

Biodun Jeyifo

Biodun Jeyifo is Professor of Literature and Comparative Literature and of African and African American Studies at Harvard University, Cambridge, Massachusetts, USA. His most recent book *Wole Soyinka: Politics, Poetics and Postcolonialism* (2004) won the American Library Association's outstanding academic text award for 2005.
E-mail: bjeyifo@fas.harvard.edu

Forget the Muse, think only of the (Decentered) Subject?

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This essay involves an exploration of complex and fascinating acts of decentering and re-centering of writers in relation to traditional Muses as institutionalizations or sedimentations of artistic and intellectual inspiration in cultural tradition. Using the specific example of Wole Soyinka's much discussed appropriation of Ogun, the Yoruba god of war, metallurgy and creativity as a point of departure, the paper gives what is intended as a far more complex and even more contradictory relationship between Soyinka and this chosen Muse than what we typically encounter in the criticism and scholarship on the Nigerian dramatist's writings. This is done in two distinct though interlocking interpretive, discursive moves: first, by reading Soyinka's positive appropriation of Ogun against Derek Walcott's disavowal of the Muses of both Europe and Africa in the play, *Dream on Monkey Mountain* and in one of his most important essays, "The Muse of History"; and, secondly, by critically excavating Soyinka's own scathing and revisionary critique of Ogun as a Muse in his first major play, *A Dance of the Forests*. Building on these readings of Soyinka and Walcott, the essay ends with a plea for paying as much attention, in the postcolonial Nigerian and African context, to re-centering as is given to decentering in Western postmodernist discourses, always with an eye to the interpenetrations and exchanges that take place among the diverse literary and cultural traditions of the world. **Key words:** Muse; a-muse; avant-garde critical theory; decentering and recentering; the Subject of traditional humanism.

Amuse: 1480, from M.Fr. *amuser*, "divert, cause to muse", from a "at, to" (but here probably a causal prefix) + *muser*, "ponder, stare fixedly."

Online Etymology Dictionary

Before getting into the opening move in this essay, it is perhaps necessary for me to give a clarification of the title which rather enigmatically hints at the forgetting of muses and an ancillary fixation only on decentered subjects. What does this all mean?

Some of the most widely influential aspects of contemporary avant-garde critical theories pertain to the *decentering* of subjects from what are deemed essentialized or foundationalist mystifications of the operations of knowledge, power and influence. "Subject" in this context alludes to the humanist tradition and its veneration of *individuals and persons* as autonomous, sovereign agents, together with the defence of

this human “subject” from the presumed overweening claims of the objective and impersonal processes of history, economic production and ideological interpellation. This involves a paradox, for the sovereign subject of the humanist imaginary is not really free of history, culture or tradition; rather, he or she is often rooted or *centered* in those institutionalized codifications of power, knowledge and influence that are lodged either in *religion* (the God of monotheistic religions and the deities of pantheons; grace; faith), *culture* (language; tradition; values), *community* (ethnic group; nation; race) or *reason* (science; law; education). In other words, the subject is “free” only because he or she is rooted in, or indebted to the inspiration, solicitude and empowerment offered by belief in God, culture, community or reason, especially in their most powerful institutional sedimentations.

But these are precisely the same sedimentations that throughout history have often led to acts of great barbarity, injustice and inhumanity. They are the same entrenchments of power or knowledge that led to the use of science in the service of the Nazi “Master Race” ideology and the death camps; to the use of Christianity to rationalize the transatlantic slave trade; and to the use of *reason* to secure the discourses of the so-called “civilizing missions” that rationalized the colonial subjugation of entire peoples. Thus, the decentered subject is the agent freed of the seductions and illusions of the humanist imaginary: God, country, science, and reason. It is from this vigorous critique of humanism and its veneration of the rooted, centered subject that some of the great decentering intellectual projects derive their rationale. One thinks here in particular of Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer in *Dialectic of Enlightenment*; and as an astute interlocutor of the decentering projects, one thinks of Jurgen Habermas in *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity*. In the more specific context of literary and cultural studies, one thinks of Roland Barthes in “The Death of the Author” and of Michel Foucault in “What is an Author?”

