

# *Human Sacrifice in Literature: The Case of Wole Soyinka*

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HUMAN SACRIFICE lies at the heart of European perceptions of the primitive. At an opposite, alien extreme from "civilization," it evokes horror tinged with prurient fascination. In literature and film it has generated its own exotic variety of the gothic genre. For many decades it has provided a staple element in popular entertainment: in images of witch-doctors with bones through their noses prancing round their victims, or girls tied to stakes awaiting the arrival of the Sacred Crocodile or King Kong. Combined with cannibalism it appears in cartoon-portrayals of wisecracking missionaries standing fully clothed in cauldrons over blazing fires.

Engagingly uninhibited versions of such stereotypes have found their way into the "true-life" memoirs of colonial administrators. In *Ju-Ju and Justice in Nigeria* (1930), for instance, we follow the British colonial official, Frank Hives, as he puts a stop to one gory, but picturesque ceremony:

The dancers were about twenty in number, all stark naked; and they pranced madly round a small tree, to which was tied a poor wretch who was evidently the latest prospective victim of the sitting, their black bodies drenched with the perspiration which ran down them in streams, and added its odour to the general stench that prevailed. Their legs were bespattered with freshly shed blood from four dismembered human trunks that lay on the ground beside the ju-ju man. These trunks had many marks on them — looking to me as though the unfortunate creatures had been flogged to death — and were probably intended for the consumption of the guests at the conclusion of the ceremonies.

At the side of the fire were two iron pots, and in each were two human heads getting simmering. (38)

After breaking up the proceedings and capturing the ju-ju man, the enlightened and humane European describes his captive with knockabout humour: "the old blighter . . . glared at me with his cruel, bloodshot eyes, gnashing his yellow teeth with fury. Then, overcome by impotent rage, he started to scream, so I gagged him again, this time with my handkerchief, in such a way that he could breathe without discomfort" (41). Characteristically, the administrator Hives takes a briskly secular, no-nonsense attitude to the ritual's meaning. There is no suggestion of any authentic religious or spiritual dimension. It is seen merely as the superstitious means by which the ju-ju man preserves his power and increases his wealth. It is hinted that he chooses wealthy victims in order to steal their property (28).

T. S. Eliot's elegant ironic use of this comic-horrific image of primitivism in *The Cocktail Party* (1950) is at an opposite literary and spiritual extreme from Hives. Nevertheless, Eliot's Christian concerns place him at a similar cultural distance from the misguided superstitions of the ignorant natives. Celia, we learn, has devoted herself to Christ by joining a nursing order of nuns working among "the heathen," only to become the victim of a cruel parody of her own self-sacrifice. The natives of Kinkanja devote her to their own gods instead, and crucify her over an anthill in an attempt to avert the plague which she had been endeavouring to cure by medical means (Eliot 432). It is also hinted, with a horrified *frisson*, that they subsequently eat her. In Eliot this ridiculous and obscene human sacrifice forms part of an Absurdist exploration of the mystery of faith.

But white writers who treat this theme are not all as Eurocentric and detached as Hives and Eliot. The darkness which confronts Joseph Conrad's protagonists in Africa cannot be dispelled by brisk enlightenment, nor incorporated into a Christian mystery. Nor, with his troubled sense of the moral position of imperialist Europe, can Conrad see this darkness as specifically non-European. Indeed, the "unspeakable rites" of *Heart of Darkness* (1902) become as much a symbol of the obscene rapacity of European imperialism as of African savagery. The underlying common humanity of Africa and Europe expresses itself troublingly in the cult of divinity which Kurtz has developed around himself, which judging from

the heads displayed on posts before his house is founded on ritual human sacrifices and possibly also cannibalism. Kurtz's original motive — to amass ivory — is as crude and venal as that of Hives's ju-ju man, but, unlike the primitive ju-ju man who knows no better, Kurtz is civilized, so there is something sinister and appalling in his resort to the same primitive methods: "the wilderness . . . had whispered to him things about himself which he did not know, things of which he had no conception till he took counsel with this great solitude — and the whisper had proved irresistably fascinating" (Conrad 83). Instead of merely dismissing the barbarism of sacrifice from the height of European enlightenment, Conrad employs its ritualized, systematic murder as a symbol of a universal evil in both Europe and Africa. Like human sacrifice, colonialism also reduces human beings to things, to means rather than ends. Conrad makes an imaginative short-circuit between the secular bloodshed of the European "pilgrims" and the religious sacrifice of the primitive "savages." The power which the trader Kurtz obtains is not merely secular but also spiritual: a true heart of darkness.

