

WOLE SOYINKA'S POSTMODERNISM: THE POETICS OF *IGBALE*

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Between postmodernist and secular humanistic ethos

Extinction is an asset of matter, which itself is a slave of change. Mythology observed this paradox in nature and divined it with the metaphor of the Phoenix that, every million years, ritually gets burnt and resurrects from the ashes of its own ruins. In time, movements and cultures are prone to nurse the fear of the transience of being. In acceptance of this challenge, they, then, instinctively develop and exert self-defensive mechanisms for protective purpose. This same phobia has mainly stimulated the ideology of cultural and doctrinal superiority, domination and control, thus upholding the dynamism and quest for continuity as yet other assets of matter. Enriching world intellectual vision and practice, the Phoenix's archetypal cyclicity offers postmodernism a template to emerge as the renaissance of antiquity.

Responding to the all-pervasive and affective dictate of the phobia of outright extinction, irrelevance or temporal docility, the Fall 1998 issue of *Free Inquiry* was entirely committed to combating a perceived eroding force of its doctrinal dignity. The journal – the Council for Secular Humanism's idea dissemination organ – editorially describes postmodernism as an attack on truth, 'science, morality and common sense' (1998: Front cover). Timothy J. Madigan's "Transcending Havel" is one of the most topically incisive feature-essays. Specifically reacting to the content of "The Power of the Powerless" (*Civilization*, April/May, 1998) by Vaclav Havel – a playwright, actor and an anti-communist philosopher and revolutionary who later assumed the presidency of the Czech Republic having led the 1989 Velvet Revolution – Madigan concludes:

It is appropriate that the literary school that most influenced Havel was the Theatre of the Absurd (10).

Havel's absurd thinking had, existentially, attributed the root cause of current global problems and man's astounding limitation in solving them to the human 'loss of metaphysical certitude' and self-alienation from 'the sphere of the spirit'. By criticising 'the whole nature of the current civilization, with its shortsightedness, with its proud emphasis on the human individual...rational cognition...' (1998: 52:). Havel has, unguardedly, trampled on the larger-than-life toe of science and modernist thought-system: the core ideology of secular humanism. He has exposed science's fallacious self-assumption as the bastion of the ultimate truth.

Determined to embrace that same absurdist realm, I have found the Havelian advocacy of a global *Existential Revolution* attractive. Mine is an acceptance of the challenge of mystical existentialism as a paradigmatic sense in the permanent art exemplified by the myth-inspired literary canon, using the Soyinkaresque postmodernist creative temperament as a window of entry. Thinkers of Madigan's bent will, certainly, find this below the absurdist line for Wole Soyinka is a self-confessed secular humanist. The septuagenarian writer had precociously philosophized atheism in a secondary school prize-winning essay. The title of that essay, 'Ideals of an Atheist,' speaks volumes. And one can assume that the thoughts outlined in it, however teenage, must have prepared the writer for his official acceptance of Secular Humanism in his adult years. He had, in 1952 – at barely eighteen, led a team of Nigerian university undergraduates to inaugurate a non-faith-based organization – the Pyrates Confraternity, which later became the National Association of Seadogs and NAS International, and whose doctrinal summary still stands today as "For Humanistic Ideals". He had reaffirmed his subscription to the ideal of atheism in an interview with the present writer about forty-eight years later:

Very well. The correct title is "Ideals of an Atheist". And I certainly could still remember the thrust. By twelve I was a convinced atheist. And still I'm a qualified one (Wole Soyinka, in Awosanmi, 2003: 627).

He is a prominent member of the Council for Secular Humanism, and had stated the reasons he is a secular humanist in one of the editions of *Free Inquiry* (Vol. 17, No 4).

Here, my engagement with Soyinka's mysticism would be to prove – adopting the famous Pythagorean dictum – that the status of *man*, in Soyinka's creed, as "the measure of all things", is without the "loss of God" (Havel, 1998: 52). Wole Soyinka may have theoretically professed atheism but that atheism is spiritual, not secular. Actually, the Nobel Laureate's humanist mysticism offers the scholars of his works a platform of conviction in a specific *deistic* approach. This satisfactorily reinforces the fact that his secular humanist ideal itself is not only rooted in metaphysical existentialism, it is a process in private spirituality. Soyinka's deep suffusion in mythology and pro-life activism can concurrently reify humanism as his deity! And Soyinka's *igbale* mysticism – by which the transcendental values of the spiritual space are exploited in interrogating and proffering solutions to the problems of the inhumanity of the so much devalued secular space – shall serve as the beacon of my analytical exploration.