Now, Wole Soyinka is one writer and intellectual, one *subject* who, throughout his career as one of the African continent’s leading public intellectuals, has most emphatically resisted all acts of decentering carried out on his work and his social and cultural engagements. He has been especially scathing in his response to critics and theorists that he deems blind to the complexities of the stakes involved in such acts of decentering and the critics’ and theorists’ own often messy entanglement in the historical process. Indeed, Soyinka (1988) in such appropriately and provocatively titled essays as “The critic and society: Barthes, leftocracy and other mythologies” and “The autistic hunt; or how to Marximize mediocrity” has, in this matter, posed the ultimate interrogation to the critic: the interpreter or theorist who decenters the writer and artist from his culture or from the historical process, does he or she extend the displacement or decentering to him or herself? And does she or he write from a place, a location that is itself decentered – in which case it is presumably (or presumptuously) no place, no site but pure, self-originating enunciation? This

interrogative assertion of Soyinka which could be generalized as an expression of the perennial quest of writers and artists (and indeed everyone alive) for self-authorization provides the point of departure for this paper: it is not enough, as many postmodernists believe, to talk only of decentering; we are always confronted with the impulse, the will and the imperative to re-center, always on the understanding that it is not the same center(s) to which we return.

In line with the wide-ranging ramifications of Soyinka's resistance of critical and theoretical acts of decentering, this paper re-situates discourses of decentering in the postcolonial context, specifically the field of Nigerian and African literary-critical discourses. The grounds on which decentering critical projects in Nigerian and African critical discourses have been undertaken have generally started from the critique of romantic, idealized cultural nationalisms or nativisms and ended with a thoroughgoing dismantling of any and all attempts to posit a separate and unique space or "earth" for Nigerian or African literature. One thinks here of Valentin Mudimbe's *The Invention of Africa* and Achille Mbembe's *On the Postcolony*.

In thinking of these particular texts of decentering Africanist critical projects, one is moved to invoke, as an antecedent counterdiscourse, the apparent "generational" imperative of writers like Achebe, Soyinka, Okigbo and Clark to locate the deepest sources of their writings in institutions, symbols and idioms of creativity of their ethno-cultural backgrounds. But if it could be persuasively argued that this "generational imperative" to be rooted and *centered* in sustaining and defining African matrices of creativity and identity has not lasted beyond the cohort of Femi Osofisan, Niyi Osundare, Odiya Ofeimun, Tess Onwueme and Zaynab Alkali, it remains true that it was of great import to the earlier generation and could be found in representative inscriptions in the work of each author: Achebe with his famous essayistic musings on the "chi" in Igbo cosmology; Okigbo with his invocations of the river goddess, Idoto; Clark with his stupendous scholarly and creative works on the Ijaw Ozidi saga; and far more extensively and definitively, Soyinka in essays, poems and plays on and about Ogun.

As demonstrated in the book of scholarly essays edited by Sandra Barnes and titled *Africa's Ogun*, there can hardly be, in Africa itself and in the African diaspora in the Caribbean and South America, a pre-colonial deity or avatar with a more powerful institutional consolidation as a religious and expressive frame of reference than Ogun. In the form of traditional deities and avatars, muses are exceptional codifications of symbolic capital; in this respect, Ogun as Muse is the quintessential locus of centering and decentering in African critical discourse. This is the point of departure for this paper. It entails an exploration of the paradoxical acts of *centering* and *decentering* that perpetually take place with regard to Muses as traditional institutionalizations of artistic and intellectual inspiration.

