

# Ritual/Carnival Performance in Wole Soyinka's *The Road*

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**Abstract**—Wole Soyinka chooses theatre as a political art for the purpose of showing tradition and myth as the main political forces in the postcolonial situation of Africa. He uses Nigerian ritual performance to bring back the traditions which were neglected by the colonizers and dictators. Hence, Soyinka masterfully brings the African gods most notably Ogun on the stage in the most of his plays. This paper investigates Wole Soyinka's *The Road* as a political and artistic work and shows how he applies some of the ritualistic and theatrical devices like traditional dances, festivals, carnivals, and masks to approve his devotion to his homeland and tradition, and also to show the resistance in colonies.

**Index Terms**—ritual performance, carnival performance, Wole Soyinka, *The Road*

## I. INTRODUCTION

When the Second World War finished, the whole world witnessed a great change in geography of countries. The almost all of colonized lands gain their independence and were decolonized, most notably Africa was one of the greatest lands that was released. In fact, postcolonial texts are the evidence of recovery in these lands. Post-colonialism is the result of people's fears, hopes and dreams about their future and identities and also their cultural clashes with the conquering culture. How the colonized respond to changes in economic issues, morals, language, and race differences become the context for developing theories of post-colonialism. Several African playwrights, poets, and novelists in the early postcolonial era sought to strengthen national unity and consciousness by producing works which praised the past for the hope of a wonderful future. "Literary texts from Africa are seen by many critics as social documents concerned with the culture and politics of the continent" (Akingbe, 2013, p. 125).

Wole Soyinka, as the Bringer of Light to African Literatures, has put Nigerian literature on the world map. Since 1986 hundreds of Nigerians have proudly taken to studying Nigerian literature. Soyinka was famous as a political activist throughout the period of civil war. He tries to show the corruption of the political system in the newly created Nigerian government. In his novels, poetry and drama Soyinka criticized the influential groups of postcolonial Nigerian government. His aim was to recover tradition and insert it in modern and postcolonial Africa to facilitate transformative moral and political justice. Soyinka believed that African literature is "consciously guided by concepts of an ideological nature", the writer:

is far more pre-occupied with visionary projections of the nature of literature, or of any other medium of expression ... the writer in our modern African society needs to be a visionary in his own times has, I find, been often interpreted as a declaration that this is the highest possible function for the contemporary African writer .... (Abiodun, 2006, p. 224)

He has been discussed in the various fields of studies and in different literary approaches especially in the political, colonial and postcolonial perspectives. Soyinka is best known as a playwright and dramatist. Although he has written commonly in all the genres of literature, he is more famous in drama than other genres. Wole Soyinka wrote *A Dance of the Forests*, *The Strong Breed*, *The Road*, *The Bacchae of Euripides*, *Death and the King's Horseman* to build on his theory and notion of tragedy. In fact his greatest success has come from his dramas. As dramatist he uses stage as a powerful resistance weapon to portray the black world of his colonized homeland which was occupied by colonizers and dictators. In his work, Soyinka criticizes the oppression by the dictators who governed Nigeria before and after colonialism. He wanted to show the disasters in Yoruba society, so he decided to challenge the current situation of the society.

## II. LITERATURE REVIEW

Alain S  verac in a paper entitled "The Verse of Soyinka's Plays: 'A Dance of the Forests' (1992)" states that the verse occurs whenever the text adopts a ritual or mystical tone, and expresses man's attempt to establish a relationship

between himself and the cosmic forces or his actual possession by them. The writer states that like the drums, verse plays an essential role in producing the trance during which spirits come to visit the living. Soyinka's use of verse not only shows the communication is being established with the unknowable but also constitutes a medium that contributes both visually and spiritually to the spectator's grasp of the play's meaning. Soyinka tries to imbue his language with a faculty inherent in the tragic rites.

Another researcher, Diedre L. Badejo in an essay, "Unmasking the Gods: Of Egungun and Demagogues in Three Works by Wole Soyinka (1988)," investigates the deep roots of Yoruban myths that Soyinka applies them on stage. The egungun or the ancestors in Yoruba cosmology represent the spiritual links of living with dead, and the present with past. Soyinka demystifies the egungun in order to destroy 'the ambience of power' which surrounds these worldly Machiavellian elites. He uses them to emphasize the historical culpability of a corrupted power structure.

Samuel B. Olorunto, the author of "Modern Scheming Giants: Satire and the Trickster in Wole Soyinka's Drama (1999)", tries to show how trickster is an object of ridicule in the plays of Soyinka. This contention seems contrary to the high regard often accorded the trickster in traditional African narratives in which he is the powerless. In traditional conventions, we know that trickster is a clever, resourceful, quick-witted and vicious individual who plays tricks to deceive and take advantage of his opponents. In Soyinka's definition, a trickster who uses any means to take advantage of his opponents sometimes ignores and violates traditional and modern norms. He goes to metamorphose from them into new tricks that seem appropriate to modern conditions of politics, pursuits of power and rapacious desire for materialism.

