

Ritual and Revolution: Soyinka's Dramatic Theory

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IN A NOTE to the director of his adaptation of *The Bacchae*, quoted in his collected essays *Art, Dialogue and Outrage*, Wole Soyinka wrote: "Ritual equates the divine (superhuman) dimension with the communal will, fusing the social with the spiritual" (71). These terms are, in fact, dramatically equitable only through the rather artificial link between religious ecstasy and political revolution in this particular play. Yet the idea of ritual (notably, the ritual of transition) as the meeting point of divine and human, spiritual and social, dominates Soyinka's metaphysical theory, his general view of man, and the concept of tragic drama which he extrapolates — a distillation of essences rather than a derivation of particulars — from the consecrated component of cultic "Mysterics" of Ogun rites. Ogun, the pathfinder deity who bridged the abyss between gods and men, is himself the god of transition, the archetypal crosser of boundaries; and Soyinka, in his highly personal reading of Yoruba myth and ritual in *Myth, Literature and the African World*, finds something of him in all dangerous, exploratory passages, in all crises of change and confrontation, or wherever there is transition from one dimension of reality to another, whether of nations at the brink of creation or of individuals at the edge of a personal unknown: "stripped of excrescences," man is taken over by "transitional memory" and "intimations rack him of that intense parallel of his progress through the gulf of transition" (149). *In extremis*, he is again Ogun; his life, transition. In the process, Ogun becomes the embodiment of that principle of complementarity according to which, in the Yoruba universe, things generate the energy to embrace their opposites and, through the dynamic of the ritual process, carry them across the gaps in the continuum that separate the living and the unborn,

and the human and the spirit communities. Ogun represents “the complete cycle of destruction and creativity” (Morell 121). Thus, even his own radical cycle-breaking activities are but a stage in a cosmic cyclic process of disruption and restitution, making him both challenger and part of the matrix of forces that he challenges, and Soyinka can claim that, in the Ogunian context, “acting is therefore a contradiction of the tragic spirit, yet it is also its complement” (*Myth* 146).

Soyinka’s special idiosyncratic input into Yoruba mythology’s structure of complementarities, however, is his combination of his adopted deity with Obatala, the god who is “the embodiment of the suffering spirit of man . . . of the redemptive qualities of endurance and martyrdom” (*Myth* 152). Soyinka conjoins the separate legends of Obatala’s confinement and Ogun’s wars and transitional crossings in such a way that Ogun’s energy is made to issue out of Obatala’s captive inertia and is then reabsorbed into his harmony (a pattern repeated in the release of Dionysos’ energy from Pentheus’s imprisonment in *The Bacchae* and of Olunde’s from Elesin’s in *Death and the King’s Horseman*). “With the former [Obatala] immobilised, Ogun comes into his own and enjoys full ascendancy” (*Myth* 19). Ogun’s erratic dynamism is triggered by his opposite number’s passivity and the harmony represented by Obatala can be achieved only after Ogun’s task of combative will and the passage of the gods through the transitional gulf, which therefore become prerequisites for Obatala’s serenity (*Myth* 145-46). “Passion” in the Ogun Mysteries, claims Soyinka, is “released into quietist wisdom by a ritual exorcism of demonic energies” (*Myth* 157). There are always further alternating phases of hubristic infraction and reparation, disturbance and conciliation, for it is their antithetical interflow that provides the charge of transitional energy which keeps the Yoruba universe in motion, and consequently there is never any final, absolute affirmation of the confrontational impulse over the human tendency towards complacency and inertia. Rather, the prevailing pattern in Soyinka’s ritual dramas is one of rebellious chaos and disintegration, represented by Ogun, repeatedly accommodated by but never wholly resolved into the quiescent harmony and wisdom represented by Obatala. Subsequently some critics, such as Ann B. Davis,

have stressed the Ogun element and regarded Soyinka's dramatic ideas as stimulants of a revolutionary consciousness while others, notably Andrew Gurr, have favored the Obatalan complement and viewed them as registers of fatalistic acceptance and resignation after the fashion of European tragedy.

