

AN INDIVIDUAL AND HIS FOLKLORE: AN EXPLICATION ON SOYINKA'S APPROPRIATION OF OGUN MYTH AND SYMBOL

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This topic has an obvious Jungian implication, but I hasten to say that my approach is that of a folklorist and literary critic, rather than a psychologist. I wish to show how folk expressions are drawn into the literary ambience in order to extend our aesthetic, and sometimes philosophical, understanding of text and its creator. Therefore, there is the need for caution by a would-be analyst of Soyinka's use of myth in several poems (*Idanre*, *Ogun Abihiman*) and play (*The Road*). From a reading of how myth is regarded in Anthropology, Religion, Folklore, Philosophy and Literature, I find that Soyinka's use of it is intimidating. It is hard to fix it either into Ernst Cassirer's or Stith Thompson's model. Soyinka shares thought processes with both Paul Radin and Claude Levi-Strauss and several other users and interpreters of myth in cultural studies. Whether we interpret myth in his work literally or allegorically, for aesthetic appeal or liberative intent, from a religious or political bondage, his use of Ogun myth and the concept of the road welds folklore, myth and religion together to enable a cross-disciplinary study like this to take place, in which horizons of interpretation (Ruland, 1975) could repay our full understanding of religion and literature as dimensions of one integral process of human experience. Hence, the choice of this topic demands explication, as it relies very much on Alan Dundes' illuminating views on folk ideas as a unit of world view.

The intent of this discussion, therefore, is to examine folk ideas as a unit of world view. It shall also show how myths reveal cultural responses to the ever-important questions of life. Folk ideas are appreciated by folklorists as means towards the study of human thoughts (Dundes, 1971). It has assuredly become materials of philosophical interest, albeit controversial, among African philosophers, too (Hallen, 1995). It is in the light of this premise that Soyinka's *Myth, Literature and the African World* becomes an explicit dialogue on the intellectual status of African oral or verbalised knowledge as philosophy. In this discussion, therefore,

the preoccupation with the use of Ogun and symbol of 'the road' shall explore the ideas as they stride between folklore, myth and religion; it shall explore how both the myth and the symbol achieved the status of a private mythology not for Soyinka alone, but that of a communal mythology for a people in their expressions of how some phenomena could be understood. In other words, both propitiation to Ogun as a religious symbolism and the folklore mysteries of the road attempt to allay the anxiety of the contemporary man (Eliade, 1970:232).

The myth of the Road

Apart from the fact that, in Soyinka's work, 'the road' is very much tied to Ogun's mysteries, myth and rites, it is a concept that hides a lot of mythic symbol and folkloristic data in which implicit religious truth is expressed. Folk speech and custom about the road show how human consciousness applies itself as it struggles to interpret the world of experience and reality. As a folklorist myself, I have observed that the word "road" creates a world of its own as myth, in accordance with a spiritual principle; it is a word that discloses an immanent rule and its rites become a characteristic necessity for both the tender-minded conservatives and the tough-minded (secularised) reformers in Africa. The former appreciates the word as having eternal, allegorical, religious and philosophical truths, while the latter sees it and the rites to it as fiction or myth, designed to mislead the credulous, superstitious multitude.

Soyinka's use of myths on 'the road'

The following lines from Soyinka's "Death in the Dawn" (*Idanre*, p.11), which demand more than a literal interpretation, shall be used to illustrate the point about the characteristic necessity of the rites of the road as far as the two groups mentioned above are concerned.

The right foot for you, the left, dread
And the mother prayed, child
May you never walk
When the road waits, famished.

The idea of the road in these lines points to some questions that can only be answered from the domain of mythology, which, is also on the borderline of folklore and religion. The lines show that the

concept of the road goes beyond a purely poetic expression to an expression that reveals cultural responses to the fears, hopes and aspirations of man in the Yoruba and African world view, in an attempt to find answers to the following questions:

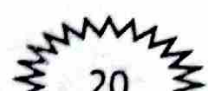
- How should I lead my life?
- What is the nature of the universe in which I live?
- How do I relate to that universe?
- How much control do I have over my life?
- What must I do in order to survive?
- How can I reconcile myself to the inevitability of death?

All these questions have been identified as the common focus of myth (Rosenberg, 1986). I hasten to add that the lines just quoted have become prayer points for the two categories of human mind: the conservative and the secularised. The level at which those lines are recited, either at the conscious or subconscious, need only be imagined, especially before journeys are embarked upon.