### III. METHODOLOGY

This study is based on a library research and tries to provide an analysis of the role of ritual elements in *The Road*. The complete procedure would consist of a number of phases. It necessitates an understanding of the role of ritual in the Black and Yoruba tragedy. Afterwards, this study is probing that how Soyinka uses ritualistic elements and mythological aspects in his tragedy, *The Road*, as powerful resisting devices to help the colonized to utilize their own myth and tradition in order to revive their vernacular values and resist the hegemonies. In this play, the application of festivals and carnival performances and also the role of Mask ritual is going to be studied.

### IV. DISCUSSION

Soyinka compared the tragic modes of Western drama and theatre with some Yoruba gods (Ogun, Sango and Obatala), and sees tragedy as belongs to:

the Mysteries of Ogun and choric ecstasy of revelers,...Yoruba tragedy plunges straight into the 'chthonic realm', the seething cauldron of the dark world will and psyche, the transitional yet inchoate matrix of death and becoming ... Tragedy, in Yoruba traditional drama, is the anguish of his severance, the fragmentation of essence from self .... (1990, p. 140)

In fact his philosophy was based on different Yoruba gods of African mythology. He searched out his origins in myth and history, applies them in his art, and thus revive identity for his people. In fact, he tries to bring back rituals to preserve vernacular values among his people. Soyinka masterfully applies performance as the best tool for depiction and applied drama to show his protest in postcolonial views. He believed that through the ritual drama African societies can establish social and moral standards and find harmony in their land. Soyinka expertly employs meta-theatre on setting. As a responsible dramatist and artist, Soyinka uses meta-theatrical devices like music, dance, costumes, song, color, ritualistic masks to catch his goals. In fact, Meta-theatre as specific aspect of drama is used for resisting in postcolonial discourse. Soyinka tries to apply mythology and ritual to make new world on stage; therefore, audiences are shown to a concrete reality in their own environment.

### V. RITUALS IN THE BLACK WORLD AND YORUBA TRAGEDY

Ritual is the language of the mass. In Africa, rituals are important instances during which the human world interacts with the divine world. In fact, ritual drama and the power of divinity are correlated in black religion. So, ritual practices in Africa are central to religion. According to Benjamin C. Ray (2000):

Rituals are performed to cure illness, increase fertility, defeat enemies, change people's social status, remove impurity, and the future. At the same time ritual words and symbols also say important things about the nature of what is being done- for example how and why men communicate with the gods, expel illness, settle moral conflict, manipulate sacred power, make children into adults, control and renew the flow of time. (p. 78)

Soyinka's dramatic and theatrical vision is influenced by some factors such as: the Yoruba god of iron (Ògún), rituals and festivals; individual disposition to life; early contact with Western and Christian education; and religious, moral and economic problems. He believes that the main function of ritual drama is to control religious and social norms of people to keep their world and also to have a permanent communication with the divine. Within black religion, ritual theatre is always associated with social problems and moral conflict. In *Myth, Literature and African world*, Soyinka explores African world views and rituals and tries to show how they can help to make a true modern African drama. His conception of drama is revealed in the following terms:

Ritual theatre ... aims to reflect through physical and symbolic means the archetypal struggle of the mortal being against exterior forces ..., even the so-called realistic or literary drama can be interpreted as a mundane reflection of this essential struggle. Poetic drama especially may be regarded as a repository of this essential aspect of theatre; being largely metaphorical, it expands the immediate meaning and action of the protagonists into a world of nature forces and metaphysical conceptions. (p. 43)

The world view that dominates Soyinka's plays believes in the reality of the invisible world such as spirits, gods, the dead, the unborn, and the ancestors who affects the lives of humans. Soyinka recognizes that ritual ceremonies and festivals are an attempt to bring back the original oneness.

Soyinka delves into traditions of his homeland in order to find detailed and exact content for shaping his art. As the result, the Yoruba tragedy reveals as one of the most effective medium for expressing his Afrocentric dramatic art. The Yoruba tragedy is a pragmatic approach to drama in Africology. Orisa Ogun is one of the essential pillars of the Yoruba tragedy, who inspires the main themes of Soyinka's art. He is the first god of the Ifa Pantheon and also is equally known as the 'roof over the homeless', the 'protector of orphans', and the 'terrible guardian of the sacred oath'. Ogun is regarded as both the god of creativity and the god of death, iron and war. It is this multidimensional aspect of Ogun that impacts Soyinka's artistry. The violent and destructive aspect of Ogun's nature is explored in this play.

