

The Bacchae of Euripides, A Communion Rite
Bi o s'enia, imale o si :
If humanity were not, the gods would not be

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I shall begin by commemorating the gods for their self sacrifice on the altar of literature and in so doing press them into further service on behalf of human society and its quest for the explication of being¹

This paper deals with the dramatic texts of Akinwande Oluwole “Wole” Soyinka’s *The Bacchae of Euripides: A communion Rite* 1973 and *The Bacchae* of Euripedes (premiered posthumously at the Theatre of Dionysus in 405 BC as part of a tetralogy). *The Bacchae of Euripides: A communion rite* was commissioned for performance by the National Theatre at the Old Vic, London, in the summer of 1973. Focus of this analysis will be Soyinka’s attempt of translating rituals between cultures and not of texts and investigating certain political and mythic elements, of the Yoruba as well as the Greek tradition. Also underlying my analysis is Wole Soyinka’s tendency of appropriating his cyclical view of history derived from the Yoruba belief and to learn how these myths lead him to the formation of his play world and how ritual enables him to transfer this into drama. Hence the question arises: how does this expression of a cosmic worldview occur in Soyinka’s plays, and how is it useful to actually make those texts ‘dramatic’? Soyinka’s view is that those materialist historians who fail to take² this cosmology into the account “tend to construct a false adumbrated reality of their own social milieu.”² Thus he admits Yoruba cosmology into the realm of factually consciousnesshistorical analysis. The Yoruba concepts of “being” endowed Soyinka with a base of ideas from which his works flow.

The original home of the Yoruba is western Nigeria. G.J.Afolabi Ojo, a distinguished Yoruba scholar defines his cultural area- “the area where Yoruba culture is typical coincides with the six western provinces of Western Nigeria-Oyo, Ibadan, Abeokuta, Ijebu, Oudo, Lagos, Ilori in division of Ilorin Province and Kabba division of Kabba Province.”³ Soyinka was born in Abeokuta, Ogun State, Nigeria, and an area which still remains the highest density of Yoruba speakers over 90% of the population according to Ojo. The Yoruba ascribe themselves to four hundred and one gods. Soyinka prefers to translate a similar expression Irunmale, not literally four hundred deities but a thousand and one. There are of course major deities who are recognized and worshipped all over Yoruba land. Olodumare (Olorun) - is the supreme god- “the Creator King, Omnipotent, All wise, All-knowing, Judge, Immortal, Invisible and

Holy.” The Yoruba does not represent physically or build shrines to him. The Yoruba pantheon includes Orisa Nla, the principal deity under Olodumare. Esu, the spirit of disorder, evil and change. Sango, god of lightning and electricity. Esumare, Eriule and Soyinka’s favourite god, Ogun. The duality of this last god, the seeming contradiction in his nature, both creative and destructive essence- makes him an enigmatic symbol both in Soyinka’s own creative work and in his criticism. The three deities chosen by Soyinka are Ogun, Obatala and Sango. They are represented in his drama by the passage-rites of hero-gods, a projection of man’s clash with³ forces which challenge his efforts to complement with his surroundings physical, social and psychic. In Soyinka’s words ...

... gods they are unquestionable, but their symbolic roles are identified by man as the role of an intermediary quester, an explorer into territories of ‘essenceideal’ around whose edges man fearfully skirts.⁴

Why does Soyinka need an intermediary to fulfill his communication with the world at large? Compared to other literary genres drama is realised through dialogue mainly. But it is also meant for performance. The structure of the genre helps it to be much undiluted, responsive, communicative, and transparent between the readers, the playwright and the text where the authorial agency of dramatist is hidden. Is this expression relevant for the dramatic texts of Soyinka? Because it is the dramatist who structures the semiotic system of the play world, and adjusts the principal beliefs that inhabit that world. Is Soyinka’s audience familiar with his world? And if they are not, how does he achieve communication of an unknown world view to his audience/readers? Soyinka point outs in *Myth, Literature and the African World* that the gods of the Yoruba world enhance man’s existence within the cyclic consciousness of time. It is within this divinely engineered framework that traditional society poses its social questions or formulates its morality.

gods control the aesthetic considerations of ritual enactment and give to every performance a multi-leveled experience of the mystical and the mundane⁵

For Soyinka the source of drama is through ritual, the drama of the gods in its cosmic whole he compares it with the Epic “which represents also on a different level, another access to the Rites of Passage.”⁶ Therefore Soyinka’s play world can be defined as the natural home of the unseen deities, a resting place for the departed and a staging house for the yet-to-be-born. Soyinka defines his world as

