
The Drama of Existence: Myths and Rituals in Wole Soyinka's Theatre

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Abstract: The citation for Soyinka's 1986 Nobel prize for literature reads: "Who in a wide cultural perspective and with poetic overtones, fashions the drama of existence". The "wide cultural perspective" mentioned refers to the fact that Soyinka's writings, especially the dramas for which he is best known, are at once deeply rooted in traditional African expressive and performance forms like myths and rituals, dance and mime, music and masquerade and are also greatly influenced by such diverse Western dramatic and theatrical modes as classical Greek drama, Shakespearean and Jacobean theatre, and modern European and American antirealist and avant-garde forms and techniques.

Keywords: Theatre, Rituals, Myths, Soyinka

Wole Soyinka is, no doubt, Africa's leading playwright, but the African audiences for his major plays are very small indeed. He addresses himself to the reflection of an African sensibility and the creation of an African drama, but his plays have non-Africans amongst their most ardent admirers. Some African critics accuse him of a reactionary sensibility and intellect; yet his political activities, for which he has suffered imprisonment and exile, seem to stem from a deep concern for the common man seen as mercilessly exploited by tyrants, bureaucrats and opportunists.

First of all, he is very specific about the role of the audience in a live theatre performance: the members of the audience are part of the space of the performance and therefore metaphysically part of the conflict taking place. The audience participate in this much deeper metaphysical sense throughout the 'ritual' – which is the word Soyinka uses for the drama in performance – because they are an integral part of the space in which the performance of the conflict takes place; and he refers to the audience as a 'chorus' who give the protagonist strength in 'the symbolic struggle with the chthonic presences' (MLAW, 38).

Soyinka therefore sees the use of the stage space as *affective*, not merely effective, because it *affects* the audience in certain emotional and physical ways. Therefore the use of the stage space moves from being metaphorical to being metaphysical. This metaphysical awareness on the part of the audience is, for Soyinka, most clearly seen in those performances of 'ritual' theatre where a fundamental anxiety manifests itself in members of the audience over whether or not the protagonist will survive confrontation with the forces of chaos which now exist in the arena of performance space.

In the analysis of Soyinka's *Myth, Literature and the African World* which is for readers of Soyinka's plays, a sourcebook on his philosophical, poetic and critical precepts, a kind of "poetic manifesto", there is one element which we need to consider before moving on to an understanding of Soyinka's first major play *A Dance of the Forests*: music and its metaphysical significance.

Music, dance and masquerade are crucial to nearly all Soyinka's plays and especially to *A Dance of the Forests*. Music, the playwright writes in *MLAW* "is the intensive language of transition" (*MLAW* 36). And as 'the language of transition' it lies at the heart of his metaphysics; it is the actual means of communication to the audience both of the disintegration and the retrieval of self; it actually translates the actor and the audience to that state of awareness of the journey through the abyss. Soyinka also endorses the affective and cohesive properties of the theatre:

It is a truism that the theatre is simply but effectively in its operational totality, both performance and audience; and there exists already in this truth a straightforward dynamic of drama which is not to be found in painting, a technique whose only end can be change, not consolidation. – It suggests that theatre is perhaps the most revolutionary art form known to man.

(MORELL 1975: 105)

The recourse to the theatrical medium had metaphysical, as well as aesthetic implications. It 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 by Aristotle or Nietzsche. He averred that the dramatic performance of a recognizable rite, a rite drawn from the mythical heritage of the community, forces the active participation of members of the community in the ritual. Through submergence in the ritual members of the community emerge with a new consciousness of themselves as individuals and as a collective. Soyinka, therefore, used the ritual format to express his consciousness of socio-political imperatives, precisely because of its communal or audience affective qualities. Thus, the playwright envisaged the consequent awakening of communal consciousness to be the preliminary step towards change or action.

The scope of this paper – which does not claim to be exhaustive – is to explore some elements connected with the dramaturgy of *A Dance of the Forests*, thus showing how Soyinka experiments with ritual and theatrical idioms by drawing upon what he calls the "aesthetic matrix" of his own Yoruba culture (or upon any culture likely to provide him with good theatre) and how he uses them in an interpretative way.