With more than a tad of purposive playfulness, I describe the paper as an exercise in going *a-musing*; it is an exploration of what I would describe as the “A-musing complex” in the cultural traditions of Africa and the Caribbean in particular, but more generally and comparatively the cultural traditions of all the peoples, regions and nations of the world. Here I am exhuming from the past of the English language an old word, “*amuse*”. This word is etymologically related to but also quite distinct from the modern word, “amuse” which means to cause laughter or hilarity. The older version of the word, “amuse” has gone out of ordinary, everyday usage in the language; as shown in the entry from the *Online Etymology Dictionary* that serves as an epigraph to this essay, the word roughly means to “divert, to cause to muse.” In the present context, I am adapting it to imply looking into the ways and doings of the *muses* in a given culture. If it is not yet clear, let me explain that the formulation of the term, “a-muse” or going “a-musing” follows the semantic logic through which, by adding that prefix “a” to any verb, one makes it more dynamic, more performatively efficacious. For instance, by adding that prefix, “a” to the word “begging” to form “a-begging,” you transform the verb into its more active and dynamic register. Same with “a-musing”: when you go “a-musing,” you are undertaking an intellectual journey which may take you through a whole range of issues and ideas including, but not limited to the following possibilities: the veneration or, on the other hand, the rejection of a particular Muse or muses in general; the clash between Muses and their human protégés; the processes of cross-breeding or cross-fertilization of Muses within and across cultures; the abandonment or renewal of the cults of a particular Muse or muses in general; the gendered or racialized origins and provenience of a particular Muse or a cluster of muses; divine muses as contrasted with human ones; phenomena which in time achieve the status of muses as opposed to say, things like mineral or ethereal essences conceived of as muses. Indeed, one can extend the possibilities to include the historic or social conditions in which one goes “a-musing,” whether in times of post-imperial nostalgia, irredentist, ethnic nationalisms in the failed or failing states of the developing world, or *laissez faire*, neo-liberal, “adjustment” programs of globalization that seek to entrench the dominance of market-driven options for the present and future of the human community. So, let it be said: going “a-musing” can be very exhaustive and exhausting as an intellectual project and a short paper such as the present essay cannot hope to even scratch the surface of what it entails when one says one is exploring the “A-musing complex” in cultural tradition. Moreover, just as the term “muse” leads to “a-muse,” so does it share etymological roots with other words and terms like *bemuse*, *museum* and even *music*. Thus, the range of references, allusions and fields of inquiry and speculation opened up in the matter of muses and their cultural and literary implications is truly astounding.

It is on account of this extraordinary and some would argue bewildering range of connotations embedded in the term, “muse,” that in this paper, I have chosen to limit

myself to only one or two of the many possibilities that I have just highlighted. At the end of the paper I shall return to some of these other expressions and manifestations, but for now, I shall explore only two of these expressions of muses and “a-musing”. The two aspects on which I wish to focus pertain to, on the one hand, conditions that occasion either vigorous contestations between the Muses of a culture and their associated cults or, on the other hand, an onslaught on particular Muses or muses in general. In exploring these particular dimensions of the “A-musing complex,” I shall be paying special attention to the transcoding or cross-fertilization that often takes place in the appropriation and deployment of the respective Muses of colonizing and colonized peoples and nations in the aftermath of the classical age of Empire and the historic context of the seemingly unending crises of the failed and failing states of Africa and the developing world.

In exploring these particular issues, I have chosen to focus on some of the works of Soyinka and Derek Walcott, with specific references to such dramatic texts as *A Dance of the Forests* and *Dream on Monkey Mountain*, and essayistic and theoretical monographs like “The Fourth Stage” of Soyinka (1976) and “The Muse of History” of Walcott (1998). In going “a-musing” on these texts of these two major figures of contemporary African, Caribbean and world literature, I hope to share with the reader some rather startling differences between them and, even more startling, some similarities and convergences of views and positions on the place and role of Muses in the formation and development of literary and cultural traditions.

