

## **SOYINKA'S THEATRE. A PROPOSAL FOR AN ARTISTIC CREDO**

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*Abstract: In Myth, Literature and the African World, Wole Soyinka, the 1986's winner of the Nobel Prize for Literature, reclaims ritual as a source of revitalization and revolutionary reconfiguration. And in his description of a ritual which could fill the voracious space between humankind and godly entities, between – as within a theatrical context – the audience and the message on stage – Soyinka acknowledges Ogun myth as a prototype for the process. In introducing his concept of theatre and socially engaged literature in a becoming Africa, but also the role the artist must play in eliciting and translating the Fourth Stage [the stage of "social acting"], Wole Soyinka outlines a new form of consciousness, change-oriented and permissive to any and all of the means of achieving the definition of the new African identity. This conscience takes the form of a dramatic expression based on which tragedy, as Soyinka sees it in his plays Death and the King's Horseman and The Road, constitutes the bases of an ontology. This ontology must be read and understood through folktales and moral fables functioning as a normative referential framework regulating the moral behavior in pre-colonial African societies, while the elaborated forms, such as myths, constituted the primary means for triggering a historical awareness. In his plays, especially in his tragedies, Soyinka proposes a quest for identity as a context for the performative space, a context in which the chthonic presences, delineated in his artistic credo, not merely action based on a script, but represent the very channels of the quest. In this African challenge a raw model for the tragic hero is born, insecure and psychologically unstable, but nonetheless a powerful potentiality.*

**Keywords: Obatala's myth, chthonic space, tragedy, catharsis, Yorùbá philosophy**

Before culture itself established, and developed its specific theories and intimacies with sociology and psychology, a prominent magnitude was conferred by the human being to play. And the play continued to accompany and inform culture from the early beginning of the structured society to the post-modern civilization. Differentiating itself from "ordinary life", "play [is] present everywhere as a well-defined quality of action."<sup>1</sup>

Not unlike Nietzsche, "Soyinka is concerned with a metaphorical rather than a historical link between the experience of ritual and the experience of drama."<sup>2</sup> But unlike Nietzsche, his theory is centered on the interplay of psychological and social processes creating the experience of theatre. Soyinka insists on the abandonment of self-consciousness, of individuality, in favor of a group belonging or a mythical consciousness.

In *Myth, Literature and the African World*, Soyinka reclaims ritual as a source of revitalization and revolutionary reconfiguration. And in his description of a ritual which could fill the voracious space between humankind and godly entities, between – as within a theatrical context – the audience and the message on stage – Soyinka acknowledges Ogun myth as a prototype for this process. The sharing of experience means "to be resorbed within universal Oneness, the Unconsciousness, the deep black whirlpool of mythopoetic

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<sup>1</sup> Philip Auslander (ed.), *Performance. Critical Concepts in Literary and Cultural Studies*, Vol. I, London-New York: Routledge, 2003,

<sup>2</sup> Ann B. Davis, *Dramatic Theory of Wole Soyinka*, in James Gibbs (ed.), *Critical Perspectives on Wole Soyinka*, Boulder-London: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 1996, p. 147.

forces,”<sup>3</sup> and to trigger a new sense of self, with a revolutionary act. In introducing his concept of theatre and socially engaged literature in a becoming Africa, but also the role the artist must play in eliciting and translating the Fourth Stage [the stage of “social acting”], Wole Soyinka outlines a new form of consciousness, change-oriented and permissive to any and all of the means of achieving the definition of the new African identity. This consciousness “can happen in the worlds of the living, and in the modes of remembering the dead and the ancestors. Its goal is disalienation as a constant process of deconstructing domination and seeking a language of equity and justice.”<sup>4</sup>

This language facilitates the understanding of Soyinka’s works with “a socio-logical accent to his mythopoeic vision and aesthetic.”<sup>5</sup> His aesthetic enterprise embraces a two-fold perspective, with reference to, on one hand, “the traditional Yorùbá worldview transformed into a theory of historical being” and, on the other hand, “art as witness of the adventure of the social.”<sup>6</sup> This choice of re-investing the African mythopoeia with the referential systems as markers of its “abstract deduction” triggered Biodun Jeyifo’s argument that, as a result of this systematic convergence to myth and trans-historical archetypes, the playwright’s mythopoesis reclines to abstractionism and historical apathy<sup>7</sup>.

