

TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY RELEVANCE OF SOYINKA'S  
A DANCE OF THE FORESTS: A POSTMODERN  
CONCEPTUALIZATION

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Abstract

This article embarks on a re-reading of Wole Soyinka's *A Dance of the Forests* in order to determine the relevance of the play to the twenty-first century Nigerian cum African society. The re-reading is cast in a postmodern conceptualization because it attempts a deconstructive reading procedure, which reassesses and subverts earlier significations imputed to the text by previous readers, the author and characters in the text itself. It affirms that, to the 21<sup>st</sup> century reader, the play is a paradox of dramatic representation which integrates antinomies that are antithetical to progress with a shallow but conceivable salutary vision to the twenty-first century African society.

Keywords: Twenty-first century African society, *A Dance of the Forests*, Antinomies, Post-modernity

Introduction

The narrative and rhetorical strategies in *A Dance of the Forests* are such that the popular view of history, and of social and political progress, is subverted to justify the failure of vision and lack of cohesion in the society; and they suggest the need for new myths (and metaphors) for societal rejuvenation and progress. From these demythologizing perspectives, the play impresses one as a narrative of liberation in this era of technological revolution and late capitalism. The artistic contributions in the play therefore are timeless.

This discovery places one in a position to argue that narrative knowledge is salutary and that it leads to progress and subsequently to technological power. This is a view J.F Lyotard similarly articulates in his book, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, when he argues that what legitimizes social institutions is narrative knowledge not scientific knowledge (1-3). Frank Mawah rightly affirms that: it is

... narratives (like myths, legends, stories, songs, etc.) that define for cultural institutions, the experiences and actions, and what is transmitted from the set rules that constitute ... social bond. He further asserts that:

... narrative knowledge derives its potency from the fact that it can clarify itself without recourse to argumentation and proof. But since science which is the epic of the age of technology ... needs legitimacy, it has to fall back on narrative knowledge as an instrument for that legitimacy [my emphasis].  
(11)

The way *A Dance of the Forests* embarks and achieves its narrative of liberation is that it demythologizes old myths of progress by presenting certain antinomies in such a way as to make readers see how these myths have failed. The antinomies shatter the false image of oneness and progress and present fragmented (or distorted) views through which we can reconstruct new community and identity. The dramatic medium becomes very appropriate for a political discourse because by the nature of drama, which embodies action, dialogue and characters, fragmentation (an essential tool of drama) is an inherent aesthetic and structural device, which is politically significant. The depth of the play's fragmentations can be seen in the character's presentation of ideas and in the author's use of rituals, myths, flashbacks, parody, songs, dances, imagery and symbols as synchronic elements in the artistic portrayal of society.

### The Antinomies of Progress in *A Dance of the Forests*

By 'antinomies', we simply mean antithetical conceptualizations, negative, sceptical, or contradicting views of human progress presented through the various criticisms of society in the play. These antinomies deconstruct the false notion of conceptualizing a change in an epoch, such as the play's 'gathering of the tribes', as progress specifically as Adenebi implies it:

...I remember what I said, what we promised to do. An occasion such as the gathering of the tribes - a great thing ... [my emphasis]. It would happen only once in several lifetimes.. only once in centuries of history. It is a whole historical epoch in itself. We resolve to carve a totem that would reach to the sky. (Collected Plays I, 30)

Adenebi further says that: "I should have thought that something more in keeping with our progress would be more appropriate" [my emphasis] (31); and he expresses his disappointment with the calibre of guests the gods sent to the human community's seeming landmark achievement. The 'totem' in Adenebi's speech is the symbol of the image of oneness, progress and achievement. The idea of the gathering of the tribes suggests that. This image is displaced and it becomes defective through the portrayal of varying shattering and distorting images of despair, occasioned by the historic event. The image of landmark achievement therefore can be identified as the play's central informing metaphor (the transcendental signified), which pervades the entire text. The images of despair suggest a progress which is absent - the other - and which renders the epochal development in the text to be an 'unreal' and 'a false sense' of progress. The images of despair are signifiers, which introduce complications in the text, fragment the structural vision and enable us to see through the play's mythological framework a lot of social problems, which recourse to mythology has engendered, and which have actually made progress elusive. In the play, despair is palpably a dominant mood; it is also the contradicting and displacing signifier, which leads to other signifiers. The first instance of despair is occasioned by the choice of the Dead Man and Woman sent by the deities to celebrate with the humans. What the human community actually wanted, in Adenebi's words, were "the descendants of [their] great forbears", "the scattered sons of proud ancestors", "builders of empires", "descendants of ... great nobility" (31) to help mark the historic event, but the deities chose for them, as the old man (Demoke's father) puts it, "slaves and lackeys" (31).

