

## Church versus Ogun: Subversion and Irony in Wole Soyinka's *The Road*

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### **Abstract**

Subversion is the thrust of irony in Wole Soyinka's *The Road*. The play reveals a space of foreboding that is charged with confrontations. The cosmos of the dramatis personae is designed as a kind of high mimetic arena in which all the participants are trapped as they seek to find meaning and value for their daily existence. Their lives are soured in irony, and they are caught on the quicksand between Church and Ogun. A psychic figure spins everyone and everything in thrall and into a vortex of persuasions which keeps knowledge and truth in a state of convolution from one point to another. This study examines the dimension of this subverted space, to mark out the indices of its subversion, and situate the pervasive tangles within the matrix of irony. It also locates the median of the conflict, the lead character, whose past and present collide within him as he propagates Ogunian perceptions in a manner that leaves a grim smudge on both deity and propagator. The confusion of values in the life of the propagator extends as a contest of values in the play.

**Keywords:** Soyinka, Subversion, Irony, Church and Ogun.

### **Introduction**

*The Road* is one of the most important plays of Wole Soyinka. It was awarded the Grand Prix in 1965 at the International Festival of Negro Art, in Dakar. It is one of the early events that cast Soyinka in the global spotlight that increasingly culminated in the Nobel Prize in 1986. Over the years, the play has come to attract critical attention for diverse reasons. This paper seeks to examine the element of subversion in the play, and to show that the subversion is steeped in the density of irony. There are three steps to this submission. First is to take an overview of some of the strongest voices who have discussed *The Road*. These are some of the critics who have become important authorities on the writings of Soyinka and African literature.

The aim is to appraise some of the issues which have been raised on the status of the play. The second step is to anchor the play's ambivalence on its dense irony. The third step is to discuss the multiple aspects (under five different headings) of the thrust of subversion in the play with a view to establishing the indices of irony that mark the subversive temperament of the quest-motif. This is to situate the conflictual status of the Ogunian persuasions in the play.

### **The Conflict of Interpretations**

A lot of dust has been raised on *The Road*. From the time of its publication in 1965, the play has received the attention of readers and critics. Simon Gikandi, Susan Yankowitz and James Gibbs have discussed the play's obscurity. In spite of the play's vitality, Gikandi says that it presents many "difficulties of reading" (61). Yankowitz describes the play as "bogged down in a slough of cabalistic metaphors, unexplained actions and verbiage" (132). Gibbs has remarked that when the play was first produced it bewildered many critics (85). Gibbs also argues that it is not a play to be understood because it does not reach any conclusions, that it is rather a play to be experienced because the sequence carries us along and "leaves us... emotionally exhausted" in the end (80). A play that does not reach conclusions will certainly problematize classification. It will be seen as complex or ambivalent.

This complexity or ambivalence is reechoed in the views of Eldred Jones, Abiola Irele, Oyin Ogunba and Biodun Jeyifo. Jones posits that the play's mood ranges "from the near tragic to the hilariously comic, it contains biting satire as well as religious and mystical speculation; it contains grim realism with near abstract symbolism" (75). But it nevertheless produces a recognizable theme. Did it take enormous effort for Jones to wade through the tangles to reach the fact? In another essay, entitled "Progress and Civilization in the Work of Wole Soyinka," Jones thematizes the play "as a symbol of the double-edged nature of progress" (132). It could be said that if a play has been so thematized, then it has been situated within a certain paradigm of meaning. Irele does not think so.

Irele first argues that "*The Road* is a kind of fantasy in which the inner questionings and obsessions of the playwright are exteriorized" (193). He reasons that it will be difficult to unravel the inner questionings and obsessions for the purpose of elucidation since the play does not provide "a constant framework of references" (193). But he identifies the theme of the play as "a traditional collective myth" which evokes a symbol of human experience (193). A play with a recognizable theme cannot be dismissed as "a fantasy" without "reliable pointers to the various stages and direction in the unfolding of Soyinka's

meditation" (193). What does Irele want us to believe? If there are no reliable pointers to meaning, then of what value is Irele's conjectural reading? And by what pointers did Irele arrived at the theme? This kind of presentation leaves a question mark on Irele's interpretation of the play. Yet it appears that it is the nature of the play's dramaturgy that has made such ambivalent reading inevitable. There is a similar thrust in Ogunba's critique of the play.