African Tragedy, as Soyinka calls it, constitutes the bases of an ontology which, through its destabilized hypotheses, gives way to artistic creation, a process in which tragedy ceases to be cathartic, restrictive and dangerous, in order to become a tool of outlining the cyclic action of the anticolonial subjectivity. Soyinka provokes his dramatic characters to endlessly move back and forth, circling their own becoming, turning from and returning to the same event which should be perceived, in Soyinka’s desire, through entirely different lens. As Awam Amkpa underlined, “[...] the tyrannical role of power in alienation and social inequity [...] must be represented, framed and possibly subverted by individuals and societies through transformative processes. [...] as Soyinka himself states, the purpose of the tragic paradigm as he articulates it, is to signify human beings as socially active and “acting” beings.”<sup>8</sup>

In order African thought to preserve the quality of being African, it must return to its essentials, and it should proceed to a work of translation, not merely remembering or merely interiorizing the Western artistic worldview. In this enterprise, Soyinka gives credit to the African mythos, but one refracted through the language and outer expression of the Western stage in Soyinka’s drama case.

Folktales and moral fables functioned as a normative referential framework regulating the moral behavior in pre-colonial African societies, while the elaborated forms, such as myths, constituted the primary means for triggering a historical awareness. The commemoration of the shared past, through visual and physical engagement, promotes the active sharing of the present, and in doing so, the cultural hero, through his historical

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<sup>3</sup>Wole Soyinka, *Appendix: The Fourth Stage*, in *Myth, Literature and the African World*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1976, p. 129.

<sup>4</sup>Awam Amkpa, *Theatre, mythology, and political activism*, in *Theatre and Postcolonial Desires*, London-New York: Routledge, 2004, p. 26.

<sup>5</sup>Olakunle George, *Cultural criticism in Wole Soyinka’s Death and the King’s Horseman, Representations*, No. 67 (Summer, 1999), pp. 67-91, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/2902887>.

<sup>6</sup>*Idem.*

<sup>7</sup>Biodun Jeyifo, *Soyinka Demythologized: Notes on a Materialist Reading of A Dance of the Forests, The Road, and Kongi’s Harvest*, Ife, Nigeria: 1984.

<sup>8</sup>Awam Amkpa, *op. cit.*, p. 28.

motivation, “partakes of the nature of the myth.”<sup>9</sup> As such, the historical sign significance of the African narratives “is endowed with a powerful symbolic charge.” Following Mircea Eliade, time becomes a “category of consciousness,” discriminating the stages of the natural processes.<sup>10</sup> Becoming as sacred as the deities it assists in their becoming, time marks the return to the matrix. Once again, the circularity of the African temporal development employs the encapsulation of time not as a measure of a process, but more as a factor of coalescence, as a “spectator” in the play it triggers.

As powerful as it is the mythical channel of expression, the strength of African mythology resides in the relations that it establishes with the surrounding orders of existence, at least with the ones recognized by the Africans. Its power of representation, at which we must add the symbolic agency which enables action, determine the determination to act of the audience, and in order to act:

[...] the Promethean instinct of rebellion, channels anguish into a creative purpose which releases man from a totally destructive despair, releasing from within him the most energetic, deeply combative invention which, without usurping the territory of the infernal gulf, bridges it with visionary hopes.<sup>11</sup>

In the land of Yorùbá people, the vast folk literature converts itself in meaningful forms in order to allow the implantation of new forms of expression, for the established literature to develop an uncanny African “flavour”, with an English language embedded in the awareness of the Yorùbá people, inseparable element of their mental universe.