The two guests (the Dead Man and Woman) of the play are described by Aroni (one of the deities) as "two spirits of the restless dead" (5) who have been victims of terrible treachery in their previous lives. They "were linked in violence and blood" (5) in their former lives with four of the human characters: Rola, Demoke, Adenebi and Agboreko - three of whom are the protagonists of the play. The presence of the guests helps to establish guilt in the consciences of the protagonists and the rest. This explains the psychological and physical rejection of the guests by the humans in the latter's hostile reception of the former. The disappointment of the human community and the subsequent violent rejection of the guests advance the dramatic plot, which rises to a schizophrenic peak when the stage direction informs: "[Sounds of bells, shouts and gunshots, from afar. [And]...Dead Man Listens". To the Dead Man, "That is hardly the sound of welcome" (8). The following conversation further reveals the tension

and restlessness of the humans who desperately drive away their guests.

Adenebi: I heard all the commotion. And I met one of your men who said you were hunting some shady characters.

Old Man: And so we are.

Old Man: Look here, we haven't got nets or cages, so you can see we are not really trying to capture them. If we can drive them away from here, it will be sufficient. [To the Councilor.] tell the men to scatter... I cannot hear them. They must make a lot of noise. (28-9)

The old man suddenly thinks he has found a solution, and orders an "old decrepit [monster] wagon", christened the "Chimney of Ereko" which has been "put off the road" (29), to do the job. According to the Old Man: "... the Chimney ought to do it. When that monster travels at anything over two miles per hour you can't see the world for smoke or smell a latrine for petrol fumes. If any ghost can survive it, then there is no power that can help me" (30). The complications in the play are further extended with the revelation that Demoke (one of the protagonists) killed his apprentice carver, Oremole, during the carving of the totem. The dead guests reveal this to the other protagonists, and Demoke admits:

Dead Man: It is death you reek of. Now I know what the smell is.

Demoke: I did ... I asked you, did he accuse me?

Dead Woman: I said the living would save me. What fingers are those whom I begged to let down my child gently? What have you thought to push me further down the pit? [Goes]

Dead Man: May you be cursed again. May you be cursed again[Goes]

Demoke: I pushed him. I pushed him down

Rola: Why?

Demoke: ... The one, who did not fall from the tree, apprentice to my craft, till I plunged him into hell. (25-6)

We find therefore that at the centre of the play's celebrative mood is an underlying view of discord, disunity, animosity, sterility and anarchy. This undercurrent of chaos and discord is, for instance, given dramatic representation by the sustained conflict between the two deities, Eshuoro and Ogun. Oremole's guiding deity, Eshuoro, who

has been wronged in many other ways due to the events, demands vengeance and justice, and Demoke's patron god, Ogun, vows to protect him. Demoke confesses to Obaneji that envy was the motive of his murderous act:

Obaneji: Hatred, Pride. Blindness. Envy. Was it Envy?  
 Demoke: Envy, but not from prowess of his adze.  
 The world knew of Demoke, son and son to carvers  
 Master of wood, shaper of iron, servant to Ogun  
 Slave, alas to height and the tapered end  
 Of the silk-cotton tree, Oremole  
 My bonded man, whetted the blades  
 Lit the fire to forge Demoke's tools  
 Strong he was ... [my emphasis]. (26)

The emphasized words and many other details about Oremole in Demoke's long speech, reveal that the former was a promising, intelligent, creative, skillful, and youthful member of the community killed in his prime. The carver's murderous act is sacrilegious even when we try to believe otherwise that the killing was a necessary sacrifice to the gods for their task to be completed as Aroni's words imply: "Demoke pushed a hand and plucked him down.. the final link was complete - the dance could proceed" (5).