A Dance of the Forests was composed at a time when Soyinka evidently felt his country should be rethinking its cultural heritage, its past and its present, in terms of the future that lay before it. The author had returned to Nigeria, earlier in 1960, with a Rockefeller Foundation grant to research into traditional African drama and its continuation in modern theatre, and woven into his play are a series of traditional rites, ceremonies and performances. Like *The Tempest*, *A Dance of the Forests* can be seen as repertory of some of the different forms of drama, ritual and ceremony available to the modern

playwright, but also as an indication of the different areas from which theatre has probably evolved and of the changes it has undergone in its absorption into a different ideological universe. At the same time, as part of the Independence Celebrations, *A Dance of the Forests* was a celebration (or anti-celebration) within the celebration, a play within a play, offering a series of formalised representations of reality, of “plays” within the play, themselves containing still further plays and players. For beside the “producer”, “actor” and “spectator” figures with which Soyinka’s *ADF* abound are a number of variously codified re-enactments of experience, from the trial to the game, from the religious or mantic rite to public ceremonies and feasts, from spectacular acrobatics to more strictly theatrical forms.

Of all Soyinka’s plays it is theatrically the most demanding. It requires a set and scenery which can effect the transition from one world to another by almost instantaneous transformations. A separately lit back scene is necessary for the transitions from forest to primeval glade, and from forest to the court of Mata Kharibu. The scenery must offer instant visual clues to the order of reality it evokes: drably “natural” for the mundane forest with its sound-effects of ‘beaters’ and engine noise; supernatural and mysterious for timeless spirit-forest which is co-extensive with the former, but charged with mystery, power, and significance, particularly in the moist primeval glade which forms the setting for the ordeal; and lastly the barbaric splendour of Mata Kharibu’s court in the past.

Similarly, the characters are drawn from four distinct levels of abstraction or ‘reality’, a number of them appearing as themselves, but in different forms, at two levels. Costume, make-up, and gesture therefore have to be contrived to make such crossers of the boundaries instantly recognisable, whilst at the same time suggesting the nature of their change.

Within the mundane forest we meet three orders of being: present-day humans; two revenants who must be instantly recognizable as such; and, in certain scenes, Murete the tree-imp who belongs to the spirit world. In the numinous forest we meet three of the humans; the same humans in a previous incarnation; and a host of spirits, some of whom assume temporary disguises. The terrible Triplets, grotesque symbolic masks, are perhaps yet another category.

The surface plot of this complex play can be rapidly summarized. The humans are gathered for a festive celebration, a “gathering of the tribes” and they ask the deities and spirits of the sacred groves of the forest to send to the occasion illustrious ancestors as symbolic presences of the greatness and glory of the race. But the forests spirits, principally, Forest Head, know better; they know of the past crimes and evils of individuals and groups in the community; they therefore plan to convert the euphoric supplication of the humans to its opposite: a cathartic, purgative confrontation by the gathered tribes with the truth of their past historical experience and reality. Thus, not illustrious ancestors but two restless dead are sent to the humans, accusers and gnawing spots in the buried collective conscience of the race – dead man and dead woman (the dead man’s name is “Mulieru” which literally means “he-who-is-enslaved” – he is a ghost returned to confirm the participation of black Africa in its darkest historical tragedy: the transatlantic slave trade; both come out of the bowels of the earth in the empty clearing of the forest, breaking the soil with their heads, coming to life as it were,

but in the case of dead woman heavy with child and having carried her pregnancy for eight centuries). The humans in fury and evasion drive out these unwelcome guests; but the spirits of the forest are remorseless and they lure three of the most important personages among the humans, Demoke, Rola and Adenebi to an expiatory “dance” in the heart of the forest. These three representations of the human community have recently repeated the cycle of moral corruption and murderous violence that they had each perpetrated in previous incarnations in a decadent and brutal kingdom of the past. In this ritual-judicial space in the heart of the forest, these humans are forced to confront both the restless dead and their other crimes and stupidities, which appear to them as objectified grotesqueries and phantoms. Day breaks in the forest and the three humans, chastened but still unsure and groping, return to the other humans.