More romantic than Conrad is D. H. Lawrence whose nameless protagonist in "The Woman Who Rode Away" (1928) traces a similar imaginative journey to that of Kurtz. Crucially, however, Lawrence lacks Conrad's profound moral anxiety over his protagonist's reversion to primitivism. Indeed, he seems to see the American woman's half-voluntary submission to the sacrificial ritual of the "wild Indians" of Mexico as a kind of symbolic act of atonement, through which the "descendants of Montezuma" exact their revenge on the materialist conquerors who have all but destroyed their precious, organic culture (Lawrence 553, 550). Almost playfully Lawrence confuses his readers' perspectives. He begins apparently in the clear day of enlightenment. The woman's desire to go to the Indians who "kill missionaries at sight" is seen as "crazy" and a kind of "madness." She gushes naïvely to a visiting mining engineer: "But surely they have old, old religions and mysteries — it *must* be wonderful, surely it must." He responds with dry reason: "I don't know about mysteries — howling and heathen practices, more or less indecent. No, I see nothing wonderful in that kind of stuff" (549). But then as the story develops, its

rhetoric slides into incantation and mystery, investing the Indian men and their ancient culture with a romantic glamour. They possess a masculine, "glittering," "inhuman" impersonality. The woman, doped and massaged by these gentle, sexless men, finds herself "diffusing out deliciously into the harmony of things" (572), and ultimately assents to her sacrificial role as reconciler of sun and moon, male and female. It is a strange sexist fantasy, whose effect patently depends on the vagueness of the unnamed protagonist, and the imposition upon her by the male author of a somewhat distasteful rhetoric of female yielding and submission.

Ultimately what excites Lawrence and disturbs Eliot and Conrad about human sacrifice is its profound rejection of that basic principle of Western ideology, the sanctity of the individual. Human sacrifice is the most imaginatively powerful assertion of that subordination of the individual which lies at the heart of primitive communalism. The gods, the deified king, the sun, or the ancestors, require the sacrifice of human life in return for power or survival. The victims' deaths are a matter neither of tragedy nor punishment, though in some versions of the custom they may bear the sins of the community on their shoulders, as scapegoats. Their function is to act as a bridge to the supernatural world, and their individual entities are lost in their role. In communalism there are no individual human rights, no freedom of choice, no tragedy. For a modern reader the late nineteenth-century account by the Yoruba historian, Rev. Samuel Johnson, of the royal funerals and coronations of his people evokes an alien world, governed by a magical hierarchy of nature, where human life is afforded no sanctity, and where the awesomeness of death is routinely employed to add solemnity to public occasions. On the entry of the new king into his palace, for instance: "they offer in sacrifice a snail, a tortoise, an armadillo, a field mouse, a large cat, a toad, a tadpole, a pigeon, a fowl, a ram, a cow, a horse, a man and a woman, the last two being buried at the threshold of the opening" (Johnson 45). (In "the early times," Johnson also tells us, "the new king would eat the heart of his predecessor on his accession" [43].) Personal names themselves may indicate from birth the sacrificial role of their possessor. The name "King's Horseman" (Ona-Olokun-Esin), for instance, designates a man whose func-

tion in life is to accompany the Alafin of Oyo into the next world when he dies (56). That is his reason for living. He has no other option. It is this total denial of "Western individualism" which makes human sacrifice fascinating to the Western writer, either as symbol of the abyss which lies beneath civilization (Conrad), or as expression of an alternative communalism (Lawrence).