Refracted across the terrain of drama through the prism of ritual, Soyinka's metaphysics are prone to paradox. The Yoruba "tragic" form which he extrudes from ritual is, translated into Greek terms, Promethean rather than Olympian: it prefers release from despair, through an act of will that overcomes the trauma of severance and reunites man with his divine essence, to passive endurance at the hands of remote and incomprehensible gods. Though Soyinka insists that his "epilogue of reassemblage does not nullify the tragic experience" (qtd. in Katrak 19), Ogun's emergence from his own annihilations forms a post-tragic coda to the cosmic bridging act re-enacted in rituals of transitional crossing, and the fact that these rites are performed on behalf and for the benefit of the community makes for important teleological differences from Western tragic models. In the calamitous, event-ended Shakespearean tragic model the closing notes of communal restoration and redemption are often no more than perfunctory sops to the idea of social continuance and conventional notions of justice, howled out by the prevailing desolation, but pulling against these is a subtextual undertow of vegetation motifs, slain gods, resurrected nature, and other ritual trappings of a lost organic mythology. In Yoruba ritual drama, these sacrificial motifs are not subdued secondary resonances but powerful primary encodings: suffering must be ritually performed in order that prosperity be restored to the community, fertility to the earth, and the continuum of life maintained, and it is what the community makes of the protagonist's martyrdom which immediately turns the defeated challenger and failed revolutionary into a tragic hero. Soyinka in a 1975 interview compressed both into the unitary concept of the sacrificial revolutionary, remarking that "inherent in all struggle on behalf of society is always the element of self-sacrifice" ("Interview" 37). Thus it has been observed that if there are Western equivalents of the Ogun-Obatala paradigm, they are to be found in the tragic repertoire's more affirmative and progressive struc-

tures: notably, those unorthodox, open-ended "tragedies of reconciliation," *The Eumenides* and *Oedipus at Colonus*, where the closing focus switches to the continuing community and the land blessed by the hero's death (Katrak 34-35). In the Yoruba model it matters less whether the protagonist's disintegration is followed by a self-willed reassemblage or by death, or whether he does or does not achieve self-knowledge (the Professor and Pentheus do not), than that his ordeal injects a new strength into the communal life-blood, either by engendering new levels of awareness in sudden acts of collective self-apprehension or by his continuing service as an exemplary or cautionary model (Katrak 19-20, 31-44). The ritual action does not end with the life of the hero but entails a beneficial follow-on effect for the community more pervasive than in the Western individualist tragic tradition.

At the same time, however, the very fact that this post-tragic aftermath commonly takes the form of the hero's apotheosis into communal figurehead, abstract moral principle, legendary hero or mythic archetype has suggested to some that the real subject of Soyinka's ritual drama is religious salvation, conceived in terms of divine-comedy metaphysics, rather than the "social regeneration" and "revolutionary challenge" of which he speaks so much in his dramatic theory (Nkosi 190). There is nowhere, argue Soyinka's detractors, any analytic portrait of the social canvas on which the mythic aspiration is predicated (Amuta 111). The direct equation of the communal with the cosmic will through the medium of ritual allows for no midway sociopolitical dimension and no specification of the social dynamic by which the Ogunian actor-celebrant, in whom the social will is invested, breaches the *chthonic* realm and, by reconstituting his own psyche, strengthens that of the entire community. Moreover, the material benefits that accrue to society from protagonal trauma in Soyinka's plays are always left in some doubt and it is usually the suffering itself which is most powerfully conveyed. Indeed, the tendency of his holistic, irreducible metaphysic, as demonstrated by his comments on the genetic doom enshrouding Henrik Ibsen's *Ghosts*, is to absorb the curative, changeful forces of history into the numen of fate, assimilating the remediable into the "tragic" realm of the irremediable instead of the other way round (*Myth* 46-49).

The Ogun-Obatala cycle of Soyinka's informing metaphysic is a volatile, endlessly alternating continuum in which the joy of Obatalan resolution is always about to be plunged back into turmoil by Ogun. Yet any cyclic order, even one that contains disturbance and is capable of self-violation, expresses a static world-view consistent with that required by tragedy and, as Gurr and others have noted, Soyinka has a theoretical tendency in "The Fourth Stage" to see Ogun's disruptions merely as a prelude to returning harmony and to find an ultimate resolution in Obatala's quietist calm (142-44). This complacent fatalistic wisdom, insofar as it explains why everything is eternally the way it is (a variant on justifying the ways of god to men), can be used to rationalize inertia in a static, unalterable cosmos; it is very close to the enervating, paralyzing knowledge of Hamlet which seeks to understand the world as an alternative to changing it and so becomes a substitute for, instead of a spur to, action. Paradoxically, Soyinka describes the transitional exploits of Ogun's aggressive combative will in predominantly passive verbal constructions — he is "reabsorbed within Universal Oneness" and "surrenders his individuation" — and the semantics of cognition — he "immerses himself" in "the Unconscious" to "understand its nature" and "emerge wiser" — place the emphasis not on will and deed but on the purely intellectual fruits of the experience (*Myth* 153). Soyinka is not unaware of the problem: "It is true that to understand, to understand profoundly, is to be unnerved, deprived of the will to act. . . . Suffering hones the psyche to a finely self-annihilating perceptiveness and renders further action futile and, above all, lacking in dignity. And what has the struggle of the tragic hero been, after all, but an effort to maintain that innate concept of dignity which impels to action only to that degree in which the hero possesses a true nobility of spirit?" (*Myth* 154). It remains to ask how this "struggle" is finally any different from the exemplary endurance, stoic resignation, and Christian patience advocated by a variety of Western tragic forms, and the "action" it "impels" any more than the cultivation of nobility and dignity as ends in themselves, as modes of self-realization, without reference to the world acted upon. Soyinka has resorted to similar semantic shifts and subterfuges in his defence of his plays against charges of tragic