A chthonic realm, a storehouse for creative and destructive essences. It required a challenger, a human representative to breach it periodically on behalf of the well being of the community.⁷

Soyinka's work represents an important phase in the deliberate formation a new mythography which draws from the indigenous resource base. His work has generated a large mass of commentary and analysis. This is in keeping with not only with the variety of his output but also with the cultural energy with which his writing is imbued. Biodun Jeyifo notes that Soyinka's plays have an elaborate substructure of myth, ritual and symbolism which transforms them into "haunting apocalyptic creations of the imagination",⁸ he suggests that the mythic substructure and the symbolic and ritualistic framework are rarely given full thematic clarification, but are "cumulatively elaborated in hieratic action, emblematic mime, epiphanic image and passages of incantatory speech and prose description"⁹

It is an interesting evaluation of Soyinka's work for his assessment in terms of a subtext or substructure of meaning which is seen as elusive and requiring special attention in order to be grasped. I think this substratum is a function both of the literary artifact of the play-text, as well as of the cultural references woven into Soyinka's texts.

Several critics have sought to uncover the cultural meanings of Soyinka's plays. His work has often been explored in terms of mythological motifs and cultural rituals evident in the plays. This emphasis has been necessary because of the need to engage with the culture-specific elements of his writings to set the readings of his plays against his own critical pronouncements on the nature of tragedy. That is vastly different from the Western notion of tragedy. Wole Soyinka in his book *Myth, Literature and the African World* writes

"the persistent search for the meaning of tragedy for a redefinition in terms of cultural or private experience is at the least man's recognition of certain areas of depth experience which are not satisfactorily explained by "general aesthetic theories" and of all the subjective unease that is aroused by man's creative insights, that wrench within the human psyche which we vaguely define as 'tragedy' is the most insistent voice that bids us return to our own sources."

Aristotle maintains that kinds of poetry imitate different kinds of subjects in different sorts of ways. Comedy treats baser figures, while tragedy and epic focus on noble characters. Epic and tragedy differ in other subtler ways: tragedy exploits many kinds of verses, while epic constrains itself to one; tragedy but not epic, make use of tune in addition to rhythm; and most significantly, epic is expansive in time, whereas tragedy, as a matter of actual practice and perhaps also ideally, is compressed and unified in its temporal setting. In saying that the imitation of an action is serious and complete, Aristotle has in view the thought that a plot must be well ordered and optimally

sufficiently complex to encompass both a reversal of fortune (peripeteia) and a recognition (anagnorisis) on the part of the protagonist. Plots which are simply strung together one after the other bother against an audience's legitimate expectation of probability and verisimilitude. Aristotle remarks, 'it makes a great difference whether something happens because of something else or merely happens after it'¹⁰.

Completely opposed to Aristotle, Nietzsche traced the evolution of tragedy from early rituals, through the joining of Apollonian and Dionysian forces, until its early "death" in the hands of Socrates. In opposition to Schopenhauer, Nietzsche viewed tragedy as the art form of sensual acceptance of the terrors of reality and rejoicing in these terrors in love of fate and therefore as the antithesis to the Socratic method or the belief in the power of reason to unveil any and all of the mysteries of existence. Nietzsche in "What I Owe to the Ancients" in his *Twilight of Idols* wrote:

"The psychology of the orgiastic as an overflowing feeling of life and strength, where even pain still has the effect of a stimulus, gave me the key to the concept of tragic feeling, which had been misunderstood both by Aristotle and even more by modern pessimists. Tragedy is so far from being a proof of the pessimism (in Schopenhauer's sense) of the Greeks that it may, on the contrary, be considered a decisive rebuttal and counterexample. Saying Yes to life even in its strangest and most painful episodes, the will to life rejoicing in its own inexhaustible vitality even as it witnesses the destruction of its greatest heroes — that is what I called Dionysian, that is what I guessed to be the bridge to the psychology of the tragic poet. Not in order to be liberated from terror and pity, not in order to purge oneself of a dangerous affect by its vehement discharge — which is how Aristotle understood tragedy — but in order to celebrate oneself the eternal joy of becoming, beyond all terror and pity — that tragic joy included even joy in destruction"¹¹