The myth of Ogun

The concept of the road in Soyinka's literary works exhumes itself from the Ogun myth, which has a cluster of ideas found usable both for the psyche and the art of Soyinka when the tale of the god is told. Ogun, in Yoruba folklore, myth and religion, is identified in celebrations as a fire-god and master-smith. Like some other great epic tales, he is the inventor of many useful arts, which he taught to man. He is fabled to be the pathfinder to other gods in the Yoruba pantheon. He is identified with volcanic activities and earthquakes, and has ruthless destructive tendencies. At the same time, he is the defender of orphans as well as the weak. He is, above all, the keeper of the road. Hubert Ogunde's phonodisc record, "Onimoto" ("The Driver"), relays the religious belief of the Yoruba people about death on the road in relation to the mysteries in the myth of Ogun. For the purpose of our discussion, the most important point revealed by this record is that the myth of Ogun or the concept of the road should not be considered as being a mere decadent or obscure tale. The lyrics of the song run as follows:

*Onimoto rora sa're o
Onimoto rora ni kona yen
Onimoto rora gb'ese le*



*F'eso jaive, onimoto
A sa're tete ko ma ni koja ile,
Arin ghere ko ma ni sun s'ona
Orere o le jin
Ko ma ni 'pekun
Eive o fo ko fori so'gi
Ogangan ona lulake so*

*Ogun lakaye, osinmole
Onile kangunkangun tin be l'orun
Olomi ni 'le feje we*

*Mariwo l'aso Ogun
Ogun nbe l'agbede, omo a fawo edun s'ewiri
Ona arin ye e e
Ona arin ye
Onimoto at'ero
L'omo Ogun onire
Ona arin ye*

Agbon gba l'ori eni t'ose

*Eniyan ti l'ehin ole
Odi fa fun Ogun
Ogun nti ikole orun bo wa s'ile aiye
Aiye ni wowo ntiwo
Aiye ni wowo ntiwo
Nje tani yio la 'na f'aiye o?
Ogun onire e ma seun
Ogun onire e ma seun l'aiye
O la 'na f'omo eniyan
O la 'na f'omo eniyan
O la 'na f'iji gbona
Tii lo dodu 'fe nibi ojumo ti nmo wa
La 'na rere ko mi o
Ogun, olona ola
Ki nm'ori de 'le
Ile koko n'tagbe.*

*[Driver, speed slowly
Driver, be careful at that corner
Driver, apply your foot gently on the accelerator
Take it easy, driver.
He who runs fast, will not go beyond his home
He who walks slowly, will not sleep on the road
No matter how long the street is
It surely terminates somewhere*

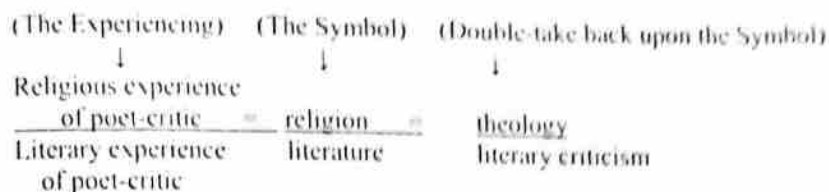
The bird does not run into a tree in its flight
It is straight ahead into the wood it goes
Ogun, the lord of the earth, head of all gods
You with many houses in heaven
You who have water at home, but
Choose to take your bath with blood
Palm fronds are the clothes of Ogun
Ogun, you live in the smithy
Happy cruising on the road
The driver and his passengers
All belong to Ogun
Happy cruising on the road

Coconut is broken on the head of the insolent
Multitudes only shout after the thief
Makes divination for Ogun
The day he was descending into the earth
The earth was clustered, very thickly clustered

Who shall clear the path into the world?
Ogun of Ire, we thank you
Ogun of Ire, we thank you immensely
You cleared the path for man
You cleared the path for the gods
Till they reached Ife at the break of dawn
Prepare the path of goodness for me
Ogun, the owner of the path to wealth
That I may reach home safely
As the raven heads straight for home.]

Implicit in the first stanza are several folk ideas about how a careful driver who is mindful of his soul shall drive home happily. The second and the third are concerned with myths and religious beliefs. The mythic symbols in those stanzas alluding to the various aetiological tales of Ogun as the guardian of the road are not merely symbolic expressions of objective reality, but are closely identifiable with reality itself. The deduction of David Bidney (1955) that myth promotes belief is evident in how the road has become, for Soyinka, a poetic experience (as in *Idanre*), while Ogun combines religious aura (as in *The Fourth Stage*) with artistic sensitivity (as in *Ogun Abibiman*). Soyinka's literary output on the concept of the road and Ogun thus fits well into Vernon Ruland's (1975:4) diagrammatic representation reproduced below. This will lead us further into the discussion of Soyinka's use of Ogun and the road to explain an

author's mystical experience and his theoretical postulation on the concept of tragedy.