pessimism levelled by Femi Osofisan and others: "There is the apparent stasis as symbolized in Obatala's serenity, contradicted and acted upon when events demand by the revolutionary agent Ogun. The action is cyclic, yes, but is it claimed anywhere that society returns precisely to its original phase?" (*Art* 122). We seem for a moment to be in the presence of an evolutionary spiral rather than a circle but then it is not made clear exactly where society does go or what terms it is changeable in. Soyinka next asserts his belief "that all socio-political systems believe in the 'final resolution of things' and that many facets of experience in the process of catalysing the status quo into a new level of society are understandable and explicable through a recourse to myth," and proceeds to take up Osofisan's question of whether "the necessary culmination in Obatala harmony and serenity [can] vitalize society or sharpen its awareness" (*Art* 123). This may be fine as abstract metaphysic but it is hard to pin down what "catalysing" or activating a static entity such as a preexisting order of value amounts to in practical terms or how achieved states like harmony and serenity, or a "culmination" in them, can logically "vitalize." The vague rhetoric of phrases like "a new level of society" persuades that what Soyinka may really have in mind here are changing levels of awareness, in which case the "final resolution of things" is, inevitably, back into the changing of the consciousness of reality, not of reality itself. We are informed that Ogun's acting "releases man from a totally destructive despair," but what appears to issue from that despair to bridge "the infernal gulf" is not changeful action but "visionary hopes" in the shape of the imaginative projections and rationalizations of myth (*Myth* 146).

Some commentators have found this "safety valve" or opiate element of the tragic world-view, more anodyne than antidote, to be consistent with ritual structures. Ritual, claims Osofisan, is inherently change-resistant in its capacity for sublimating disaster (qtd. in *Art* 123), and by containing rebellion within its own purely ceremonial limits, argues Richard Priebe, ritual precludes the possibility of actual revolution. Ritual liminars like the Ogun celebrant, says Priebe, simultaneously filter new energy into society and protectively cushion society from its dangers. The dynamic equilibrium, in this view, seems to make for a rigid stasis (Priebe

1973, 63; 1976, 105). Ann Davis (148-54) takes a contrary view and argues that, in the dramatic context, Soyinka invests ritual with revolutionary potential. Ritual, however, is a confusing term in Soyinka's theoretical writings because its meaning shifts as it moves between contexts, particularly those of ceremonial and stage drama. For this reason it is unwise to extrapolate a coherent dramatic theory of ritual from ad hoc, uncomplementary sources such as "The Fourth Stage" essay, the lectures in *Myth, Literature and the African World*, and Soyinka's 1975 lecture at the University of Washington, "Drama and the Revolutionary Ideal,"¹ in which he asserts that drama is by its very nature a "revolutionary medium" and benefits from ritual infusions (*Art* 52). Davis has attempted this ambitious and extremely difficult task but, even so, partly concedes that there are crucial contextual differences between a highly effective, cerebral course of lectures on African culture delivered to unreceptive Cambridge academics and an address to a predominantly black audience in search of authentic dramatic idioms compatible with the cause of black American revolution (though Soyinka offers the latter no easy panaceas). In the Cambridge lectures "ritual" carries primarily ceremonial meanings and refers specifically to the esoterics of Ogun Mysteries while in the Washington lecture, where "ritual is a language of the masses" and "a universal idiom" (*Art* 60), it is used in the neutral and generic sociological sense of any determining organic pattern of cultural behaviour. Indeed, in the latter context it is virtually interchangeable with "culture," though here this means culture at the grass-roots level, where ritual behaviour is not yet crusted over with habit but still spontaneously alive, and is not to be confused either with elitist "high culture" or with the cultic practices usually referred to under the name of "the ritual process." In this lecture, Soyinka resists the negative implications which ritual has acquired through its associations with tragedy but this does not justify the opposite notion that ritual is itself inherently revolutionary in nature, and therefore anti-tragic in spirit, which Davis appears to impute to him: "Drama is the most potentially revolutionary art form because it always potentially embodies the ritual form . . . the liberating social consciousness Soyinka believes results from the experience of drama may be thwarted if the author

rejects the use of ritual" (150). When the critic tests this idea against *The Bacchae*, observing that "Dionysian ritual is utilized by slaves to overthrow an oppressive social system" (151), she neglects to mention that the same system has used another ritual form (the carrier rite) to enslave them and that revolution thus proceeds not directly from ritual but from subversion, or at least a subversive reinterpretation, of ritual which places the two things essentially in opposition. The character and function of ritual, it would appear, are defined by the uses it is put to. If the theory does not hold up, it is most likely because it is basically a misrepresentation of Soyinka's argument in the Washington lecture.