When we turn to the first generation of African imaginative writers to treat this topic, we find a similar spectrum of attitudes to that shown by European writers, though sometimes with new and more intimate perspectives. At one extreme there are those enlightened writers who, like Okot p'Bitek, will have no truck whatsoever with metaphysics, whether "primitive" or sophisticatedly romantic: "I am neither a Christian nor a pagan. I do not believe in gods or spirits. I do not believe in witchcraft or supernatural forces. Heaven and hell do not make sense to me; and for me metaphysical statements are nonsense" (qtd. in Goodwin 171). Translating this scepticism into imaginative form Bessie Head offers a strictly modern, enlightened perspective on the custom. In her short stories, "ritual murder," as she bluntly calls it, appears simply as a manifestation of one of the "insane beliefs of a primitive society," which her characters are struggling to reject (Head 85). In her deft little moral tale "Jacob: The Story of a Faith-Healing Priest," in *The Collector of Treasures* (1977), the sacrificial custom is shown, quite unromantically, in the service of power-lust and superstition. The portrayal of the immoral religious hypocrite Lebojang is neatly completed by the revelation on the final page that he is engaged in sacrificing young children in order to increase his clients' power and wealth by magic:

They arrested the three men with the cut up parts of a dead child in their hands. This was the first time that the doers of these evil deeds had been caught in the act. Often the mutilated bodies were found but the murderers were seldom caught.

The position was desperate. The chief and witch-doctor immediately turned state witness and shifted the blame to Lebojang. The witch-doctor was so obliging as to point out to the authorities the graves of twenty other victims to fix the case against Lebojang. They said they did this sort of murder to make potions for the cattle of rich men, like the chief, to increase. Lebojang could even make rain. Lebojang's potions had long been recommended as the

best in the land. He had been making these potions and killing men, women, and children for twenty years. He had also been the priest of a Christian church with a big blue cross down the back of his cloak.

Lebojang was sentenced to death. (36)

In Head's stark moral universe there is no spiritual mystery in human sacrifice, no profound metaphysical evil, no intimation of cosmic harmony. She treats human sacrifice as a current social problem, a crime properly to be dealt with by the police.

In contrast to Head, John Pepper Clark offers an easygoing, almost pantomimic treatment of sacrifice in *Ozidi* (1966). The raucous atrocities of this play recall oddly the comic gusto of Frank Hives. And as in Hives, "sacrifice" carries no spiritual dimension, being merely a casual element in the gothic bloodthirstiness of the play. The men of Orua offer Ozidi's severed head to his brother as "the ultimate tribute . . . a royal dish" (Clark 75), and later Ozidi's son turns his sword on a woman who resists his advances, exclaiming "I must make / Sacrifice to my shrine you sought to defile" (111). Clark's ogres and villains are reminiscent of those of the Brothers Grimm and derive from a universal folklore common to all cultures. The "sacrifices" in *Ozidi* are distinctly superstitious rather than religious.

Other treatments of sacrifice by black writers, however, attempt a more complex perspective, incorporating human sacrifice into the ongoing postcolonial revision of history by which African writers assert that their past was not "one long night of savagery from which the first Europeans acting on God's behalf delivered them" (Achebe 1973, 4). In the majority of such treatments human sacrifice is presented with historical, anthropological understanding as a "normal," accepted social practice, avoiding the moralizing and lurid exoticism of the Europeans. This was, indeed, the approach of the Rev. Samuel Johnson in his pioneering historical work. The oft-cited episode of Ikemefuna, the hostage whose life is required by the gods in Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* (1958), shows a careful mixture of psychological insight and dispassionate historical distance. Achebe's tone conveys both sympathetic involvement with the culture he is describing and detachment from its customs. Unlike Lawrence he shows no inclination to accept the meta-

physical premises of sacrifice, but is neither embarrassed nor defensive about this custom of his grandfathers. He seeks to understand it from inside. We are led to empathize with Okonkwo's attitudes and those of his tribe, to the point that we appreciate the communal piety of an action which Hives and Head would simply dismiss as barbarism, or "ritual murder." But, significantly, Achebe also shows a half-formulated puzzlement and unease about such practices in the minds of some of the Umuofians. The practice is seen as inherently unstable and questionable. The village elder, Obierika, is troubled by Ikemefuna's death, and this human sacrifice plays its part in the eventual conversion to Christianity of Ikemefuna's adoptive brother, Nwoye.