However, my conceptual stand on *igbale* is imperative at this point. Theoretically, *Igbale* is Soyinka's *cosmo-logical* ritual space. *Igbale* is a concretization of the vast, but cryptic, symbol of the dramatist-philosopher's unique existentialist response. *Igbale* is the all-pervasive index of his 'philo-theoretic' construct of *spatiosophy* – existentialist spatial philosophy. In the rituo-pragmatic world of Soyinka's Yoruba cultural origin, *igbale* is the domain, the grove of the spirits; the abode of the ancestors; the conserved space for the shrine of humanity; the cultic forest for *flesh dissolution*; the mediating stage for man's inevitable movement of transition. It is an arena whose currents are catalysts to the ritualizing of man's revolutionary instinct and the revolutionizing of man's ritualistic instinct as variously experimented and proved by Soyinka in his works. *Igbale* is the phenomenal space for Soyinka's superstructure. In this era that is witnessing a dearth in theoretical structures, and as such a repetitious critical cycle with respect to Wole Soyinka's literary vision, *Igbale* could very well serve as a theoretical basis for future, therefore new, appreciation of the author's creative, critical, theoretical and polemical productivity.

Permanent arts and pristine cultures have, over the years, universally embraced the poetry of the mythical Phoenix's *birth-death-resurrection* construct by resisting and transcending the canal hubris of modernist scientism and secularity. If we reflect on the

incessant appearance and re-appearance of norms, values, customs, behaviours and even fashion, it is explicit that cultures and arts have consistently observed the postmodern dance before the formal birth of the theory itself. In realization of the occasional cryptic appearance of such literatures – marked by transcendental codes – especially to the “civilized” but “shortsighted”, this investigation of Soyinka’s mystical system – via the *igbale* symbolic total space – may serve as an eye-opener. Considering the depth of Wole Soyinka’s exploration of mystical symbolism and existentialist mythopoesis, a semiotic explication of what I have identified as *igbale aesthetic codes* will suffice. This will be accomplished within the conceptual contextualization of postmodernism in such a manner that reveals Soyinka’s humanistic combination of both the *neoconstructive* and the *revolutionary* strains (Hutcheon, 1988).

Soyinka: meta-humanism and postmodernism

The following truism is the major reason the *igbale* ideal is a living canon in Soyinka’s mythopoesis today, and why it has survived the neo-Tarzanistic ‘poetics of death and mummification’:

The African world...is governed by a far more holistic habit of perception and representation...various expressions come to mind in an effort to define the African world – holistic, animist protean, totalist, etc...etc...(Soyinka, 1988:108-109).

I do not know of any African writer who has courted as much intellectual dislike as Soyinka. The artist, always a vintage survivalist individual, is driven by the phobia of possible extinction, on the one hand, and the quest for survival and continuity, on the other. Soyinkaresque postmodernism, caught in this paradox, inscribes resistance as another asset of matter. For a greater part of his theoretical critical and creative years, Soyinka has been a combatant against registered illusions of outright secular [mis]understanding of the African worldview as expressed by him. A postmodern recognition of the African total material-immaterial reality has been an instructive anchor of his *meta-humanism*. I must stress that a *meta-humanist*, such as Soyinka, would be an uninspiring and self-contradictory secular humanist. My reason? *Igbale*, Soyinka’s operational *meta-space*, is not an atheistic space that can easily suffer annihilation by the neo-Tarzanistic ethical

conjecture of secular humanism. This position the playwright himself would find agreeable. Believing otherwise would be simply accentuating culpability in the same anti-African spirituo-cultural terrorism as he had accused the *neo-Tarzanists* and *leftocrats* of African literature (1988).

Igbale is a microcosm of world-being. As a semiotic sign, it serves as a spatial fort for Soyinka's meta-humanistic poetics due to an avalanche of existential codes which links the reader's cognition to the writer's heart and the heart of the indomitable cultural universe, which it commands. In Soyinka's mythopoesis, the *igbale* codes are the transmitting devices of the African cosmic sense. The *igbale* mythology itself is explicit as spatial unification of cosmos and landscape in primitive holistic cognition of existence. *Igbale* synthesizes the antithesis of knowing and unknowing and yields a reserve of knowledge about existence, which can be well divined through its semiotic codes. Thus, physical and metaphysical spaces, forming a continuum, determine a profound existential awareness that is both pragmatically and theoretically revered. This indexes the pragmatic meta-humanistic idea in which the Soyinkaresque mystique is existentially foregrounded - combining both the *physical* and the *metaphysical* as two equal halves of its binary nature.

At the level of theory, the postmodern culture can be both anti-modernist and pro-modernist. As a synthesizer of the old in, and for, the new, the concept and practice of postmodernism is vision, rationale and form which is essentially pro-primitivistic. It is these indices of pro- or neo-primitivism, which, in their functional capacities. Linda Hutcheon has articulated as "the poetics of postmodernism" (1988). Seeing the postmodern as a "problematizing force" (xi) in today's global cultural space cannot be dissociated from postmodernism's ideological travel into the distant past [in postcolonial spaces; precolonial past] as a reclaiming force of sign and value for the interrogation of man's modernity and the edification of the present. Thus, most postmodernist writers accept Michel Foucault's (1985) prescriptive conceptualization of the term "problematize" in its "continuous", "current" and "active" vibrancy to generate discourses through their arts. Neo-primitivist writers employ antiquity to truly "problematize" their value-reduced social presences. This is the revolutionary relevance and usage of ritual. Those pre-modern devices of modern creative problematization, in

Soyinka's case, are sufficiently *igbale*-based; and they are indexes of his mythic inspiration and exploration. Since the concept of process is at the heart of postmodernism (Hutcheon, 1988), artistic products so created are critical subjects of that reading. The significance of such writer-critic inter-dependency could then reside only in the forging of "new meaning and understanding of the human condition" (Docker, 1994: 85).