Hubert Ogunde's popular record "Onimoto" and Soyinka's prayer in "Idanre" on the mysteries of Ogun become important in explaining the diagram above. Soyinka's prayer, (which has a folk idea behind it) and Ogunde's record, (which is a prayer put in the context of a cautionary tale) point to the close affinity between the poet and the shared acts of religious-poetic experience of his audience. Contrary to Vernon Ruland's view as this may sound, both Ogunde's "Onimoto" and Soyinka's "Death in the Dawn" are cast in new poetic sensibility and in such prayerful tones on the electronic medium of radio as follows:

*Ogun lakaye ki'binu lasan
Eniyan to ba nwa irin Ogun
T'osi n mu oguro Ogun
Afaimo
Ni 'o ni fi ara re we'wu
Ni'jo Ogun ba npebu Atari
Ti wa o ni si ni'be
A mo sa bi a barin ni'jo na
Yio ti wo wa l'ewu irin*

[Ogun does not get unnecessarily angry
Any one who is driving Ogun's iron
And also drinks Ogun's palm wine
Almost invariably
Places his life at risk
The day Ogun is slicing heads
May ours not be among
And if we happen to travel on the road that day
He would have clothed us in iron garb.]

In the above excerpt, just as myth and symbol merge, so do folklore and religion. We can see how reality is perceived by a people for

whom scientific explanation of death on the road does not exist. It is observed that some other foreboding statements about the road, even in current Yoruba language, could be seen as a development from a mythological mode of thought to one based on experience and reason (Gaarder, 1997:22). Every event is shrouded in mystery. To Soyinka and, perhaps, his fellow Yoruba, a radio jingle like "If you drink, don't drive, if you drive, don't drink", may not instil as much fear as the earlier quoted warning in which Ogun is invoked. Ogun's myth is a bearer of eternal truth about mediations between life and death. Such lines as the above and the ones from Soyinka about a famished road lying in wait, explains, however, the truth in Ruland's other view that 'one's religion and literary work are both human constructs, giving symbolic actualisation to aspects of the religious-poetic experiencing.' The religious and the poetic symbols must not be viewed as any less synergetic than the unitary religious-poetic act itself. In other words, the Ogun myth has become a private mythology in which there is an observed movement of poetic experiencing from religion to theology in Soyinka's literary works.

At least among the Yoruba, the associated rites or rituals to the god during the annual festival celebration, and even the daily propitiatory rites to the road are to meet a recurrent human need, which is the need for life and prosperity in one form or the other. Ogun myth, in relation to the concept of the road, means a lot to the public. Its folklore has psycho-mythic religious thoughts which transcend art or literature. For instance, the killing of a dog while travelling on the road serves a psycho-mythic relief expressed in the saying that "*Ogun ko ni f'eran wa yi'lele*" (May Ogun not make our flesh as meat for the dusty ground.) This is copiously expressed in the following lines of *The Road*:

Kill us a dog, Kotonu, kill us a dog
Kill us a dog before the hungry god lies in wait
And makes a substitute of me...Serve Ogun
His tit-bits so the road won't look at us one
Day and say "Ho ho you two boys look juicy to me."
But what's the use? The one who won't give
Ogun willingly will yield heavier meat by Ogun's designing.

While some Nigerian drivers take this rite of the road very seriously, others treat it as mere superstition which nevertheless is performed by the most tough-minded of them for fear of the unknown. The

varied reactions to such "religious experience" show how the dynamics of faith is kept alive by folklore and myths. This is true of all modern day religions. The killing of a dog for Ogun may not necessarily be an attempt to worship Ogun, but to ensure safety on the road. Taboos about the road range from the injunction to refrain from walking the road when the sun is too hot, to keeping away from the road at night or when it rains or thunders. These folk ideas and various other assumptions about the road as a symbol of uncertainty are the building blocks of a world view on the tragic idea (Bamidele, 1981). In *The Road* by Soyinka, as in Chinua Achebe's *Arrow of God*, the rite to the road is not merely a narrative associated with a god or some spirits, but it is a narrative which, with or without the associated rite, is believed to confer life as well as being crucial to the survival of the culture.