One final note before I move directly to explorations of some of the dramatic works and theoretical writings of Soyinka and Walcott: In all that I have to say in this essay, I urge the reader to please bear in mind one fundamental approach to the broad topic of muses as institutionalizations of sources of creative and intellectual works in any given culture that informs all the observations, claims and contentions in my paper. This is the proven fact, the contention that inspiration for creativity and for self and communal renewal comes from innumerable sources and muses constitute only one composite site of these diverse sources. But having acknowledged that fact, it must also be conceded that in all cultural traditions, muses often constitute extraordinarily powerful codifications and sedimentations of the sources of inspiration available in a culture. And that is the source of their strengths and their weaknesses, their propensity for veneration and profanation.

For those who have not read Walcott’s essay, “The Muse of History,” but have read *Dream on Monkey Mountain*, the ferocity with which, in the essay, he wages a total war on History as *the* presiding Muse of Afro-Caribbean writers in the first few decades of the post-independence period can only be appreciated by comparison with what transpires at a particularly stunning moment in the dramatic action of *Dream on Monkey Mountain*. Parenthetically, two qualifications need to be made about Walcott’s

attack in the essay on History as Muse. In the first place, one could argue that it is not so much History in general that Walcott savages in the essay as the Muse of Caribbean writing of the period, but rather a view of History as deterministic, narrowly progressivist and normatively elaborated in terms of an endless struggle between winners and losers. And secondly, "History," as one soon discovers within the first few pages of the essay, is not really the "Muse" under attack in the essay; rather, it is the array of African-derived deities, cults and cultural symbols deployed by Afro-Caribbean writers of the militantly Black nationalist school as their muses, it is these that Walcott compositely designates the "Muse of History" and savages as misbegotten and enervating influences on the then emerging Caribbean literary tradition. But having made these qualifications, the fact still remains that in the essay, Walcott is driven to what can be described as excesses of a fiercely "anti-Muse" passion and eloquence, so much so that he directs his ire against all particularistic and ethnocentric Muses, African and European, black and white, supremacist and defensively nativist. In the face of the scale of Walcott's opprobrium and anathemas against all race-based muses in this essay, I suggest that those who have not read the essay but are familiar with the dramatic action of the play should consider what occurs in the final "apotheosis" scene of the play. In the scene Makak, the protagonist, at the urging of the gathered tribes of which he is now the King or Life President, beheads his Muse. This Muse is the apparitional white woman whom he had all along credited with having been the source of his most positive and transforming ideas and intuitions, the origin of his growing sense that he is far greater in human worth than the internalized image of a sub-human helot implanted in his psyche by the material conditions of his existence and virulently racist colonialist ideology. In other words, there is Makak, the lowest of the low among the "wretched of the earth" whose conditions of oppression and dehumanization are explicitly racialized; then there is the apparitional white woman who is his Muse and who fills Makak with intimations of the grandeur of his ancestral heritage; and there is the moment of apotheosis in Walcott's play when Makak is forced to reject and slay this Muse.

Everywhere in the world where I have either taught or lectured on this particular moment in *Dream on Monkey Mountain*, I have been struck – and rather discomfited – by the fact that for most students, what they find more unsettling, more troubling is less the act of the slaying of his Muse by Makak than the inscription by Walcott, the playwright, of a white woman as a black man's muse, an oppressed, illiterate black man at that. Let me re-state this point: Makak is compelled to destroy his Muse, the source of ideas which have helped him to think of himself not in the image of racist, colonialist ideology and discourses but as a man from the African world, a descendant of warriors and empire builders with rightful claims to a patrimony about which he need feel neither shame nor apology. This act of slaying his Muse excites far less interest than the fact that that Muse, the source of Makak's inspiration, is an apparitional

white woman. With the analytical tools of a radical feminist critique of patriarchal colonialism and imperialism, one could carefully do an enumeration of all the myths and phobias of racial purity and gender anxieties generated or felt about this inscription of Walcott's at this nodal point in his play, but this is not the place or the occasion for such an interpretive endeavor. More pertinent to the present discussion is the fact that Walcott is in this drama of Makak and his Muse whom he is forced to brutally exorcise radically subjecting the role of a Muse, or muses in general, to searing scrutiny and indictment.