Bearing this in mind, the ideological or meta-humanistic sub-text of Wole Soyinka's postmodernism is the universalized Afro-Yoruba mysticism, and this is the determinant of the scope and depth of meaning of his myth-oriented works. Though sometimes covert in sociological context, the structural sign and its codes are also usually self-reflexive – within the framework of the background culture – of its catholic social applicability. Meaning is encoded in purpose. Meaning is the semiotics of *igbale* as Soyinka's universal meta-humanistic spatial sign. Within this spatio-symbolic ambience, the semiotic codes themselves are functional interpretive mediators.

***Igbale* semiotic construct: sign, codes and meaning**

In semiotics, being a decoding system, meanings of signs are perceived, while the signs or codes are indicators of units of ideas, notions and values (Yakubu, 2004) – which may be concurrently culture-bound and universal. The Saussurean *value signification* and Peircean *icon-index-symbol* semiotic interpretive formulas have both yielded other modes such as Northrop Frye's *mythic-archetypal theory* (1963 and 1973); Roman Jakobson's *communicative codes*, Gerard Genette's *architext* and Udu Yakubu's *archetypal-semiotic approach* (2004) – a *mélange* of the last three. My option in this paper is what I have called the *architext-indexing mode* (A-IM): a derivative of the six formulas above. I have collapsed these diverse approaches for the fact that they all have contributory relevance in my location of aesthetic codes and the navigation of their individual and collective poetic functionary status within the framework of Soyinka's *igbale* archetypal text.

Igbale, in Soyinka's philo-creative universe, is an archetypal space: an existential sign in his meta-aesthetic symbology. *Igbale*, then, is yoked with an intent-meaning-effect value. The same impetus that qualifies its *archetextual* status also mandates certain innate syntagmatic referents useful for the decoding of its structure.

An inter-textuality of meaning exists, within the *igbale* spatial framework, between physical and metaphysical spaces. In Soyinka's works, the physical text or space relies, for real meaning, on the metaphysical text or space. The metaphysical spatial text, then, is the *supertext* – the reason mysticism retains the ultimate superstructural position in Soyinka's mythological complex. The *igbale* *archetext* only survives within Soyinka's mythological *supertext*. The *igbale* aesthetic referents, then, are sense-indexing codes meant for decoding the *igbale* essence. An application of the *A-IM* semiotic formula to a meta-existentially grounded literature, therefore, aims at the investigation of the sub-textual meaning of *meta-signs* and cryptic layers characteristic of the mythology-dependent art.

Aesthetic codes in Soyinka's myth-oriented works are deliberate *transcendental signifiers* and their textual potency reinforces the writer's essentialist ideal constructivist taste. By textual potency of aesthetic codes, I mean the epistemic competence of the codes as reifiers of the writer's objective existential realism within a given meta-materialist textual universe. Semiologically speaking, then, by being identified as knowledge pillars in Soyinka's *igbale* cosmo-symbolic structuring, the codes are worthy devices implicitly capable of aiding – in line with Jacobson's expressive communication "model of linguistic communication" (Chandlers, 2004:17) – the construction of an ideal community of 'culturally well-adjusted' (Panofsky, 1970: 51-3) readers.

Soyinka's art of encoding within the mythopoetic text – which projects mythology itself as a universal semiotic system – has been achieved with a mind that has captured the traditional and historical process, as well as the essence of the *thoughtstream*, of his race and beyond. Cultural signs can only make sense within the cultural matrixes created by cultural codes through cultural agents. Soyinka's poetic signposting, via the *igbale* mystico-aesthetic system, performs the function of meaning within the philosophical context that ramifies both his nativist and foreign predilections to sign and meaning preference and projection. This fact stretches his postmodernist ethic into a culturally boundless realm – the true meaning of his creative-aesthetic and philosophically eclectic cosmopolitanism.

Poetic signposting deepens, then, the objective of the creative meaning-making exercise and counter-balances Jan

Mukarovsky's (1976) poetic referential formula whose 'relationship to reality is weakened' (162) by the necessity of mere semantic contextualization. And *A-IM* is a semiotic tool of decoding poetic signposts. In the art of signposting of meaning, as Soyinka has done in his neo-primitively rooted works, aesthetic function is sought in the *meta-text* of the reality of existence which the works themselves explore; not the surface plasticity of verbal utterances or figurative signification of writings. *Igbale* aesthetic codes, then, are tools of the *meta-realistic* content of the poet's mystical existential humanism. This is what qualifies Soyinka's mythopoetic oeuvre, its *igbale* universe and the *igbale* aesthetico-poetic signs as a complete semiotic system.