Aristotle's stricture was almost dictated by the decree of the Greek city state. A Greek tragedy is a tribunal, a kind of institution. Tragedy is like synecdoche in the Greek world for the Athenian democracy. Nietzsche demands that tragedy asks for celebration of self. Both Aristotle and Nietzsche cannot depart from in the realms of pity and fear as Nietzsche also highlights that the tragic joy is the joy of destruction. Whereas Soyinka's definition gives us the flavor of a different perspective in terms of cultural or private experience dealing with man's recognition of certain areas of depth experience which are not satisfactorily explained by "general aesthetic theories" and of all the subjective unease that is aroused by man's creative insights that wrench within the human psyche, that bids one to return to their own sources. Returning to sources is much more important to Soyinka than purgation of pity and fear or celebrating

the joy of destruction. For Soyinka “remembering” and “returning” entails selectivity and what is selected invariably subverts the remembered. His view of history is best summed up in his own words:

Historical data is permanently irretrievably and irrevocably incomplete...which is why the creative (or re creative) imagination has its function in the world, ‘system’ may be elicited from the incomplete data naturally at the expense of regarding the missing, the distorted, the incomplete as the nonexistent or irrelevant. Not so, says the creative originator, poet or ideologue for whom not only the anterior but the potential human history remains ... permanently, irretrievably, irrevocably incomplete.”

To include the dramatic texts in this analysis one would want to begin by citing a poem by Soyinka named ‘Idanre’ written in celebration of Ogun’s night pilgrimage:

Rich-laden is his home, yet, decked in palm fronds
He ventures forth, refuge of the down-trodden,
To rescue slaves he unleashed the judgment of war
Because of the blind, plunged into forests
Of curative herbs, Bountiful One
Who stands bulwark to off springs of the dead of heaven
Salutations, O lone being, who swims in rivers of blood.

Such are the virtues that Soyinka eulogizes Ogun with. Ogun is a metaphoric representation of the realization that people create the means to destroy themselves. He stands for the collective human attempts to govern, not what is out of control in nature, but what is out of control in culture. He represents not so much what is inexplicable, unseen, or unknown, as what is known but not under control. This vigor and fortitude of the Ogun-hero is found in Soyinka’s *The Bacchae of Euripides, A Communion Rite*. In Wole Soyinka’s adaptation of Euripides’s *Bacchae* there can be no doubt that the historicist response is a planned analysis of the circumstances within which he and his people have been accustomed to look at the world in which they live: namely the relations between their ancestral traditions and an imperial culture⁹ that continues to pose severe challenges to these traditions. Soyinka’s effort is clearly grounded in an ideological review – against the background of relations between the residents of Soyinka’s own world and in the world in which Euripides wrote his play. Soyinka begins the introduction to his adaptation of *The Bacche of Euripides (A communion rite)* by citing a passage from his essay “The Fourth Stage” where “the Phrygian god and his twin hood with Ogun” are presented to us in quite positive terms. “*Bacchae*”, he tells us at the end of the citation, “belongs to that sparse body of

plays which evoke awareness of a particular moment in a people's history, yet imbue that moment with a hovering, eternal presence". It was thus "inevitable" that he should do an adaptation which basically celebrated the play's "insightful manifestation of the universal need of man to match himself against Nature"¹² Soyinka explains his interest in this play in both religious and political terms.

Andre Lefevere suggests that Soyinka has achieved an accomplished translation with *The Bacchae*, because of his "attempt to translate not only the linguistic circle but the cultural circle and the circle of literary procedures as well." This includes his attempt to influence "the cultural and/or the literary circle towards change."¹³ In rewriting *The Bacchae of Euripides (A communion rite)*, he has made Euripides's treatment of oppression and religious conflict "significant" to a new context. He has translated Euripides's temporal setting, after the Peloponnesian Wars, to the period of the postcolonial African Wars. Soyinka demonstrates a certain political affinity with Euripides, who in 407 B.C., in his seventies, had written *Bacchae* in a spirit of distancing from the Athenians. There are, however, other reasons for finding *Bacchae* relevant to Yoruba and other African societies, reasons both mythic and cultural.

Most important is the fact that Soyinka uses the Yoruba god Ogun as a close resemblance to Dionysus. In fact, both gods may have sprung from similar roots; yet, while Soyinka's Dionysus is clearly indebted to Ogun, Soyinka does call him Dionysus. The beings who inhabit the Yoruba world, help Soyinka to recreate *The Bacchae of Euripides (A communion rite)* with no help from the western theoretical paradigm of which Euripides is part of the defining canon. In his introduction Soyinka also points to the mining industry as a major employer of slave labour keeping alive the imperial war machine. The harsh conditions under which these slaves worked are evidenced by periodic incidences of revolt. Whereas the historical canvas of Euripides exposes the birth of a new industrial economy which had begun to replace the agrarian economy on Mainland Greece, in her colonies and in the outlying areas of Asia Minor. Silver and gold mines opened up. A series of wars had displaced peasants and forced them to work in the mines. Labour migrations brought with them their customs and religions.