The ultimate aim of the Yoruba tragedy is to bring the protagonist to self-awareness at the end of his tragic experience. Therefore this self-awareness brings his people to a new state of consciousness. Jeyifo (2003) believes that "this Yoruba Tragedy reveals the playwright's strong will to stray away from Greek and Shakespearean tragedies and his determination to explore the depth of the fecund of his own Yoruba world in order to shape the genius of his play" (p. 134). He also relies on the effectiveness of the Yoruba worldview to restore balance, peace, and harmony in society. Soyinka made a concerted effort to bring theatre as a device to increase the consciousness of the people. He strongly believes in revolutionary function of drama to bring about change. Interestingly, he has a fascination for the West Africa traditions which is shaped by a history of resistance to colonial aggression.

#### VI. THE ROAD AS A RITUAL DRAMA

Reginad states that Soyinka builds his tragic theatre through the fourth stage that abundant rituals, tragic rituals music, tragic songs, and dances, all in a transition where "the past is the ancestors, the present belongs to the living, and the future to the unborn" (p. 195). In "The Fourth Stage" (1998) he sees drama "as integrating ritual in order to develop social wakefulness through the passage from one area of existence to another...or one level of awareness to another" (p. 6). *The Road is filled with rituals, tragic rituals music, tragic songs, and dances and also is an obvious symbol of the paradoxical nature of progress.* Before Nigeria's independence, the colonizers made roads in order to exploit Nigeria's natural resources of the country for their own gain. Now in independent Nigeria, the country's resources and people's welfare has engendered the corruption among officials. Moreover, individuals like the protagonist of the play, Professor, spend all his time to predatory activities.

*The Road* dramatizes the profound dislocating impact of the forces of technology and social and cultural change on the daily lives of the newly residential working poor of West African cities who try to make a living out of professions associated with the roads and the highways. Its dramatic action revolves around Professor, who plays the role of the main character. As a former churchman, he is engaged in an obsessive search for the meaning of the death. This play represents the destructive and the creative forces of its god Ogun that is the source of the many deaths that accident cause and is the result of the creativity which technology and progress have brought about. Professor's abuse of traditional rituals in the play made him a real danger to the community. Consequently, Soyinka suggests that there is a benefit in Professor's death. The road, as the representation of progress, remains the source of death that puts people's lives at risk. It is worth to mention that during the early sixties, Soyinka was forced to travel permanently on the dangerous road linking Lagos to Ibadan. Sometimes, he witnessed road accidents that caused him to fear for his own life. This is why he considered the road as the main cause of death.

In Yoruba drama, tragic protagonist should pass some phases such as isolation, suffering, and self-awareness. According to Soyinka's book, *Myth, Literature and African World* (1990), "the will is the only functioning faculty during the experience of the transitional gulf." In fact, "The existence of a gulf to be bridged is crucial to the Yoruba cosmic ordering. The gulf is what must be diminished by sacrifices, rituals, ceremonies of appeasement to the cosmic powers which lie guardian to the gulf" (p. 31). And "the ultimate one is sacrifice that its goal is to energize the community." (ibid, p.137). In Abimbola's words, sacrifice is a way to recognize the universe in favor of humans. Abimbola declares that African believe that verbalization is not enough in relationship of man with the supernatural. They believe "by making sacrifice, man send symbolic messages to the supernatural world which are often accompanied by verbalization" (p. 16). In *The Road*, Ogun as the god of the road, represents creativity and technology that causes the building of the road and at the same time embodies destruction with accident and death.

Professor's search for the meaning of death throughout the play shows a fundamental aspect of the Yoruba worldview according to which death makes the transition from one world to another. Opoko (1990) asserts that "for African people life will not come to the end by death because the ancestors continue to live with their family and community, and thus, they also have an effect on both" (p. 782). In fact, the annual Egungun festival that celebrates the

return of the ancestors to earth is “a metaphysical assertion of the continuity between life and death.” (Soyinka, 1990, p. 109).

The opening lines of the 'Alagemo' poem help to show that this passage between death and the arrival in the other world is the subject which Soyinka explores in *The Road*:

I heard! I felt their reach  
 And heard my naming named.  
 The pit is there, the digger fell right through  
 My roots have come out in the other world. (p.150)

In *The Road*, Professor as a modernist man turns to traditional Yoruba religion in order to find out a satisfactory answer for the essence of death without dying himself: “I cannot yet believe that death’s revelation is total, or not at all” (p. 226). He clearly believes that Murano is the only one who can help him with the reaching to the knowledge of death. Professor makes sure that Murano is “the one in this world in whom the word (death) responds” (p. 221). Murano is the character that is the typical example of the passage from the human to the divine as he performs the Ogiunian ritual dance. His accident occurred at a time when he was possessed by Ogun. Eventually, it is Murano who got and understood the Word and the secret of death better than Professor, because he is somehow between two worlds.