The conundrums put in play in this scene from the play become both more intensified and clarified in Walcott's important essay, "The Muse of History." As I have remarked earlier, this essay is a veritable attack on the appropriation of African-derived muses by Caribbean writers and artists of the school of extreme Black Nationalist rejection of all European influences in the name of a return to African sources. Like Makak in *Dream on Monkey Mountain*, Walcott, the brilliant and eloquent theoretician of the emerging tradition in the Caribbean of the 60s and 70s of postcolonial letters and a poetics of self-fashioned personal and collective identities is, in this essay, also out to slay all *apparitional* Muses. But unlike what we see in Makak, the rejected and slain muses in "The Muse of History" are white and black, European and African. Indeed, it is useful to quote directly from the long, concluding paragraph of the essay on this particular point, bearing in mind that this is only one out of many similar passages and inscriptions:

I accept this archipelago of the Americas. I say to the ancestor who sold me, and to the ancestor who bought me, I have no father, although I can understand you, black ghost, white ghost, when you both whisper "history", for if I attempt to forgive you both I am falling into your idea of history which justifies and explains and expiates, and it is not mine to forgive, my memory cannot summon any filial love, since your features are anonymous and erased and I have no wish and no power to pardon. You were when you acted your historical roles, your given historical roles of slave seller and slave buyer, men acting as men, and also you, father in the filth-ridden gut of the slave ship, to you they were also men, acting as men, with the cruelty of men, your fellowman and tribesman not moved or hovering with hesitation about your common race any longer than my other bastard ancestor hovered with his whip, but to you, inwardly forgiven godfathers, I, like the more honest of my race, give a strange thanks. I give the strange and bitter and yet ennobling thanks for the monumental groaning and soldering of two great worlds, like the halves of a fruit seamed by its own bitter juice, exiled from your own Edens you have placed me in the wonder of another, and that was my inheritance and your gift. (Walcott 1998: 64).

At this point, and as a critical gloss on this passage, let me confess that it was mostly on the basis of the radically uncompromising, Edenic rejection of ancestral muses from both Africa and Europe as New World writers, in Walcott's formulation, set out to create the world afresh, it was on this basis that I chose the title for my talk in this paper: Forget the Muse and think only of the *subject*. The subject here is the personality, the special, unique identity and sensibility of extraordinarily original writers and artists that Walcott invokes in "The Muse of History" in place of what he considers ghostly, apparitional ancestral bequests. I believe that I speak for all who have critically read this particular essay of Walcott that it is precisely in those passages in the essay when the author writes in praise of the most accomplished writers of the New World that he is at his most brilliant, most moving and most compelling in the essay. In other words, Walcott clears the deck of literary and cultural history in the Caribbean of the inherited, bequeathed Muses of Europe and Africa and looks instead to the personality, the subjectivity of powerful creative writers and artists. But Walcott is in this matter caught in the horns of a dilemma since we cannot ignore strong intimations in his essay that the strong artists, the *subjects*, have themselves become muses to other writers who (will) look to them for inspiration. This is why this issue is raised as a *spectral* question in the title of this paper: Forget the Muse, think only of the Decentered Subject?

At one level, this question seems utterly redundant, if not actually unworthy against the background of the vast body of literary scholarship on the relationship of Wole Soyinka to his chosen Muse, Ogun, the Yoruba god of metallurgy, warfare, and lyric poetry, protector of orphans and guardian of sacred oaths. Forget the Muse in any accounting of the significance for Soyinka's writings and his career of the underlying beliefs and values that center his social and political activism in symbolic, mythic idioms of identity formation? You might as well forget or throw *mythopoesis* out of your reckoning of the originality and authority of artistry in Soyinka's poetry and drama. For without the least shadow of doubt, scholars of Soyinka's writings have conclusively decided that for the Nigerian poet, playwright and thinker, the personality or subjectivity of the artist, especially of great artists, suffers no diminution by acknowledgment of tutelage to a Muse, specifically the so-called "tribal" gods and muses of Walcott's disapprobation. On this score, Soyinka's celebrated essay, "The Fourth Stage", is nothing if not a ringing refutation of most of the claims and insights of Walcott's "The Muse of History". The veracity of this observation may be seen in the famous passage in "The Fourth Stage" in which Soyinka proposes Ogun as a deity who not only combines in his essence the values and inscriptions differentially associated with the great, warring art-sponsoring deities of European classical antiquity, Dionysus and Apollo, *and* also removes Ogun from transfixation in time and space, in narrow, parochial "tribal" cultures since Ogun, in Soyinka's insistent formulation, constantly changes his essence in the light of new social, scientific and