At this point it is also important to mention that from the Yoruba world the major population of slaves was transported. Such brutality puts in perspective the dangers faced by the slaves in Soyinka's play from among whom one must be chosen every year as scapegoat in the Eleusinian mysteries.¹⁴ The Old slave originally slated for the Eleusinian rites would have died from the flogging had Tiresias (protected by the fawn skin under his garment) not offered to take his place, in the event. The Old slave would have added to the figures like those lining the road to the grain fields. So far Soyinka has stayed close enough to the society of Euripides' day in his adaptation. But

why does he portray a slave leader fully Negroid? The stage direction reads:-

“The Slaves and the Bacchantes should be as mixed a cast as is possible, testifying to their varied origins. Solely because of the ‘the hollering’ style suggested for the slave leader’s solo in the play it is recommended that this character be fully Negroid”¹⁵

The image of the slave leader does indicate a gradual disengagement from Euripides’ purposes. The choice of the skin colour of the slave leader is just the beginning of the translation of culture from the climate of Greek Tragedy into the play world of Soyinka. The moment the curtain lifts on Soyinka’s stage we begin to witness that we are dealing with an essentially different god from that presented by Euripides. Ogun begins to possess the root traits of Dionysus in terms of image. Soyinka in the *Fourth Stage* mentions “Ogun for his part is best understood in Hellenic values as a totality of the Dionysian, Apollonian and Promethean virtues.” The opening set almost proves that the play will be far less a tragedy than a “communion rite”, as the subtitle suggests which illustrates the continuities of Yoruba experience. The subtitle “*A Communion Rite*” is essential, since communion and sacrifice have an inevitable relation in Soyinka’s play. He draws on the ancient Greek notion that to ensure the fertility of the crops, a scapegoat must be sacrificed to the gods (specifically, to Dionysus).

This idea of sacrifice does not occur in Euripides’s play; it is brought out in Soyinka’s version. At first, the chosen scapegoat is not the king, but an old slave. Of major importance to Soyinka’s theme is the transference from sacrificing the slave to sacrificing the king. As the rebellious slave leader argues, “Why us? Why always us? . . . the rites bring us nothing. Let those to whom the profits go bear the burden of the old year dying.”¹⁶ The responsibility for the ritual is thus transferred from the elite to the masses, who adopt Bacchus as their god and reject the “state religion” that demands their sacrifice. Through communal participation, they enhance their social power, as Soyinka emphasizes in his introduction to the play. “By drinking the king’s blood, the community as a whole partakes of his power and all are revitalized and unified.”¹⁷ This theme of communal participation is dormant in Euripides’s version, but Euripides ends with vengeance, not communion or regeneration.

In the opening speech of Dionysus, Soyinka makes a conscious departure from Euripides. The theme of revenge in which Dionysus states his grudges against Thebes for slandering both his mother Semele and himself is very much more detailed and prominent in Euripides than in Soyinka. Pentheus acts as a king in Euripides where as legal authority in Soyinka. Euripides’ Pentheus is the representative of god who cannot be questioned but he feels threatened by the outside force that is Dionysus himself

from Asia Minor. Euripides' critique of his society took place in an era when Athens was in social and political crises that led her to defeat in the Peloponnesian war with Sparta (431-404 B.C). Euripides was forced into exile in Macedonia. In Macedonia he composed *The Bacchae*.

As I have already mentioned that tragedy is like synecdoche in the Greek world for the Athenian democracy; and in order to maintain this Athenian democracy each time, Dionysus was being suppressed by Pentheus. By the end of Euripides' *Bacchae*, Dionysus also somehow gets assimilated in Greek pantheon. He remains no more the 'other' from the Asia Minor and shares the attributes of the Apollonian gods. In Soyinka the worship of Dionysus is the worship of Ogun. Ogun can connect man and god. Oludumare is the creator who divides man and gods. Soyinka's tragic hero is modeled after Ogun, the Yoruba god who works within the space of marginality. Ogun is not a part of any community. To be a part of any community he has to undergo conflicts and trials. He often loses sanity under the influence of palm wine but he is also the one who dares to pave a path for his community to follow. The Ogun tragic hero is the one who destroys himself, lives and dies for the community.