The murder signifies the barbarism and cannibalism, which have plagued the African society and which have also been the hallmark of the competitive, capitalist modern civilization. The cause of such barbarism and cannibalism is the will to annihilate others who stand on the way of our drive to satisfy our pleasure instincts, which produce in the first place social competition. All societies (past and present, traditional and modern) have been basically propelled by the same ego motive. The irony in the play stems from the ambiguity that, repressions which have been the cause of civilization are also the bare of it. In fact, in the play, the murder is Demoke's present sin for which with his past one, he is led into the forest - a metaphor, in the play, for the abode of the gods and spirits - for trial and expiation.

We reiterate that the "totem" and the festival of the "gathering of the tribes" represent a false sense of progress - a false image of unity or oneness - because of the numerous underlying images of dependency and anarchy in the social structure. The images of false achievement and those of despair are signifiers which produce other signifiers - metaphors which introduce other metaphors - creating a complex interplay of significations. The despair creates in us an awareness of substitutes - the unattained ideals lacking in the society and resulting in social sterility and decay. These substitutes, the absent

ideals, constitute the paradigmatic elements, which are as important as the syntagmatic superstructure of the play. They reveal the ambiguity or ambivalence in the text's superstructure and show its inherent irony.

Furthermore, despair and frustration form the underlying principles of characterisation. Like Demoke, the other protagonists, Rola and Adenebi, and the other characters, suffer from certain inhibitions. Rola and Adenebi, for instance, display antisocial behaviour which contradicts the celebrative spirit that the historic event is supposed to inspire. A sensitive reader gets worried that this historic event – the present progress necessitating the gathering of the tribes – does not bring these protagonists happiness. Rola and Adenebi psychologically reject the celebration. They go into the forest to seek sanctuary. We hear Rola say: "The whole sentimentality cloy in my face. That is why I fled. The whole town reeks of it ... the gathering of the tribes! Do you know how many old and forgotten relations came to celebrate?"(9). And Adenebi also says; "I have a weak heart. Too much emotion upsets me", and later informs "I came here to get away from the excitement"(11).

The dissatisfaction, frustration, disillusionment and gloom are pervasive in the environment of the play in a manner that tends to prophesy the outcome of the newly independent Nigerian nation. The gloom and decadence, which pervade the text, are worsened by the massive corruption and general insensitivity to the plight of the underprivileged – the same facts which have crippled the economic stability of African societies and retarded social, political and technological progress.

The reader wonders at the scale of corruption and destruction in the play and whether what is being celebrated is any achievement at all: massive fraud and bribery take place at the council resulting in the death of thousands; vehicles that are not road worthy are put back to the road when money has exchanged hands. The horrifying fatality of this greed and indiscretion results in numerous terrible accidents. The destruction wreaked by the two lorries, 'Chimney of Ereko' – ironically christened "God my Saviour" (17) – and the 'Incinerator', illustrates the loss of order, and belies any achievement in the community. The following conversation portrays the catastrophic use such that modern inventions have been subjected by a careless, insensitive, corrupt and anarchic African society in the play.

- Obaneji: ... this one, the Chimney of Ereko. What a lorry! What a record it has. You put it off the road recently, didn't you?
- Adenebi: We had to, it was smoking like a perpetual Volcano.

- Sobaneji: Pity ... Chimney of Ereko. It had survived crashes, apart from falling in a pit two or three times ... .
- Obaneji: ... now take another casebook which we closed only yesterday. Another passenger lorry. They call it the Incinerator.
- Adenebi: Never heard the name.
- Obaneji: You couldn't have. It got that name only yesterday after what happened.
- Rola: What?
- Obaneji: Before I tell you I must let you know the history of the lorry. When it was built, someone looked at it, and decided that it would only take forty men. But the owner took it to the council. ... one of your of fice workers took a bribe. A substantial bribe. And he changed the capacity to seventy. (17-8)

The result, as Obaneji intimates us, is that the lorry got an accident and caught fire and sixty five of the seventy passengers "burnt to death" (19). According to Obaneji: "They were all on their way here - the gathering of the tribes" (18). The human characters in the play have obviously neither changed nor learnt from any past mistakes. The same mistakes continue to repeat themselves: the corruption, hatred, hostility, cruelty, brutal murder, deception and general lack of discretion. All these still very much characterize the present as they did in the past. The Dead Woman confirms this: "A hundred generations have made no difference. I was a fool to come" (25).

