

Akomaye Oko, *The Tragic Paradox: A Study of Wole Soyinka and his Works*. Lagos: Kraft Books, 1992, pp. 116., no price.

Kraft Books Limited has produced an attractively presented study by Akomaye Oko which builds to the conclusion that

The tragic paradox is not negative. The momentum created by the old and the new creates a dynamic art and a social consciousness. (106)

The volume includes chapters entitled 'The Religious Paradox', 'Political Aspects of the Conflict' and 'The Social Conflict'; there is a five-page Bibliography and an Index. On the back cover Edde M. Iji provides a recommendation in which he describes the volume as

a very welcome addition to the ever-growing evaluation and revaluation of Soyinka's priceless creative works with their continuously spiralling unfoldment of the levels of meanings in application to, not only, the historical, socio-political evolution of the Nigerian human state and contradictions, but also to the universal conditions and experiences of man.

If you want to buy it on the basis of the fact that it looks good, has intriguing chapter headings, contains the expected academic apparatus and arrives with a commendation by a published author with a position in a university Theatre Arts Department, then go ahead. I have certain reservations, which, by and large, make mine a negative response to the book.

Perverse readers, among whom I include myself, sometimes turn to the back of a book before digesting the contents proper. In the case of Oko's volume such readers soon encounter Iji's statement on the back cover. I must admit that I was soon lost in it - somewhere around 'continuously spiralling unfoldment', and did not recover my balance before the end. I've still no idea what Iji means, still the general message seems to be that he admired the book. After all he described it as a 'welcome addition to the ever-growing evaluation... of Soyinka's... works.'

From the back cover, the perverse reader (p.r.) turns to the Index. The entries in this instance suggest that Oko spread his net wide and indicate that there are at least allusions to a range of writers and concepts - some rarely encountered in discussions about Soyinka. Writers referred to include A. W. Pinero and Blaise Pascal, concepts

include 'The Racinian paradox' and 'Theocracy-Islamic Republicanism.' Clearly Oko has plunged into the deeper waters of theatre history, philosophy, and politics. All in all the Index suggests that there are some daring and original references and, perhaps, comparisons in the text.

But before moving on to the text, the p.r. examines the Bibliography. The first thing that struck me about the list of 'Primary Texts' was that it included nothing later than 1971. This, in a 'welcome addition... of Soyinka's works published in 1992, suggested that, while possibly covering the first decade and half of Soyinka's career as a significant writer, two decades of creative and critical writing had been passed over in silence. Whatever else the text contained there would be nothing on **Opera Wonyosi, Death and the King's Horseman, Season of Anomy, Ake, Unlimited Liability Company, Isara, Myth, Literature and the African World**, and so on. It was also disconcerting to note that some entries were incomplete, for instance **Camwood on the Leaves** was listed but there were no publication details.

A glance at the list of 'Secondary Texts' confirmed the impression gained from the Index - that Oko had spread his net wide. Here were listed volumes on the theory of democratic elitism, on Karl Marx, on comparative religion, on illusion and reality, and on sociology through literature - to go no further than the first page. And there were also relevant Nigerian titles: volumes by Awolowo and Azikiwe, and novels by Chinua Achebe - well those published before 1966. At this point it became clear that the list confirmed another impression: that gained from the 'Primary Texts' that life ended in the seventies. Oyin Ogunba's **The Movement of Transition** leaped from the page with a publication date of 1975, but it was the only book published in that year and there were no later titles. There was one from 1974, Kobina Sekyi's **The Blinkards**, and a couple of essential volumes from 1972, namely the monographs on Soyinka by Eldred Jones and Gerald Moore. It was clear that Oko was a creature of the sixties and very early seventies, unwilling to trespass into more recent times.

A check in the Index indicated that the reader should not expect to find any references in the text to major critical studies listed in the Bibliography: there were no entries for Ogunba, Jones or Moore. Could it be that Oko's line of enquiry was so original and independent that not one of these leading critics contributed a single idea or fact that he could use?

As a result of this digging around at the end of the book, I turned to the 'Introduction' with some trepidation. I was already afraid that this 'welcome addition' was a late arrival at the debate about Soyinka's achievement. Oko's contribution had all the indications of having left home about twenty years ago, the journey had been a long one - on the way a few titles might have been added to the bibliography but there was no proof that the typescript had been tampered with for some two decades.

With this attitude, it was some relief to find, on page 9, a reference to the Nobel Prize - so Oko had not been hibernating all the time. But it soon became clear that the author had indeed missed out on years of creative effort by Soyinka and on years of critical debate about his work. He was writing about Soyinka and tragedy without reference to the extended attention given to this topic by Ketu Katrak, Obi Maduakor and many others. Not only was he writing, he had been published!