Buchi Emecheta's description of the burial of a slave girl in her mistress's grave in *The Joys of Motherhood* (1979) offers a variant of Achebe's treatment from a specifically female, even feminist, perspective. As in *Things Fall Apart*, the custom is neither romanticized nor explicitly condemned. But Emecheta's sense of the sexual and social injustice so often embodied in the sacrificial custom precludes emotional detachment. Like Achebe she sceptically suggests that, even in a communal context, individual emotions and moral implications will complicate the attitudes of the participants. Those groups who so often supply the victims of such sacrifice, women and slaves, for instance, will not view it favourably:

In the evening it was time to put Agunwa in her grave. All the things that she would need in her after-life were gathered and arranged in her wooden coffin which was made of the best mahogany Agbadi could find. Then her personal slave was ceremoniously called in a loud voice by the medicine man: she must be laid inside the grave first. A good slave was supposed to jump into the grave willingly, happy to accompany her mistress; but this young and beautiful woman did not wish to die yet. She kept begging for her life, much to the annoyance of many of the men standing around. The women stood far off for this was a custom they found revolting. The poor slave was pushed into the shallow grave, but she struggled out, fighting and pleading, appealing to her owner Agbadi.

Then Agbadi's eldest son cried in anger: "So my mother does not even deserve a decent burial? Now we are not to send her slave down with her, just because the girl is beautiful? So saying, he gave

the woman a sharp blow with the head of the cutlass he was carrying. "Go down like a good slave!" he shouted.

"Stop that at once!" Agbadi roared, limping up to his son. "What do you call this, bravery? You make my stomach turn."

(Emecheta 23)

Wole Soyinka is unique among African writers in the ahistorical imaginative commitment which he gives to the motif of human sacrifice in his work. In *The Strong Breed* (1964), *The Bacchae of Euripides* (1973), and *Death and the King's Horseman* (1975) he challenges European images of barbarism, and asserts through the ritual of human sacrifice a communal interrelationship between the individual and society, different from that of the individualistic "West." In this respect he is closer to the romantic Lawrence than the dispassionate Achebe or Emecheta. In place of Lawrence's Mexican Indian blood-consciousness Soyinka adopts an organicist myth of communalism or negritude. With characteristic metaphorical adventurousness and provocation Soyinka attempts in these three plays to rescue and rehabilitate this most irreducible symbol of primitivism. In the boldest and most coherent of them, *Death and the King's Horseman*, a particular historical sacrifice, which took place within living memory, becomes the central symbol of the metaphysical "universe of the Yoruba mind" (Soyinka 1975, 7). I have already dealt with this play fully elsewhere (Booth 1988), so shall confine my remarks here to the first two plays: *The Strong Breed* in which the young Soyinka attempted to fashion out of the sacrificial custom the framework of a conventional tragedy of moral choice, and the much later and more developed *Bacchae of Euripides*, which imposes an organicist communalism on the moral and psychological complexities of the Greek original.

*The Strong Breed*, Soyinka's first essay on this topic, shows the playwright struggling to find a structure of sacrificial custom which will allow his victim-protagonist to develop tragic stature. This problem remains a fundamental difficulty in the subsequent plays. A human sacrifice which truly asserts the communal unity of society must involve a willing victim harmoniously subordinated to the will of the people. Such a character could scarcely be of more than dispassionate, anthropological interest to a modern audience.



Consequently, in order to create dramatic suspense and to confront his protagonist with the moral choices which are the stuff of theatrical action, Soyinka has to resort to a mystification. The form of sacrifice depicted is factitious and oddly complicated. Eman, we gather, is destined by custom, like his ancestors, to become a scapegoat, or "carrier" of the community's sins. Already Eman's father, wearing the prescribed boat headdress, has borne these sins down "to the river . . . for over twenty years" (Soyinka 1973, 133). Although Eman's father has been ritually chased by his neighbours "year after year," he has not yet been killed. It seems then that we are dealing with a merely symbolic form of sacrifice in which the victim is customarily allowed to escape. Eventually, however (it is hinted), the time will come when he must finally die in the ritual. This doubt as to when, or even if Eman will inherit the sacrificial role from his father, provides a basic element of suspense in the play.