If this is the case, the Soyinkaresque art attains the status of a *semiotic fact* – to borrow Mukarovsky's fertile idea in another paper – since a work of art "is at one and the same time sign, structure and value" (1976: 1). The factual semiology of Soyinka's mythopoesis owes its signification to "the double existence" of the relevant artistic works "both in the world of sense perception and the "collective consciousness" (1). What, then, are the tools of Soyinka's artistic semiotic fact within the *igbale* mystico-spatial construct?

My analytical passage into the world of Wole Soyinka's *igbale* semiotic sign will be, logically, what I have identified as *igbale* semiotic codes – the facts or particulars of the symbol. Within the purview of the *archetext-indexing mode (A-IM)*, *igbale*, the spatio-sign, is the *archetextual* structure. This is premised on the obvious sense that pillars are the bones or spines of structures. *Igbale* is the large and cryptic spatial paradigm of Wole Soyinka's mystical symbology. It must have, then, syntagms of its simplification. As structure and sign, its referential pillars manifest in form of metaphorical and symbolic code that burst out in a multiplicity of sub-codes with visual, auditory, psychical leanings, which, in turn, constitute the *indexes* of its depth and meaning. *Index*, within the *A-IM* semiotic context, is the fact or particular of the *semiotic text* (the *archetext*).

In *A Dance of the Forests* (1963), the term postmodernism comes to the fore as a synchronization of matter and spirit within the *igbale archetextual* spectrum. This work, which could be easily pronounced, in critical terms, as Soyinka's postmodern masterpiece, occupies an historical position in Soyinka's productivity as the real

evidence of his artistic cosmopolitanism and mytho-cultural complex. Though *The Strong Breed* (published in 1963) had been written and performed about two years before the writing of *A Dance of the Forests* in 1960, it only serves as a preliminary to Soyinka's mystico-symbolic construction. It can be observed that the same spatial attitude runs through *The Strong Breed* and *A Dance of the Forests*. The dramatic actions and existentialist revelations of both plays are consciously sited in the *igbale* (spi)ritual environment. It would be correct to assert that *The Strong Breed* offers Soyinka a forum for initiating his semiotic indexing creative purpose, a consciousness that the playwright simply advanced in *A Dance of the Forests*. But the latter play certainly presents itself to a critic as a more revolutionary and experimental platform for engaging Soyinka's distinct meta-humanistic and postmodernist ethic. If the *igbale* spatio-mystical icon is a cultural framework within the Afro-Yoruba cultural universe, four major codes: the mask, *The Word*, *The Earth* and the *Araba* arboreal totem employed in Soyinka's mythology-inclined works reinforce the *igbale* conceptual praxis. However, these selected codes do not, in any way, exhaust the *igbale* code-categories in Soyinka's mythopoesis. Other symbolic dimensions and their contextual meaning will be absorbed in future explication.

First, *The Word*, whose semiotic index status within the *igbale* archetextual structure is conferred by the power of its source: the mysticism of sound, itself a primal elemental sign. Sound as an active force in creation is justified by most myths of origin. Yoruba creation myth talks about the summoning of the *Irunmole* (the arch deities) by *Olodumare* (the Supreme Being) to embark upon the trip that resulted in the creation of the earth under the leadership of *Obatala*, equipped with a five-toed pigeon and a leaf-packet of soil. After the creation of the earth, *Olodumare* revealed to the arch divinities *Ifa* – a word-driven mystery – as an instrument with which to govern the world. The Judeo-Christian myth depicts God as the principal actor in creation as well as the utterer of the key sound that ultimately transformed into the world: 'Let there be light, and there was light.' The physical manifestation of the major landmarks in creation – light, man, earth, animals, etc. – is in primal obedience to the order encoded in *The Word*, the ultimate sign of affirmation of the primal sound. It is the major code of the existential antinomial

signs of life and death and the *carrier* in the mystery of ritual – itself the form and medium of action in *igbale* mysticism. This is the reason Soyinka embarked upon the existential philo-creative investigation of *The Word* in *The Road* (1965).

Sound lives in *The Word*. It is its active agent. Going by the testimony of mythology, *The Word*, in mystical essence, is a reference beyond word. Equipped with *Ase*, an extra-verbal reality or force, *The Word*, in Soyinka's mystical philosophization of 'The Road' (not as play title now, but as another mystical element) is the mystico-symbolic sound-sign of the world. *The Word* is the vehicle of the affirmation of wish or thought as well as psyche. It is the principal negotiator, the *mid-force*, between all the levels of manifestation of consciousness: psyche, thought, word and action. This conclusion is in spite of such reductive procedures as Burke's (1966) *terministic pyramid* model, which seeks to examine, in general terms, the cross-ideational characteristics of term-referents by establishing four ideo-verbal realms: natural order, verbal order, socio-political order, supernatural order (359-379).