And in Soyinka’s work, his characters redeem the quest of primal worldviews, and the work of recuperating the myths, and the struggle toward “a coincidence with an ethos fashioned by the binding structures of life it animates. This movement represents not only a means of reconnection with a grounded authenticity of experience but, more important, a revitalization of consciousness.”<sup>12</sup>

The roots of Soyinka’s drama are intertwined with traditional African performance concepts, through myths, rituals and singing, and with Western theatrical influences. Within the latter, of prominence are the classical Greek drama, Shakespearean strategies, European and American surrealist and avant-garde modes and techniques, combining them into “[...] his mythopoeic project – a project that simultaneously affirms and disavows a religious perspective, a vision that upholds and subverts the mythic paradigm.”<sup>13</sup>

Soyinka never turned back from the challenge of unifying the African cultural systems with the Western paradigms, partially from the desire to make African thought more permeable to the Western understanding, and partially in order to enhance the common

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<sup>9</sup> F. Abiola Irele, *The African Imagination. Literature in Africa and the Black Diaspora*, New York: Oxford University Press, 2001, p. 128.

<sup>10</sup> Mircea Eliade, *Cosmos and History. The Myth of the Eternal Return*, New York: Harper & Brothers, 1964, cited in Abiola Irele, *The African Imagination. Literature in Africa and the Black Diaspora*, New York: Oxford University Press, 2001, p. 128.

<sup>11</sup> Wole Soyinka, *op. cit.*, 1976, p. 146.

<sup>12</sup> F. Abiola Irele, *op. cit.*, p. 81.

<sup>13</sup> Mark Mathuray (ed.), *Dramatising the Sacred: Wole Soyinka’s ‘The Fourth Stage’ and Kongi’s Harvest*, in *On the Sacred in African Literature. Old Gods and New Worlds*, New York: Palgrave-Macmillan (2009), p. 46.

referential systems that any mythology, any cultural heritage refers to when informing the consciousness of humanity. Because, as the playwright maintains,

In Asian and European antiquity, therefore, man did, like the African, exist within a cosmic totality, did possess a consciousness in which his own earth being, his gravity-bound apprehension of self, was inseparable from the entire cosmic phenomenon. (For let it always be recalled that myths arise from man's attempt to externalise and communicate his inner intuitions.)<sup>14</sup>

This search for a common ground, a common language, has triggered his intricate fabrics in theatre production, his spheres of meaning in perpetual development. And the spectator is left with the seeds of a thought, in his power remaining the translation of the codes encrypted in the lines spoken or danced on the scene. The audience, seen by Soyinka as a social embodiment of the quest for identity, is part of the performance space<sup>15</sup>; they give impetus and nourishment to “the symbolic struggle with the chthonic presences”<sup>16</sup>. The audience is touched by the use of stage space, determining, as in the “ritual” theatre, a primary anxiety at the powers of the primeval chaos.

Through dance, singing and movement, the symbols recover the life of the gods they stand for, and the music “from the abyss of transition”<sup>17</sup> becomes their language. And as a language they fulfil the role attributed to them by Levi-Strauss, “the role of ritual and mythical symbols as instigators of feeling and desire.”<sup>18</sup> The nature of Soyinka’s symbols, including language, is beyond mere representations, they possess matter, substance and have the power to enforce the concept for which they stand. The uniqueness of African drama, and literature in general, is provided for by the sources of a deeply engaging imagination, resting in the depths of “achthonic realm, a storehouse for creative and destructive essences. [...] The stage, the ritual arena of confrontation, came to represent the symbolic 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.”<sup>19</sup>

The author establishes the common roots of social consciousness, the shared “fountain of ancient wisdom”, a concept which Soyinka, together with Jung, will advance in his works, especially in his drama based on African/universal mythologies, in order to promote the belonging of African arts to the world. The playwright refers not to the means, but to the sources, as a common “language” from which the premises are created to an understanding of the “exoticism”, but also the “classicism” of the African artistic world. Because, if the African modern writers write works that are “[...] closely connected with the

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<sup>14</sup>Wole Soyinka, *op. cit.*, 1976, p. 3.