Soyinka is much concerned in this lecture to demonstrate that a play's explanation of the way it is should be contained within its own terms. Its vision, he argues, should be validated by its own internal, cohesive, self-sustaining structures and not, as in the case of the Nkosi and Wesker plays he discusses, resolved by recourse to concepts external and alien to its own autonomous, self-apprehended world. Ritual is one such cohesive structure and provider of a play's inner formal consistency or integrity. What Soyinka argues is that a play's usefulness as a force for changing consciousness, as a social weapon, or indeed as a tool for any purpose, is blunted by false and unconvincing resolutions. If the Baraka and Caldwell plays which he discusses are more powerful than the Nkosi and Wesker ones, it is because their visions are more valid and this is in turn partly due to ritualistic structures which, because they ground the plays in a particular, integrated grass-roots milieu, help to liberate their "message" from their "matter" in a natural, unforced manner. This is not the same as saying that a play can have no revolutionary impact without a ritual input. The dramatist, says Soyinka, may "seek to integrate myth and ritual into the revolutionary potential of a play" (*Art* 53), and the phrasing is crucial: ritual is integrated in order to impart its own inner cohesive power to a play's liberative thrust. Yet Soyinka is able to admit that even a decadent Western play like *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?*, written from within its own stringent interior ritual dialectics, can have a more liberating effect on the personality than the hollow didacticism and spurious resolutions of a piece of revolutionary propaganda. Moreover, he is aware that ritual

can itself be used to impose false, willed resolutions upon plays (his own *Kongi's Harvest*, for example) and can have no efficacy when it does not take life from the whole range of sources tapped by its celebrants (as in the case of Professor's half-invented rite in *The Road*).

Much critical confusion hinges on terms like "ritual" and "revolution." The latter, in Soyinka's elastic concept, has no primary political sense — when he speaks of "revolution" he is not thinking in terms of class struggle or blood and barricades — but refers mainly to social regeneration as effected by dynamic reawakenings of consciousness. At other times, it seems to refer to no more than the routine periodic recharging of natural energies or, in its most literal usage, to the turning of the seasons in nature's cycle. In the one play that presents revolution through ritual, *The Bacchae*, the logic of events is more purely ritual than revolutionary, the revolution more religious than political (social upheaval is expressed in 1960s idioms of the liberated personal consciousness and release from inhibition); and it perhaps testifies to Soyinka's unease with "revolutionary" definitions of his values that in his collected essays his Washington lecture is retitled "Drama and the Idioms of Liberation" (*Art* 42-60). Gurr writes: "Tragedy is a blanket term which, when stretched to cover both religion and revolution, is likely to get torn" (141), and the same is substantially true of ritual, which is strictly neither a religious cushion against nor a viable alternative to revolution. Ritual structures do not in themselves revolutionize plays, though they may impart inner continuities and patterns of inevitability that help to authenticate their vision, and the same is true of ritual acts in life. They do not return society to the exact status quo but the transition from one area of existence to another which they mark is not simply equitable with changing levels of awareness and progression to the higher states of collective consciousness required for concerted political action. Though specific ritual forms may restore a former state or prepare for transition to a new one, the overall purpose of ritual is to maintain a continuum that contains within itself both change and recurrence. Its aim is to constantly recharge and keep in motion a vital flux which prevents stagnation and ensures the continued healthy functioning of society and the continuity of the species

(*Myth* 4, 52-53). At the metaphysical level it holds in place the walls of a sacred cycle of being, mending the cracks that occur along the seam of the continuum by acts of libation, prayer, thank-offerings, and sacrifice, and maintaining the contiguity of the cycle's interdependent phases of childhood, adulthood, and spirit-hood. Ritual, therefore, does not retain but sustains, does not renovate but regulates existence.