What is revealed is a complex illustration of how the past is paradigmatic of the present endless reproducibility and universality of evil. In the pre-colonial African monarch, Mata Kharibu, we have an example of a leader without any scruples and whose sole concern, like that of the post-colonial leadership of Kongi and Kamini (Soyinka’s protagonists of *Kongi’s Harvest* and *A Play of Giants*), is with self-aggrandizement and absolute power. Kharibu takes the wife of a neighbouring king, Madame Tortoise (Rola in post-colonial times), for a lover; and when the husband does not react as he expects, he and Madame Tortoise, both of whom are extremely keen on a fight for the sheer of love of violence, cast around for a pretext on which to invade the neighbouring Kingdom. In the end, some flimsy excuse is found, but, to the King’s and Madame Tortoise’s surprise, the General refuses to fight what he regards as an unjust war. Madame Tortoise, having failed to persuade him to change his mind with the offer of her body, falsely accuses him of attempted rape and has him castrated and sold into slavery; as a consequence his pregnant wife commits suicide. As it turns out, the General and his wife are the deformed dead spirits that have been sent to represent the ancestral spirits at the gathering of the tribes.

The Dead Man may be said to represent Soyinka’s view of the limitations of political awareness. It is a position which Soyinka’s real protagonist in the play, Demoke, must completely transcend if he is to change anything in the future. The Dead Man has served his purpose. He has embodied a position which had to be stated so that it could be transcended. Now he can be dispensed with in the play.

Not so for the Dead Woman and her unborn child. She is relieved of her burden so that “the tongue of the unborn, stilled for generations, be loosened”. At the same time the three town dwellers are masked and are now incorporated into the dance as forest spirits. This is the transition into the world of the unborn, the space of the future, where all resources of the earth are wantonly plundered by men, as the words and the masquerade convey; while the Figure in Red, a bloody destiny, plays with the Dead Woman’s Half Child – the future – and wins. Because of man’s greed and avarice the future will be bloody. Then comes chaos: the rivers run red, the winds cease, the sun is darkened at noon, the volcanoes – energy within the earth – cease. “Whose hand is this” asks Forest Head, “that reaches from the grave?” The ants have joined the masquerade: they represent the suffering humanity,

Down the axis of the world, from
The whirlwind to the frozen drifts,
We are the ever legion of the world,
Smitten, for – ‘the good to come’

(*DF*, in *Collected Plays 1*, 68)

But there is no ‘good to come’. The Ant Leader curses the future: after the scourge of silent suffering, there will be blind retaliation, like the sting in the tail of the scorpion. A bloody destiny. Again the Figure in Red appeals for the Half Child: a bloody destiny is claiming the future.

Forest Head orders the unmasking of the three town dwellers so that they may see the final enactment of the future with their natural eyes, and not with the eyes of the forest spirits. The rite now embraces the collective mask of the Three Triplets, who join the dance one after the other. They embody the hideous future that the Ant Leader pronounced. The First Triplet is a manifestation of that ‘good to come’, for which numberless, nameless human beings have died. But it is grotesque, headless and no ‘good’ end at all. It is followed by the Second triplet: the Greater Cause that lies like a mirage, beyond all immediate ends. It, too, is grotesque: a huge, drooling head only, the complement of the headless First Triplet. The First and Second Triplets are linked to the world of the living by a comment of Forest Head. The triplets, ‘perversions’ as he calls them, are born when ‘weak, pitiable criminals ... acquire power over one another, and their instincts are fulfilled a thousandfold, an hundred thousandfold’. There is a Third Triplet, ‘fanged and bloody’. ‘I am posterity. Can no one see on what milk I have been nourished?’ For the third time the Figure in Red, the embodiment of a bloody destiny, appeals for possession of the future, for the Half Child. We now discover that the Figure in Red is Eshuoro (the trickster) in another disguise, another god-concealing mask. The Half Child struggles to move towards his mother, the future seeking to escape from a blindly vengeful god, uncaring of humanity.

The reader/spectator has to try and carry in his imagination the sound of the music, the movement of the dances and the visual spectacle of the masks. The scene has built up to this passionate pitch from the absolute stillness of the dripping scene which marked its beginning.

As the dance moves to its climax, Ogun has intervened, standing behind the mother and drawing the Half Child towards her. The frenzied ‘ampe’¹ distracts the Half Child, disarms him, then the first two Triplets catch him up and toss him to the Third Triplet. The Half Child is tossed back and forth as in a furious and lethal game. Demoke tries to save the Child – he intervenes to rescue the future from this chaotic and bloody disintegration – and finally, through the help of Ogun, gains possession of it. Demoke would give it back to the mother, but Eshuoro blocks the way. Both Eshuoro and Ogun appeal to the Forest Head for a judgement. He refuses, and in a short speech he expresses the fundamental contradiction between the Creator’s omnipotence and man’s freewill:

¹ The ‘ampe’ dance is a Yoruba children’s dance (‘ampe’ means ‘Do as I do, we are the same’) in which two children face each other, jump and make the same hand and foot movement uttering in unison the sound ‘pe pe pe pe pe pe shampe!’ and stretching corresponding feet to indicate perfect agreement.

