

In Focus

African Literature

Vol. 2, Issue 1 (June, 2016)

An International Journal of World Literatures & Cultures

Wole Soyinka's Re-deployment of Yoruba Folklore in *The Strong Breed*

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Abstract: Folklore encompasses the entire gamut of a community's worldview—from its myths to rituals to everyday existence. The retrieval of native tradition from cultural repressions of the colonial period was provided an impetus by the folklore elements in Africa. The plays of Wole Soyinka, a Western-educated Nigerian writer, embody a hybrid form of theatre deriving at once from his indigenous Yoruba folklore heritage and the Western dramaturgy. His play *The Strong Breed* builds on the Yoruba custom of ritual sacrifice in which the protagonist Eman is killed. Although he previously refuses to take part in his family's ritual purification, the mature Eman embraces his sacrifice for the well-being of society which recalls the legend of Christ. Eman's sacrifice also alludes to the commemorative Ogun myth of bridging the three worlds of the dead, the living and the unborn which connects the world of human beings with that of the spirits or Gods. The present paper will try to appraise, with particular reference to *The Strong Breed*, Soyinka's re-deployment of folk elements which permeate the ethnic world of the Yoruba tribe. The paper will also study Soyinka's theatrical methods of employing the Yoruba folklore which is not retrieved unquestioningly, but re-articulated with critical looks.

Keywords: *Yoruba, Ogun, Ritual, Sacrifice*

The project of postcolonial drama is motivated by an attempt to recuperate native culture, history and indigenous performance traditions with the focused agenda to subvert the biased representations of the natives by the colonizers. The natives are represented as primitive and irrational in need of cultural upliftment sanctioned by the colonizers which, however, is a pretentious justification of their exploitative mission in the colonies. Postcolonial drama, like other genres of

postcolonial literature, addresses this cultural hierarchy and finds techniques of resistance lying within the very resources of native culture. As it is difficult to retrieve a pre-colonial past in its pristine glory, most of the postcolonial literatures have attempted instead to investigate the mechanisms by which Europe contrived and maintained colonial domination—in administrative as well as cultural forms—over the so-called Third World countries. Postcolonial drama attempts to find out the ambiguities of colonial discourse to trace the lacuna of its self-proclaimed superiority and misrepresentation of the colonized so that such ambiguities can serve to challenge the cultural hierarchy. Postcolonial dramatists like Wole Soyinka, Derek Walcott and Girish Karnad are more or less influenced by the Western dramaturgy, but they are also profoundly indebted to their indigenous traditions for supplying them storyline or motifs for their plays. The repertoire of native culture becomes instrumental in the ameliorative task of cultural self-definition. As Brian Crow points out, “in colonized societies with rich indigenous cultures (for example West Africa or India) that remained largely intact—whatever the colonialists may have wished or done—not only was cultural identity not lost, it has served as a potent weapon in the struggle for independence and liberation” (6). The traditional modes in drama often incorporate folklore, dance, music and song, and operate mostly from an oral rather than a literary base. The re-deployment of folklore elements and theatrical devices in English-language drama is an effective means with which to assert cultural opulence and resist the representational biases of the Western discourse. Thus, even if the writers operate under the influence of the colonial culture, “the Western form is subverted and adapted through a process of indigenization, through the incorporation of local strategies, themes and images” (Nayar 228).

Africa is a vast continent, and any attempt to generalize African culture will do grave injustice. Nigeria, the homeland of Wole Soyinka, itself is an abode of myriad tribes, cults and creeds. Soyinka’s sense of belonging to the Yoruba tribe, which is second largest among the Nigerian tribes, and his education in Western-style schooling in Nigeria and later at Leeds University placed him at a crossroad of cultural hybridity. Influenced by the Western dramaturgy, Soyinka’s plays draw upon both the Western and Nigerian traditions and attempt to synthesize the Yoruba folklore and European performance codes. Although drawing

heavily on the indigenous traditions, Soyinka's plays offer a unique space in which myth, ritual and complex symbols are conflated which transforms them into an evocative creation of the imagination. Soyinka refashions the traditional Yoruba culture in a way that combines old myths with new forms imparting it contemporary relevance. His frequent resort to the Ogun myth enacts the ontological radiance of Yoruba cultural sensibilities. The Yoruba tribe is a reservoir of myths and folktales which are the essence of folk wisdom. These folk cultural idioms regulate the behavioural patterns of the community. Yoruba "philosophy" is cosmological in scope which bridges the physical nature with the unseen spiritual or transcendental realm. "Yoruba thought is mainly narrative in form, explicating and pointing to the knowledge of things, affecting the corporeal and the spiritual universe and its wellness. Yoruba people have hundreds of aphorisms, folktales, and lore, and they believe that any lore that widens people's horizons and presents food for thought is the beginning of a philosophy" ("Yoruba People").

