
UNIT 3 *A DANCE OF THE FORESTS*: SUMMARY

Structure

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3.0 OBJECTIVES

In this unit I have summarised the two parts of the play as well as the play-within-a-play. This is to help you keep track of the often confusing plethora of characters and incidents that unfold in this play. Since the characters double up and take on two roles, the possibility of losing one's sense of direction increases. This unit can also be used as a means of ready reference while one is studying the next unit, the critical analysis of the play. I have highlighted the names of characters on their first appearance--beware, the names too often sound alike! Try not to confuse the characters like Adenebi and Obaneji.

3.1 SUMMARY OF PART ONE

The play begins with a short prologue spoken by *Aroni* the lame one which establishes the connection between the two sets of characters placed in the two different time frames of the play, the first the present, during the Feast of the Human Community and the second the past, during the reign of *Mata Kharibu*. *Aroni* also briefly introduces the concepts of *Ogun* and *Eshuoro* and how they are presented in the play. By way of transition to Part One *Aroni* speaks of the totem pole, the "symbol of the great re-union" that *Demoke*, the son of the *Old Man*, has been chosen to carve.

After the prologue the *Dead Man* and the pregnant *Dead Woman* appear on stage and wonder whether they have come to the right place. They ask for help and directions to *Adenebi* the Council orator, *Demoke* the carver, *Obaneji* and *Rola* the courtesan, all of who refuse. Thus within the first few minutes of the play we have met almost all the main characters. As a result of the behaviour of the living characters the two dead characters feel they should not have obeyed the summons to appear in the world of the living. After the exit of the dead pair the four living characters sit down and start talking. They talk among other things of the totem that *Demoke* has carved and which is now the centre of attraction. The reappearance of the dead pair makes the living wander off stage in order to avoid contact.

The next section (there are no acts and scenes in this play--stage settings denote changes in locale) is an exchange between *Aroni* the lame one and *Murete* a tree imp about the festivities and rituals that are about to begin to celebrate the gathering of the tribes, among them the welcoming of the dead. *Aroni* wants to extract

information from the mischievous and unwilling witness, *Murete*, as to who it has seen passing by him (*Murete* is hidden in his tree home). We learn that the dead pair has been sent by *Aroni* as a result of the request of the living for some representatives of their illustrious ancestors. *Aroni* informs *Murete* that one of the four living characters who has passed by *Murete*'s tree is a servant of *Ogun*.

Once *Aroni* exits and *Murete* disappears inside his tree to continue spying, *Agboreko*, the Elder of the Sealed Lips, enters and tries to coax *Murete* out of the tree and extract information, only to be told that he has to return later. Next it is *Ogun*'s turn to enter and get information from *Murete*--this he does by the simple means of forcing a lot of alcohol down *Murete*'s throat. We learn from *Ogun* that it is *Demoke* the carver who is *Ogun*'s servant among the living characters. There's also some talk of *Eshuoro*, a wayward cult-spirit, whom *Murete* drunkenly threatens to bite if he comes anywhere close. Before leaving *Ogun* says that he will not forget that *Demoke* had injured the araba tree, *Eshuoro*'s favourite, while carving the totem pole.

After *Ogun*'s exit the four living characters we have encountered before, *Demoke*, *Obaneji*, *Rola* and *Adenebi*, reenter and begin their conversation by conjecturing about the identity of the two dead persons. *Obaneji* reveals that he knows quite a bit about people's secrets because he has been a senior filing clerk for the Courts. *Rola* begins to taunt him but *Adenebi* interrupts and says there should be no unpleasantness since they have to spend time in each others' company. *Obaneji* explains some of the interesting parts of his job, such as the records for motor lorries, for which he owns a passion. There was one such lorry, the Incinerator, for which the concerned official took a substantial bribe and changed the capacity from forty to seventy. Once it caught fire only five of the seventy on board managed to escape. All of the passengers were on their way to the gathering of the tribes.