It does not, however, provide any element of moral choice or ambiguity, since, as a member of the strong breed, Eman is quite willing and prepared to inherit his preordained scapegoat role. In order to provide the element of moral choice Soyinka is forced to complicate the sacrificial pattern still further. Eman is in exile among a people whose sacrificial practices are similar to those of his own people, but also different. Like Eman's people, Oroge's do not customarily kill their victim, but merely drive him out into the bush, though in the case of such defenceless and half-witted victims as Ifada, one may presume that this is equivalent to a death sentence. Oroge explains: "no carrier may return to the village. If he does, the people will stone him to death" (Soyinka 1973, 129). This seems to contrast with the custom of Eman's people, since his father *has* (presumably) been allowed to return to the village each year after his ritual pursuit. There seems to be a significant contrast here between the two customs, although this is not fully clear. A more important difference, however, and one which is central to the play's theme, is that Oroge's people always choose a defenceless stranger as their scapegoat, rather than a member of their own community. Their custom thus seems more cowardly and less morally respectable than that of Eman's people.

The moral confrontation between the different forms of sacrifice provides the dramatic dynamic of the play:

EMAN: Yes. But why did you pick on a helpless boy. Obviously he is not willing.

JAGUNA: What is the man talking about? Ifada is a godsend. Does he have to be willing? . . .

EMAN: A village which cannot produce its own carrier contains no men. . . . Does it really have meaning to use one as unwillingly as that? (128-29)

Like the Christian martyr, or like Christ himself, the scapegoats in Eman's society embrace their sacrificial role voluntarily. The communal totalitarianism of *human* sacrifice thus appears (with a certain philosophical incoherence) as a kind of *self*-sacrifice — a matter of personal morality and choice. The gods may require a victim according to absolute natural law, and this victim may be destined to his fate from birth. But he must nonetheless be "willing." The possibility that the inheritor of the scapegoat role might use his freedom of choice to evade death is not considered. Presumably this would be "weak" and shameful. Eman's father and Eman himself accept their version of the custom unquestioningly, and clearly they are meant to hold our sympathy.

But there is a confusing ambiguity here at the heart of the play. The powerful sense of moral disgust at its conclusion must surely suggest to some spectators that any form of ritual which ends in the actual death of the victim is to be condemned. But is this the playwright's intention? Or is the death of the (willing) victim acceptable, or even necessary, in some cases? Eman's father seems to have resigned himself to his death on his last journey to the river, while Jaguna suggests that the fact that Eman has run away before he has been "prepared" by Oroge, has necessitated an extreme purification in that case also: "But things have taken a bad turn. It is no longer enough to drive him past every house. There is too much contamination about already" (135). Soyinka himself seems not to have fully worked out his own attitude here, and the play becomes somewhat incoherent. It is, for instance, Jaguna, the man who originated the idea of killing the victim, who is subsequently most indignant at the barbarity of the death:

JAGUNA: I am sick to the heart of the cowardice I have seen tonight.

OROGE: That is the nature of men.

JAGUNA: Then it is a sorry world we live in. We did it for them. It was all for their own common good. What did it benefit me whether the man lived or died? But did you see them? (146)

Is it simply the cruel gusto of the killers which shocks Jaguna, or is it the killing itself? Was it necessary, in terms of the ritual, to kill Eman in this case, or was it a matter of moral choice on the part of the villagers whether they become "murderers" (135) or not? The audience is not given enough evidence to decide.

This inconclusiveness has the unfortunate effect of making the play's whole debate on sacrifice seem artificial and muffled. The real moral issue at its centre must surely concern the religious legitimacy of killing human scapegoats at all (though it would be difficult to imagine that a modern audience could take such a debate seriously). Instead, Soyinka leaves us with a complicated argument about the specific degree of barbarity involved in one particular sacrifice. Worse still, the ultimate "mission" of the strong breed remains throughout the play insubstantial and unexamined, not only in philosophical, but also in dramatic terms. Quite simply, it is difficult to believe that anyone as articulate and sophisticated as Eman could actually believe in the metaphysical necessity for actual, non-metaphorical scapegoating or human sacrifice. And in the absence of the historical and moral contextualization which marks Johnson's, Achebe's, and Emecheta's treatment of sacrifice, the audience is left merely puzzled by this strange confusion of cultural levels. More simply, the people on whose behalf this sacrifice is being made are not presented to us in any human depth, and the four characters we are shown: Jaguna, Oroge, Sunma, the girl, are so unremittingly selfish and sordid that it is difficult to give one's imaginative assent to any sacrifice made on their behalf.