In Euripides's *The Bacchae* Dionysus, though born in Thebes has been travelling in Asia and is considered a foreigner by Pentheus. Although his worshippers, the Bacchantes, are Asian, Dionysus is a mediating figure between Hellenistic and Asian cultures. Dionysus is not the anti-Apollo that Nietzsche considered him to be. He is in the center between opposite poles, not the god of change, but the god of dichotomy. He is in the middle between man and woman, between Asia and Europe, between Hellas and the barbarian world, between heaven and hell (according to Heraclitus, his other name is Hades), between death and life, between raving and peace.¹⁸ Comparing this with Soyinka's description of Ogun in *Myth, Literature, and the African World*, the chthonic god of metals, creativity, the road, wine, and art: no other deity in the Yoruba pantheon correlates so absolutely with Dionysus, through his own history and nature, with the spiritual temperament of the fourth area of existence which he identified as the abyss of transition. Ogun is also 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". His was the first rite of passage through the chthonic realm.¹⁹ In Soyinka's view of tradition, the Yoruba believe that the spiritual turmoil of the gods began when a slave rebelled and hit the original being, Atunda, with a rock, shattering him into 1,001 fragments that turned into 1,001 beings. "The shard of original Oneness which contained the creative flint appears to have passed into the being of Ogun."²⁰ Ogun then journeyed into the human realm and was made king. All went well until the trickster god Esu gave Ogun some palm wine. After that,

Ogun confused friends with foes and began slaughtering his own men. When he realized what he had done, he shrank from the human realm but did not forbid the use of palm wine, since the wine was essential to his own self-realization.²¹ The description of Ogun, in Soyinka's play makes it evident that the god's effect on mankind is favourable and spiteful, gentle and terrible, as Euripides said of Dionysus. Both gods mediate between earthly and heavenly realms, but whereas Dionysus represents dichotomies Ogun is transitional. The difference, according to Soyinka, lies in European and traditional African conceptions of reality. European thought has tended to operate in Manichean terms, opposing good and evil, reason and emotion, and so forth, whereas the Yoruba have what Soyinka calls a "cohesive cultural reality."²² Furthermore, whereas Euripides's Dionysus is soft and effeminate, Soyinka's is "a being of calm rugged strength", one who merges both Apollonian and Dionysian characteristics. Cadmus and Teiresias represent the inherited wisdom of the elders. Euripides has Teiresias say "We are the heirs of custom and traditions hallowed by age and handed down to us by our fathers. No quibbling logic can topple them, whatever subtleties this clever age invents."²³ Pentheus, on the other hand, is an iconoclast who would rather trust his own wisdom (Apollo is the only god he worships) and not accept anything foreign, strange, or undignified. He tries to suppress Dionysian ritual, but this attempt only leads to its extreme expression as the god demands his due. In Soyinka's play Teiresias is outraged that the floggers, having forgotten that this is only a ritual, have really hurt him. The theme of ritual and emotion in *The Bacchae* eventually spills over into the sphere of political and social reality. The question is who will be in control? Recognising the power of strong emotion, Pentheus tries to suppress these Dionysian rites based on religious emotion. Yet it is Pentheus's own internal disorder that causes him to see corruption in others, despite Teiresias's comment, "But even in the rites of Dionysus, the chaste woman will not be corrupted."²⁴ Pentheus cannot understand why he smells rotteness all around him. Euripides has him say, "When once you see the glint of wine shining at the feasts of women, then you may be sure the festival is rotten". Pentheus's own sense of corruption destroys him; Dionysus lets Pentheus see what he expects to see. Soyinka also recognizes this problem of Pentheus and emphasizes it by having him say, "I shall have order! Let the city know at once, Pentheus is here to give back order and sanity"²⁵. Yet Pentheus violates order by flogging the Old Slave, which the crowd knows to be an atrocity:

"We are strangers but we know the meaning of madness. To hit an old servant with frost on his head such a one as has stood at the gateway of mysteries. When even one person steps out of place, he disrupts universal order. The consequences are even greater when this disruptive element is a king. He must be sacrificed to restore harmony."²⁶

Euripides's play stresses the theme of order. His chorus cries out, "O Justice, principle of order, spirit of custom, come! Be manifest; reveal yourself with a sword!" The principle of order is used to extract vengeance. Pentheus is pulled down from the treetops and torn apart like a beast. Agave mounts Pentheus's head high above the doorpost, only to bring it down later when she discovers her errors. Euripides's characters learn very late that Dionysus is an agent of divine justice. Another medium for revenge is the perversion and destruction of rationality.