The central point of *The Road* and the poem of "the road" in *Idanre* is a depiction of the mythic propensity of the human behaviour to liberate the mind from foreign religious bondage. The Nigerian traveller on the road, especially the Yoruba person, does not take rituals of propitiation to Ogun for granted. The rites at dawn are a death ritual with an inherent formula as a life-giving myth (Hocart, 1952). The killing of the dog on the road by any driver has its own reverse magic in a way that the folklore about the road reveals a lot of traditional thoughts concerning the essence of death. The psycho-mythic thought about it is that it is a monstrous man-eater and that death on it is most often an inexplicable and inescapable reality. While Professor, in *The Road*, may conjecture about some man-made faults for the cause of death on the road, all this may be mere speculations as the ultimate source in the quest for the "Word" may end up as part of the mysteries of Ogun and the deceit of the road. *Idanre* couches the idea in the philosophy of fatalism in such words as:

Man's passage, preordained, self-ordered winds in reconstruction..
And the monolith of man marches still
A blind hunger in the road's hidden belly.

When the road is hungry, it is invariably, Ogun that is hungry. Like the sea in John Millington Synge's *Riders to the Sea*, the road as a symbol of uncertainty in the African world-view shows the intrinsic nature of folklore in literature. For emphasis, rather than repetition,

the road accumulates ideas, signs and omens to such an extent that Gustav Jahoda's (1969) explanation of superstition as belief carries on the universal significance of myth and folklore operating on a religious parameter. The range of allusions to the idea of the road as a "spider's web ready to trap flies," as either "the rock" or "woman" lying and waiting for life and death, provide profound meanings for a people who believe in omens, superstition and the supernatural before embarking on a journey. At least, that is what the idea of knocking the right or the left foot against a stump or a stone connotes, as in "Death in the dawn". Between the symbols, the metaphors and the death imageries in Ogun's tale as recounted in Hubert Ogunde's phonodisc record earlier cited, or Soyinka's experiencing of the road as symbol of death, there is an autochthonous related idea of life and death in such a folk idea as *Ona ofun, ona orun* (The path to the stomach is the path to heaven). All those who daily ply the road, like those who regularly ride to the sea as in Synge's play, see the road in the image of mother earth, who lies waiting to receive life or death.

Folklore has been found to be an intrinsic literature in support of a religious experience, based on the concept and symbol of the road as developed from the myths and mysteries of Ogun and the people's attitude to the carnage associated with them. For the public as well as for Soyinka, Vernon Ruland's idea that

$$\frac{\text{Religious experience of poet-critic}}{\text{Literary experience of poet-critic}} = \frac{\text{religion}}{\text{literature}}$$

is the translating of cultural experiences to literary/creative experience. The passion for rites to the road is still acute these days when accidents occur on the road. The mind of man is held at grips with tradition when surreptitiously or subconsciously he recites poetry (prayer) to Ogun as an expression of a form of knowledge essential to life. It is part of the socio-religious complex of the Yoruba man in whom the myth of Ogun as the keeper of the road, the blood-thirsty god (*Olomi ni'le f'eje we* = He who has water at home but bathes in blood), is real as every psychological experience is real to the subject. Any socio-anthropologist, of the Nigerian Muslim or Christian identity, would observe that when accidents on the road happen, definite poetic specification is given to a supposedly mysterious occurrence.

Talking, therefore, about how the Ogun myth has become personal mythology, *The Road* and *Idanre* have a basis in the personal experiences of Soyinka. Both works show how a poet can appropriate a myth to the level of religion. Ogun's ascendancy that is sung about in the gods' descent into earth, either in the choric song of hunters or Hubert Ogunde's *Onimoto* phonodisc record, has led many to conclude that Ogun is Soyinka's personal god. Ogun is so much romanticised in his poems as a reaper in terms of harvest, and feared to be recalled even in fertility ritual that is mingled with blood-cuddling experiences of carnage where men and animals become "fated lives riding on the wheels of death when the road waits famished." He is of seven paths, the godfather of all souls who by road made the voyage home. Soyinka's particular style of address to Ogun is distinctly romantic in that, while it communicates an objective truth for him, it communicates a subjective experience that many may share in the premonitions of walking on the road with a rite to Ogun.

Ogun, in *Idanre*, explains the relationship of an individual with his folklore. It is often said that when a myth is congenial to an individual, he may use it as personal fantasy (Eggan, 1955). The poet's walking tour of the terraced hills of Idanre appropriates the folklore and myth of Ogun, and raises it to the level of deity. It provides some psychological sense of a power-giving or a protecting guardian-spirit as derived from the god's narrative exploits. When Soyinka says 'I walked in the footprints of a god', there is an implied psychological ego-synthesis that the deity gives him strength, wisdom and advice, as he is well assured of treading on the right path. Ogun's poems speak volumes about Soyinka's veneration for the myth.