<sup>15</sup> Rosa Figueiro, *The Drama of Existence: Myths and Rituals in Wole Soyinka's Theatre*, *International Journal of Arts and Sciences*, InternationalJournal.org.

<sup>16</sup>Wole Soyinka, *op. cit.*, 1976, p. 38.

<sup>17</sup> Wole Soyinka, *Introduction to "Death and the King's Horseman,"* New York: Norton, 1976, p. 3.

<sup>18</sup> Victor Turner (ed.), *The Ritual process. Structure and Anti-Structure*, New York: Cornell University Press, 1987, p. 42.

<sup>19</sup>Wole Soyinka, *op. cit.*, 1976, pp. 2-3.

political and social dramas of the various African countries, they are, an the same, universal works; and [...]they aim at reaching the absolutes. As art does.”<sup>20</sup>

The great achievement of the African literary space, and of Soyinka’s as major proponent, 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>21</sup> And yet, Soyinka is “a shape-shifter”, 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>22</sup>

The fruitful core of Soyinka’s most plays “is a multiform «abyss» or field of transformation”<sup>23</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>24</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.”<sup>25</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 message of African theatre 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, denouncing their a-historicity. 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

<sup>20</sup> Agostino Lombardo, *Wole Soyinka: the Artist and his Tradition*, in M.-T. Bindella and G.V. Davis (eds.), *Imagination and the Creative Impulse in the New Literatures in English*, Amsterdam - Atlanta: Rodopi, 1993, p. 94.

<sup>21</sup> Abiola Irele, *op. cit.*, p. 46.

<sup>22</sup> Thomas R. Whitaker, *op. cit.*, Michigan: Michigan University Press, 1999, p. 186.

<sup>23</sup> *Idem*, p. 187.

<sup>24</sup> Wole Soyinka, *op. cit.*, 1976, p. 36.

<sup>25</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).

living – is a space of coexistence, where the order of the humankind must be 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). [...] 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>26</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>27</sup> The “ritual problematic”<sup>28</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 his plays, Soyinka engages the deconstruction of the ritual, of African godly symbols and history, into fragments alternatively combining in symptoms of postcolonial alienation and, sometimes, in remedies not necessarily reclaiming the past.

The referential frame for understanding Soyinka’s perspective was advanced in 2006 by one of the researchers in Soyinka’s theatre who, in line with prodigious critics of his works (James Gibbs, Gerald Moore, Eldred Durosimi Jones, Biodun Jeyifo among others), “[located] the organic laws” governing his theatre: “the law of «communal catharsis» in African nay Yorùbá communal tragedy”, with an indirect, albeit interiorized, engagement of the Aristotelian and Western concept of tragedy; “the direct theatricalisation of Yorùbá methaphysics,” pointing to a major “celebration of Yorùbá’s myths and folklore”; the recourse to “ritualistic and especially tragic theatre and drama of Ogun, the Yorùbá god of iron and war”; “the law of messianism (monomania heroism and individualism) versus collective heroism which often graduates into anti-heroism and scapegoatism;” the interstices of comic elements in tragic dramatization; and “the pervading use of music, songs, dances, mime, pantomime, invocation, evocation, masking and masquerading and other total theatre idiom in the African festival/traditional theatre.”<sup>29</sup>

Soyinka’s gods are distant and sometimes vengeful masters; they watch, with an uncaring eye, the human struggle for meaning. Their presence tends to “lurk” into the darkness of the void, patiently or impatiently waiting for the follies of men. Summoned in oaths, as a warrant of maintaining the societal fabric, they judge and punish: Ogun and Sango [...] are usually invoked in oaths. Ogun is the god of oaths and justice. “[...] The Yorùbá

<sup>26</sup> Wole Soyinka, *Art, Dialogue and Outrage: Essays on Literature and Culture*, London: Methuen, 1993, p. 138.

<sup>27</sup> *Idem*.