The Yoruba people are animistic whose belief system is nurtured by the conviction that the forces of nature intervene in the ways of life. They believe in the teleological purpose of the upliftment of spirit to the realm of transcendence whose possibility is dependent not only on personal righteousness but ensnares collective social endorsement. The immortality of the soul is asserted in Yoruba beliefs according to which the soul revolves in a cyclical journey of life and death effacing the rough ends of existence. A man might have to embark on a valorous personal journey to gain wisdom which often turns out to be rewarding to the entire community. Such a journey usually recalls and parallels to that of the Orishas. The Orishas (translated as 'demigods' or 'deities') occupy a pivotal position in the Yoruba cosmology who act as intermediary between the people and the spirit-world. Comprised of a host of Orishas who control specific elements of nature, the Yoruba cosmology encompasses a dynamic view of life recruiting individuals to discover its spiritual layers and inner rules of sustenance. Soyinka is especially fascinated to the Orisha Ogun who undertook the difficult task of bridging the mythic gulf that separated Man and the Gods. Thus Ogun is hailed as common people's God and his perilous journey often provides Soyinka an apt metaphor to complement his protagonist's relentless spiritual adventure.

Soyinka's play *The Strong Breed* (published in 1963 and first performed in 1964), a complex dramatic creation, orbits around the central theme of ritual-sacrifice prevalent until-recently in some Yoruba sub-tribes. According to the *Wikipedia* entry on Yoruba people, Yoruba culture consists of folk philosophy, religion and folktales where the thoughts of man that leads spiritual consciousness (*ori*) to the creation and the practice of religion are considered to be primary over religion ("Yoruba People"). A number of folk rituals and beliefs are depicted in Soyinka's play which integrates the individual with the community. According to Crow, this appears to be a much simpler among the plays of Soyinka, but is a secretive text, "with its intimations of an interior drama played out in the author's imagination that is not made fully explicit at the surface level" (88).

In the play, the protagonist Eman is sacrificed on the last night of a year which is believed to procure expiation to the tribesmen's yearlong vices. He is warned by Sunma about the forthcoming calamity that might befall on him that night. Eman is an "outsider" or "stranger" to the tribe of Sunma. Soyinka distinguishes between the two tribes which have different beliefs regarding annual purification ceremony. In fact, the play is built on the concept of difference which evokes the heterogeneity of culture underlying African continent. The colonial rulers conceived the natives as a homogenized mass who share common interest giving the opportunity to the colonizer to administer them in a unified way. What this scheme overlooks is the numerous differences between communities and even small villages. The tribe Eman belongs to is a comparatively liberal one which does not sacrifice human beings at the ritual of purification. Eman's father, who is the chief of his community, considers his community to be the "strong breed" who are supposed to perform purification ritual every year for the wellbeing of the entire community. The ritual is briefly described in Eman's "flashback" thus:

Drumming begins somewhere in the distance, and the OLD MAN sways his head almost imperceptibly. Two men come in bearing a miniature boat, containing an indefinable mound. They rush it in and set it briskly down near the OLD MAN, and stand well back. The OLD MAN gets up slowly, the ATTENDANT watching him keenly. He signs to the men, who lift the boat quickly onto the OLD MAN's head. As soon

as it touches his head, he holds it down with both hands and runs off, the men give him a start, then follow at a trot. (Soyinka 62)

The “OLD MAN” or Eman’s father asks Eman to take part in the ceremony which the latter refuses. It is difficult to answer why Eman rejects his customary function as a sacrificial “carrier”. A possible explanation to his rejection is that he might have been depressed on the untimely death of his beloved Omae who died giving birth to his child. Eman’s father says that “No woman survives the bearing of the strong ones” (62). He further says that it is not a boastful thing to belong to a strong breed family, but, on the contrary, a member of the family is bound by certain tasks for the welfare of the community even at the risk of provoking danger upon him.