Pentheus prides himself on his reason, during debates with Dionysus, when he humiliatingly tells Dionysus, "You wrestle well-when it comes to words."²⁷ Yet, Dionysus comes out the winner through his subtlety. Dionysus not only out reasons Pentheus, he hypnotizes him and makes him drunk, until Pentheus says,

"I seem to see two suns blazing in the heavens. And now two Thebes, two cities, and each with seven gates. And you-you are a bull"²⁸.

This, it turns out, is both a drunken vision and a true vision. The ultimate degradation and hallucination of Pentheus, however, occurs when he lets himself be dressed as a woman so he can spy on the Maenads. Soyinka develops this image more fully by having Dionysus wrap Pentheus in a chain of hallucination (Ogun is a god of metal). Soyinka's Dionysus creates two visions of weddings, first a traditional but cold, formal one, among nobles, then one with the warm, loving image of Christ turning water into communion wine. Here Soyinka has temporarily underplayed Euripides's political implications and stressed the religious connotations. Scornfully, Dionysus tells Pentheus to reject illusion and seek truth on the mountain:

"You are a king. You have to administer. Don't take shadows too seriously. Reality is your only safety. Continue to reject illusion."²⁹

Is Dionysus telling Pentheus indirectly that mercy is not for him or should this be read ironically? Soyinka creates a gentler Dionysus than does Euripides, one who reveals his divine poser to the audience although Pentheus is too blind to see it.

Euripides's sacrificial ritual ends in merciless destruction of the royal family, Pentheus dismembered, Agave banished, and Cadmus and his wife doomed to become serpents leading a barbarian host. All have come to a horrified realization of Dionysus's divinity, but realization comes too late. "When there was time, you did not know me."³⁰ Cadmus seeks pity from Dionysus, but Agave recognizes that Dionysus is inevitability, the hand of fate, and cannot be outmoded. In Euripides's conclusion, the people of Thebes are sentenced by Dionysus to slavery in other lands for blaspheming him and threatening

him with violence. Soyinka's conclusion is quite different, with no sense of violent revenge. Not merely a just conclusion, but a reordered world, is foreshadowed by the Bacchante as Pentheus goes to his death (p. 75):

Come dawn, herald of the new order.... the hunter's shrieks Forgotten. Let the new order bring peace, repose, plenitude....³¹

In a lyrical passage, which Soyinka quotes from his own poem *Idanre*, which is sung by a slave as Pentheus goes off to his death, the slaves' newfound freedom is stressed:

Night, night, set me free Sky of a million roe,
highway of eyes Dust on moth wing, let me ride
On ovary silences,
freely Drawn on the reins of dreams.

The stage directions tell of "casting off of the long vassalage in the House of Pentheus" as Pentheus goes to his death. Dionysus tells him:

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, that also is the fate of heroes.³²

This is partly ironic, since Soyinka seems to believe in the involvement of the total community. Still, it is more believable than it would be coming from Euripides's Dionysus. Although Dionysus does not appear in Soyinka's final scene, his music, a red glow, and a wine fountain, wonderful and terrible, spurts from Pentheus' head. Thus the cycle is complete. Pentheus, the rejecter of Dionysus, has become the source of Dionysus. In this version, unlike that of Euripides, there is no need for pity because no one suffers without finding some positive resolution.

I would argue that in substituting the characteristics of the Yoruba Ogun for the Greek Dionysus, the playwright is compelled to transform the ending into a communion rite that creates a dramatic problem: while the transformation of Pentheus' head into a fountain of blood changing into wine is a depiction of the renewal of life and unification of the community that his sacrifice made possible. But it is bought with a disquieting negation of Agave's voice as a grieving mother. By altering the character of Dionysus into Ogun, Soyinka removes the central axis of Euripides's play: that the young Pentheus and his half-mortal cousin Dionysus are two sides of the same coin. The impulsiveness and cruel, unmeasured power that the young King Pentheus exercises in concert with his inability to recognize the sensuousness and irrationality of Dionysus within himself are the qualities that unleash the same uncontrolled forces of will in the god. Clearly,

Soyinka rejects this mirror image as well as its implications in the original play because it does not fit with his vision of Dionysus as Ogun. Soyinka considers myth to be part wish fulfillment through hero projections and elaborates it to be an outline for action, especially for groups within society who have experienced loss and deprivation. Soyinka's denial of revenge as a fitting impetus for Pentheus's sacrifice in favour of the king's death is to serve as the means for purification and subsequent rebirth as a fitting way to restore the "sacrificial logic of the play". The play is the reconstruction of those facts that are not written in historical narrative contrasted to other plays of Soyinka like *Death and the King's Horseman* that deals with history directly.