<sup>28</sup> Biodun Jeyifo, *op. cit.*, 2004, p. 126.

<sup>29</sup> Rasheed Abiodun Musa, *The Drama and Theatre of Wole Soyinka, An Encyclopaedia of The Arts*, Vol. 11(3): 2006, p. 225.

consider Ogun fearsome and terrible in his revenge; they believe that if one breaks a pact made in his name, swift retribution will follow.”<sup>30</sup>

And fearful are the answers of Yorùbá gods to that invading and pervading Western modernity, within which *The Road* elicited a powerful answer as a critique to Christianity as an agent of change. Most certainly, the character of the Professor is as caustic and unforgiveable as any scientist on the verge of lecture against the dogmatism of religion. The Professor is “trapped in his verbal inquiry into two conflicting theologies of transition, the «Word made flesh» of Christian doctrine, and the «flesh dissolution» of the *agemo* cult.”<sup>31</sup> The road, a hungry and terrifying god, needs sacrifices. As Samson “despondently” urges, “Kill us a dog Kotonu, kill us a dog. Kill us a dog before the hungry god lies in wait and makes a substitute of me.”<sup>32</sup> The metaphysical death, the transition from a state of individuality to a state of community, are both anchored and translated through the social unbalance and the new psychological and sociological order derived from the transformed Nigeria of the beginning of the 1960s.

The insatiable Nigerian highway, a road to hell and beyond, is appropriated to Ogun, the destructive force of a destabilized sense of invasion, an invasion which enrages the desecration of the ritual sites. Within the call of Ogun’s destructive forces, a new cult will be born, a cult of death and denial, which proceeds from denying the Western Christian doctrine. “The conversion outside of church doctrine”<sup>33</sup> transforms the road in a god and its cult at the same time.

As Soyinka explains in his note “For the Producer,” *The Road* employs the masque idiom, “strange to many.”<sup>34</sup> And as Ulli Beier highlighted, an underlying belief of masquerade is that “the spirit of the deceased may be evoked to enter into the masquerader during the dance. At the height of the dance every true Egungun will enter into a state of possession, when he will speak with a you voice.”<sup>35</sup> Soyinka moves beyond Beier’s definition and, through dance, he attempts to create “a visual suspension of death.”<sup>36</sup> In the same way, Murano, the mute character, translates spoken language in movements, becoming “a dramatic embodiment of this suspension.”<sup>37</sup> In *Death and the King’s Horseman*, Elesin begins his passing into the ancestors’ realm with a dance, not a possession, even if the quality of the chants possesses the power of a trance.

Soyinka considers myth the agency of the perpetual passing, like the perpetual journey of his patron, Ogun. As Awam Amkpa underlines: “The historical and cultural changes in Oyo turn the iconicity of Elesin’s character into a floating signifier,”<sup>38</sup> towards the

<sup>30</sup>K. Naveen Kumar, *Yorùbá tradition and culture in Wole Soyinka’s “The Lion and the Jewel”*, *International Refereed Research Journal*, [www.researchersworld.com](http://www.researchersworld.com), Vol.– II, Issue –3, July 2011 [88], p. 6.

<sup>31</sup> Dan Izevbaye, *West African literature in English: beginnings to the mid-seventies*, in F. Abiola Irele, Simon Gikandi (eds.), *The Cambridge History of African and Caribbean Literature*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004, p. 480.

<sup>32</sup> Wole Soyinka, *The Road. Collected Plays I*, New York: Oxford University Press, 1973, p. 198.

<sup>33</sup> Douglas Killam, Alicia L. Kerfoot, *Student Encyclopedia of African Literature*, Westport-London: Greenwood Press, 2008, p. 262.

<sup>34</sup> Wole Soyinka, *The Road*, p. 149.

<sup>35</sup> Ulli Beier, *Introduction to African Literature*, Northwestern University Press, 1970, cited in VN Manjula, *Song for the Road Wole Soyinka’s Imagery and Tradition*, p. 84, Language in India [www.languageinindia.com](http://www.languageinindia.com).