The foregoing point is significantly portrayed by a flash back into the court of Mata Kharibu, eight centuries back, where the three protagonists in their former lives were responsible for the enslavement, brutal treatment of the Dead Man and the death of his wife, the Dead Woman (while being pregnant) (46-57). The significance of this flashback is vividly captured by Eldred Jones:

Soyinka heightens the comparisons with our imperfect present by making the human characters in the play double as both contemporary and historical characters, thus making the point that the more men change, the more they remain the same. The specific garb may change but the basic human characters remain fundamentally unaltered. ("The Essential Soyinka" 118)

Jones' view is corroborated in the text when Forest Father (the supreme deity in the play) who doubles as Obaneji, a mortal being, says:

Trouble me no further. The fooleries of beings whom I have fashioned closer to me weary and distress me. Yet I must persist, knowing that nothing is ever altered [my emphasis]. My secret is my eternal burden to pierce the encrustations of soul-deadening habit, and bare the mirror of original nakedness - knowing full well, it is all futility. (71)

This is where many critics identify pessimism as a prominent feature in the play as in many Soyinka's works. To say, however, nothing ever changes or "nothing is ever altered" is to deny the play of its salutary message, which rests squarely in the expiation we are told by Demoke the three protagonists have undergone. The vision of pessimism is described by Maduakor thus: "In a situation where nothing happens or so much happens at a leisurely pace, all too suddenly, the balloon of inertia is punctured and both audience and cast are shaken up by the impact of the blast" (183). And he further identifies it as "Soyinka's favourite method of organizing the structure of his plays" (183).

The vision of pessimism nevertheless is significant to a postmodern critical perspective; and:

One of the abiding concerns of the new historicism [which] is the reconstruction of our view of history not as progressional, evolutionary inevitability, but as multi-directional network of ruptured continuities in which cause may be effect effect cause ... . (Osundare in "African literature and the Crisis of Post-Structuralist Theorising" 2)

The flashback device in the play is a historical tool and is therefore of a postmodern aesthetic interest. It is symptomatic of the text as a product of schizophrenia. It foregrounds the visions of characters and the play's structure, and ruptures the image of order in structural progression. It provides historical explanations for the prevailing loss of values and the lack of humanity in the capitalist world hinted at in the play. The meaning derivable here is that African society can liberate itself from the Third world bondage of tyranny, underdevelopment, poverty, superstitions, and corruption by looking back into the glorious and inglorious part of her history, legends, myths, folktales and proverbs in order to reconstruct a new identity and to recreate new structures and institutions for the survival of community.



A Dance of the Forests is a political play. It is not just a celebration of a glorious achievement as suggested by the phrase in the title, 'A Dance', but a metaphor of contrasting fragments, which also portray the "problems confronting [the] inchoate world" (Eyoh 67) of the 20<sup>th</sup> century new Nigerian nation - if we can allude to the state of Nigeria and her historic achievement at the time the play was written. The half-child symbol in the play distorts the image of unity, completeness and order. It is both an allegory and a concrete symbol which demythologizes the myth of the glorious past; it detotalises (contrasts) the vision of accomplishments. Its association with the figure - in - red and the dangerous game at "knife-points" (70-1) are signifiers, which create an awareness of future strife, destruction and bloodshed. More significantly the Half-child confronts us with the need to reassess our old myths in order to see how they have repeatedly led us to self destruction, man's inhumanity to man, avarice and lack of "progress" in the real sense of the word. More so, just as the half-child was not born in the past because of the atrocities of that past, he can not be born in the present as well because the same conditions that made his birth impossible in the past are still in the present. The interpretation here is the major perspective which the schizophrenic trial scene in the forest, which also constitutes the play's main climax, represents. The text does not just resonate pessimism; salutary vision emerges from it as well. First, the various images of despair create an awareness of social problems, and this knowledge is itself salutary. Second, the denial of Demoke to take custody of the half-child is significantly so (that is, salutary); it suggests the need to create new myths of existence, break away from, and rupture, the recurring image of duplicates which our history has embodied as we have learnt, for instance, from the Crier in the play:

To all such as dwell in these Forests; Rock devils,  
 Earth imps, Tree demons, gnomids, dewilds, genie  
 Incubi, succubi, windhorls, bits and halves and such  
 Sons and subjects of Forest Father, and all  
 That dwell in his domain, take note, this night  
 Is the welcome of the dead. When spells are cast  
 And the dead invoked by the living, only such  
 May resume their body corporeal as are summoned  
 When the understreams that whirl them endlessly  
 Complete a circle. Only such may regain  
 Voice auditorial as are summoned when their link  
 With the living has fully repeated its nature, has  
 Re-impressed fully on the tapestry of Igbehinadun  
 In approximate duplicate of actions ... . (45)

Forest Father does not see how Demoke's inability to adopt the Half-child proves him wrong when the deity says: "my secret is my eternal burden - to pierce the encrustations of soul-deadening habit, and bare the mirror of original nakedness - knowing full well, it is all futility" (71). These words by Forest Father directly inform us of the failure of the gods and superstitions to provide lasting solutions to societal problems. Man must therefore look inward for personal and social redemption.

The salutary message is further extended by Eshuoro's inability to destroy Demoke on his totem. Ogun, his patron god, helps the carver to escape Eshuoro's vengeance. This singular act is liberation for Demoke and the rest of the human community. Symbolically, it shows that though myths and superstitions have been part of the bane of social progress, it is also through the reordering of these myths and the attuning of selves to inner potentials that society can advance. The sense of expiation further affirms the play's salutary vision. It tells us that social transformation can never come from superstition and sacrificial offerings to the deities, because these have served as the instruments of "conservatism and thus of anarchy and oppression in our society" (Mowah 13). Our lesson is that, expiation is a personal and liberated process of self discovery. The conversation between the Old Man and Demoke, his son, speaks of this.

Old Man: Demoke, we made sacrifice and demanded the path of expiation

Demoke: Expiation? We three who lived many lives in this one night, have we not done enough? Have we not felt enough for the memory of our remaining lives? (73)

From this perspective, the journey of the three protagonists into the forest is a journey into the labyrinth of the mind for the healing cure to the problems of the external environment.

Significantly, antinomies in the text manifest as the social, political and psychological problems which cause despair, which put any sense of achievement in doubt and destroy any celebrative mood. They attest to the inadequacies of the gods and the futility of relying on them. The gods are portrayed as displaying man's weaknesses, corrupt, petty, indiscrete and visionless - the same cankerworms which have caused anarchy in the human environment. According to Aroni, "it is enough that they [the protagonists] discover their regeneration" (59). This is a pointer to the fact that people must seek salvation in themselves, discover their potentials and redirect their own energies to more useful purposes.

The antinomies in the play serve as effective paradigms for understanding the real meaning and essence of progress. Real progress from both content and form also includes using myths to your own advantage by becoming a myth-maker yourself; people should not depend on myths but myths on people.

Soyinka addresses many social and psychological problems in *A Dance of the Forests* so much so that we can have recourse to it for healing. The play demonstrates how narrative knowledge can be an alternative for, or complement, scientific knowledge. Through his criticism of society, the playwright created his own myth to help advance the course of culture and society; his creation is a substitute for modern myths like computer and other technological inventions.

### The Paradox of Dramatic Representation in *A Dance of the Forests*

*A Dance of the Forests* is a text which demonstrates that literature as a cultural product can function as a demythologizing art. The play achieves that through its inherent conflict and fragmentary devices such as satire, irony, parody, flashbacks, and other symbolic representations. These aesthetic elements in the play establish it as a paradox of dramatic representation. Paradox is hereby used in consonance with the view of the new critics who extend the term to include "all surprising deviations from, or qualifications of, common perceptions or commonplace opinions" (Abrams 127). It is also in agreement with Jeyifo in his article "For Chinua Achebe: The Resilience and the Predicament of Obierika", who sees it as "irony and dialectic" which he says is the "pole of demystification" (61). In fact, as Cleanth Brooks has said "the language of poetry is the language of paradox" (Abrams 127). Drama itself actualizes through paradox by the mythical realization of an action through foregrounded elements, characters and dialogue.