technological revolutions. This, definitely, is the image of Ogun that we get in the two of Soyinka's volumes of poetry that place the god center stage in their poetic ruminations on the modern experience of racial formation and political emancipation of Black Africa, "Idanre" and *Ogun Abibiman*. In all of these textual inscriptions, one cannot but conclude that Soyinka is a world away from his fellow Nobel laureate, Walcott. To put the matter in the special heuristic idiom indicated in the title of this paper, one laureate says forget the muse, think only of the subjectivity of the artist while the other says, accept, accept the bequest of ancestral deities as muses, for therein lies not the evisceration of your subjectivity but the possibility of untold increments to your stock of visionary powers as an artist and an intellectual.

But, as usual in our encounter with the work of Soyinka, we must not be overhasty in drawing our conclusions! For if, on this issue of acknowledgement and veneration of Muses, you approach the Nigerian playwright's first produced major play, *A Dance of the Forests*, you will find that there is an aspect of Soyinka that is not so distant from the Walcott of *Dream on Monkey Mountain* and "The Muse of History." To put the matter as succinctly as possible, there is in *A Dance of the Forests*, a scathing critique of Muses and their workings on their human protégés, almost in the accents of Walcott's withering critique in "The Muse of History." Indeed, I would go so far as to suggest that on the subject of my central claims in this paper around what I have playfully designated the "A-musing complex" in cultural tradition, *A Dance of the Forests* stands in a vigorously and dialectically opposing relation to Soyinka's veneration of his Muse and muses in such texts as "Idanre" and *Ogun Abibiman* and the essay, "The Fourth Stage." Permit me to elaborate on this point as carefully as possible and as warranted by spatial considerations in this paper.

As anyone who has studied *A Dance of the Forests* knows, apart from the main plot of the enticements of the major human characters of the play into the heart of the forest, the sacred grove of ritual and expiatory catharsis there to confront their crimes in present life and previous existences, there is the sub-plot of the total warfare between two deities, Ogun and Eshuoro over the rivalry between their two respective human protégés, Demoke and Oremole. It is impossible to overstate the pettiness, the cantankerousness and the self-serving use of their protégés by these deities for their own ends. Demoke, Ogun's protégé, is a master carver; for the celebration of the so-called "gathering of the tribes" that is at the center of the dramatic plot, he has carved a monumental totem pole, one which impresses by its superlative power. But this he has done at the cost of the life of his apprentice, Oremole, Eshuoro's protégé. For in the process of the carving of the totem, Demoke, who is psychically afraid of towering heights, is exceeded by the daring of his apprentice and the masterful carving is completed only because the acolyte surpasses the master in scaling heights which defy his master, thereby claiming the glory which comes with completion of the totem. For this, Demoke plucks his apprentice from his perch atop the carving and

sends Oremole hurtling down to his death. Significantly, Ogun claims that he, the Muse, the god, it was who made Demoke commit this crime of jealous passion, precisely because Ogun himself is jealous of the glory that redounds to his rival, Eshuoro as the Muse, the inspirer of Oremole's daring feat. To sum up on these aspects of *A Dance of the Forests* that are of central significance to the subject of this paper, let me place great emphasis on the following critical observation: the worth or value of the masterful totem carved by Demoke and his apprentice, Oremole is not in doubt, just as, more generally speaking, the heritage of great works of literature and art is of inestimable significance in the life of humanity; however, this is greatly compromised by the moral nullity of the crime of the master carver, Demoke, against his apprentice, Oremole, all the more so given the implication of the two rivalrous deities, Ogun and Eshuoro in the crime. In other words, Soyinka in these particular aspects of *A Dance of the Forests* is alerting us to those dimensions of the appropriation of cultural tradition which are often of dubious, even contradictory value to the community, with particular regard to investments in the deities and their cults as venerable muses, as sources of artistic inspiration and moral progress.