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

(*DF*, in *Collected Plays I*, 76)

He seeks to ‘torture self-awareness’ from their souls in the hope that new beginnings may indeed reflect some change. If Demoke really means to take the world of the unborn, the future, out of Eshuoro’s hands, and return it to the human world of the living, he will have to pay a heavy sacrifice. He gives the Half-Child to its mother; and the last phase of the dance begins.

In *A Dance of the Forests*, while the dead appear in person, the spirits use masks. Whether cosmic in the narrow sense (Darkness, the Sun, Rivers, Volcanoes), elemental (Precious Stones), vegetable (Palm), or animal (Pachyderms), they show how they themselves have been contaminated by human violence. Says the Palm: “White skeins wove me, I, Spirit of the Palm/ Now course I red./ I who suckle blackened hearts, know/ Heads will fall down/ Crimson in their red!” (*DF*, 64). Cosmic powers have been stained by human cruelty. The unconscious soul of the universe is tainted with violence. The masks reveal the cosmic totalism in which the environment shares man’s destiny. Then the demonstration switches to introduce “the ever legion of the world” (*DF*, 68), the masses of humanity in the form of innumerable ants, which appear as the sons of the earth whose closeness to her makes them dangerous to their oppressors. They are the expendable myriads ruthlessly sacrificed under the pretext of progress and “the good to come” by the leaders. The triplets finally come in a climax of horror: the End that justifies the Means, the Greater Cause, the bloody Posterity.

Soyinka’s dramatic transposition and free adaptation of the traditional mask shed light on the nature of his symbols: they are not mere representations, they hold and manifest the substance and force for which they stand. A mask is therefore not intended to be an object of static contemplation. Its expressivity appears best in the context of a ritual, in connection with music and dancing. The physical and the aesthetic are manifestations of the dynamism and harmony of inner and cosmic realities. Through dancing, the passage between the visible and the invisible dimensions of the universe becomes possible. In a note to *The Road*, Soyinka declares that “the dance is the movement of transition”. In *Death and the King’s Horseman*, Elesin, the protagonist, prepares and begins his ritual suicide, his passage to the world of the ancestors, with a dance which progressively leads him to a trance. In *Kongi’s Harvest*, dancing is an occasion for the feet of the kings to “speak to the feet of the dead”. In *The Bacchae*, it helps a man to reach his inner self: “when you step onto the dance ... you are immersed in the richest essence of all – your inner essence. This is what the dance of Dionysos bring forth from you, this is the meaning of the dance” (*CPI*, 255).

A Dance of the Forests is a dramatic transposition of an epiphany of the subreal rhythms in conscious man; the play invites the audience to take part in this revelation of man’s

inner self. A certain type of music is associated with this transitional dance. In his introductory note to *Death and the King's Horseman*, Soyinka calls it “the music from the abyss of transition”. Drums accompany the horseman’s progress towards death. In *Kongi's Harvest*, Daodu’s bursting of the lead drum breaks the ecstatic dance and marks the end of an age. In *The Road*, drums revive Murano’s possession and dance. In *The Bacchae*, they trigger off Dionysiac ecstasy.

In *A Dance of the Forests*, the drums (and the flutes) contrast with the “noise” of the beaters and revellers (see pp. 8,11,28,35). In the divination scene, they evoke the dance of the dead (36). They accompany the dance of the forests at the welcome of the dead, starting softly (63) and are mentioned again in the end (72,76). We must imagine this “music of the forest drums” for want of actually participating in the play.

All the metatheatrical elements in *ADF* are, in fact, essential for a full appreciation of the play. Together they represent a basic strategy, knitting the play’s themes and modes into a compact but disturbing whole and linking it to the idea of the theatre the author was soon to express more directly in his essays. The first of the metatheatrical elements in *ADF* is of course its title, in which *dance* – a non-verbal but highly articulate language of the body welding ecstasy with discipline and appealing not only to the senses of sight and hearing, but to the erotic, intensely communicative, spatialising sense of touch – is united to *forest*: a powerful and mysterious expression of natural life, proliferating shadowy signs and symbols and providing a location for the staging of secret rites of passage.