It is impossible at this remove to work out how such a dated book arrived in the bookshops. It might have been because of pressure from an insistent author, or the action of a publisher anxious to jump on a bandwagon, perhaps the bandwagon hooked to the decision taken by the Swedish Academy in 1986. But perhaps I am doing the author and publisher a disservice, perhaps Oko does represent the present state of Soyinka criticism in Calabar. Perhaps I should consider the plight of hard pressed researchers, the victims of economic dislocation, of falling library allocations and of the disruption in book distribution. The problem of getting access to the abundant materials which now exist on Soyinka is indeed considerable, probably insurmountable in the absence of a special collection of Soyinkana. But, on consideration, I cannot allow Oko this excuse: obtaining copies of Soyinka's recent work in Nigeria should not, given the author's use of Nigerian publishing houses, have been insurmountable. For example, *Isara* was published in 1989 by Fountain Publications of 32 Adenuga Street, Agodi, Ibadan. That should have been available.

So far I have spent considerable energy declaiming 'you come twenty years too late,' but does this mean that there is nothing in Oko's book that can justify the accolade that it is 'a very welcome addition'? In fact, there are passages of value and I am happy to draw attention to them. For example, Oko quotes illuminatingly on occasions from Awolowo's autobiography (20), from Major Lawrence's prophecies for

1930, from a leaflet distributed by the Christ Apostolic Church of Oke Anu (37-38), and from I.M. Lewis, whose comments on the Bori cults of North-west Africa can be seen to parallel West African experience (51). These references and the comments on them all assist students in coming to terms with Soyinka's writings and in placing them in appropriate contexts. I am sure teachers will make use of them repeatedly. Incidentally, to save time teachers should note the page references given above since, on closer examination, the Index emerges as highly selective. Pinero and Pascal are in, but it does not mention any of the following: Awolowo, Lewis, or Bori.

While providing some useful insights and discussions, the text should, however, be read critically. This late-comer to the debate should be repeatedly frisked, and certain attributes impounded. There is, for example, an affected and unnecessary use of various foreign languages, including Latin (16) and French (85). The second reference is to a passage from a book by Alain Ricard which has been transcribed - or printed - or proof-read with little attention to the conventions of the language in which it is written. Ricard's book, incidentally, has been excellently translated into English and published in Nigeria - one wonders why Oko chose to quote from it in 'the language of Racine'.

Oko's use of 'the language of Shakespeare' sometimes gives grounds for concern, and this category produces some 'dangerous weapons.' For example, he writes of two young men in **Dinner for Promotion** who try 'to worm their way into (their) employer's favour.' (96) The idiom he requires employs 'to worm' - and is such an odd expression that I suspect that the error has almost achieved the status of a Nigerianism. There are other more or less established local usages, though whether examination boards and university markers are prepared to accept them I do not know. For instance, to describe the thugs in **The Road** as 'nearly photocopies of the political thugs that were retained by each of the leading parties' is to make a valid point but to extend the meaning of 'photocopy' far beyond its usual range (73). These are just the kind of confused and inflated usage that Soyinka makes fun of in satirical sketches and condemns in newspaper articles.

Elsewhere in his study Oko refers to a time 'when the land was socialized,' (78) which suggests an uncertain grasp of usage and must leave the reader guessing. 'Socialized medicine' - yes; 'socialization processes' - certainly; but 'socialized land' - that, as an

American ex-President might say, 'boggles the mind.' Confusion of a different kind is caused by the following: writing of Soyinka's activism, Oko maintains that Soyinka 'uses his talents to pick the teeth of society, as his own contribution towards society's redemption' (104). The image presented is ludicrously inappropriate: Soyinka with a sharpened piece of wood in his hand poking free the strands of meat which have lodged between the teeth of society! As a teacher, and one who knows the respect, nay reverence, which students are apt to accord to any opinion in print, I shudder to think of the references to Soyinka as dental hygienist, possibly a 'societal dental hygienist', that will find their way into essays and exam scripts before you can say 'the tragic paradox.'

It is, I think, the fear that this book will fall into the hands of impressionable students that gives an edge to my unease - and accounts for the bilious note seeping into this review. Apart from the problems caused by the unnecessary use of various languages, by the misuse of expressions and by the confusing use of words, there are four other major areas of concern. The first is the inclusion of irrelevant material, the second the 'typographical errors', the third the dubious reading of texts and the fourth the controversial description of **Camwood on the Leaves** as Soyinka's earliest play (9).

On the second page of his text, Oko considers it relevant to give an account of what was happening in the British theatre during 1934 - because that was when Soyinka was born. He begins a paragraph thus:

1934, the year of his birth, was the year of Gielgud's second **Hamlet** at the new Theatre, Devlin's **King Lear** at the Westminster theatre, and Evan's **Richard II** at the Old Vic. (8)

He continues with references to works by Robert Grave; L. Horseman; S. O'Casey and J.P. Priestley, and the paragraph concludes: 'It was also the year of A.W. Pinero's death.' In exploring the relationship between Soyinka and the British theatre there is something to be said about the impact on him of O'Casey's use of Irish idioms and there are a few paragraphs to be written about the influence of the Yorkshire dramatist's 'time plays' - including the one which has been adapted to a Nigerian setting, **An Inspector Calls**. But Oko's avalanche of theatre facts beginning with 'Gielgud's second **Hamlet**' throws no light on the relationship. It simply shows that Oko had access to a theatre year book for 1934 or some such volume: he decided to clutter

up his study, and possibly the minds of students, with irrelevant trivia. The last sentence - about Pinero - is an accurate statement, but one which, with respect to the memory of the playwright (usually known by his full name: Arthur Wing Pinero) and with due deference to his family, is likely to prompt the response, so what?