This last observation is strongly supported by that other celebrated fact of the production of *A Dance of the Forests* as part of the independence celebrations of Nigeria in 1960: it caused great shock in its fiercely unflattering look at the ideological tendency of African nationalist thought of the early phase of the postcolonial era to romanticize and idealize the African past. For let us recall that the play's main plot is woven around the return of ancestors who are not the glorious empire builders of romantic myth-making about the African past but are instead precisely the tragic victims of the inhumanity of the rulers of those "glorious" empires. And I would argue that the portrait of Ogun as a compromised muse corrupted by his raging and self-serving rivalry with Eshuoro in this play is consistent with Soyinka's general anti-Negritudist stance in the play. In other words, the general critique that Soyinka makes of romantic, idealizing cult of ancestors is given a concrete and singular inscription in the particular image of Ogun in the play as a malevolent, compromised Muse.

Given the fact that this particular image of Ogun as a Muse is one that is hardly ever encountered in Soyinka criticism, let me draw some pointed, perhaps even startling conclusions from it. First, let me suggest that we are encouraged to recognize that muses come in many forms, many incarnations, many of which are not infrequently compromised and compromising. Scholars and critics of Soyinka's writings have always recognized and emphasized the contradictory and conflicting qualities and values inscribed in Ogun as Soyinka's titular muse, but this recognition hardly ever extends to a sober and vigorous scrutiny of Ogun as a compromised muse, a corruptive inspirer of artistic creation in the Nigerian playwright's first major play. Secondly, I would argue that we are encouraged by this fact to read the place of Ogun as muse in Soyinka's works far more complexly than we have been conditioned by the four

decades of scholarship on the work of the Nobel laureate, most of this scholarship tending to a univocal, unambiguous view of Ogun as the lone figure of the muse in Soyinka's works, a muse around whom there are no other muses, no other sources of inspiration from which to choose. From this observation, we can, I suggest, extrapolate a third point: the sources of inspiration and creativity are multiple and contradictory, for if apart from Ogun we also have Eshuoro in *A Dance of the Forests*, there is also the point that while the Ogun of *Ogun Abibiman* traces a path of revolutionary, cleansing and transforming violence from one end of the African continent to another, the trail of blood left in the wake of the doings of the Ogun of *A Dance of the Forests* is the unedifying one of blind, petty criminality. Finally – and this may be the most pertinent point to make in the present context – there is indeed another powerful muse present in the interstices of the dramatic action of *A Dance of the Forests* and he is neither African nor divine and this is William Shakespeare. In addressing the implications of this claim, let me begin to move to the conclusion of this paper.

From the very earliest scholarly critical reactions to the production and publication of *A Dance of the Forests*, nearly everyone recognized the influence of Shakespeare on Soyinka in this, his first major dramatic work. But just how deep, how profound this influence was, was not perceived, again by nearly every critic and scholar. This is because it was generally felt that Soyinka's debt to the Bard was mostly in the matter of "atmospherics", of a palpable but surface invocation of the imaginative world of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. And it was precisely on this particular point that the Nobel Committee (1988: 425) based its mention of this particular play of Soyinka's in the first public announcement of the prize to the Nigerian author in the following words: "A kind of African *Midsummer Night's Dream* with spirits, ghosts and gods. There is a distinct link here to indigenous ritual drama and to the Elizabethan drama."