Yet if some of Soyinka's critics have attempted over-adventurous lateral readings across the diverse terrains of ritual, theatre, and revolution, these are in part the result of Soyinka's own cavalier critical cross-referencings from mythological to historical, and from metaphysical to political, orders of experience. More particularly, they have received direct encouragement from his postulation, in the semi-esoteric context of the first half of *Myth, Literature and the African World* and in the pure esotericism of "The Fourth Stage," of a ritual theory of drama. "Ritual Theater" is the outcome of the operation in the dramatic context of Soyinka's mystical essentialism: namely, of the philosophic outlook that conceives of ritual as the meeting point of the numinous and the mundane, of human and cosmic essences; the point at which man's "minuscule self" encounters infinity and myths are made drama (*Myth* 40). Rites of transition tap the energies of that "storehouse for creative and destructive essences" known as the "chthonic realm" (*Myth* 2), and Ogun, the ultimate "chthonic" deity who first visited earth and discovered the secret of smelting iron, undertook the crossing of this dangerous area so that the gods as a group might return to earth and solidarity be established between the entire community of gods, humans, and spirits. Appropriately, the Ogun rite is a wholly communal experience, a mass-catharsis which, like the harvest orgy in *Kongi's Harvest*, "permits no spectators, only celebrants" (130). The combined energies of the "audience" of communicants, itself "an integral part of the arena of conflict," and the celebrant in the expanded awareness of ecstatic possession generate a primal consciousness or collective inner worldview; a return to "transitional memory" in which are corporately reexperienced the states of being undergone by the god himself and which, though it may be interpreted in terms of race-memory and myths of origin, partakes initially of

pure metaphysical essence (*Myth* 33-34, 142-44). However, this mystical egalitarian telepathy and reciprocity quickly give way in Soyinka's account to the pattern of group salvation by individual action and, in the process, the private circle of communicants is collapsed into a "community" which is set to benefit from the act (*Myth* 33). Here begins that confusion in Soyinka's thought over the concept of "community" and hence also of that investment of ritual with a spurious currency at levels where it would appear to have no place. "Community" in Soyinka begins at the local village community, which may participate *in toto* as communicants in the rite, but is then extended by metaphor to take in the collected communities that constitute the entire nation or society, even though the logic of communal recovery at work in the Ogun Mysteries remains at the purely ritual level of sacrifice and religious communion and is quite distinct from the revolutionary energies required for social transformation.

The ritual action is also distinct from dramaturgical processes that publicly direct affective offerings at an "audience." The latter word, however, undergoes the same vagaries of definition as "community," and Soyinka proceeds to employ a markedly dramatical terminology that implicitly claims for the cultic experience something beyond the boundaries of ritual. The communicants are "chorus" to the "protagonist actor" (Ogun is the "first actor") and the stripping of the "excrescences" of personal inhibition at the point of possession is "the material of drama." Ogun's "first active battle of will" in "the abyss of dissolution" is what "the modern tragic dramatist recreates through the medium of physical, contemporary action" (*Myth* 149). Soyinka begins by regarding the celebrant in the divine presence as an "actor-surrogate" and then, by means of a protean usage of the vocabulary of acting, progresses to an analogy with his distant descendant: "the tragic hero stands to his contemporary reality as the ritual protagonist on the edge of the transitional gulf" (36). There follows a striking synthesis of the stage actor in the modern European theater — "a lone human figure under a spotlight on a darkened stage . . . breathing, living, pulsating, threateningly fragile" (41) — with the Ogunian celebrant or "protagonist" who experiences the parallel but more fundamental anxiety about his ability to "survive

confrontation with forces that exist within the dangerous area of transformation" (42). The actor afraid of blacking out and the celebrant paralleling himself with the deity on the brink of annihilation are both suspended in a moment of supreme aloneness, about to take the dangerous plunge into the self that will transcend the self by possessing it of energies for the forging of a new identity. Each, claims Soyinka, "involves a loss of individuation, a self-submergence in universal essence" (42). The result is a conflation of god, celebrant, and actor; their respective dissolutions into mythical, social and audience consciousness, under the term "universal essence"; and of acts of spiritual, social, and artistic communion.

This visionary, Ogunian conception of the actor as permanently *in extremis*, throwing caution to the cosmic winds, is not Soyinka's alone. The Ghanaian playwright Joe de Graft has said that the actor is always aware of the danger of being "carried away on the uncertain currents of hysteria and ecstasy" and that "acting is most electrifying when it dares to go as close as possible to the psychological safety point, the farthest limit within control — the brink of possession!" (6). This form of controlled hysteria has been restated in secular terms by Stanislavski as the subjection of the inhibitive forces of the personality to deep psychic resources (the god inside), followed by the transcendence and retrospective presentation of these in performance (72). The twofold process corresponds loosely with Nietzsche's Apollonian/Dionysian polarity, with "tragic" and "Brechtian" styles of acting, and with the two theatrogenic Yoruba gods. Ogun, much given to violent spectacle, represents the traumatic turmoil of the creative process while the more serene and collected Obatala, who "stands now as it were beside himself, observant, understanding, creating," signifies the "aesthetic joy" of its control and shaping, through memory, into art (*Myth* 143). But the problem with Soyinka's model, as much hypothesis as synthesis, is that its habitual presentation of the actor as an agent in a liturgical rite creates a basic uncertainty as to whether the ritual celebrant is being conceived in merely analogic terms or a more literal link between cultic rites (the drama of the gods) and theater (the drama of men) is being claimed: whether ritual is being likened to drama or *is* that thing. Analogy in Soy-