Nevertheless, Eman is not disrespectful to the puberty rites that he had been undergoing. During the ceremony the adolescent boys are kept in separate huts at the outer edges of the village which is prohibited for girls. As Omae, the admirer of Eman, comes to meet him in his dwelling, he becomes angry with her. His dissatisfaction with Omae is apparent in their conversation:

EMAN You. Go away.

OMAE But I came to see you.

EMAN Are you deaf? I say I don’t want to see you.
Now go before my tutor catches you.

[...]

OMAE (coyly) Aren’t you glad to see me?

EMAN I am not.

OMAE Why?

EMAN Why? Do you really ask me why? Because you are a woman and a most troublesome woman. Don’t you know anything about this at all? We are not meant to see any woman. So go away before more harm is done.

OMAE (flirtatious) What is so secret about it anyway?
What do they teach you?

EMAN Nothing any woman can understand.

OMAE Ha ha. You think we don’t know eh? You’ve all come to be circumcised.

EMAN Shut up. You don’t know anything. (63)

When Eman takes his way back to his hut, Omae tries to hold him at which Eman screams with fright. A girl's touch is considered to be polluting during the puberty rites. He relates Omae the rules that the boys are supposed to abide by:

EMAN Do you know what you nearly did? You almost touched me!

OMAE Well?

OMAN Well! Isn't it enough that you let me set my eyes on you? Must you now totally pollute me with your touch? Don't you understand anything?

OMAE Oh, that.

EMAN (nearly screaming) It is not 'oh that'. Do you think this is only a joke or a little visit like spending the night with your grandmother? This is an important period of my life. Look, these huts, we built them with our own hands. Every boy builds his own. We learn things, do you understand? And we spend much time just thinking. At least, I do. It is the first time I have had nothing to do except think. Don't you see, I am becoming a man. For the first time, I understand that I have a life to fulfil. Has that thought ever worried you?
(64)

Although Eman shows his reservation for the successful completion of puberty rites he is not devoid of ethical and moral conscience. When Omae is caught by the "tutor," the latter intrigues to seduce her in exchange of pardoning Eman of talking to a girl. But Eman protests against the lecherousness of the tutor, and even attacks him in anger. Here he is motivated by his scruples than his blind adherence to rituals. Ato Quayson highlights this ethical concern of Eman thus:

He expresses uneasiness at all traditional ritual roles which are detached from questions of ethics and free will. [...] Eman is caught at a certain liminal phase of a puberty rite in which, if he misconducts himself, there is a danger of contamination both for him and for the community at large. The rite of passage is very important to him [...] But the importance of 'becoming a man' fades beside the ethical issues raised by his tutor's

shameless behavior. [...] when his consciousness of injustice is aroused he rejects the merely social for the sake of a profounder morality. (80-81)

Although Eman breaks away from the puberty rites and even refuses to take part in the ceremony of his tribe, ironically, he is made a scapegoat of sacrificial ritual of another tribe. For Helen Gilbert, Eman is a redeemer hero who is often identified with Jesus Christ. This transcultural linkage is perhaps hatched up by Soyinka's Western-educated mind. Both Eman and Christ sacrificed their lives for "the larger good" of community (Gilbert 50). Eman, like Christ, assists the exploited, the "idiot boy" of the play, Ifada, from being sacrificed by the villagers in the ritual ceremony. Again, like Christ, Eman feels thirsty before his sacrifice. Both eventually embrace their fate after displaying initial doubt and intense anxiety (Gilbert 50).

But it is never explained whether his sacrifice has brought any good to the community. Soyinka brings out the brutality and sadism which the ritual unleashes. Wole Soyinka's attitude to Yoruba folk culture is not one of blind subscription, but incisively cautious. Although respectful to the Yoruba philosophy of larger communal harmony, the dramatist does not falter in criticizing the superstitious and barbaric rituals which he finds unnecessary—a wastage of human energy. In the words of Nasser Dasht Peyma: "His plays reject attempts to glamorize the past. He addresses the wider question of the persistence of humanity in the face of cruelty, intolerance and outrage" (72). Soyinka defies his attitude of the sacrificial carrier ritual as he found it in several local cultures in Nigeria. According to Quayson, Soyinka was perhaps relying on the research he carried out in 1960-61 into indigenous rituals in the country while writing the play (79). While retrieving and re-using the folk rituals in this play, Soyinka does not simply gather the material but seems to condemn the cruelty and terror associated with the sacrificial ceremony. Such retrieval with a decisive look at the indigenous cultural heritage is what makes *The Strong Breed* a critical postcolonial play. Postcolonial literature does not blindly accept whatever is old as glorious, but re-deploys it to meet the present socio-political standards. Soyinka's use of Yoruba folklore is not a veneration of all its cultural specificities, but discreet in its re-articulation. Biodun Jeyifo finds it challenging to reconcile the two aspects of Soyinka's theoretical and practical interest in

