, Literature and the African World*, *op. cit.*, p. 3.

The creed of Soyinka, in our opinion, resembles the festivals of Nigeria, modern places of social and cultural interactions, but they still “retain, internally, their function as a mechanism of cleansing and renewal for Yorùbá community in Western Nigeria”<sup>15</sup>.

A strong sense of community shapes the African worldview and transforms the individual in an active participant in the societal processes, which the writer must translate in “the ideal of social solidarity” (Kunene, xvi). This is the core of Soyinka’s philosophy in *The Interpreters* and *Season of Anomy*, as in the works of Ngugi and Achebe, to name two of the most important African writers of the postcolonial period.

Another dimension of African culture, expressed in the works of major writers, including Wole Soyinka, is the sacred bond between the African and his land. The land is the place gods look upon, of birth and death that define the living, in other words, the ownership of a piece of land means respect, honor, human dignity. This is the reason why the departure from the land for the adventure of the city brings alienation, loss of meaning and moral decay.

The temporal dimension is relevant for African writing, for the cycle of death and birth creates the guideline in understanding the development of a character and his meaning. Far from being a static probing into the African psyche, they are based on a flow of ebbing waves, which always return to their matrix.

From these few features, far from exhausting the complexity of African culture, we may draw the conclusion that this culture is “more socialized than based on individual psychology” (Ojaide, 56). Maybe in this resides its deep humanism and hard-core belief in the future. Within this culture, the narrative constitutes one form in which African writers must voice the ordeals of their people. In *Myth, Literature, and the African World*, Soyinka defined such a “literature of a social vision”:

A creative concern which conceptualizes or extends actuality beyond the purely narrative, making it reveal realities beyond the immediately attainable, a concern which upsets orthodox acceptances in an effort to free society of historical or other superstitions, these are qualities possessed by literature of a social literature.

The creative act is not individual, maintains Soyinka, it is socially prone and needs to find its justification in the alteration of social mores. This is in keeping with the didactic valence of African art in general, but in Soyinka’s case, it doesn’t merely teach social values, it also calls for action in modifying them according to the new social realities.

An important aspect of Soyinka’s writing, which can be recognized in all his works, is the accent on the need to create a literature, and by extension, a culture rooted in African myths, expressed through African ritual (masquerades, songs and dances), but not one transfixed by it.

The use of rituals and myths, which in Soyinka’s plays such as *The Swamp Dwellers* or *The Road*, at least at a latent level, brings a form of closure, of aesthetic shift which provide the resolution of the dramatic conflict, in *The Interpreters* remains fruitless. The failure of the social factors – political, social, moral, or historic – continues to haunt the present-day Nigeria. The disillusion brought by the impotence of post-colonial state in embodying a firm national identity is amplified by disharmony, mediocrity elevated to the rank of originality, and the frustration of coping from a moral position with this failed attempt to a civilized state. And all these social markers justify Soyinka’s sturn “to both modernist

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<sup>15</sup>Wole Soyinka, *Ritual as the Medium: A Modest Proposal*, *African Affairs*, Vol. 96, No. 382 (Jan., 1997), pp. 5-23, published by Oxford University Press, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/723748>.

aesthetic strategies (a turning away from realism's linear narrative and triumphant closures) and to the ethical as a means of escaping the failure of politics". (Mathuray, 2014, p. 645)

Colonialism and its subsequent aftermath created a rich field of re-evaluations for the African culture. The products of this fragile and unsure material gave birth to "explorations of the rifts and continuities between oral and literate worlds and as interpretations of African societies which perform contesting and contested inter-textual and intra-textual evaluations." (Kanneth, 21).

The masks of the Yoruba theatre should fall without the fear that the two worlds colliding in the past will embrace trajectories to divergent universes. Soyinka's Africa claims recognition, and its writers will write not only about the "famished" road between Africa and the rest of the world, but about a way and the means of bridging these universes together in a perspective that promises the resources of that beautiful hybrid Africa Soyinka militated for.

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