The conflicts in *A Dance* are the first to raise the play's metaphor to prominence. We can identify conflicts at different levels. There is the conflict between the living and the dead heightened by the rejection of the dead by the human community; between the living and the supernatural necessitating frequent sacrifices for atonement and thereby establishing the need for expiation as solution to the various acts of transgressions; between two principles: restriction and freedom, self-denial and self-assertion (which stimulates an awareness of the conflict between reality and pleasure principles). The protagonists and the deities, especially Eshuoro and Ogun, incarnate these in the text. Conflicts also exist between old and new or the past and the present; between tradition and modernity - a subtle theme which the

destruction by the two lorries, 'Chimney of Ereko and the Incinerator', including the destruction of the forest and the araba tree, explore at a lower level of signification. The list is endless.

In this re-reading of the text, the supernatural agreeably emerges as a potent signifier. D. Aiyejina rightly observes this when he examines *A Dance of the Forests* in his study of the supernatural in African drama:

The signifier [the supernatural] thus operates at two functional levels: first as an expression of the archetypal image operational in the subconscious of the society; and secondly as a function of time past and present. (95)

However, the supernatural signifier operates at more than these two levels. The supernatural functions at different planes: metaphysical, secular, individual, collective, psychological, historical, etcetera. Each plane contains its own conflict creating therefore series of conflicts, which intermingle and deny the play of a palpable plot. It is through these conflicts that the supernatural serves as a link between the deep and surface structures creating a situation whereby form becomes meaning, and meaning form. The 'forest' is where the conflicting interests converge. Maduakor attempts an explanation of the elaborate signification of the forest metaphor:

The forest is an extension of the grove metaphor; it is not only a ritual symbol of expiation or purgation but also a non-ritual symbol with multiple connotations. First, the forest is an abode of an unseen power, the home of the gods ... . The forest is also a metaphor for the human world. Finally, the forest is a maze, a labyrinth impenetrable and unknowable, where nothing happens and yet everything is possible. (179)

What is left out in Maduakor's brilliant explication of the forest metaphor in the play is that the 'forest' also signifies the inner dwelling place of the unconscious drives (individual and collective) where we confront our various gods (our inner potentials) and from which we can confront the reality of our existence. It is ironical that the gods in the play which the humans should look up to are not fundamentally different from the latter since the former incarnate the same cankerworms that have caused rift and disorder in the corporeal world. The conclusion therefore is that there is no salvation in these gods, but in man himself. This explains the significance of the three human protagonists' experience of expiation, and why when the Old Man says:

Old Man: Demoke, we made sacrifice and demanded the path of expiation ... . (Demoke replies)

Demoke: Expiation? We three who lived in this one night, have

we not done enough? Have we not felt enough for the memory of our remaining lives?" (73).

The forest which is the setting of the play is like a mirror held on to life. The gods themselves are not spared because we are to see through the "forest" mirror the true nature of the gods. They are demystified as they quarrel, make their own mistakes; they are mean and petty, portrayed sometimes as cheap crooks, blood-thirsty; they show delight in trivial and in human misfortunes. There are many instances where the foibles of the gods themselves are portrayed. For instance, Obaneji (Forest Father) displays his pettiness and love of trivials when he says:

Obaneji: Pity. I was very fond of it. Chimney of Ereko. It had survived eight crashes, apart from falling in a pit two or three times. Yes it was something of an Old Warrior. I grew a real affection for it. (17)

Adenebi's reply, "If you like that sort of thing [,]" casts doubts as to the integrity of the deity. And he becomes more disappointing when he narrates with relish the story of the fatal accident involving the Incinerator which claimed many lives. The encounter between Murete (the spirit inhabiting the wood) first with Eshuoro, and later with Ogun, shows the pride, gullibility and greed of these gods. Agboreko - the Elder of the Sealed Lips (the diviner) - approaches Murete several times with wine to appease him in order to know the where about of the protagonists in the forest and to learn about what the gods think of humans. After accepting the offering, Murete in his arrogance is hardly forthcoming with the information Agboreko seeks. In fact, other gods in the play, like Murete, behave like the humans and do not show they are better. The demystification of the gods is a sustained parody in the play.