Ogunba's criticism bears the mark of contradiction. In his earlier essay, "Modern Drama in West Africa," he considers *The Road* as "the most faulty of Soyinka's plays" (104). Though he identifies Soyinka as the dominant figure in West African drama and as an excellent theatre technician, he pairs Soyinka with Sarif Easmon to make two playwrights who are suffering "from a paucity of ideas, or have not yet started to think of materials of lasting worth for their dramatic composition" (105). But in a later work, in *The Movement of Transition*, Ogunba names Soyinka as a playwright who takes himself seriously, with the mien of a man with an important message to deliver in a forthright manner. Ogunba further posits that one of Soyinka's major concerns is the depiction of spiritual darkness, and he identifies *The Road* as "by far the strongest and most significant expression of this darkness of the soul" (5). He says that in the play, Soyinka matches "language perfectly with the theme of transition" (163) though the play falls short of being a masterpiece "because one cannot resist comparing what the play is with what it might have been. The difference still is the gap in Soyinka's dramatic construction" (164). Is the picture of what the play might-have-been the exclusive perception of Ogunba? It cannot be so. Here is a critic who makes a volte-face on the quality of the play, but appears too bogged down by his conceit to accept the merit of the play.

It helps that Jeyifo makes his own volte-face, and he has endeavoured to keep the line straight. It should be recalled that in an earlier essay, "The 'Hidden' Class War in *The Road*," already published in *The Truthful Lie*, Jeyifo accuses Soyinka of distortion and mystification, and of masking the class struggle in the play (12 - 13). At last, Jeyifo comes to the point that mythopoesis is not the occlusion of social vision. Jeyifo's later position is a giant leap for one who in the past described Soyinka's mythopoesis as a negative masking of reality. The play appears to be vintage Soyinka as Jeyifo has attempted to explain in a latter essay. Jeyifo argues that Soyinka's plays are hinged on a mythic structure which gives the plays a symbolic and ritualistic framework that is really never thematically clarified but rather "cumulatively elaborated in hieratic action, emblematic mime, an epiphanic image, passages of incantatory speech or prose description" ("Mythopoesis" xii). The formation of this symbolic and ritualistic

framework pushes “imagination even beyond its own limits. This is perhaps what is implied in Soyinka’s own term for mythologizing tendency, ‘hermeticism’ (“Mythopoesis” xiii). The term “hermeticism” evokes the idea of inscrutability, and Jeyifo is quick to add that, in spite of Soyinka’s dense dramaturgy, meaning is never lost. Jeyifo remarks that “even the most casual acquaintance” with the works of Soyinka “cannot fail to notice the superbly observant and poetic strokes with which Soyinka is able to evoke, with vividness and lyricism, the mundane and the typical, the absurd and the risible expressions of lived experience in his society” (“Mythopoesis” xiv).

Obi Maduakor agrees with Jeyifo. Maduakor says that the major ideas dramatized in the plays of Soyinka, with particular reference to *The Road*, are within the intellectual reach of most readers. What is difficult, Maduakor adds, is the tortuous knot of Soyinka’s dramatic method. This method is the “elliptical style” which teases the reader, “distorts chronology, forestalls organic development of characters, and relies instead on fragmented revelation of expository details” (197). The purpose of the elliptical method, according to Maduakor, is not to court obscurity. It is to sharpen the attention of the reader, “to make the reader alert, energize his response and involve him in the act of creation” (197).

Like Maduakor, Dan Izevbaye sees the play as an engaging one. Izevbaye’s position appears to sum up the conflicting views on the play. He argues that the play is indeed vintage Soyinka because the playwright “achieves an unequivocal success in the union of theme and dramatic technique” (52) in the play. He, however, concedes that the play poses the problem of communication due to its language and formation (52). But Izevbaye’s insightful submission makes a plinth for further reading of the play. The play is capable of generating discourse as “an inexhaustible source of new critical discoveries” (Frye 17). The density of irony in the play is a clear motivation for attention; it is the foundation of its ambivalence. The irony opens up the task of locating the median that subverts traditional orders and also lays bare the intricacies of existence.

### **Situating Irony as the Background of *The Road***

The ambivalent formation in the play posits levels of interpretation that are complex. The beauty of the play is in its capacity to problematize and reveal meaning at the same time. The subversive import of the quest in the play estranges everything. Because irony is the foundation of play, all things exist in a state of ambivalence and they cumulatively reveal the deep contradictions in the ambit of the play. By this, all figures and objects in representation attain multivocality.