Some spectators may find a further source of dissatisfaction in the play's strident assertions of masculinity. The most vigorous on-stage dramatic embodiment of the "strength" of the "strong breed" is indeed the rejection of "women" and "womanish" behaviour. As Eman's father remarks, Nature itself vindicates this

scheme of things by ensuring that the mothers of "the strong breed" always die in giving birth to them. "No woman survives the bearing of the strong ones" (133). It seems then that those women who are courageous or stupid enough to marry into the "strong breed" bear an even more onerous and ungrateful sacrificial burden than their menfolk. However, there is no acknowledgement of this fact in the play. In one of the flashbacks the boy Eman remarks contemptuously to Omae that he is learning in his circumcision ceremony "[n]othing any woman can understand." And when she continues to pester him he bursts out: "Don't you see, I am becoming a man" (137-38). The death of Omae, which occurs while she is giving birth to another future "carrier," is viewed not as a tragedy for her, but as a further testing of her husband, Eman, and a strengthening of the mystique of his role. Later Eman remains unmoved when Sunma (admittedly a selfish and worthless character) declares "you have tonight totally destroyed my life" (123). Any spectator of the play who is irritated by this kind of thing is likely to be unimpressed by the highfalutin' rhetoric with which Eman puts Sunma in her place and asserts his stern destiny: "Let me continue a stranger — especially to you. Those who have much to give fulfil themselves only in total loneliness. . . . I know I find consummation only when I have spent myself for a total stranger" (125).

Soyinka's *The Bacchae of Euripides*, published almost a decade later than *The Strong Breed*, shows a considerable advance in both thematic and dramatic terms. Its unusual form — an expanded translation of an ancient Greek play — serves to universalize the sacrificial theme, subsuming the modern antithesis between Europe and Africa into the ancient conflict between "Eastern" mysticism and Hellenic reason. Soyinka reproduces the dramatic structure and ambiguities of the Greek original virtually intact. In Euripides' version Pentheus can be seen as an impious blasphemer justly punished by Dionysus, or alternatively as a tragic figure unable to hold the line against the tide of anarchy which the new god represents. His fate can be seen in political terms, as an exploration of the unstable balance in society between order and licence, control and freedom. He can also be interpreted in psychological terms, as a severely repressed man, unwilling to "let

go" and accept the healthy, uninhibited freedom of the maenadic women. There is an awesome poetic justice about Dionysus' cruel trick of making him dress up as a woman before he is humiliated and then torn to pieces by his mother. By faithfully reproducing Euripides' narrative and the sequence of his speeches Soyinka's play largely preserves these thematic complexities.

However, the ultimate impact of Soyinka's play is significantly different from that of Euripides'. In some respects it is a "modernized" version, its style and texture being updated to make it seem relevant to a modern audience. For instance, the playwright directs that his bacchic chants should extract "the emotional colour and temperature of a European pop scene without degenerating into that tawdry commercial manipulation of teenage mindlessness" (Soyinka 1973, 248). The play's tone also has a very modern (even "postmodernist") unpredictability about it, modulating abruptly from ecstatic elevation to farcical pantomime. In the midst of the sacrificial ritual, for instance, Kadmos and Tiresias become caught up in a flippant pun between "fawnskin" and "foreskin," which leads them to a discussion of whether or not Dionysos is circumcised (252). Later Kadmos again plays for easy laughs when he proudly produces the "first collapsible thyrsus," providing the opportunity for yet more off-colour *double-entendres* (254-55).

The most substantial updating of the ancient original, however, is its translation of the political element of the original into the terms of Marxist class-analysis. It might at first sight seem difficult to reconcile this secular, political approach with the sacrificial theology of the central action. Nevertheless, at the beginning of the play, at least, Soyinka succeeds in boldly combining the two elements, imparting a convincing class dimension to the scapegoat ritual. The annual victim, who is lashed through the town carrying the sins of the people (and is occasionally killed), is always a slave, and the rebellious Slave Leader seeks to rouse the resentment of his fellow-slaves over this injustice: "Why us? Why always us? . . . Let those who profit bear the burden of the old year dying" (237). When the god Dionysos appears and announces himself, the Leader assumes that he has come to restore social justice and introduce "the new order" (239). Apparently Nature itself has

taken sides with the “dispossessed” against the tyranny of the royal house of Kadmos:

We are no longer alone —  
 Slaves, helots, the near and distant dispossessed!  
 This master race, this much vaunted dragon spawn  
 Have met their match. Nature has joined forces with us. (240)

This suggestion of political revolution is picked up several times later in the play. Tiresias, for instance, explains that he has taken the slave-victim’s place in order to defuse the discontent of the lower orders and prevent a revolt: “well, let’s just say the situation is touch and go. If one more slave had been killed at the cleansing rites, or sacrificed to that insatiable altar of nation-building . . .” (242). The hint of third-world, postcolonial jargon here suggests that Soyinka may view Pentheus as a kind of Kongi, an autocratic ruler in a newly-established state. Following through this logic it is possible to see the sacrifice of King Pentheus in place of the customary slave as a symbol of third-world political revolution.

Ultimately, however, this interpretation does not carry imaginative conviction. The political impetus is not sustained. The slaves do not possess a coherent political programme, and Dionysos is not a revolutionary in any sense which Marx or Fanon would recognize. The god, whose smooth, white hands show that he has “never done a day’s work in the fields” (271), turns out after all to be no champion of the workers. The “new order” which he provides is a matter of purified consciousness and transcendence, rather than coherent social reorganization. He offers a freedom to worship him, not to vote or participate in politics. As Tiresias says: “He has broken the barrier of age, the barrier of sex or slave and master. It is the will of Dionysos that no one be excluded from his worship” (255). The Dionysiac rites expand consciousness in a manner which recalls a trip on hallucinogenic drugs: “When he invades the mind / Reason is put to sleep. He frees the mind / Expands and fills it with uplifting visions. / Flesh is transcended” (260). Pentheus’ death comes as an emotional and spiritual climax to the play, not a political one.

Indeed, in its religious dimension Soyinka’s version seems to be the very opposite of a modernization of Euripides’ play. In the Acknowledgements, for instance, he mentions that he has based

some of the praise chants on his own *Idanre*, "a Passion poem of Ogun" (Soyinka 1973, 234). The redemptive action of this Yoruba god, who braved "the transitional gulf" in order to re-establish the communion of men and gods, has long been at the heart of Soyinka's Yoruba theology (see Soyinka 1976, 145). Here he terms Ogun "the elder brother to Dionysus" (Soyinka 1973, 234). In his version of Pentheus' death as a human sacrifice made to Ogun/Dionysus in order to ensure seasonal renewal and the harmony of nature, Soyinka's play does indeed seem to be "older," more atavistic than that of the Greek playwright. Though Euripides' original play is also ultimately based on an ancient rite of human sacrifice, his attitude towards the gods possesses a characteristic Greek scepticism and ambiguity. Like Aeschylus before him, he conceives of the gods as amoral, awe-inspiring, inhuman. Agamemnon sacrifices his daughter, Iphigenia, in order to obtain a favourable wind to speed him to the war with Troy. The gods accept his sacrifice, and the wind rises. However, the chorus denies that the gods approve of Agamemnon's action, despite their favourable response. Indeed, it is suggested that while they cannot refuse a request so reinforced with human blood, they can still condemn the action of spilling that blood. They impose upon Agamemnon a pitilessly dialectical and dispassionate "justice": "The scale of Justice falls in equity: /The killer will be killed" (Aeschylus 50-51).

Similarly in Euripides' play, Pentheus may seem to deserve punishment for standing against a god, but Dionysus' capricious revenge on him evokes awe, fear, submission, even resentment, rather than glad devotion. The god inexorably imposes his power on the deluded Pentheus, cruelly congratulating him on his coming sacrificial death on behalf of the people: "You alone suffer for the whole city — you alone; and the struggle that awaits you is your destined ordeal" (Euripides 212). At this point in his version of the play Soyinka significantly turns from the moving tragedy of Pentheus' fate to elaborate the theology of sacrificial renewal:

DIONYSOS: Yes, you alone  
 Make sacrifices for your people, you alone.  
 The role belongs to a king. Like those gods, who yearly  
 Must be rent to spring anew. . . . (293)

Soyinka's Dionysos suggests that Pentheus' scapegoat role is necessary for the renewal of the seasons. As Norma Bishop says, Euripides' "god of dichotomies" is transformed here into "a god of redemptive sacrifice" (78). The new subtitle of the play, "A Communion Rite," indicates the religious commitment of Soyinka's version. In Soyinka's play, Pentheus is not only, as in the original, punished for his blasphemy, as an awesome, intimidating lesson to humankind. His blood is shed in sacrifice, in order to restore natural harmony. Like Yahweh in the story of Abraham and Isaac, Soyinka's Dionysos demands propitiation. But unlike Yahweh, he is not satisfied with a merely symbolic substitute.