But “dancing” is only performed when the action of the play draws towards a climax requiring a fuller, more primordial idiom than speech. The implications of dancing – and of the Forest dance in particular – are not limited to the moments of actual performance, though the whole of *DF* is affected by the title’s invocation of an art that is both emancipating and controlled, exploiting all the resources of the human body and creating a harmonious order in which human, natural and cosmic divisions may be transcended.

If *A Dance of the Forests* is, in fact, a play within the play, as I mentioned before, incorporating numbers of other plays within the play, the stage upon which the action takes place can be seen under a similar light (as can the frequent proverbs: while their micro-narratives or micro-dramas provide a metacommentary on the themes and actions of the play itself, they themselves often evoke “theatrical” or “spectacular” situations). Aroni’s testimony, metaphorically setting the stage for the action of the play, is mirrored, in miniature, by the circling gesture of his hand when he conjures up the court of Mata-Kharibu, the “scene” in which the deeds of the ancestors are re-enacted: lit up on the darkened stage on which he and Forest Head continue to be present as producer / spectators. Similarly, the creation of a special space for the divination ceremony and the dirgeman’s chant in Part I, through the actions of the flogger and the acolyte, is recalled, in Part II, by the movements of the masked figures, drawing slowly widening circles in the midst of which the game of death is played out, or, later, by Rola and Adenebi sprinkling libation on the scene as Demoke performs the Dance of the Unwilling Sacrifice. And these stages within the stage are, again, incorporated into a vaster, outside stage: not only the “stage” on which Nigerian independence is being celebrated, but the theatre of the world. The setting of Yoruba traditional drama, Soyinka tells us in

his essays, is the cosmic entirety, the stage a ritual arena of confrontation defined by the presence of the audience. Entering the space of theatre, the dramatic microcosmos, involves a loss of individuation, a self-submergence in universal essence. It is an act undertaken on behalf of the community and the welfare of that protagonist is inseparable from that of the total community.

The acquisition of knowledge which is one of the main objectives of the play's metatheatrical strategies implies the integration of the protagonist into a more complex, interdependent social reality. Understanding is necessarily accompanied by socialisation, and the process by which these may be attained can only be accomplished through a destructive / constructive experience of the sort that Soyinka sees as fundamental to the actor of Yoruba ritual drama. By divesting the self of its individuality and assuming the identity of another being, the actor recognises that he is a member of a wider community and translates his recognition into communicable experience. Thus he re-enacts the story of the God Ogun, described by Soyinka as "the first actor" (*MLAW*, 145), who journeyed into the primordial void, submitted himself to the experience of dissolution and reintegration and, through an effort of the will, built a bridge across the gulf, permitting the passage of gods and men.²

Since *A Dance of the Forests*, Soyinka has been very prolific, restlessly experimenting with theatrical idioms, drawing upon the living traditions he still has at his elbow and fusing them with whatever forms from whatever origins he feels are likely to provide him with good theatre. For example, to mention just a few plays, he wrote and directed *Opera Wonyosi* in 1977, his Nigerian version of Bertolt Brecht's *Threepenny Opera* (1928), itself a reinterpretation of John Gay's *The Beggar's Opera* written two hundred years before. He has adapted Euripides' *The Bacchae*, acknowledged his indebtedness to Jean Genet's *The Balcony* for the form of his own *A Play of Giants*, and launched into his "guerrilla" or "short-gun theatre" whenever he felt the urge to comment upon a specific situation and to take up a very satirical stance. Soyinka crosses cultural barriers in order to use the language of the theatre to its fullest: in extending the boundaries of his theatrical idioms, he was already, even in 1960, a pioneer in the development of the kind of drama associated now with the names of Peter Brook and Jerzy Grotowski.

² "Ogun's history is the story of the completion of Yoruba cosmogony; he encapsulates that cosmogony's coming-into-being in his own rites of passage. (...) Ogun is the master craftsman and artist, farmer and warrior, essence of destruction and creativity, a recluse and a gregarious imbibor, a reluctant leader of men and deities. He is 'Lord of the road' of Ifa; that is, he opens the way to the heart of Ifa's wisdom, thus representing the knowledge-seeking instinct, an attribute which sets him apart as the only deity who 'sought the way', and harnessed the resources of science to hack a passage through primordial chaos for the gods' reunion with man." in SOYINKA (1976) *Myth, Literature and the African World*, 27.

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