Obaneji asks *Adenebi* to find out some information for him. The characters launch into an argument as to how the bribe-taking official ought to be punished. *Demoke* says he'd much rather die from a fall from a great height as did his assistant on the totem pole rather than be burnt to death like the unfortunate lorry passengers. *Adenebi* refuses to answer how he would wish to die. *Rola* answers *Obaneji*'s question with a kiss. When *Obaneji* refuses to respond to her advances she taunts him saying he is not a man. *Obaneji* retorts by saying that she is so promiscuous and so cruel that the graveyard is full of her lovers. As a result of this exchange *Demoke* guesses that *Rola* is none other than the infamous *Madame Tortoise*. He confesses that she dominated his thoughts when he carved the totem. *Rola* attacks *Obaneji* for revealing her identity. *Adenebi* is disgusted to be in her company and shocked at her brazenness. *Rola* asserts that she regrets nothing and if her lovers killed themselves that was their problem. She is proud to have used her physical assets to acquire wealth. *Adenebi* accuses her of ruining thousands in order to amass her riches. *Demoke* asks *Rola* if she was aware of the legendary *Madame Tortoise*.

The dead pair enters and the Dead Man speaks of how he'd always wanted to return here to his home. *Demoke* wants to know if the carver who fell to his death from the totem blames *Demoke*. The dead pair leaves in despair of being saved by the living, saying, "May you be cursed again."

After they leave *Demoke* confesses that he pushed his apprentice, *Oremole*, off the totem pole. Unable to bear being taunted by the boastful *Oremole*, servant of *Oro*, and "fawner of *Eshuoro*," and unable to tolerate being prevented from trimming the araba tree, *Demoke* pushed *Oremole* off the pole and then cut off his head.

A man's voice is heard calling Demoke, and Obaneji leads them away in the wrong direction. Ogun enters and admits that he imitated Demoke's father's voice just now. Ogun takes Demoke's crime on his own shoulders because Oro is his enemy and Oremole was Oro's follower. It was Ogun who made Demoke raise his hand because Oremole would not allow Demoke to bow the araba tree's head and master wood with his iron axe. Ogun tells Forest Father, masquerading as a human being (Obaneji) that he'll not desert his son at the moment of trial and punishment.

As Ogun leaves the Old Man enters with two councillors and lots of beaters. The Old Man asks after his son Demoke but the councillor tells him that he has seen Adenebi, not Demoke. Adenebi enters and says he hears they're looking for "some shady characters." The Old man says yes. They have no cages or nets to capture them--just driving them away will be enough. The Old Man says they have to drive away their guests because the wrong people have come--statesmen were asked for and executioners came instead.

The Old Man orders petrol to be poured all over the forest because the dead cannot stand the smell. Then he changes his mind, realising that the whole forest would be burnt down. Instead, he orders that an old wagon, the Chimney of Ereko, be driven through the forest, polluting it with smoke. The Old Man is sure no ghost can survive the Chimney's smoke.

Adenebi is confused by the Old Man wanting to drive away the very guests he has invited. He recalls the ambitious plans for the gathering of the tribes--the building of the totem pole, the bringing home of the "scattered sons" of their "proud ancestors," be they sages, conquerors, philosophers, mystics, warriors, even from hell if need be. The Old Man says that their plans have misfired and instead of great people, "slaves and lackeys" have come to accuse their hosts in the land of the living and undermine the whole celebration. Adenebi goes on and on about how he had expected the great heroes of old to appear while the Old Man restlessly waits for Agboreko to come and report what information he has got from Murete. Agboreko enters and reports that the dead pair, so full of their own woes, has been taken under Aroni's wing so they won't trouble the living. The dead pair is closely related to Madame Tortoise. Murete has refused to reveal where Aroni will hold his court. The Old Man asks Agboreko if Oremole, Demoke's apprentice, is among the dead and if the dead pair will accuse Demoke on Oremole's behalf. Agboreko does not know. The Old Man then asks if Forest Father works along with Aroni, and Adenebi asks about Forest Father and the others are amazed that he does not know of him. Agboreko leaves to try and get more information from Murete. As Adenebi leaves he tells the Old Man that he saw Demoke in the forest and that there were two others, besides himself, with Demoke. When the Old Man asks him if he heard anything or met anyone else, Adenebi says there were two "unpleasant looking" "mad creatures" who followed them around and made him sick. He also discovered that the woman with them was Madame Tortoise. In order to avoid being seen with such a disreputable woman, he left. The Old Man becomes very agitated to learn that his son is in the company of Madame Tortoise and he conjectures that the fourth person (Obaneji) must be Eshuoro, thirsting for the blood of the slayer of his servant, Oremole. He calls out to Agboreko who enters almost immediately. The Old Man and Agboreko conjecture who the fourth living being could be. The Old Man is convinced it is Eshuoro while Agboreko surmises that it could even be Forest Father himself. The Old Man becomes impatient and agitated, and Agboreko tries to calm him down by reciting proverbs.