It must be understood that *The Word* as engaged in Soyinka's play, *The Road* (1965), is symbolically yoked with a mystical current. Actually, *The Word* is the fire the action, the propelling force in the play, *The Road*. An alternative title for *The Road* could easily have been *The Word*. Wole Soyinka's symbolic metaphorization of *The Word* goes to the heart of *The Sound* as a key elemental component of life. Within this ambit, *The Word* is the major quest of not only Professor (Soyinka's tragic hero) but also all knowledge-seekers, including scientists, to unravel the ever-compelling mystery of existence as encapsulated in the symbiotic mysteries of life and death. Soyinka's pre-occupation with *The Word* propels it beyond mere metaphor and crystallizes it as a symbol. It, therefore, unites Soyinka's vision with, and also reveals his possible subscription to, the stoic philosophy.

As a matter of reminder, for the Stoics, *Logos* is the actual force, the very active principle that determines the nature, sense and essence of the world. Indeed, there is a parallel between the conceptualization of *Logos* in Christian Theology as *The Word of God* manifest, and in Yoruba Orisa Theology and mysticism as the concrete form of the utterance of *Olodumare*, the spiritual primary. It would be interesting further to remark that the universal caretaker of

Ase – the living substance in *The Word (Logos)* – is, ironically, the Christo-Islamically demonized *Esu* of the Yoruba pantheon (See Abimbola, 1976 and Euba, 1989). *Ase*, the cosmic force of efficacy in *Oro* (The Spoken Word) endows man and his entire existence with reality, form, palpability, destiny. This is the standard truth in all mythologies, all theologies, all religions, all mysticisms. But it is a subject worthy of fuller attention in another forum.

Questing for the essence of *The Word* (as in the depth of life and the depth of death) as found in *The Road* is investigating the road that leads to the heart of the very force that crystallized into existence – the force, a substantial energy or tool not too far from the Supreme Deity (Himself *The Word*) in essence. To penetrate the so much acclaimed impenetrable mask of *The Road*, therefore, care must be exerted in the comprehension of the esoteric force of *Ase* (Logos/Word) and the centrality of *Esu*'s divinity to Beingness; to the *Ase* phenomenon itself as well as his unity with God. *The Road*, then, is Soyinka's research-adventure into the *Ase* mystery and the *Esu* reality and universality, as well as his mystico-creative experimental action to unravel the core-essence of the world. And *igbale* provides for him the right symbolic ambience for this ritual excursion.

The Word is the precursor of *The Earth*. This ascendancy is underscored by both the Hebrew and Yoruba myths of origin and other mythological accounts. *Olodumare* of the Yoruba pantheon gave the *Irunmole* (the arch divinities) the instruments of creation of the earth – a five-toed pigeon and some soil enwrapped in a leaf – and gave them the *Logos* for their application. Biblically, God, in stages, affirmatively issued the related *Logos* before the manifestation of all aspects of His creation – light and day, the heavens/sky, earth, plants and vegetation, the sun, moon and stars, land and sea creatures, and lastly, human beings. The logical support for the consideration of *The Earth (Ile in Yoruba)*, then, hinges on the fact that it is one of the foremost/basic elements of *igbale*. Actually, *ile* is the sanctuary of *igbale*. Without *ile*, *igbale* would not have been realizable. It would only have been banned to a mere conceptual post.

The ancestors are metaphorically coded as the *alale* (the owners of the earth). The *Irunmole/mole* can be deconstructed to mean *Irun ti o mo ile* (the deities that know the earth). Of course, the

Irunmole partnered with *Olodumare* in the primordial creation of the earth and the Yoruba world, just as Jesus Christ (God the Son) and the archangels were witnesses to the creation of the Hebrew world. The *Ogboni* conclave of elders, keepers of the historical, political, organizational, socio-cultural and spiritual secrets of the Yoruba communal essence, also has *The Earth* as the central elemental symbol to its mystical being. This resides in the *Edan*, a bi-gender staff that existentially integrates the male essence in the female essence and resolves both into the earth as the *ibere* (alpha) and *opin* (omega) of being. The *ilepa* (the soil scooped from the depth of the *oju oori* (the grave of a departed person), in the Yoruba metaphysics of the dead, is an *igbale* mystico-symbolic element of existential plane-linkage, mysticism of revelation and spirituality of remembrance. *The Earth*, then, as both element and planet, is revealed more forcefully as the great womb of existence. But it is just a mere fraction of the *meta-global Odu*, the existential mysterium, which *Ifa* keeps and cognizes.

Before suspending this explication of *The Earth* for now, it must be hinted that this mystical code of the *igbale* existential sign also has its own codes, and this fact is firmly embedded in Soyinka's mytho-dramaturgy. Dead Man and Woman of *A Dance of the Forests* (1963) return to the plane of the living through the *earthstream* of the wide-world-womb. *The Earth* is the central symbolic element, the cultic superstructural mysticism, of *Madmen and Specialists* (1971). At a crucial stage in the process of the tragic march towards his destiny(ation), Eman, the protagonist of *The Strong Breed* (1963), scoops the earth and purifies himself with it. With *The Earth*, the eyes of Eleshin Oba in *Death and the King's Horseman* (1975) are sealed to the world here to open into the world there.