inka's prose has a habit of slipping into direct association and thence into identification. Thus, after a lurid account of Ogun's titanic archetypal struggle in the transitional gulf, we encounter the literal statement that "the actor in ritual drama operates in the same way," making parallel mental and physical preparation for his "disintegration and re-assembly," and that "tragic feeling in Yoruba drama stems from sympathetic knowledge of the protagonist's foray into this psychic abyss of the re-creative energies" (*Myth* 30-31). This ill-defined "ritual drama" appears to lead an uncertain hovering existence somewhere between the mask-drama of festival rites and the mythological theater of Duro Ladipo and Soyinka's plays.

It is, of course, fatuous to look for theatrical thoroughbreds in the circular, holistic maze of Yoruba religious art, in which myth, folklore, oral narrative, and the dramaturgies of ritual, festival masquerade and modern literary theatre all have common points of contact. Myths are made drama in their enactment by ritual and are themselves accumulations of folklore which supply the incantatory chants and praise songs of festivals. The oldest autochthonous, hieratic forms of ritual theatre coexist, as in a cultural time-warp, with sophisticated literary drama; and the playwright's ritual and mythological borrowings, in Ladipo's dynastic dramas or Soyinka's *A Dance of the Forests*, can be measured against their "pure" originals in still extant festival forms. So it is with some historical justification that Soyinka has been reluctant to mark the exact point at which "a religious or mythic celebration can be considered transformed into drama," and he has caricatured the compartmentalizing habits of Western evolutionist thinking in the form of a steam engine which lurches forward "in a series of intellectual spasms" as it shunts between historical stations to pick up successive cargoes of ritual, allegory, naturalism and surrealism (*Myth* 6, 37-38). To ride the evolution engine along even the most crooked course through African theater history — from breakaway *egungun* groups at Oyo court obsequies through travelling masquerade troupes and folk theatre — would do little justice to the complex lateral interplay of religious and dramatic, hermetic and popular forms, and Soyinka, in his historical essay "Theatre in African Traditional Cultures," demonstrates that lo-

cating the origins of African drama has in fact been made impossible by a number of historical imponderables (such as the colonial dispersal of the *egungun*) (*Art* 191, 194).

When his mood is metaphysical, however, as in the early sections of *Myth, Literature and the African World* and its Appendix, "The Fourth Stage," Soyinka affects a strong ahistorical bias which professes to favor Africa's "irreducible truths" and "fundamental, unchanging relationships" over Western "period dialectics" (38), as if history were not a dimension of theater development as of everything else. Here the reader appears to be invited into a realm of timeless essences in which the transition from ritual to drama has never and has always taken place; where ritual, insofar as it has always contained the inherent possibility of drama within itself, is eternally drama and drama ritual. These metaphysics then become ground for the confusion, in the modern dramatic context, of "Ogun Mysteries" and "Yoruba tragic drama"; of the Ogun ritual celebrant and the risk-taking "Ogunian" actor; and of rival formal and metaphysical conceptions of the theatre as, respectively, a "physical area for simulated events" and a "chthonic space," or "contraction of the cosmic envelope" (*Myth* 39-41).

Even allowing for the complex interweavings and hybridization of Yoruba religious and theatrical forms, a rite is not instant drama nor ritual movement ballet and elsewhere Soyinka has been at pains to point this out. In "Theatre in African Traditional Culture" he observes that pure initiation rituals contain rudimentary performance elements but have no finished artistic form (*Art* 193), and in the early 1960s he argued that "authentic" dances do not come ready-made for theatre performance but need to go through a "necessary transition" to be shaped into "a conscious art form" (qtd. in Gibbs, 1983 5). A rite is not about but is its own reality, and Soyinka's plays are, of course, not rites proper but reworkings of ritual, through metaphor, into art. The dramatic theorist's vigorous anti-mimetic stance, his insistence that Ogun's "spiritual reassemblage does not require a copying of actuality" and is not "a reflection or illusion of reality" (*Myth* 142, 160), are finally more meaningful in the ritual than in the theatrical context. The subtitle of "The Fourth Stage" promises to locate the origins of Yoruba tragedy in "The Mysteries of Ogun" but, in spite of its

dramatic terminology, the essay sheds little light on the mysteries of "ritual drama" and its volcanic rhetoric leans towards the vulgar meaning of "drama" as violent sensation, excited commotion, and alluring spectacle. It is, finally, not an essay on dramaturgy or any aspect of theatre but a flight of metaphysical lyricism which has as its real subject religious ecstasy.