The beaters enter along with the flogger who clears a space for his whip which he then freely uses. The dancer, the dancer's acolyte and the Dirge-man begin their work. The Dirge-man asks for room for the dead and Agboreko makes his prophecy

with the help of the divination board, the bowl and kernels. But his prophecy--"The loft is not out of reach when the dust means to settle"--does not satisfy the Old Man. The Dirge-man and Agboreko take turns in making a number of statements referring to figures in Yoruba myth. The Dirge-man repeats his request for leaving the dead enough "room to dance." The Old Man makes fun of Agboreko's meaningless platitudes ("Proverb to bones and silence" is a particular favourite). Suddenly a lorry appears, its headlights flashing--it is the Chimney of Ereko. Agboreko mistakes its roar for thunder. It is now Agboreko's turn to laugh at the Old Man for believing he can get rid of the dead with such toys.

The crowd panics at the sight of the Chimney and tries to flee. Adenebi is knocked down and trampled. He cries out for Demoke and Madame Tortoise, whom he now terms his "friends." An assortment of forest creatures and spirits pass across the stage grumbling and holding their noses because of the petrol fumes from the lorry.

Obaneji, Rola and Demoke enter. Obaneji once again asks Adenebi if he has found out the information he required—who was responsible for the deaths of the sixty-five lorry passengers. Adenebi says he wants to be left alone. Obaneji, Rola and Demoke go to the welcoming of the dead. After hesitating, Adenebi runs after them.

3.2 SUMMARY OF PART TWO

Part Two begins with Murete grumbling to himself because he can't drink the milk of the palm tree in which he lives. He is about to leave for the human celebrations when Eshuoro grasps his throat from behind. Eshuoro asks him to swear that Murete hasn't seen him. Eshuoro wants to know if today is the day for Aroni's ceremony of the welcome of the dead—a ceremony which will be a lesson for the humans. Eshuoro says that the humans have spoilt too much of the forest by their greed and thoughtlessness and today must be a day for the forest to fight back. He has no patience for Forest Father and Aroni's "gentle rebuke(s)." Murete is not bothered because he feels the forest claims its own victims; its recompense is given or forced out of the humans.

Eshuoro has decided that even if Aroni lets the human witnesses go, he won't. Eshuoro is furious at the way the humans have destroyed the forest. He wants justice. He is particularly incensed by the totem pole which he calls "the centrepiece of their (the humans') vulgarity." Murete insults him and says that it is an offering of which even Forest Father would have approved.

Murete runs off as Eshuoro threatens him with a branch. Eshuoro then dances and rants in fury. He is particularly angry with Demoke who carves and defaces trees. He threatens that he and Oro will have their revenge. He rushes off the stage.

In another part of the forest the Forest Crier comes in with a scroll and strikes his gong. The Forest Spirits listen to him either from their hiding places or out in the open. The Forest Crier informs all the forest creatures that tonight is the welcome of the dead. He clarifies that only those spirits of the dead that are specifically summoned can be seen or heard this night.

Forest Father and Aroni enter and exchange a few words about how tame the human witnesses have become and how they do not suspect Forest Father's identity. As the play-within-a-play begins, Aroni reminds Forest Father that they have gone back eight centuries, perhaps even more.

3.3 THE PLAY-WITHIN-A-PLAY: THE COURT OF MATA KHARIBU

The scene that is gradually lit up is the court of Mata Kharibu. The King and Madame Tortoise, soon to be his Queen, the Court Poet (Demoke) and his young scribe are present on stage. Mata Kharibu is very angry; Madame Tortoise gay and flirtatious. The poet tries not to respond to her coquetry. The conversation is entirely between Madame Tortoise and the Court Poet. Madame Tortoise says that she is sad because she's lost her canary which has flown off to the roof. She orders the poet to fetch it. The poet's novice immediately offers to go. The Court Poet doesn't want him to go because a soldier fell to his death from the same roof two days ago, but Madame Tortoise overrules him.