In *A Dance of the Forests*, one earth-code that stands out is the *Araba* tree, which functions fascinatingly in double capacities. It manifests first as the totemic plant of *Oro*: the *igbale*-bound cult of the dead and the race's mystical spirit of vengeance. It is later revealed as a "symbol of the great reunion" in its purposefully transformed stage at the "Gathering of the Tribes". Actually, the *Araba* tree's manifestation in the play does not commence until it has become diminished. Soyinka, then, has embedded this arboreal edifice – within the drama's overall symbolic structure – with a dual

integral dimension: its secular totemic value is infused into its original mystico-natural sacred symbolism. Though both dimensions uniquely connect its post-sacred identity, it still retains a large dose of mystical significance, and this can be viewed via three fringes. The carving of *Araba* into a totemic image, certainly, is reductive of its arboreality, and this is a negation of the environmental preservation principle of African religious groves. *Igbale* is the sacred grove of environmental preservation. Trees and shrubs – mostly medicinal and sacred – are thus totemic plants of gods, goddesses, spirits and forces. Every plant in *igbo igbale* is not just any plant. Every plant has specific purposes. Within the vicinity of shrines of certain deities too, some plants are totemically conserved to protect the culture of the divinity, which the shrine venerates. It, therefore, upsets the crux of unity as enshrined in the African worldview's sense of community, which recognizes an interflow of currents – mystically and medicinally – between planes of existence and sections of nature. *Araba* presents the environment as a metaphor of communality, which is harboured within itself. It projects *igbale* as a sign of itself as invested in the mystico-vegetative environment.

This demystification of the natural order informs the second interpretive axis. An obvious act of desecration of spiritual substance, the reduction of *Araba* to an ordinary art-sign alludes to the devaluation of African spiritual order by colonialism, especially the system's symbiotic tools of Christo-Islamic and political control. While Christian and Islamic imperialism co-subjugated, spiritually, African native religious beliefs, western colonialism, the *super government*, stole, confiscated and shipped African artifacts – mostly looted from numerous faith centers – of the home-countries to be showcased in museums as relics of the imperialists' annexation of the African territory and spoils of their battle for the African culture and mind. This, certainly, is nothing short of a spiritual tragedy: a decapitation of the African communal mystical being – just as it happened to *Araba*.

Colonialism, a globalizational ideology, is then glaring as a denuding essence. With the usage of the *Araba* tree symbolic code, Soyinka depicts the African spatial continent as *igbale* while the denuding of *Araba* depicts the denuding of Africa's spiritual essence. Further, Soyinka, in his customary way, has

mythographically offered a critique of the incursion of modernity, and its attendant despoliation – a discourse that he decided to carry into *Kongi's Harvest* (1967) – into the traditional frame of existence. This is a great elemental transgression for which the sinner must atone. Demoke's punishment by sacrifice is a prediction that negative modernity and its harbingers will one day atone for their intransigence against the positive African universe. The arch-antagonist of *Kongi's Harvest* is made to confront his own negative metaphysical head through the appropriate symbolic mirror of Segi's father's head kept in the copper salver.

Writing *A Dance of the Forests* by Wole Soyinka is an auspicious endeavour, considering the timing and the writer's audacious insistence on the staging of the play, in spite of the independence celebration authority's denial of funds because of the its satiric and revolutionary barbs. Here, the artist's role as a socio-political and time-space mediator is boldly imprinted. From a socio-mystical frame of meaning, Demoke – the artist – may have been unconsciously possessed by the spirit of his guardian-deity (*Ogun*) – in his characteristically paradoxical destructive-creative formula – to foment a project of nationalism and unification. Equipped with the power of clairvoyancy, the *Ogun-Soyinka-Demoke* triad, co-priests and co-artists, may have had a futuristic knowledge of the new *continent-coming-into-being*, especially its historical propensity for disunity and chaos: in the ramifications of religion, class, politics, gender, power etc. If the *Ogun-Soyinka-Demoke* cooperative messianism inspires the apotheosis of *Araba* (its global enlargement, beyond its originally circumscribed relevance in the *Oro* cult, to a signifier of a national cult of progressive ethics) into a communal totem – “Symbol of the great reunion” – the aim, then, is to courageously fashion a socio-mystical ideal of nationhood in *igbale*. In the semiotic sense, races and people produce civilizations and cultures. The dynamism of culture resides in its potentiality as a veritable sign-producer. The artist, then, is a cultural-sign transmitter. If mysticism is the synthetic tool in Wole Soyinka's mythopoesis, and symbols are essential to this mystico-synthetic process, one symbolic code produced by the Yoruba culture as an index of the *igbale* archetextual sign is the mask.