<sup>36</sup> Wole Soyinka, *The Road*, p. 149.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>38</sup> Awam Amkpa, *op. cit.*, p. 42.

growing of the “myth embryonic” language of the mythic tragedy,<sup>39</sup> and, in the beholder’s translation, “the sense [of the public] do not at such moments interpret myths in their particular concretions: we are left only with the emotional and spiritual values, the essential experience of cosmic reality.”<sup>40</sup>

In *Death and the King’s Horseman*, some critics saw in the death of the two heroes, Elesin and Olunde, the collapse of a cosmology, because none of them manages to accomplish the construction of the bridge between the worlds, both Ogun (Elesin) and Obatala (Olunde) failing to affirm the heroic gesture overpassing the distance between personal and communal. But Elesin makes a major mistake in confusing the achievement of Obatala – the creation – with the Ogunian torture – the creating act. In other words, Elesin asserts that he has already “outleapt the conscious act and... [I] have come among the great departed”<sup>41</sup>, when in reality he still desires to remain “still earthed in that beloved market of my youth”,<sup>42</sup> not having created anything.

Creation takes place only by bridging the world of forever, the world of the gods, and the world of their creations. Making the bridging leap, “he, the actor (*Obatala*, our emphasis), emerges still as the median voice of the god, but stands now as it were beside himself, observant, understanding, creating. At this stage is known to him the sublime *aesthetic* joy [...] in the distanced celebration of the cosmic struggle. This resolved aesthetic serenity is the link between Ogun’s tragic art and Obatala’s plastic beauty.”<sup>43</sup> But in contrast to Ogun, Elesin mistakes his individual self with the self of the community, leaving little room for the free will, which is considered, in Yorùbá order of elements, a stamp of the individuality. His suicide remains without meaning, because he was unable to recognize that he existed only for that moment of ritualistic death, and because of his error, the circle of the Yorùbá time scheme was broken.

On the other hand, Elesin’s son, Olunde, through his suicide, responds to the equation of Soyinka’s tragic view. His death is an Ogunian achievement. He represents the balance indispensable for bridging the path of transition, the recuperation of a sense of sanity. The embedded significance of *Death and the King’s Horseman* is deeply hidden under “the placid surface of the process of healing for spiritual or social rupture,” which “is mistaken for the absence of the principles of psychic experience that went into the restoration.”<sup>44</sup> Although Olunde tried to compensate for the indecision of his father, if he succeeded in redeeming him or not, it is an entire different question. He committed an offence against nature, in Yorùbá’s thought, but at the same time, his offence constitutes a positive alteration, a breaking of a taboo that “compels the cosmos to delve deeper into its essence to meet human challenge.”<sup>45</sup> And it is this magic of creation through destruction that inherits the potentiality to re-enact Ogun’s act.

The esthetic choices assumed by Soyinka are inscribed in his inheritance, and in this rich sources of imagination and power of representation reside his desire to “bridge the void,” as his ancestor, Ogun, has done before him. VY Mudimbe, in *The Idea of Africa*, was advancing a portrayal of the modern writer, in which Soyinka answers to the challenges

<sup>39</sup>Wole Soyinka, *op. cit.*, 1976, pp. 147-148.

<sup>40</sup>*Idem.*

<sup>41</sup>Wole Soyinka, *Death and the King’s Horseman*, in William B. Branch (ed.), *op. cit.*, p. 37.

<sup>42</sup>*Idem.*

<sup>43</sup>Wole Soyinka, *op. cit.*, 1976, pp. 142-43.

<sup>44</sup>*Ibidem*, p. 156.

<sup>45</sup>*Idem.*

presented by his Africa: “The artists of the present generation are the children of two traditions, two worlds, both of which they challenge, merging mechanics and masks, machines and the memories of gods.”<sup>46</sup>

And this alteration of a myth in order to respond to the new challenges imposed by ever-changing surroundings constitutes one of the major contributions of our author to the literary art.

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