It is possible for irony to be enigmatic: it “escapes all saying, all stance-taking” (Lentricchia 234). But when it becomes problematic to hold on to any fragment of perception as the utmost truth, and truth loses absoluteness because the possibilities of being are inexhaustible and infinite, the perceived enigma of the text can still mirror the enigma of reality. This is not the failure of craft. It is the definite design of the play to attain multi-tenor. Understanding Soyinka here demands patience with the various aspects of his dramaturgy. It is like understanding an elephant. To “know” an elephant is to appreciate all its features: the side, the tusk, the trunk, the knee, the ear and the tail, all at once through “complex seeing.” To hold on to a single feature is to deny its completeness. The reader cannot afford to be like the blind men in Saxe’s “The Blind Men and the Elephant” who “bicker about the accuracy of their perception while the truth stands huge and unrecognized in their midst,” as Lindfors says (53). In the play, the characters, objects and even ideas are ironic and multi-sided. All things are rendered through a linguistic facility which reverts in a movement of transition, according to Soyinka himself, “to its pristine existence eschewing the sterile limits of particularization” (124).

Thus, to discuss the play is to enter its state of ambivalence woven around Agemo and the irony of flesh dissolution, the agency and the personality of Ogun, the Word in a strange garb, the complexity of figures and actions, the symbolism of objects, the sequence of conflict, and the burden of myth. All these formations are multivocal. They are rooted in indeterminacy, not upon categorical certitudes. Of course, the absence of certitude tasks our attempt at interpreting the play. It challenges the attempts to congeal formations into meaningful interpretive capsules. But it rewards the reader by the value of its elusivity and revelation. Images appear as though in a hall of mirrors, each claiming authenticity, and each adding to the conundrum of a collectivized social condition. The median of this situation is a highly ironic figure, Professor, who seeks to pitch a highly intricate deity like Ogun against the verities of the Church. What is manifest is a context of conflict, framed within Professor himself, which spirals to everyone and everything in the play.

There is an untoward fusion of Christian and Ogunian sensibilities in the search for the Word. In fact all the personages and symbols in the play are geared towards this search which Professor leads. The Word is in conflict constantly, just as Ogun/the road undergoes unstable dimensions.

### **The Territory of Conflict**

Agemo fuses with the road and the essence of Ogun, and they are all fundamental to the quest in the play. They are bounded inseparably in the elusive Word. Through the use of the “pious capital letter,” the Word is portrayed as divinity. But the quest for the essence of death as the pathway to the Word is in itself a subversion of Christian sensibilities which posit the Word as the gospel and person of the Messiah who assumed the human figure by a divine programme for the purpose of human redemption. Eternal life is encoded in this project of redemption, a design of ultimate victory over flesh, sin and death.

The “lead seeker” in *The Road*, Professor, is known to have been a fervent propagator of the verities of the Christian holy writ at one time.

**PROF:** (Stops. Turns and faces the church) If you could see through the sealed church window, you will see the lectern bearing the word on bronze. ...oh what a blasphemy it all was but I did not know it. (68)

Professor runs afoul of the Church system though he says otherwise. He claims it is a new light that has led him to set up in the motor park. He accuses Christian liturgy of blasphemy. He sets towards a different order which appears more psychic than intellectual. He sets the Word in the enigmatic essence of Ogun and the dreaded movement of transition. The Word in this context acquires indeterminacy. It is variously described as the unbroken Word (41) and the elusive Word which “may be found companion not to life, but Death” (11). This is the Word in an ironic mode. It does not give life (as in Christian liturgy); it is revealed in death.

The ambivalence of the Word begins from the point of Professor’s first entry with the road-sign.

**PROF:** Almost a miracle.... Dawn provides the greatest miracle but this... in this dawn has exceeded its promise. (8)

How can an object described as “almost a miracle” be also posited as the “greatest miracle” at the same time? Is the road-sign the Word? The status of the road-sign does not enjoy the grace of the pious capital letter in Professor’s first reference to it. But he goes on a little later to call it the “Unbroken Word” and he addresses Samson and Salubi in his confusion: “But... and mind you tell the truth ... you are not here to take the Word from me”? (9)

Professor further muddles his perception and the comprehension of others when he acknowledges that the road-sign is not the word, “but every discovery is a signpost”(12). The multiplicity of discoveries, cast in conflictual spotlights and situated in endless shifting positions, some quite illusionary as the road-sign, render the quest and its aim problematic. It also blurs the line of conflict between Christian liturgy and Professor’s new essence.

### **The Word in a Strange Garb**

Professor’s trump is to set a rival system against the Church. He builds his base amongst the denizens of the motor park who are familiar with his own past. His strength and weakness are known by the touts. His previous Church politics and defeat are also known. But he is able to build an enclave of weird and wild men. There is a pattern of conflict in the relationship between the motor park and the Church throughout the sequence of action.