#### VII. *THE ROAD* AND FESTIVAL / CARNIVAL PERFORMANCES

Helen Tiffin in her book, *Postcolonial Drama* (1996), states that “the performative elements of a society’s secular festivals, like those of its religious rituals, provide an important archive for a postcolonial theatre praxis which aims to articulate the specificities of local experience” (p. 78). Such festivals come from pre-colonial traditions which have been changed as a reaction to changing conditions. Drama based on festival performances catches public attention of vernacular languages. Furthermore carnivals as well as festivals become vehicles for rebellion against colonial authority.

Within the Festival of Drivers, there is Egungun and then Agemo festivals. Interestingly, with these two festivals in the play, *The Road* is filled with the metaphysical and dramatic forms of Yoruba rituals. The Egungun festival is closely related to such themes as professor’s long search for the meaning of death and birth in the Yoruba worldview. Throughout this festival, a special dance, which is called the dance of masquerade, is so significant. In the case of Professor, this traditional dance is to conceive and encounter death through the mask worn by anyone other than himself. Moreover, the Agemo festival which Soyinka represents as a process of flesh dissolution, is an attempt to describe how Murano has moved from human being to his present state of being. According to Jeyifo (2003):

As Professor moves serially through exploration and then disavowals of the liturgical rites, first theological beliefs of the Christian faith. And second, traditional African ritual beliefs and practices around institutions of spirit mediums and funerary cults, and finally his own private mysterious system compound out of cabalistic signs, numerology and necromancy that follow by these two paradoxical aspects which remain constant: a very materialistic, even opportunistic interest in the “spoils” of death on the roads and highways, and a radical spirituality which revolts against all the identity-forming institutions and practices of organized religion and foreign, which impose fear and terror on man especially the poor and the disenfranchised. (p. 148)

#### VIII. *THE ROAD* AND MASK RITUAL

While the mask conceals the face of the character, it shows the position of culture. In fact, the use of mask signifies a return to traditional value and a shift away from imperial hopes. It states that in spite of the influence of Christian missionaries, the traditional ritualized practices are still going to exist. Tiffin (1996) believes that “the effect of the mask play is to de-essentialize the construction of race, to set up a tension between the racial spirit and its performance that actors come to occupy allegorical roles rather than to create unified characters” (p. 154).

Masking in postcolonial drama often shows a spiritual and political theatre. Soyinka brings the mask ritual to reawaken the colonized people of their roots and origin. Ritual festivity reaches its peak in *The Road* in the time of the accident throughout the Drivers’ Festival when Murano, masked as an ancestral Egungun spirit. The Egungun mask is the visually representation of transferring to the other world. In the closing scene Professor who constantly tries to find the essence of death in order to find a way to escape from it, finally meets death.

The mask still spinning, has continued to sink slowly until it appears to be nothing beyond a heap of cloth and raffia. Still upright in his chair, Professor’s head falls forward, welling fully from the darkness falling around him, the dirge (p. 229).

#### IX. CONCLUSION

Confronting with dictators and Whites forced Soyinka develops his ideology by ritualistic gods and myth. To understand Soyinka’s tragedy, one must study Yoruba’s rituals of passage and transition, the performance modes of Ogun festival, and the theatrical effects of the total theatre idiom in the Yoruba festival/traditional theatre. Soyinka tries his best to represent the functional elements of theatre and performance like dance, music, mask and other ritualistic customs in his plays and especially *The Road* to help resistance. He shows how colonized people can bring back and preserve their own values against hegemony by their rituals and myths. Actually the ritual theatre is a cooperative

interaction between actors and audience. In fact, his ritual drama demonstrates how literature is associated in the process of transform. Like the religious rituals, theatrical performance involves collective experience that lead the audience to a state of spiritual insight. Opoku (1990) states that “rituals and festivals in African societies transfer religious ideas, and by them, one can learn about the relationship between humans and the spiritual and physical worlds” (p. 71). In *The Road* Soyinka takes the advantage of the traditional dances and festivals and the Yoruba gods Ogun to show his concern of Yoruba myths and the bound between ritual and culture and to approve his devotion to Africa. With the application of the Egungun and Agemo festivals, *The Road* is filled with the Yoruba rituals. Therefore, Soyinka made a new world on stage and the black audiences are shown a tangible reality in their own living conditions. The use of mask shows a return to traditional values and the colonized audiences are reawakened of their roots and origin. By employing the Yoruba metaphysic in this play, he tries to bring the people to a state of self-awareness and consciousness. Therefore, peace and harmony would be restored in postcolonial Nigerian societ, and a true modern drama and African world would be made.

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