Nietzsche in *The Birth of Tragedy* comments:

Without myth all culture loses its healthy and natural creative power: only a horizon surrounded by myths can unify an entire cultural movement. Myth alone rescues all the powers of imagination and the Apollonian and Dionysian dream from their aimless wanderings. The images of myth must be daemonic guardians, omnipresent and unnoticed, restored well in the rituals, which protect the growth of the young mind, and guide man's interpretation of his life and struggles. The state itself has no unwritten laws more powerful than the mythical foundation that guarantees its connection with all social aspects of life. . . . what is indicated by the great historical need of unsatisfied modern culture, clutching about for countless other cultures, with its consuming desire for knowledge, if not the loss of myth, the loss of the ritual home, the mythical womb.³³

Soyinka's rewriting of Euripides is a task that seems to allow full rein to his metaphysical preoccupations. The close association of the world of gods and men is as much Greek as it is Yoruba, with an added advantage that Soyinka uses fully – he dramatizes the Greek city state as one that owns slaves and treats them in inhuman manner. This historical fact is added to the chief drawback of Pentheus' power hungry sovereignty. The gross nature of Pentheus who opposes the rejuvenating religion of Dionysus thus becomes the target of all who search for ecstasy of freedom, be they slaves or Bacchantes. Ironically Pentheus becomes the inverted Soyinkan tragic hero. We meet the unfeeling Pentheus who is lured into becoming the sacrifice for the rites of renewal that the Bacchantes observe. Again ironically it is Pentheus' reluctance that makes him the carrier of the negativity of the old and a helper in replenishing the new with his sacrificial blood that turns into wine. It is interesting to note that in the rewriting of Greek tragedy Soyinka keeps to the formal requirements of off stage actions, chorus and long speeches of description. With respect to Greek tragedy, offstage action, verbally reported, fixed the hierarchy of dramatic devices. The verbal, largely under the control of the dramatist came to be the most important device – the extra verbal

(actions), verbal level of gestures was 'covered' by the verbal level, the semantic filter being manipulated by the writer to attain the desired effect. This is in complete contrast to the performance of the Yoruba, where the performance in its immediacy determines the effect of the orature. There is only one spectacular instance of an actual event happening in Soyinka's play – the fiery escape of Dionysus from Pentheus' prison, a sequence that is underplayed in Euripides. Soyinka's constant effort for *The Bacchae of Euripides* is, to continually change in the direction of the dialogue to dramatize the difference of worldview between Dionysus and Pentheus. This is directly performed on stage and directly communicates and carries out a dialogue with the audience. While the conflict that Soyinka insists on is confined off-stage and does not communicate directly, leaving it to the audiences interpretive activity. The style of representation is crucial to the establishment of the play's theme in Soyinka's play.

Soyinka had asserted in an earlier essay that the structure of theatre is linked with the kind of theatre it spawns.³⁴ The Greek theatre ideal that Soyinka has espoused in his forays into tragedy is in both structure and orientation geared to the preservation of the status – quo. Society is a material through which the Soyinkan hero travels to his final destiny. In a state of crisis he forges the way and in the process destroys himself. He does not actually live in society rather he operates alone outside of it using it as material to prove his mettle, whether this be the next higher stage or the status quo. But he is not himself either constrained or directly affected by its crisis. The prototype for Soyinkan tragic hero, Ogun, was unable to live in the community of men, though he alone among the gods was able to forge a path to the human world. The outcast deity, the monster deity as Soyinka calls Ogun will yield only a superhuman ideal for the playwright. Ogun's daring his addiction to risk and his attempt at communication suit the figure of a hero. Possibly a rebel hero. But he is not provided by Soyinka with a dynamic society in which he is to function nor is his status that of a revolutionary. For if the society forges its own impetus by collective effort then there is no need to re-establish or preordained status quo. The Soyinkan tragic hero is however the kind who acts as mediator, as outsider or as one uninvolved with the actual working of the society that he acts within. The conflict does not involve his choice the choice is already made for him by the exigencies of the Ogun role. Hence he functions as a single unit which would function despite being alienated for he does not need the identity of a community to make him effective. The successful interpreter captures not just the words, but also an implied spirit, from the indigenous world view. Soyinka's creation of his play world, in its suggestion with a Yoruba deity named Ogun filled a cultural role similar to that of Dionysus, which enriches the implications and evocations of his play. In my view the political dimensions of Soyinka's play are integral to myth and borrows a lot from the native performative pattern of the rituals, since Soyinka seems to believe in the involvement of the total community.