Professor is the median and the conflict swings on the collision of his past and his present.

**PROF:** In my youth, let me tell you, in my youth we went out and waged a holy war on every sore as this. We pulled down every drinking shack and set fire to it, drove out the poisoners of men’s brains.

**SAMSON:** (spiritedly) And they didn’t fight back? You try here and see what will happen to you.

**PROF:** Oh the Word is a terrible fire and we burned them by the ear. Only that was not the Word you see, oh no, it was not. And for every dwelling that fell ten more rose in its place until they grew so bold that one grew here setting its laughter against the very throat of the organ pipes. (68)

What Professor has lost in the Church, he appears to have gained in the motor park. In his youth, he has been a destroyer of drinking places in the name of the Church. But he is unable to control his own alcoholism.

The Church considers Professor guilty of blasphemy and metes out the punishment of excommunication. Professor throws back the charge at the Church (68). The Word and its true interpretation is at the centre of the crisis. Professor justifies what the Church considers as his wrong interpretation of the Christian holy write:

**PROF:** What if they are children? Is truth ever to be hidden from children? Yes, what though there was the spirit of wine upon me. It was Sunday, Palm Sunday and each child bore a cross of the tender frond, yellow and green against their innocence. (88-89)

It can be inferred that Professor, under the influence of alcohol, may have told the children the values of palm wine. That is, he may have turned the significance of the symbolic palm frond and the Palm Sunday ceremony to a crusade for palm wine. He may have linked the Christian symbols to the significance of palm wine in Ogun's rites of passage. That is a subversion of Christian liturgy in favour of the traditional Ogun worship. It is actually the contest of the Faiths. Professor has come to embody Ogunian subversion, forged like syncretism in the soul of a deviant-worshipper, in the house of another religion.

Ogun is the Yoruba god who celebrates the palm wine in the contest of wills. Long before Professor's excommunication, the Christian liturgy and Ogun's bacchanality have been intertwined inseparably in his consciousness. He carries on this ambivalent consciousness after his excommunication. He simply goes over to the motor park to run the palm wine fold. And he carries the residues of the Church within him. He refers to the road-sign as a miracle (8), suspects Salubi and Samson as members of the devil's army (9), describes the accident victims as crucified on rigid branches (11), considers the Word as trapped in demonic bondage (35), refers to the layabouts as Judases (50), and posits that the Agemo's re-appearance is a resurrection (87). The Church is lodged in his unconscious as a kind of interpellation which makes Professor continue to frame his new order with the language of the Church.

From the drinking shack in the motor park, Professor recalls memories of his days as a preacher (51), criticizes Church practices and music (52) and attempts to regain his lost state through a substitute essence. He tells the denizens of the motor park: "you make me feel that I was back among my Sunday-School children. It is a painful thing to desert one's calling ... (94). The Christian faith still tugs his soul. Thus, the line of opposition is not clear. Professor has declared a war without borderlines. He tells Samson about the conflict:

**PROF:** Up the aisle with them and into the chancel. Don't let their cassock deter you, the eagle sides with me. We will do battle, but first we must find the Word. (70)



He is not content with running the motor park. He wants to seize the Church. He wants to walk into the chancel and defeat the clergy of the Church. But he must first find the Word? Why is it so? He claims to have spoken the Word to the children about palm wine on Palm Sunday, why is he still in search of the Word? How does the "eagle," the lectern on the Church altar upon which the Bible is placed, side with Professor? The lectern is the bearer of the Christian holy writ which is an established form of the Word. Professor is still in search of a rival Word. In the contest, Professor is the weaker entity but he speaks with the cockiness of someone who has found it all. It appears that his relevance is tied to his ability to constantly pitch himself against the Church from which he is unable to break free. He has stolen from the Church to fund his rival order. The Church funds form part of the investment in the shack (69), he keeps his bed amongst the dead in the church cemetery (11), those "chosen" by the road are buried in the church yard (52) and the layabouts crossover to the Church to pay their last respect to their dead colleagues (58).

All lives seem to flow into the Church in one way or another. Yet, Ogunian ripostes appear to be constantly evoked by Professor through Ogun's interfusion with the mask of the Agemo in the play. And the pattern is tilted towards the ministration of death. The alternate Word which Professor pursues has a grim face which undercuts its merits if any.

### **Agemo and the Irony of Flesh Dissolution**

It has been suggested that the play is structured on a "traditional collective myth" (Irele 193). That the density of tradition in the play touches on the Siamese fusion of Ogun and the Agemo, the surrogate-dog, the communion wine, the quest and its excess, the fluidity of time and the music of tragic passage. Gibbs has also argued that ideas connected to the Agemo "provide a background" to the play and serve as "a key to its structure" (20).