After the poet follows his scribe out, a chained warrior is pushed in. It is the Dead Man. Mata Kharibu slaps him and accuses him of being a traitor. The warrior has persuaded his soldiers not to fight an unjust war on the king's behalf—this is his treason.

The Physician (the Old Man) tries to persuade the warrior to agree to Mata Kharibu's war, calling it not a war to gather a woman's trousseau but an affair of honour. The warrior refuses to believe that it is honourable to steal another chieftain's wife, as Mata Kharibu has done, and then to declare war on that chieftain in order to recover the abducted woman's goods. He tells the Physician to return to the king. Even when the Physician says posterity will call the man a traitor and hints at the warrior's vulnerable pregnant wife, the warrior refuses to give in. His first loyalty is to his men. The Physician asks him if he has the right to risk the lives of those men by convincing them that they should disobey Mata Kharibu. The warrior realises that Mata Kharibu is worried about a possible revolt among his men—hence this effort to persuade or threaten the warrior.

The Historian (Adenebi) then enters with a scroll and tries to persuade Mata Kharibu to be more severe with the warrior who refuses to admit to what he calls the eternal necessity of history: war. He cites the example of the ancient Greeks and Trojans where the Trojan War was the one thing that immortalised that period in history. The Historian is convinced that only a man with slave's blood could refuse to fight.

As Mata Kharibu vows to be rid of all such men as the warrior, the Soothsayer (Agboreko) enters. He predicts a lot of bloodshed in the coming battle. Mata Kharibu is pleased because it signifies a great battle and orders that the warrior and his followers be "sent down the river" or drowned. A Slave Dealer offers not only his boat but also to take the men off Mata Kharibu's hands. The Physician pleads that the men be put to death immediately rather than face the hellish torments to which the Slave Dealer will subject them. While the Physician, the Historian and the Slave Dealer argue amongst themselves, Mata Kharibu shouts at them for making a marketplace of his court and storms off. Just before leaving the stage he admits to the Soothsayer that he knows that the battle will be lost but he has to fight it anyway because the indications of democracy and independence among his subjects have frightened him. The Soothsayer falsely reassures him. As the King leaves the Soothsayer says men will by their nature seek power over each other, and the King cannot control this.

After the Soothsayer exits, the Physician and the Slave Dealer continue their quarrel. The latter furtively slips the Historian a bribe so that the Historian will support his

claim that he has a new boat in which the slaves can travel in comfort. The Historian does the needful. After the Slave Dealer leaves happily, the Historian invites the Physician to his house to have a glass of sherbet and to discuss the implications of the coming war which will be fought, he says, like all other wars, over nothing.

After their exit, the Court Poet enters with a canary in a gold cage. As soon as Madame Tortoise sees the bird she decides she no longer wants it. When she asks after the poet's assistant she is informed he fell—not to his death, but he did break his arm. The Court Poet's asides become more and more insulting. Madame Tortoise, who cannot hear them, says the poet bores her and should leave. She then clears the entire court except for the warrior and his guard. She tries to flirt with the warrior but he will not respond. He begs her to keep her distance otherwise he might be tempted to punish her for the evil she has brought on his men. This only encourages her further.

Madame Tortoise tries to entice the Warrior by saying that he may become King since Mata Kharibu is a fool and that he may taste untold pleasures if he yields to her. The warrior merely yells for the guard who enters following a dishevelled pregnant woman--the Dead Woman. Even before the pregnant woman can beg Madame Tortoise for mercy the latter tells the warrior that he has the choice of being made a eunuch or being sold as a slave. When the warrior does not answer Madame Tortoise orders the guard to carry out her sentence, and the pregnant woman faints. The lights go out and come on again to show Aroni and Forest Father staring at the scene.