End notes

- 1 Soyinka, Wole. 1976. *Myth, Literature and the African World*. Great Britain: Cambridge University Press.
- 2 ibid
- 2 ibid
- 3 Bell, Richard, H. *Understanding African Philosophy: Cross Cultural Approach to Classical and Contemporary Issues*. New York and London: Routledge. 2002.
- 4 Soyinka, Wole. 1976. *Myth, Literature and the African World*. Great Britain: Cambridge University Press. (Soyinka, 1976, 1)
- 5 Soyinka, Wole. 1976. *Myth, Literature and the African World*. Great Britain: Cambridge University Press. (Soyinka, 1976, 2)
- 6 ibid
- 7 Ibid
- 8 Jeyifo, Biodun. 1988. "Wole Soyinka and the Tropes of Disalienation". In *Perspectives on Wole Soyinka: Freedom and Complexity*, ed. Jeyifo, Biodun, 2001. United States of America: University Press of Mississippi.⁵
- 10 ibid
- 11 Nietzsche, Friedrich. 1889. *Twilight of the Idols (Götzen-Dämmerung)*. Translations by Walter Kaufmann and R.J. Hollingdale. England: Penguin Books (1990).
- 12 Introduction Soyinka's *The Bacche of Euripides (A communion rite)*, Soyinka, Wole. 1963. *Collected Plays I*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- 13 Andre Lefevere, "Translation: Changing the Code. Soyinka's Ironic Aetiology," *Babel* (Spring 1981), p. 80. 4.
- 14 The Eleusinian Mysteries were initiation ceremonies held every year for the cult of Demeter and Persephone based at Eleusis in ancient Greece. Of all the mysteries celebrated in ancient times, these were held to be the ones of greatest importance. These myths begun in the Mycenaean period (c. 1600 BC) and lasting two thousand years were a major festival during the Hellenic era, later. The name of the town, Eleusis, means arrival. The rites, ceremonies, and beliefs were kept secret, as initiation was believed to unite the worshipper with the gods and included promises of divine power and rewards in the afterlife.
- 15 Soyinka, Wole. 1963. *The Bacche of Euripides (A communion rite)*, *Collected Plays I*. New York: Oxford University Press
- 16 Soyinka, Wole. 1963. *The Bacche of Euripides (A communion rite)*, *Collected Plays I*. New York: Oxford University Press
- 17 ibid
- 18 Siegfried Melchinger. 1973. *Euripides* New York: Frederick Ungar, p. 189.
- 19 Soyinka, Wole. *Myth, Literature and the African World*. Great Britain: Cambridge University Press. 1976
- 20 ibid
- 21 ibid
- 22 ibid
- 23 Euripides. 1990. *Bacchae*. Translated by Paul Woodruff. London: Penguin.
- 24 ibid
- 25 Soyinka, Wole. 1963. *The Bacche of Euripides (A communion rite)*, *Collected Plays I*. New York: Oxford University Press
- 26 Soyinka, Wole. 1963. *The Bacche of Euripides (A communion rite)*, *Collected Plays I*. New York: Oxford University Press

- 27 Euripides. 1990. *Bacchae*. Translated by Paul Woodruff. London: Penguin.
- 28 *ibid*
- 29 Soyinka. Wole. 1963. *The Bacche of Euripides (A communion rite)*,. *Collected Plays I*.NewYork: Oxford University Press
- 30 Euripides. 1990. *Bacchae*. Translated by Paul Woodruff. London: Penguin.
- 31 Soyinka. Wole. 1963. *The Bacche of Euripides (A communion rite)*,. *Collected Plays I*.NewYork: Oxford University Press
- 32 *ibid*
- 33 Nietzsche. Friedreich. 1993 in *The Birth of Tragedy*. Translated by Shaun Whiteside. London: Penguin. 109-110
- 34 Towards a True Theatre Author(s): Wole Soyinka Source: *Transition*, No. 50 (Oct., 1975 - Mar., 1976), pp. 63-64 Published by: Indiana University Press on behalf of the W.E.B. Du Bois Institute