Soyinka's reading of ritual as the drama of gods who watch over all transitional crossings is in itself a narrowly selective one. Not all rites enact transition (the purification rite in *The Strong Breed* is merely separative and cathartic) and not all transition is Ogunian (witness the ritual suicide in *Death and the King's Horseman* and the various uses of New Year Festivals, where the purgative-regenerative ambivalence is a purely calendrical phenomenon). Ritual does more than enact myths and there is more than one myth — the myth of Ogun — for it to enact, but the tendency of Soyinka's critical "monomythopoeia" is to make Ogun stand for the whole of Yoruba myth and rituality. And yet, in the more genuinely universal idiom of the plays themselves, ritual is as slippery and multi-faceted a property as its metaphysical interpretation in "The Fourth Stage" is narrow. On Soyinka's stage, traditional ritual practices may be positive or negative, beneficial or exploitative in the uses to which they lend themselves. They may sanctify evasion, brutality, or corrupt inertia (*The Strong Breed*, *The Swamp Dwellers*), or licence melodramatic moral gestures and merely symbolic confrontations that do nothing physically about evil (*Kongi's Harvest*); they may maintain the flux of change from one generation to the next (*Death and the King's Horseman*), or be mobilized from tools of reactionary oppression into instruments of insurrection (*The Bacchae*). Ritual, in Soyinka's own words, may be used in his plays to "question accepted History (*A Dance of the Forests*) . . . for ideological statements (*The Bacchae*) . . . and to 'epochalise' History for its mythopoeic resourcefulness (*Horseman*)" (*Art* 126). Moreover, only in a small number of plays, notably *The Road*, is there any strong suggestion that the theatrical element in ritual makes it inherently dramatic and that the relationship between ritual and drama is any less arbitrary than that between any play and its subject. On the contrary, ritual elements and effects in the plays are not drama-

turgically consistent but may at times be intrusively over-theatrical or simply untheatrical. They may, as in the case of the thematically overloaded *A Dance of the Forests*, be poorly integrated with verbal expression, allowing mime and dance to make off with meanings not delivered in the dialogue and leaving the audience unsure as to which thread of the action it should follow. Or they may be entirely at odds with dramatic clarity as in *Kongi's Harvest*, where the moral debate is submerged in festival spectacle and the protagonists' functions in the mystique of the masque are more impressive than the characters themselves.

Since its publication as a coda to *Myth, Literature and the African World*, "The Fourth Stage" has been conceived in Soyinka criticism as something of a sacred text and the primary works as themselves "Ogun Mysteries" whose secrets the essay alone can unlock, but it has subsequently become a kind of metaphysical Bermuda Triangle from which few commentators have brought back critical gems to illuminate his creative practice. Soyinka has challenged "Leftocratic" critics for analyzing his texts in terms alien to their own authentic self-apprehended worlds (*Art* 110-31, 279-314), and blanket mythographic readings of the plays by ulterior reference to the author's esoteric theory are really no less alien or more relevant simply because the terms are Yoruba ones. Although the overarching paradigm of Ogunian challenge resolved into Obatalan wholeness is dimly discernible in the structures of a number of plays, the forcing of them into its narrow conceptual framework has introduced falsehoods by ironing out their action into a single pattern: that of protagonal estrangement and disintegration followed by a reconstitution which discharges a new energy or expanded awareness into the community. At this level of abstraction anyone undergoing a crisis is likely to be dragged across an elastically metaphoric "transitional gulf" and the presence of Ogun detected in any fusion of contradictions or ambiguity of definition, or wherever transitional phenomena are in evidence. The small dent in the status quo made by Igwezu's futile gesture of protest at the end of *The Swamp Dwellers* hardly qualifies him for the Ogunian status that has been claimed for him (Katrak 136; Larsen 42), while Kongi, Professor, and Dr. Bero are only partial Ogun figures, with the hubristic challenge and will

to power abnormally developed and the redeeming sacrificial and creative characteristics left out. The imprisonment of Obatala may form a distant backdrop to the abduction of Ifada and its subsequent energizing of Eman, as Ogun-surrogate, in *The Strong Breed* (Adedeji 109), but nothing is made in the text, beyond the perverse notion that he has been sent to suffer, of the idiot's sacred link with Obatala and the play operates perfectly well on a level that makes no reference to mythic archetypes. *The Bacchae* ends with an Ogunian revolutionary breakthrough and *The Strong Breed* with a hint of Obatalan resolution in the lingering sense of balanced alternatives, but most of the plays do not end in either of these ways. The wheel — if it is a wheel — comes to a halt at a different place in each play: on the edge of a yawning void in *Death and the King's Horseman*; in barely-relieved despair in *The Swamp Dwellers*; at entrapment in an infernal cycle in *A Dance of the Forests*; and, in the closing holocaust of *Madmen and Specialists*, with the explosion of the very ideas of redemptive sacrifice and regeneration. The resulting impression is not that these plays break off either at the upturn or downturn of an endlessly alternating cycle. Rather, as Annmarie Heywood has suggested, they merely break off, arbitrarily and inconclusively, at any point of conflict: with a revolver shot and in mid-chant in *Madmen and Specialists*; with the jail door's iron clang in *Konji's Harvest*; and, in the case of Professor's dying peroration in *The Road*, with a mere restatement of the conflict that resolves nothing (131). It might be added that these abrupt terminations probably owe less to the structures of mythic archetypes than to ritual dynamics such as the utterances, during trance-possession, of the *egungun* and the *oriki* praise-chant, both of which merely pour out until cut off in mid-flow (Barber 509).