I have refrained from employing the abbreviation 'sic' in quoting the above, but it could have made numerous appearances in relation to errors which I generously described as 'typographical' above. They must, in fact, reflect carelessness on a variety of levels. If we take 'Sean O'Casey' as the normal form used by the Irish dramatist and follow the pattern of (normally) employing an individual's full name at first appearance, there is a mistake in every single one of these names mentioned. And if we insist, as we are entitled to on capitals for proper nouns, there are also errors in two out of the three theatres mentioned.

The reference to 'Evan' is particularly confusing: it should be to Maurice Evans. We might note that it should also be Robert Graves, Lawrence Houseman and J.B. Priestley. Now, we all make mistakes and typographical and printing errors creep in (particularly in articles prepared under pressure), but so many mistakes in such a brief paragraph of a book is excessive. I consider that, on the evidence of this section of **The Tragic Paradox**, Oko should be nominated for a 'Scott Kennedy Award'. That is to say, he has shown a disregard for care in the presentation of academic material approaching that displayed by J. Scott Kennedy in his slipshod book on African theatre.

When it comes to the interpretation of texts there is often room for discussion, but there are occasions when Oko makes statements which I regard as inaccurate. It is easy to disagree with them, but not easy to get involved in an argument because there is little close textual analysis in the volume. At one point, having stated that the personality that emerges (from **The Man Died**) 'is that of an indestructible man armed with foreknowledge and vision...', Oko continues:

The Soyinka of **The Man Died** is akin in many respects to Eman of **The Strong Breed**. Eman knows what will happen and he is willing. (10).

I agree that there is a kinship between Soyinka and Eman, but I cannot accept this reading of **The Strong Breed**. Surely the point is that Eman does not know what will happen: he is ignorant about the

form that the cleansing ritual takes in the village he has moved to, and, though willing to substitute himself for Ifada, he is not prepared for the violence which is unleashed upon him. Hence his flight through the village.

Even the most straightforward of Soyinka's texts provides traps into which Oko falls. In a characteristically staccato resume of **Childe Internationale**, he writes that Titi is 'attending boarding school abroad' (77). There is no suggestion that this is the case in the text - she is at an 'International School' and it is true that the ethos of the school is alien, the values foreign, and the behaviour tolerated and even encouraged 'un-African'. But, and this is the salt in the father's wound, the school itself is on African soil. It is difficult to see where Oko got the 'abroad' from, and one hopes that students reading Oko's plot summary will be ready to challenge his account.

They should also be sceptical about the information he presents as facts about the texts themselves. Oko writes:

By 1955 soyinka was nineteen and had already experimented with **Camwood on the Leaves...** (9).

In interviews Soyinka has spoken of his first radio plays being for the Nigerian Broadcasting Service and his first stage plays being set in South Africa. (See, for example, the interview in **The Literary Half-Yearly** and the **Listener** article "Gbohun-Gbohun"). To argue that **Camwood**, a play which won an independence radio playwriting competition in 1960, was an experiment from 1955 is extraordinary. I cannot see what grounds Oko has for making the claim and await illumination.

At the beginning of this review I quoted Iji's description of the book as 'a very welcome addition...' etc. etc. I would only accept it with warnings that it must be read critically and used with the utmost caution. Iji, whose address is, like Oko's, the Department of Theatre Arts at the University of Calabar, and who has had two books, like Oko's, published by Kraft, has done his own reputation no good by glibly endorsing such a flawed volume.

There is a lively debate about Soyinka's work going on, and, despite being cut off from some publications, Nigerian critics have made many of the most perceptive contributions. Into the debating chamber occupied by the likes of Abiola Irele, Biodun Jeyifo and Femi Osofisan, Oko has stumbled bearing his 'long krafted' offering. He seems to come from a different age, and to have missed out on much

that has happened in the last two decades. When he speaks it is with the voice of the Rip Van Winkle of Nigerian criticism. The reference to the Nobel Prize, the inclusion of a couple of titles from 1974/5 in the Bibliography are just hasty up-dates-made on the way to the podium. The basic study does not have the courtesy to take note of what has already been said.

As he speaks, it becomes clear that, despite being clad in gown and mortar board and despite incorporating expressions in different languages, Oko is not rigorously academic. The Index, which seems at first sight to give the whole an aura of academic respectability, is deficient; the Bibliography is embarrassingly out of date; many of the arguments do not bear close examination and the text is too often replete with Scott Kennedyisms. These negative qualities, quickly apparent to the perverse reader, obscure the illuminating quotations which await the persevering reader.

James Gibbs