My god Ogun, Orphan's shield,
Ogun path-maker, he who goes fore where other gods
Have turned, shield of orphans...
Where do we seek him? they asked
Where conflict rages, where sweat
Is torrent of rain, where clear springs
Of blood fill one with longing
As the rush of wind
So there they sought
And there they found him

(*Idanre*, 70-75)

Throughout *Idanre*, we perceive of myth progressing towards religion in the service of Soyinka's literature. It is only deserving and duly expected that the myth as concept, code and language, should become for Soyinka, a socio-linguistic and ideological event in Roland Barthes' fashion (Gould, 1981:118). And in this regard, Soyinka clothes Ogun's myth with a theology of revolution/liberation in *Ogun Abibiman*.

Soyinka progressed beyond the psycho-mythic religious thought process to that identified double-take back upon the myth and the symbol in which Vernon Rulan deduced the schema of theology. The culminating point of Soyinka's literary theory in the form of re-mythologising Ogun's status is in *The Fourth Stage*, where Ogun is the neo-Nietzschean superior man, violent and intransigent. Ogun is hero who moves on to outrageous action in the attempt to repudiate the world and, indeed, to liberate man from political bondage or autocratic control. He is a hero whose action may be eccentric to prevailing gestures and aspirations, yet he is impatient with any social pressure that may bear him down. *The Fourth Stage* has more to recommend it as a study of myth in general as it offers the basis on which a society can be understood as being either revolutionary or conservative. For Soyinka, it seems to me that Rulan's schema achieves fruition of exposition in *Ogun Abibiman*.

Ogun myth progresses from religious experience as in the "Death in the dawn" poem to rites and rituals in *The Road* to theory in *The Fourth of Stage* and the application of theory in a theological fashion by the sermonising of Ogun's ascendancy as an inspirer-god, the restorer of justice and the revolutionary spirit as focal points in the welding of the Ogun theme with the theme of Shaka in *Ogun Abibiman*, unmasking, as it were, the operations of the myth upon the social plane. The value of myth and folklore for Soyinka is that it should be inspirational for intellectual discourse as in *The Fourth Stage*, and more inspirational these days on ideological event as in *Ogun Abibiman*. This has a Barthes' paradigm, which we may not need to go into here, but the event that gave birth to *Ogun Abibiman* is proof enough of what Soyinka shares with Barthes on mythic appropriation.

In consonance with the trend of this discussion, it should be stated that the folk idea that leads Soyinka on to this "dramatized heroic poetry" is hidden in a coded fantasy that imprints Ogun in the mind as shield of orphans and restorer of justice. As Mozambique declared war on white-ruled Rhodesia in 1976, the myth of Ogun as "*adigaga re bi ija*" (He who is battle-ready where there is conflict) consumes Soyinka's fancy. Ogundipe-Leslie (1976) explains that Ogun comes to break the illusion of dialogue in Southern Africa, as Soyinka's rage mounts against the absurdity of that political solution. After fruitless dialogues and sanctions, Ogun's concept, code and language, merge with the myth of Shaka in an epic grandeur in which they both take arms to restore justice to the defenceless in Sharpeville and Soweto. The narrative exploits of Ogun are abundant in Yoruba oral literature of the *Ijala* chant, while Mazisi Kunene's (1979) recounting of the Zulu myth is replete with metaphors and similes that could have aligned both culture-heroes with, or to, the idea of revolution/liberation.

To sum up, while folklore could provide creative impetus to the artist, it at times could become for the artist the "truth", and everything else could be seen in terms of it. In Soyinka's works, there is a dynamic interpretation or appropriation of myth and symbol. Myth as a source of creativity is also a source of the psychic structure of the artist's experience. The subtlety in Soyinka's aesthetic theory makes his use of myth the most enigmatic in Nigerian literary studies. His use of myth has progressed from communal mythology to a personal mythology to the level that he is often, in real life, impelled by his personal god, to become the hero of his own drama. The activism that is seen in him plays true to his own theory and myth-inspired role. Alan Dundes' (1971) study of folklore in literature and culture, emphasizes the fact that besides folklore being a source of creativity, it helps in identifying and interpreting the world view of both the artist and his people. So it is with Wole Soyinka and his works.

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