Agemo is a major deity in Yoruba's Ijebuland. Like Ogun, Agemo is also concerned with roads. But Ogun is the actual god of the road. Ogun is the road deified. It follows that Professor's quest, with its psychic underpinning, is a return to the traditional religion of his people. He aims to validate the verities of his native faith against the pervasion of the foreign one. Even so, he leaves things in a flux. Neither Ogun nor Agemo is represented by their divine dualities of good and evil. The gods are worn the face of evil, of death. They have no creative or positive side to them. And this is a subversion of the verities of the indigenous religion.

Agemo, as a cult of flesh dissolution, is ironic in this play. The prefatory note to the play ties this idea of grim dissolution to the dance of transition and as the passage to the numinous essence. Agemo invests death with a pattern of necessity and the quest motif in the play is represented as a search for a certain sublime knowledge sown in the essence of death.

**SAMSON:** (disinterested) Where does one find it, Professor?

**PROF:** Where? Where ascent is broken and a winged insect plummets back to earth. Ask Murano. (45)

The “ascent” is a figuration for human life and its activities, halted suddenly by the horrible reality of sudden death. Professor tells Samson that truth is lodged in death. As death conquers the flesh, it ushers the dead to the realities about the essence of life. Professor tells Samson to ask Murano. The irony is that Murano has lost his capacity for speech in an accident. Murano is the Agemo masquerade knocked down by a reckless Kotonu. Murano has recovered through time but he suffers grievous impairment. How is he to reveal the truth to Samson? Professor has simply pointed to Murano as the one who is trapped by the known and the unknown, between life and death, frozen in time for an eventual revelation. Whereas Professor courts this revelation, the other layabouts dread it.

**SAMSON:** (Suddenly alarmed) Wait! What is that about an accident?

**PROF:** Are you that ignorant of the true path to the Word? It is never an accident. (11)

Professor sees death as the true path to knowledge and truth. To him, road accidents are not accidents. They are designed to reveal the Word. It appears he even masterminds some of the road accidents by removing road-signs at sharp bends. Accidents do not only profit his search for the Word, they profit the Aksident Store which he stocks by looting accidented vehicles and victims. This is as far as he is able to tie the knots. The greater part of what he says does not add up. In both his excessive interest in death on the road and the opposite dread of the layabouts for it, there is a depth that is awfully conflictual. For instance, road accident victims are described as sacrifices (22) and as the chosen (52). And those who have escaped death are described as the rejects (50) and the cheats (52). But this position does not match Professor’s earlier statement:

**PROF:** ...when the road raises a victory cry ... I hurry to a disgruntled swarm of souls full of spite for their rejected bodies.  
(11)

Who then are the rejects? Who are the “disgruntled swarm of souls full of spite for their rejected bodies”? Are the dead the ones who have been caught by the victory cry of the road? Or are they the on-lookers who gather at the scene of the accident? It is most likely the former. In the case which Professor refers to, he is the first at the scene, and he loots the victims and the accidented vehicle. There is no survivor in the accident. So, how are the chosen also the rejects? In all, his perception of the rejected is muddled. The rejected appear to be the same as the chosen, caught in the paradox of flesh dissolution, interfused with the agency and the personality of Ogun who has the power to reject and to choose. The complexity of the road is Ogunian. The occurrences on it are indeterminable, and so is the person and agency of Ogun.

#### **The Person and Agency of Ogun**

The structure of the road is complex. The physical perspective represents it as the network for transportation, marked for the day to day flow of human activities. In this sense, the road is man-made just like the vehicles that ply it. But the road outstrips this interpretation. It becomes the agency and the person of Ogun. Ogun is an ambivalent deity, representing both creative and destructive energies with equal grace and sublimity. Thus, events on the road are attributable to Ogun. The users of the road are figures subject to his whims and caprices. Ogun rejects and chooses as he pleases with a victory cry (11). His divinity demands ritual sacrifices as Samson tells Kotonu: “Before it’s too late take warning and kill us a dog” (19). This ambivalent deity, described as a gluttonous god (58) who feeds on blood and flesh, also assumes the images of a spider, a serpent and a woman. Ogun’s image changes from point to point. The only constant feature is his love for blood which masks his creative value in the play. The image of the road as a spider is given in the consciousness of Kotonu, the coast to coast driver, already scared off the road by a horrible accident:

**KOTONU:** The road and the spider lie gloating, then the fly buzzes along like a happy fool ... (34).

The road shares a kinship with a spider here. The qualities of waiting and sudden entrapment, possessed by both objects, are held in comparison. The fly buzzes like a happy fool and it is caught in the web; man buzzes as a happy fool

and he is caught by the road. This is at the level of simile. But later in the play, as a follow-up to Samson's reference to "the feeding spider", Kotonu no longer discusses the objects in the context of simile but as metaphor: "I wonder which driver that was. Or maybe a passenger" (41). In essence, Kotonu sees the spider which is feeding on a fly as a figuration for the road feeding on a driver or a passenger. The spider is the road; the road is Ogun; Ogun is the devourer of the unsuspecting user of the road. The road user falls prey to Ogun's thirst for blood. Ogun does not achieve this alone. There are persons who by omissions and commissions are incorporated into this business of death. The image of the spider is not restricted to Ogun/the road alone. The entire sequence of the play seems to have been captured symbolically through Samson's interest in the spider. Samson pokes at the spider to activate it, and the play is given as the stirring of a deep essence in order to find its implicit formation. This formation defies a single interpretation: the image of the spider undergoes different interpretive formations – first as a symbol for Kotonu's indolence (34), then as a symbol for the road (34,41) and finally as a symbol for Samson's personality as a crafty medium of allurement (91). They are figures/images in the business of death. Even Kotonu's indolence, related to the imagery of the spider, is portrayed as a type of death (34). Samson's acceptance of the spider-image as his own other (91), a statement rendered as "scum risen on the froth of wine" (70), really recalls Professor's reference to the bolekaja lorry as a hearse (44). Samson reveals himself as an entrapper. He lures passengers into his lorry to their death. Samson has, perhaps unwittingly, answered the call to service the treachery of the road.

Professor, in his peroration, posits a similar image of treachery. It is the image of the road as a serpent. The image appears quite villainous.

**PROF:** Breathe like the road. Be the road, coil yourself in dreams, lay flat in treachery and deceit and at the moment of a trusting step, rear your head and strike .... (96)

Treachery and deceit are extolled. Negative energies are rendered in positive light. But why is the serpent figure to "lay flat in dreams"? Dreams are human aspirations which are cut short by the death on the road. Dreams are the ascents which are forced to earth by sudden death. The road makes no apologies for its treachery and deceit. Those negative elements serve the purpose of the road. Values are turned on their heads. Earlier in the play, Professor has framed the road as a wasteful woman, full of menses. It is about bloodlust. Ogun's bloodlust takes up the image of a waster in the consciousness of Professor when he frames the road as a woman.

**PROF:** ...what choice but this? Still it is a pleasant trickle-reddening somewhat – between barren thighs of an ever patient rock. The rock is a woman..., so is the road. They know how to lie and wait. (58)

Again, the attribute here is waiting. Waiting and wasting. The image of the road as a woman is based on bareness and wastefulness. So the duality of Ogun, as both creative and destructive, is not completely rendered. More so, the imagery of femininity does not correlate with Ogun's masculine essence. Ogun's masculinity is subverted. In the light of the subversion, what sense is to be made of a quest which is made under such an atmosphere of convolutions? The deity and the persons in the play acquire the same complexity of character.

#### **Like Deity; Like Men: Complex Characters and Actions**

The complexity makes characters and actions multivocal. The motor park layabouts are both denizens and figures in union with the utmost essence and its threshold of passage. They mark this knowledge with ritual festival and they hold the gulf of transition in dread: "May we never walk when the road waits, famished" (60). It is a worship that is governed by fear, not love, not hope, not even faith.

Professor is the foremost searcher, perhaps cast in the temper of Ogun's own pilgrimage, probing the interiors of knowledge, probing the enigmatic essence. But professor may also be considered as the fly buzzing along "like a happy fool" (34). He is a man who sleeps in the Church cemetery, who sings a victory song for every road accident, who is interested in all paperbits, who keeps a band of layabouts as a way of rivaling the Church, who has a good sense of music, who speaks with authority on the inscrutable essence of death, who is excited at any opportunity to earn a dim but cuts the figure of an ascetic and more. To describe Professor as both psychic and demented is inadequate. His subversion of values also amounts to self-subversion.

Like Professor, Murano is also strange. He is the god-apparent, knocked down by Kotonu's lorry. Through Professor's treatment, Murano comes back to life as a deformed but endowed being. He is considered by Professor as an entrapment of the Word, an expansion of the Ogun-figure with legs in the two worlds.