By the time he came to write *The Bacchae of Euripides*, the playwright, it seems, was becoming dissatisfied with the evasions and obfuscations to which he had resorted in *The Strong Breed*. Though he toys at the beginning of the play with the idea of a symbolic, non-lethal form of sacrifice, his imagination is clearly drawn to the coherence and hard-core consistency of the real thing. At first the role of the victim in the fertility ritual seems to be that of a symbolic scapegoat only. But the herdsman is impatient with the Leader's liberal squeamishness. Half-measures and symbolism are not sufficient propitiation of the gods, he declares:

LEADER: . . . Suppose the old man dies?

HERDSMAN: We all have to die sometime.

LEADER: Flogged to death? In the name of some unspeakable rites?

HERDSMAN: Someone must cleanse the new year of the rot of the old, or the world will die. Have you ever known famine? Real famine? (237)

Despite the liberal rhetoric of the Leader ("unspeakable rites") the direction of the argument is clear enough.

Characteristically, however, Soyinka keeps his readers guessing for some time; indeed it may be that he is hesitating himself, and as in *The Strong Breed*, is undecided about his own meaning. Tiresias complains to those flogging him: "Can't you bastards ever tell the difference between ritual and reality . . . Symbolic flogging, that is what I keep trying to drum into your thick heads" (241). This is a symbolic ritual which only occasionally reverts to actual bloodshed when the enthusiasm or cruelty of the participants gets



out of hand. Tiresias does not, however, question the metaphysical necessity for this kind of sacrificial renewal. As in the earlier play, it is only the degree of sacrifice required, and the proper kind of victim, which are in question:

DIONYSOS: Were you really in trouble?

TIRESIAS: I was. One can never tell how far the brutes will go.

DIONYSOS: But what made the high priest of Thebes elect to play flagellant?

TIRESIAS: The city must be cleansed. Filth, pollution, cruelties, secret abominations — a whole year's accumulation.

DIONYSOS: Why you? Are you short of lunatics, criminals, or slaves? (242)

By the end of the play, however, the doubts seem to have been resolved. Symbol is reduced to reality, and Tiresias himself has been persuaded that the gods are not satisfied with symbolic substitutions. Real sacrificial bloodshed is, after all, sometimes required: "Perhaps . . . perhaps our life-sustaining earth / Demands . . . a little more . . . sometimes, a more / Than token offering for her own needful renewal" (306). Like Elesin in *Death and the King's Horseman*, the King of Thebes must die to secure cosmic harmony. Soyinka has imposed upon the moral and psychological complexities of his Greek original a kind of Yoruba religious fundamentalism.

James Gibbs has claimed to detect moral detachment in Soyinka's treatments of human sacrifice: "Soyinka does not conceal the existence of human sacrifice in Africa" he says, "but he contextualises it and shows that other means of purification exist" (97-98). This is a puzzling judgement. The setting of *The Strong Breed* is abstract and universal, and despite its debate on the different forms of scapegoating, the moral and philosophical justification of sacrifice is not questioned. *The Bacchae of Euripides* depicts a Yoruba-ized version of ancient Greece, and ultimately suggests that the earth in the form of Ogun/Dionysus does require the sacrificial shedding of human blood. Again, the "Author's Note" which prefaces *Death and the King's Horseman* claims that the play is not concerned with any historically contextualized "clash of cultures," and insists that the theme can only be properly

realized "through an evocation of music from the abyss of transition" (Soyinka 1975, 7-8). It seems then that, contrary to what Gibbs says, Soyinka is concerned precisely to decontextualize and dehistoricize the practice of human sacrifice, and progressively rejects alternative metaphorical, secular or political means of "purification." Among African writers who treat this subject his work remains the exotic, perverse, romantic exception.

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