Soyinka demonstrates with his constant use of mythology and rituals that he uses these elements as convenient metaphors to make vital, social and political comments. Mythology and rituals form a larger controlling force in this play's mesh of significations. They serve as totalizing and detotalising tools. That is, Soyinka uses them to present issues from different perspectives and they also become the means with which he debunks or destroys an earlier portrait or structure erected; he constructs, reconstructs and deconstructs with them. It is from this perspective that Sekoni's assertion about Soyinka's use of 'ritual' in "Ritual and Communication in Soyinka's Drama" may be better appreciated: Ritual in Soyinka's drama is not only used to produce and convey meanings ... it is also employed to comment on the entire process of communicational act of which it is an element (87).

Drama is a communicational act. Ritual and mythology can be useful metaphorical vehicles. This is characteristic of Soyinka's creative impulse, which he admitted in an interview he granted *The Southern Review*: "I use Yoruba gods as creative metaphors, sometimes as metaphors for my own existence. One in particular called Ogun" (512). The situation in *A Dance of the Forests* is such that humans and gods are parodied and satirized in the portrayal of social decay and imbalance. It is a dramatic style which is similar to Euripides' and Brecht's. The narrative strategies in the text such as parody, satire, irony, mythology, rituals, stories, flashbacks, fragment and foreground man's psychological, cultural, social and political experiences; they take us back and forward in the drama and enable us to see in the stream of time the diachronic and synchronic elements which constitute the totality of life in the dramatic representation. These elements also detotalise by making sensitive readers and audience, as the case may be, question the supposed sense of progress, social stability, secular logic and the infallibility of the gods.

The dances and music are other idioms which foreground experience and make the dramatic representation a meta-narrative of ruptured continuities. Dance is an important metaphorical vehicle in the play. It is an element which shows its prominence right from the title: *A Dance of the Forests*. It is likely to raise one's "expectation of a celebration in which leafy boughs are borne by dancers to give the impression of dancing forests" (Ukala in "Dance and Music in Wole Soyinka's *A Dance of the Forests*" 121). Ukala in the foregoing article, identifies three kinds of dances and their significance in the dramatic text:

The dances in the play can loosely be classified into three types: the ritual, the symbolic and the pseudo-sacrificial. The ritual dance [according to him] occurs during the more elaborate rite of divination in the play... This dance seems designed to inspire the gods to make utterances, through the oracle, regarding possible solutions to the problems of the human community... The symbolic dance comprises the *ampe* and the *Dance of the Half-child*... The pseudo-sacrificial dance is ... called "the *Dance of the Unwilling Sacrifices*". (122-4)

Ukala also identifies two kinds of music in the play, namely: "Background music and Dance music" (126). Ukala believes that the use of Dance and music in the play help to strengthen the "main motifs of the play - namely, the hostility of hosts to guests, contradiction (or disharmony), and (mis)application of freewill" (128). The motifs of the play are many as they also include personal and group sacrifice, greed, guilt and freedom.

A Dance of the Forests, through its paradox, is both a counter- and meta-narrative which subverts popular views of progress and history, and which achieves objectivity by discountenancing the "pit falls of self essentialisation in the construction of community" (Jeyifo in "Wole Soyinka's Theatre" 65-6).

### Postscript

The 21<sup>st</sup> century Nigeria validates the relevance of the prophetic vision of Soyinka's *A Dance of the Forests*, which was written in 1960 to celebrate the country's newly acquired independence at that time. The corruption, insensitivity, inhumanity, failed vision, false unity and progress, which characterise the celebrative society of the play, are reminiscent of Nigeria. One of the major recurring features in the play is its recourse to mythology and rituals because of the need for expiation and sacrifice. It suggests that this can be attained by objectively reviewing old and contemporary myths and by identifying the antinomies that have stood against economic, political and socio-cultural progress. Until this is done, whatever is celebrated in 'The Gathering of the Tribes' (which many believe signifies Nigeria) is false unity and progress. The antinomies that are antithetical to genuine progress could grow monstrous and in a schizophrenic peak destroy the foundation or the existence of the community of 'The Gathering of the Tribes'. The good news is that there is an identification of a solution to the anarchic sterility in the play. This is in the objective analysis of the past and contemporary history and a subsequent effort toward expiation at individual and collective levels. The bad news is that those to lead society out of the gloom, are leaders like Adenobi, Demoke, and Rola, who are terribly tainted and visionless. Such are the ambivalent moods that surround the vision of progress in the society of the play, and, by extension, its referent, Nigeria, even in the 21st century.

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