In spite of Soyinka's theoretic harping on the sacrificial teleology and socially beneficial orientation of Yoruba tragedy, there is in practice always some doubt surrounding the strengthening of the community's spiritual health by protagonal suffering or death and the accrual of material benefits from the regenerative energy of sacrifice. Professor and Pentheus have to die because one preys upon life while the other denies it altogether and yet, though the plays' ritual mystiques work hard to disguise it, their riddance, by

creating in each case a vacuum, releases merely negative energies into their societies. The world is rid of a parasite and a tyrant and is restored, retrospectively, to sanity and liberty. However, it is hard to imagine the vicious and corrupt underworld of touts and thugs being much changed by Professor's end, while there is no certainty that Thebes will be any freer than before and the new order of Dionysos any less tyrannical, in its way, than Pentheus's old one. In material terms, society is not regenerated by the deaths of these figures but is simply better off without them; the pragmatic logic of socioeconomics and politics is given primacy over the ritual one of sacrifice. Meanwhile, in *Death and the King's Horseman* the closing impression is that there is no Yoruba "world" or "universe" left intact to benefit from the double death, no future for the rite to admit passage into. The unprecedented role-reversal of father and son leaves no successor to take up their ritual task and the world stumbles forward into a void. The feelings of emptiness, desolation, and needless death that prevail at the end of this play seem to have little to do with a pattern of beneficial tragedy built around the Ogun archetype and are more like the conventional feelings at the end of a Shakespearean tragedy or a play like Bertolt Brecht's *Mother Courage*, where waste is perceived not as tragic or purposive, but simply wasteful.

Soyinka's relentlessly cosmic view of drama is, finally, too tenuously abstract to imagine in theatrical terms. Plays are, after all, about people, not primal essences projected into mythological beings: even in Greek tragedy divine appearances are rare and the neoclassical deities who populate Racine's plays are but magnified human passions. It is significant that Ogun presides over only one play and makes but one personal appearance on Soyinka's stage, for he is never closely characterized in the theoretical writings but is rather a matrix of essences, a crucible of creative and destructive energies. When Soyinka does attempt a pristine cosmic drama of essence, representing the whole of human and divine history (in *A Dance of the Forests*), the stage is simply not large enough and the amount of shape-changing and crossing of boundaries between different orders of being, manageable in a metaphysical essay but perilous in performance, produces only multiple confusions of identity. Moreover, the abrupt switches to mythic registers and a

rhetoric of "essence" in local dramatic effects is responsible for some of Soyinka's most inflated and pretentious writing, as when the love-chat of Segi and Daodu in *Kongi's Harvest* swings into the choric chant of Earth Mother and Spirit of the Harvest and their sexuality takes on powers of political, natural, and cosmic regeneration (97-99); or in Elesin's casuistical defence of his deathbed lust in terms of seeds, shoots, and stalks, as if he were not a man but an impersonal element in an agricultural cycle (*Horseman* 20-21). These episodes lack stylistic modifiers to ease the passage from one frame to another — odd in a writer who speaks so much of transition — and one is left unsure whether the intended tone is celebratory or ironic.

The mythographic lore of deities dismembered in chthonic gulfs and its ritual embodiments have had a loud voice — perhaps too loud, disproportionate to their true importance — in Soyinka's criticism, and reassessment of their proper place in his work is long overdue. It may be that the metaphysics of transition, like Yeats's exotic symbological system, are in the end only fitfully relevant to the work, and then mainly for esoteric non-dramatic texts such as "Idanre" or parts of *The Interpreters*. Plays like *The Road and Death and the King's Horseman* naturally benefit from some knowledge of them, but metaphysics have always translated badly onto the stage and plays weighted down with their burden often have difficulty standing on their own feet and achieving viability at performance level. The paradoxical result is that a metaphysics sited in ritual and drama has come to lead a life almost independent of the plays: the theory has gone in one direction, the practice in the other.

NOTE

- ¹ This essay (entitled "Drama and the Idioms of Liberation: Proletarian Illusions" in *Art* 42-60) was originally published in Morell.

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