Eshuoro strides onto the stage proclaiming that the warrior was a fool and a coward. He threatens Aroni to beware of slighting him. He wants immediate redress of the assaults on him. He is convinced that his follower Oremole (Demoke's assistant on the totem pole) has been murdered. Forest Father reassures him that nothing has been forgotten. Ogun enters and tries to silence Eshuoro by saying that Demoke followed his orders and that he will answer for him. Ogun even taunts Eshuoro that Demoke has done him a favour by acting as his barber. Was he sleeping, Ogun asks, that he could not save his follower as he fell to his death? Eshuoro, goaded beyond endurance, tries to attack Ogun but Forest Father prevents him. Forest Father warns the two not to behave like spoilt humans and excite his anger. He asks Aroni to proceed. Forest Father wants the humans to "discover their own regeneration"—either to change their destructive ways or to follow the same path. Ogun begs for his servant (Demoke) to be released, but Aroni claims he needs him most of all. Eshuoro says he is impatient but Aroni says he must wait. The living ones will speak for the future themselves. When Eshuoro asks why they are so ready with a solution Forest Father says that Eshuoro had thought of the same remedy and hence came himself and would not allow any others to come in his place. Forest Father asks for the questioner to be called and orders that none interrupt the proceedings.

There is a change of scene, and in the damp and drizzly atmosphere the Questioner asks the Dead Woman who sent her and why she came before her time. The Dead Woman replies that a woman without a womb sent her and as for the reason, she wants to ask that of Forest Father. The Questioner says she should not have come but lived to rear the child in her womb. The woman answers that she was weak. The Questioner asks her if the woman without a womb was also weak like her. The Forest Father is more gentle with her. He asks her to rest and quieten her spirit, disordered by the suddenness of her death. He says he has news of another son who has come from very far.

The Dead Man then enters, saying he has led three lives but his first life still obsesses him. The Questioner, seeing his well-fed appearance, asks him if he has a

happy tale to tell. The man says he has been searching for Forest Father ever since they cut off his manhood because Forest Father means home and restful sleep. Forest Father calls him by his name, Mulieru, and recalls his journey by ship till he was sold as a slave for...A bottle of rum, answers the Questioner. So even though the man looks sleek and well fed, he is as well fed as a gelded pig. The Questioner accuses the man of surrendering his manhood too easily and says instead of desiring sleep he should wander even longer. Aroni enters and rips off the Questioner's mask—it is Eshuoro. He (Eshuoro) immediately runs off. Forest Father is merely amused and asks for the earthly protagonists to be called.

The Interpreter enters, leading in Demoke, Rola and Adenebi. Forest Father looks closely at the Interpreter, wondering if he has been sent by Eshuoro, but Eshuoro enters and says that he needs no slaves to carry out his plans. Aroni enters and leads off the Dead Woman on Forest Father's orders and the Interpreter masks the three humans. The masks wear the same expression—that of resigned passivity. Forest Father announces the moment of the welcome of the dead. The Dead Woman enters, no longer pregnant, but leading the Half-Child by the hand. For each spirit that is called, one of the three humans becomes agitated. As the Spirit of the Palm speaks, saying how his colour has changed from white to red and how those guilty will be punished, the Half-Child turns around, trying to guess which of the masked figures has spoken. Then the child leaves his mother's hand and plays a game of "sesan" while a Figure in Red dogs his footsteps. When the child appeals for help no one responds. The child chants that he fears he will be born dead. The Spirit of Darkness then joins in with the Spirit of the Palm saying how "they'll be misled" and doomed. The Spirit of Precious Stones says how he lures them into the pit promising wealth but gives them death instead. The Spirit of the Pachyderms complains of the theft of ivory, and the Spirit of the Rivers weeps for humans' ruthless exploitation of their natural environment out of greed. The Spirit of the Sun complains of untimely eclipse, and the Spirit of Volcanoes says that he is winded and unable to belch lava. The Ant Leader complains of millions of his brothers being trod underfoot even though they guard the wisdom of Mother Earth. All the ants speak up, complaining of the destruction that follows in the wake of "progress"—"the good to come." Aroni shouts and asks them for what unfortunate future they rise to speak. As the ants vanish, the Figure in Red confronts Forest Father who unwillingly gestures at the Interpreter for the humans to be unmasked and to see with their human eyes.