**PROF:** When a man has one leg in each world, his legs are never the same. The big toe of Murano's foot ... rests on the slumbering Chrysalis of the Word. (45)

Murano doubles as the god-apparent and the surrogate-dog. Significantly, Ogun's festival is often marked with the symbolic sacrifice of the surrogate-dog over which a mock-struggle ensues between the priest and his acolytes, during which the dog is dismembered. Murano becomes the similitude of this propitiatory dog, as Kotonu reminisces.

**KOTONU:** What was he running from? It was almost as if he was determined to die. Like those willful dogs getting in the way of wheels (71).

The image of the sacrificial or propitiatory dog is subtly enunciated. Dog is Ogun's meat. It is to be killed on the road by drivers for the consumption of Ogun. Kotonu is one driver who would not pay his dues to Ogun. There has been a subtle conflict between Kotonu and Samson (Kotonu's conductor) on the need for ritual sacrifice to the road.

**SAMSON:** When other drivers go out of the way to kill a dog, Kotonu nearly somersaults the lorry trying to avoid a flea-racked mongrel. Why, I ask him, why? Don't you know a dog is Ogun's meat? Take warning Kotonu. Before it's too late take warning and kill us a dog. (10)

Kotonu abhors the sight of blood. "Dogs intestines look messy to me" (59), he says. But Samson's insistence is hinged on the fact of tradition: "the one who won't give Ogun willingly will yield heavier meat by Ogun's designing" (99). Is Murano the feared heavier meat by Ogun's design? It is the accident involving Murano that scares Kotonu off the road. Kotonu is unable to summon courage to mount the wheels. It appears that Ogun has scared the deviant driver off the road. It may be reasoned that Ogun's retribution against Kotonu is expressed in the accident against Murano (as an Agemo). But by this, Murano, Ogun's apparent, is the foremost sufferer, not Kotonu. Murano assumes the image of the propitiatory dog (71), so Ogun's apparent becomes Ogun's meat. How does a god offer himself to himself? Road accidents are sacrifices to the deity. So why does a god offer himself to himself? There is a kind of arbitrariness in Ogun's selection. More so, the efficacy of "dog-killing" as a pattern of substitution comes under a question sign. It is difficult to assume that the list of drivers claimed by the road in the play is the list of those who failed to pay their dues to Ogun. And it is difficult to determine Murano's propitiatory status.

Murano is also the provider of wine. Ogun's festival is often climaxed with the symbolic expiation of his tragic error. The deity, still, "in proud acceptance of the need to create a challenge for the constant exercise of will and control, enjoins the liberal joy of wine. The palm fronds are a symbol of his willful, ecstatic being (Soyinka, "Fourth Stage"133). The palm wine is the drink of challenge and communion. As Murano provides the palm wine in the play, Professor enjoins the liberal joy of wine. Professor fears the possibility of excess even before the commencement of the communion. He tells them to be calm.

**PROF:** Tolerance. Tolerance my friend. There will be enough for everyone. Enough to breed unawareness which you all seek in your futile ways. (74)

It is the communion wine which brings all the votaries of the road together, under the lordship of Professor. Professor seems to hold everyone in thrall through the industry and essence of Murano. He achieves this by successfully rehabilitating Murano and keeping him captive. Thus, Murano is also a captive-god, captive to the whims of Professor. Professor's tragic end is reparation, perhaps, for this excess:

**PROF:** ... it came to the same thing, that I held a god captive....  
And should I not hope with him to cheat, to anticipate the final confrontation..., why may I not understand...? (90)

Ironically, it is the same captive-god, the cheated one, who fights for Professor. All the communicants are stirred beyond control in their bacchanal revelry, and then the tragic mistake occurs. In the ensuing conflict, Say Tokyo Kid (Say T. ) and Salubi contrive Professor's death. Murano, as the Agemo, punishes Say with a fatal stroke.

Say T. has been angry that Professor has taken liberties to launch the Agemo's performance. Say T. has been piqued by the perceived impropriety of Professor's liberties. Say T. is a man of the road. Say T. lives by the road. But he falls short of being a true Ogun worshipper as much as he aspires towards it. He too appears to be simply blind to the deep structure of things. In the past, he had converted the layabouts to mercenary thugs, and this displeases Professor greatly.