From the elemental perspective, the mask is the synthesizer of meaning within the *igbale* mystico-spatial structure since it is the

veil between *in-space* and *out-space*. As veil, the mask observes such dynamism that it temporarily separates and permanently unites the concrete space and the meta-space. As mystico-visual code of the *igbale* spatial sign, the mask connects *The Word* to The Earth and this is what Soyinka has radically postmodernized in his cultural transmission of the quest of the Yoruba for the ideal essence, a quest which catalyzes man's active involvement in the reality of the triadic existential plane. The mask is a veritable tool – technically and thematically – and a medium of communal spiritual realization. The process of donning the mask is the process of attaining deityhood since *igbale* is the domain of deities. Form, appearance and being transformation, a principle deeply ingrained in the *igbale* mystery, is a basic evidence of Wole Soyinka's mask construction within the tragico-symbolic philosophizing context, for which *A Dance of the Forests* serves as the most experimental, therefore the most adventurous point of reference. This dramaturgic achievement resides in the mask-idiom introduced by the dramatist through the court of Aroni. The mask, a concrete formula of exchange of face and consciousness; a frame of transiting beyond the self into an extended identity and extra-space; and an instrument of conferring a consecrated image on the living as well as probing existential mysteries, is donned by the three tragic protagonists – Dead Man, Dead Woman and Half-Child.

Originally, the mask reflects the resigned psychological conditions of these arch-tragic specimens, but it equally crystallizes as the psychical symbol of exertion of sub-consciousness on their senses, thereby actively launching them into trance. For the mytho-tragedian, the imperative of the trance symbolic action and revelation mode at this stage owes its utilitarianism as both practical and psychical medium for the manifestation of the seven nature-spirits summoned by The Interpreter as media of revelation and fate-divination. Eshuoro, Soyinkaresquely combining two forces – *Esu*, faith-deity and custodian of karmic principle, and *Oro*, the cult of the dead and spirit of the wind and vengeance – adopts the mask as the major tool of realizing his chameleonic nature. Rapidly transforming from Interpreter to The Questioner and to Figure in Red, he consistently impersonates fate and personifies the force that leads men to their destination through a labyrinth of chances, points of determination and choices.

This *auto-symbolic* phenomenal experience, close to *hypnagogic* symbolization of thought (Sartre, 1972: 122), is an investigative strategy, on the parts of the characters involved, which essentially exemplifies the mystical ritualistic bent of Soyinka's tragic vision. It equally, tactically, integrates the various realms of the play into one another within a tragico-existential construct. Within a multiple role framework, the mask mesmerizes the human characters and induces them into trance to be psychically harmonized, with their choice spirits being effective veils of negotiation between the *in-space* and *out-space*. This is also true of the status of the mask in *The Road* (1965) as the catalyst of the body corporeal into unification with its Other. As an art stimulant of the mystical aura, the mask evokes the sense of the continuum in which material being dissolves into the immaterial presence.

Conclusion

Wole Soyinka's intercultural cosmopolitanism has been severally explained from the perspectives of forms, themes and Euro-American influences by Ogunba (1975); Adelugba (1987); Chinweizu et al (1980); Eshiet (2000); Lindfors (2002); Oko (1992); Betiang (2006), etc. But superseding this is the writer's interspatial cosmopolitanism – a practice which provides the framework of reality for his tripartite existentialist theory and lends credence to (phe)nomenal canonization as a spatio-symbolic construct.

Such essays as *The Critic and Society: Barthes, Leftocracy and other Mythologies*, *Who's Afraid of Elesin Oba?* and *The Autistic Hunt, or How to Maximize Mediocrity* by Soyinka himself in *Arts Dialogue and Outrage* (1988), have not done much to convert anti-animist theorists and critics who, through the 1970s to the early 1990s, reductively fixated his productivity as 'impenetrable', 'obscure', 'abstract', 'unstageable', 'unperformable', etc. *Leftocrats* of modern African literature, rather than take cues from those seminal essays which provide rich insights into, not just Wole Soyinka's mythology, but also into the understanding of the African philosophical mainstream of writers like him, merely treat them as *undecodable* theoretical texts produced to decode *undecodable* creative texts. In sharp contrast is the Ghanaian novelist, Ayi Kwei Armah, who, in his collection of essays - *The Eloquence of the Scribes: a Memoir on the Sources and Resources of African*

Literature (2006) - dedicated a whole chapter to the explication of Soyinka's *Myth, Literature and the African World* (1976). Obviously, being *culturally well adjusted*, Armah found the work highly crucial to the comprehension of African worldview and culture generally.