Now, as I have extensively demonstrated in my major study of the works and career of Soyinka published by Cambridge University Press in 2004, Shakespeare's *The Tempest* is a far more powerful intertextual presence in *Dance of the Forests*. For while aspects of *Midsummer Night's Dream* show up in Soyinka's play only in external formal features in the play, with regard to the deep structures of plot and characterization, the borrowings from *Tempest* are everywhere in view in *A Dance*. As I cannot go into intricacies of this issue here and anyone interested in the subject can look this up in my detailed analyses in my book, let me simply say here that such central characters of *A Dance* as Forest Head, Demoke, Agboreko and Aroni are all cleverly patterned on some of the major characters of *Tempest*.

Soyinka was about twenty-six years old when he wrote *A Dance of the Forests*; moreover, he was then as yet a fledgling, untested playwright. For these reasons, it is one of his extraordinary accomplishments in this play that he was able to successfully absorb the influence of no less a towering, canonical figure of English theatre history

and world literature than Shakespeare. For any writer at any period of his or her career, it is a daunting challenge to try to absorb the example, the model of Shakespeare's dramatic imagination, and not merely to absorb but to transform the influence and make it over into a completely new and original synthesis. That is the scale of Soyinka's achievement in that play which, let us repeat, was his first major dramatic work. The Nobel Committee was on to this scale of achievement in the second sentence of the citation of *Dance of the Forests* to which I alluded earlier in this paper: "There is a distinct link here to indigenous ritual drama and to the Elizabethan drama."

On that particular note, I would like to begin to sum up on some of the central issues and ideas that I have been exploring in this essay. One key issue maybe teased out of the fusion, the synthesis between "indigenous ritual drama and Elizabethan drama" that the Nobel Committee saw as the supreme achievement of *Dance of the Forests*. It is no mean feat to creatively interfuse elements from these two theatrical traditions and idioms, for not only do they both come from idioms of performance and expression that had, up to the production of Soyinka's first major play, never remotely been in contact, it is also the case that these two idioms, these two traditions had also been separated by the colonial ideology of "superior" and "inferior" races and cultures, and by the overdetermined reactions of the colonized to the effects of this colonialist, racist ideology.

In Nigerian and African critical discourses and indeed farther afield in comparative cultural and literary studies worldwide, we should pay special attention to the things that made it possible for Soyinka to go beyond both racist, colonialist ideology and the overdetermined nationalist reaction to it that accepted, mostly implicitly but quite often explicitly, that the cultural legacies of the colonizers and the colonized should be kept pure and separate. One of these is the Nigerian author's recognition that when Muses are constructed around the powerful or central deities and avatars of a culture, they are subject to both creative, beneficial appropriation and quite troubling and baleful uses. Another is the recognition of the corollary fact that the sources of artistic inspiration are multiple, diverse and often contradictory; it is on the basis of this factor that unlike a Soyinka or a Walcott, most writers indeed hardly ever talk about the sources of their inspiration in terms of "muses", tribal, racial or civilizational. Here, I am reminded of much of what Femi Osofisan says in a lecture given a few years ago at the University of Ibadan appropriately titled as "The City as Muse." The "city" in question here is Ibadan, both the town and the famous university located in it. In his lecture, Osofisan reflected widely on this double aspect of the city of Ibadan as the Muse to the founding moment of modern Nigerian literature, paying as much attention to the moments and periods of efflorescence as to those of regression and anomie. The pulls between the centering and decentering of muses that I have explored in relation to Walcott and Soyinka in this paper is thus apposite to Osofisan's deflection of the subject away from traditional or conventional location of muses in

institutionalized gods and avatars. The implication is clear: if we cannot and must not forget the old Muses, we can at least open the field of inspiration and speculation far beyond the trodden paths. The members of the younger generation of Nigerian and African writers have apparently taken this observation to heart, but it remains to be seen in what directions they will take their art, singly and collectively, as they negotiate the opportunities and challenges posed by their multiple, diverse and often contradictory sources of inspiration. But this is the subject of another paper.

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