As the humans are unmasked the first of the Triplets enters--it is a gangling, headless figure that proclaims that it is the End that will justify the Means--if anyone finds the Means, that is. As the Interpreter dances with it, the Second Triplet enters, an overblown, drooling head. It says it is "the Greater Cause," excusing all the present's crimes for the illusion of a better tomorrow. The Interpreter dances with both the Triplets and then the Second Triplet, after sniffing at them, asks who the humans are. Forest Father calls them "weak, pitiable criminals," and terms the Triplets "perversions" born of the power the corrupt hold over each other. The fanged and bloody Third Triplet then enters and says that it is Posterity, nourished by blood and violence.

As the Figure in Red rips off its hood, Eshuoro is revealed. He tries to catch the Half-Child but Ogun prevents him and says that he has no right to claim him because he played too many roles for his own good. Telling Eshuoro to beware of the mask "lined with scorpions," Ogun exits. Eshuoro once more tries to get the Half-Child who moves to his mother saying he has found an egg as smooth as a pebble. Eshuoro gleefully chants that a serpent that will swallow him will be born of that egg. The Half-Child spins around till he is giddy. As he chants his fear the Dead Woman joins him in his chant saying she too fears the loss of another child.

Then a long section follows which is completely without words in which Eshuoro and Ogun both try to get the Half-Child by playing a game of "ampe." The Interpreter, throws off his mask and reveals himself as Eshuoro's Jester, and the Third Triplet also join in. Eshuoro and the Third Triplet throw the Half-Child between them, trying to catch him on the point of two knives like circus acrobats. Demoke rushes forward to intercept the child as the deadly game continues, but Eshuoro tricks him. Ogun then comes in, pulls the Interpreter aside, catches the Half-Child and passes him to Demoke. Demoke is confused as all the others watch him. He attempts to restore the child to its mother, but Eshuoro blocks his way and appeals to Forest Father. Ogun appeals against him.

Forest Father then makes his longest speech, more to himself than to the other characters, saying that he will be troubled no further by the follies of his creations. He knows it is futile to teach humans the wickedness of their ways and to show them a picture of their lost innocence. He cannot intervene in earthly affairs, but if he does not continue to teach humans he will be accused of being ineffectual. He keeps hoping against hope that his labour will not be in vain. He asks Aroni if Demoke knows the meaning of his act. Aroni tells Demoke that he holds a doomed thing in his hands and that he cannot reverse a deed that happened many years past.

Once again there is a dumb show where Demoke gives the Half-Child to the Dead Woman who leaves with him. Forest Father too leaves, whereupon Eshuoro yells in triumph and rushes off stage, followed by his jester. The Triplets follow, grinning from ear to ear.

A silhouette of Demoke's totem is seen, with the villagers dancing around it. There is no contact between the villagers and the three human protagonists. The Jester enters with a leap, puts the sacrificial basket on Demoke's head and performs a wild dance. Eshuoro enters with a club and he and the jester relentlessly try to drag Demoke to the totem. Rola and Adenebi, as if in a trance, are made to sprinkle libation on the scene. Demoke fades and reappears at the foot of his totem. He begins to climb it and disappears from view to the beat of the drums. Eshuoro sets fire to the tree with a brand. Ogun enters and catches Demoke as he falls. The lights go out. As the lights come on gradually Eshuoro is shown frenziedly dancing with his jester. Dawn is breaking. Ogun enters carrying Demoke. He is armed. Ogun puts Demoke down on the ground, leaves his weapons beside him and flees. Eshuoro flees after his jester as the first of the beaters enters. It is now full dawn. Agboreko and the Old Man enter, a drunk Murete dragging them on. The Old Man rushes towards Demoke his son who opens his eyes.

The Old Man asks Demoke what he has seen. Agboreko asks him to leave Demoke alone, saying the truth will be out in due time. The Old Man tells Demoke that he had searched for him all night knowing that one of his companions was the infamous Madame Tortoise; she is the one who never dies, adds Agboreko. The Old Man says he was also bothered by the identity of the fourth companion whom he could not place. He sees that there are only three of them, and he asks Demoke if the fourth revealed himself. Demoke says the fourth companion was Forest Father himself. Agboreko says that they thought it might have been Eshuoro. The Old Man asks Demoke if he saw the lame one, and says how stupid they were to think that they could pit their wits against Aroni (the lame one). Agboreko says they paid a high price for their newly-acquired wisdom and the Old Man shows the injury on his face and says that behind every sapling that hit them in the forest there was Aroni's hand. Demoke wonders if they could take Murete's help in finding their way out of the forest. The Old Man speaks of the sacrifices that have been made and the expiation asked for, but Demoke feels the three have suffered enough in this one