**PROF** ...I offer you a purpose but you take unmeaning risks which means I, I must wait and hope that you return alive to fulfill the course I have drawn you .... (51)

For Professor, all the layouts, like Murano, are kept as keys to the Word. “Your lives whittle down the last obstacle to the hidden word” (87), he says. It is sheer hubris for Professor to have considered all the layouts to be subject to his appropriation. Say T. defies the attempt by Professor to put a lid on all the lives in the motor park. Whereas Professor is against Say T.’s mercenary activities, Say T. detests Professor’s weird mien. There are moments when they build a bridge across the divides. But Say T. has been inclined to see Professor as an interloper /impostor who has subverted the scale of control in the motor park. The locking point comes at the last “communion”. Murano’s second Agemo-phase displeases Say T. Perhaps, Say T. sees it as a debasement of sacred values, as an abuse of the Ogun essence. Say T. does not see it as a resurrection. So, he appears to fight the very essence he aspires to protect. Professor’s death in this struggle comes as a puzzle. Who is the offender? Say T. or Professor? Are they both the victims of their respective excesses? Is it Ogun’s punishment for their excesses, “that death’s revelation must be total or not at all” (93)? This position cannot be sustained because Murano’s bond with Professor is indeed complex in the movement of transition.

Whereas Professor cannot be exculpated from the charge of excess, he appears to be the one who has, through his wild ways, preserved and released the Agemo. It appears that the accident has arrested the process, and the communion releases the processes. Murano has been trapped in a phase of transition. Kotonu keeps Murano’s Agemo-mask as a souvenir from the road. As the mask continues to exist in the sequence of action, there is a subtle pointer to a “waiting” for the re-enactment of the unfinished business of transition. Professor calls it a resurrection. When Professor first mentions the word “resurrection” (40), its import is muddled so that it is not viewed as prescience. The second mention of the word is rendered in positive aura (87). Professor has always tied the revelation of the Word in Murano to the idea of rehabilitation (45). The puzzle is whether Professor’s death, after the “resurrection” of the Agemo as the “final gate to the word” (93), is indeed the rehabilitation, and whether the final “sinking” of the masquerade is the ideal end for Agemo’s movement of transition. It is not certain whether the dissolution is the completion of the movement of transition or simply the testimony of Murano’s nothingness. And it is not certain whether Professor’s tragic end is a logical end for his quest which he says Murano is a key to. In what way does Murano serve as key to the revelation of death to Professor? If Professor is being punished for hubris, why does the god-apparent fight for him? Is Professor’s final peroration the Ogunian Word which is to rival the Christian Word? Or is the god-apparent pained that Professor’s death is an abortion of



process, a truncation of Ogun's rivalry with the Church? None of the questions are answered. And it leaves Professor and his Ogunian pursuits in negative light.

Professor is not successful in his attempt to subvert the Christian Word and to supplant it with the Ogunian Word. In the end, he reveals Ogun as a god of negative propensities, and he calls his listeners to follow in that mode: "Breathe like the road. Be the road, coil yourself in dreams, lay flat in treachery and deceit and at the moment of a trusting step, rear your head and strike" (96). If this is the ultimate Word which Professor has received from Ogun or any allied entity, then Ogun has sold himself low. For he does not come across to the listener as a deity who sheds his own blood to procure redemption for his followers; he does not come across as a deity who preaches love; he comes across as a bloodthirsty deity who preys on the unsuspecting; he comes across as a deity who seeks to conscript a fold of predators. Professor's pro-Ogun subversion ironically leaves Professor and Ogun terribly smeared, unstable and villainous.

### **Conclusion**

The irony of subversion in the play makes it a dense text. The play reveals a space of foreboding which is charged with confrontations. Professor conceives the conflict as a confrontation with the Church. But it fails to be so. The Church is not threatened at all. The contest rather becomes a chain of multiple confrontations between Professor and the denizens of the motor park. The cosmos of the *dramatis personae* is designed as a kind of high mimetic arena in which all the participants are trapped as they seek to find meaning and value for their daily existence. Their lives are soured in irony, and they are caught on the quicksand between Church and Ogun.

As the characters beat the air, they unwittingly pull Ogun down to the quicksand while the Church keeps its height. The attempt to subvert the Church suffers inversion; a kind of implosion rocks Ogun's stony-headed followers. A psychic figure spins everyone and everything in thrall and into a vortex of persuasions which keeps knowledge and truth in a state of convolution from one point to another. The dimension of this subverted space is awful; the motor park slips into the pervasive tangles of irony. It swallows the median of the conflict, Professor, whose past and present clash within him as he propagates Ogunian perceptions in a manner that leaves a grim smudge on both deity and propagator. The confusion of values, which are entrenched in Professor and the rest of the denizens, is indeed the contest of values in the play.

In this contest, Ogun has the worse face: Professor ironically undercuts the very deity which he seeks to propagate. And if by any chance it is accepted that the propagation is true to Ogunian reality; then the Church actually appears to have a better appeal, regardless of its minuses.

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