Actually, the production of true knowledge, and cognition of the sublime mythopoetic ethics, in the Soyinkaresque scholarship domain, beckons the commitment of only those who are ready to be *culturally well adjusted* and unbiased. Only the cognoscente knows what transpires in the womb of a cultural system. This truth is metaphorically reiterated by the ethic of the *igbale* entity itself. In Yoruba communities, *igbo igbale* is as distant as it is subsumed in the individual's psyche. Only the *awo* (initiate/cognoscente) have access to *igbale*, while the *ogberi* (non-initiate/ignoramus), while not outrightly being denied access, are simply unfit. Their spiritual strength cannot cope with the radioactive energy that charges the *igbale* mystical ambience. Delving into *igbale* without being properly equipped might be dangerous. Nevertheless, such neophytes still have an idea of the *igbale* as a sacred space. Those whose lack of courage denies the fellowship of the rites and mysteries of *igbale* may become frustrated and resort to demonizing the system and the tradition that spurned it, in unsavoury terms. This is a very common experience in societies where people negativize what they do not understand and are not courageous enough to investigate. Such specimens of the culturally self-alienated then develop a strange phobia for the cultural system in question, become hollowly judgmental by proscribing the culture in prejudicial terms. This had been the case, to some extent, with the myopic rapprochement by some critics with Soyinkaresque literary productivity.

The post-Marxist phase of Soyinkaresque literary scholarship seems to be making a cyclic turn to the real appreciation of the writer as pioneered by Oyin Ogunba in his perennially relevant critical work, *Movement of Transition* (1975), a book that approaches Soyinka from his autochthonous foundations. Recently too, Samson Dugga, in an essay titled "The Yoruba Roots of *A Dance of the Forests* and *Death and the King's Horseman*" (2006), examines Yoruba tradition as the basis 'for understanding Soyinka's theatre'(71). This is merely a continuation of the project of nativist

explication of Soyinka which liberal critics like Eldred Durosini-Jones (1973), Gerald Moore (1978), Bernth Lindfors (1979), Abiola Irele (1981), James Gibbs (1980), Obi Maduakor (1986), etc., have embarked upon. As a matter of fact, Maduakor's classification of *A Dance of the Forests*, *The Road*, *Madmen and Specialists*, *The Bacchae of Euripides* and *Death and the King's Horseman* as *metaphysical plays* must have, no doubt, emanated from his understanding that they are all philosophically and super-structurally inured in neo-primitive mysticism.

Wole Soyinka's postmodernism is conveniently domiciled in his exploitation of primitive systems, aesthetic forms and mystical license to forge a relevant contemporary artistic identity. By this, Soyinka subverts the modernist creed that stresses *newness* in artistic productivity. In vintage Soyinkaresque practice, the postmodernist act is the process of exploiting the aesthetic and philosophical power-grid of pre-modern antiquity to satisfy the quest of modernity for order, thereby achieving the security of a future modernity. What indexes the *modern* in the *post* of Soyinka's postmodernism, then, is the poetics of the aesthetic network and novelty of the philosophical reality achieved through the works. Antiquity is the germ of Soyinka's *modern* postmodern relevance; mysticism, the spirit of his secular humanist concern. Betiang's (2006) conclusion on the postmodernism of *Beatification of Area Boy* is metaphorically relevant here:

Soyinka...has like the god Quetzalcoatl, reached deep into the sarcophagi for the bones of those that have gone before, to create and chart a new direction for what will come after (160).

Wole Soyinka's postmodern practice subsumes the two laps of its implication as proffered by Hutcheon (1988). It is both 'neoconservatively nostalgic and radically revolutionary' (xiii). This postmodernist spiritual and secular bent has been both creatively and philosophically systematized into a special symbol identifiable as *igbale* – a network of codes, signs and meanings noumenally transmitting the nativist global currents of the Afro-Yoruba pre-modern civilization for humanity's universal consumption.

Igbale is an established postmodern space in the dramaturgy of Wole Soyinka and the dramaturgy itself is a postmodern site for antiquarian renaissance just as mythology has proffered itself to the

Phoenix as a site of postmodern relevance through the mythical bird's cyclical return to life. Both *igbale* and Soyinka's dramaturgy are in harmony as optimistic response to the phobia of cultural extinction, which the Yoruba mystical worldview, as well as African universal thought system, are currently experiencing as a result of the inundating pressure of globalization. The Soyinkaresque vision is such conviction that is nourished in the reality of world meta-scientific culture, which need not belong in Madigan's "Theatre of the Absurd" to be existentially commonsensical in modernist terms.

Through his dramatic *contemporization* of *igbale* as a space for re-inventing the African spiritual and cultural self, Wole Soyinka has allayed the fears of Vaclav Havel that the modern global human element may have lost "metaphysical certitude" and, thus, has alienated itself from "the sphere of the spirit". His reclamation of that "loss" on behalf of humanity through his radicalization of the (phe)nomenal properties of the ancient *igbale* mystical space is a bold statement that humanity's current global predicament can be objectified and solved via a recourse to a structure that may be more truthful, after all, than Madigan's modernist ideology of Secular Humanism. Postmodernism, indeed, has yielded for the contemporary world an attractive existential revolutionary process whose core strategy and value reside in the mystical, existentialist, philosophical, theoretical and creative visions.

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