night as they relived their past lives. The Old Man eagerly asks if there was a “kernel of light” in all their suffering, some grain of wisdom, some faint ray of hope. Rola enters at this point, looking chastened. As Agboreko says he did not expect to find her alive, even though Madame Tortoise has the reputation of outlasting them all, Demoke asks him not to call Rola that because they have all been changed by the rigours of that night. Agboreko eagerly asks him if he has learned anything wise, anything of the future, but the play ends with Agboreko’s old, trite, tired cliché, “Proverb to bones and silence.”

3.4 LET US SUM UP

This unit gives a detailed summary of the play under three headings, Part One, Part Two and the Play-Within-a-Play. The first part of the play introduces the three chief (living) characters, Demoke, Rola, Adenebi and the mysterious Obaneji, tells us about the festival of the Gathering of the Tribes that they are about to attend, and also the two (dead) characters who have been summoned to this festival and yet are not made at all welcome by the living characters. We are told about the magnificent totem pole which has been erected for the festival. The atmosphere is one of mystery and confusion. We get the sense that each character has a secret which he/she wants to hide from the others. We also get the sense that the four living characters are very different from one another--their constant bickering also attests to this fact. We are also introduced to two other characters, the Old Man and Agboreko, who are in search of the four living characters for different reasons and yet keep missing them.

In Part Two there is a confrontation between Murete and Eshuoro: the latter seeks vengeance because his tree has been violated and his follower killed in the construction of the totem pole. Murete refuses to co-operate and to tell him where to find the culprit.

The Play-Within-a-Play takes the action back many centuries to the court of Mata Kharibu. The four living characters now play new roles in this court and the two dead characters are presented as a heroic warrior and his hapless pregnant wife who are both wronged by Mata Kharibu and his sensuous and remorseless consort, Madame Tortoise. The play-within-a-play is Soyinka's way of presenting the fact that old sins cast long shadows. He seems to be saying that there are a number of cruel and bloody acts of injustice in Nigeria's past that the newly-independent Nigerians would do well to remember so that they do not commit the same grievous errors of judgment all over again.

The play then returns to the present with a tremendous amount of spectacle. Eshuoro has finally caught up with his quarry and he thirsts for vengeance. Ogun tries to protect Demoke, his follower. A number of spirits, of the forests, of the palm, of the rivers etc. appear and speak of the ways in which they have been exploited by human greed to the Questioner (who is actually Eshuoro in a mask) and the Interpreter. There is a game played with the Half-Child in which Demoke tries to rescue the child and restore it to its mother, the Dead Woman. Forest Father makes a long speech, mostly to himself, about the futility of trying to teach humans the folly of their deeds. Demoke climbs the totem pole as an act of expiation for the sins of the community even though he knows he will spin off it to his death. Sure enough, he falls--but he is saved by Ogun. The play ends with the Old Man and Agboreko questioning Demoke as to what he has seen and learnt from the events of the night, but Demoke is unable to explain.

3.5 GLOSSARY

Plethora:	excessive fullness
Gelded:	castrated
Expiation:	payment of penalty, making amends for
Amass:	accumulate
Cliche:	phrase used too frequently
Dishevelled:	untidy
Disreputable:	not respectable
Flirtatious:	behaviour that invites or pays attention merely for amusement.
Flogger:	one who beats with a whip
Futile:	useless
Goad:	torment; urge someone by annoyance to do something
Incinerate:	burn
Platitude:	very ordinary remark, usually solemnly spoken
Scribe:	writer, keeper of records
Totem Pole:	pole with image of natural object, especially animal, assumed to be emblem (visual sign) of clan or individual.
Trousseau:	brides clothes
Vulnerable:	open to injury

3.6 QUESTIONS

- Q.1 What is the significance of the play-within-a-play?
- Q.2 Why does Soyinka have the characters, Demoke, Rola, Adenebi, Agboreko, the Old Man, the Dead Man and the Dead Woman, play double roles?
- Q.3 What is the significance of Demoke trying to rescue the Half-Child and of climbing the totem pole?