ritual: “the most autochthonous, pristine African ritual forms and idioms, side by side with a view of the “ritual matrix” as not only universal but inherently emancipatory and even revolutionary” (125). Unlike his contemporary Western, and Western-influenced African and Asian playwrights whose “interest in the interface between drama and ritual is deeply inflected with doubts and hesitations, Soyinka’s approach to this interface is self-assured and clamant; and it is insistent that drama’s renewal as a cultural medium able to respond to the great crises and contradictions of the present age lies in a recombining fusion with ritual” (Jeyifo 125). What gives momentum to this insistence is not “an unambiguous recuperation of rituals and ritualism” but Soyinka’s “anti-ritual” (Jeyifo 125). Jeyifo modifies Crow’s observation that Soyinka’s theatre is a “theatre of ritual vision” by highlighting the “anti-ritual” of the Nigerian playwright coming with “layers of formalistic and thematic reconfigurations which considerably interrogate the legitimacy and value of the pristine ritual traditions that Soyinka deploys in his plays, especially in his greatest dramatic creations” (125).

In the play, Eman has shown his apathy to the folk rituals since the very beginning. When Sunma repeatedly urges him to leave and return to his native place, Eman refuses. Sunma herself is critical of the ritual ceremony of her tribe which she finds brutal and heartless. She does not want to identify herself with her tribe succumbed to evil, as she says: “I wonder if I really sprang from here. I know they are evil and I am not. From the oldest to the smallest child, they are nourished in evil and unwholesomeness in which I have no part” (Soyinka 55).

Even if Soyinka is critical of the barbaric ritual of sacrifice, he penetrates into it to discover the communal ethos that pervades the tribal world-view. What Soyinka tries to capture in the play is the generic structure that lies behind the rituals which manifest a system that governs the life of the tribals. The colonial (mis)conception which conjures the natives as irrational and uncivilized is given a jolt by Soyinka’s drama which unravels the structured behaviour that lies behind the ritual observations. Sunma despises the sacrificial ritual of her tribe while her father Jaguna, the chief of the tribe, and his associate Oroge are blind followers of tradition. As Jeyifo points out, in *The Strong Breed* (and *The Swamp Dwellers*), “official guardians and priestly functionaries on whom the legitimacy of cultural tradition depends are shown to be

ruthless and petty-minded toward any questioning, any exposure of their compromised, self-serving manipulation of tradition” (43). The elders, Jaguna and Oroge, consider the sacrifice of a stranger essential for the welfare of the tribe and propitious for harvest next year. They, however, end up being the harbingers of death thoughtlessly attached to their primitive rituals. The generation gap that the play entails necessitates thinking about the emerging order which forces its way through the fissures of the past which is becoming obsolete. This is also an occasion which exemplifies how folk culture renovates and evolves itself—modifying the old and incorporating the new.

Another compelling picture that Soyinka depicts in the play as largely superstitious and outdated is a girl’s obsession with her effigy. The girl, who apparently belongs to Sunma’s community, carries an effigy all the time because she is told that the effigy would take away her diseases. Her conversation with Eman illustrates her anxiety:

GIRL [...] I am unwell you know. My mother says it will take away my sickness with the old year.

EMAN Won’t you share the carrier with your playmates?

GIRL Oh, no. Don’t you know I play alone? The other children won’t come near me. Their mothers would beat them.

EMAN But I have never seen you here. Why don’t you come to the clinic?

GIRL My mother said No. (*She gets up, and begins to move off.*)

EMAN You are not going away?

GIRL I must not stay talking to you. [...] (54)

The girl avoids Eman’s company because he is a “stranger” to her community. She looks at him with suspicion as if the latter is allied to some evil forces. The girl, on the other hand, is deemed untouchable by other children because she is “sick”. The only person willing to play with her is Ifada, the idiot boy. She implores Ifada to hit the effigy and hang it from a tree so that she can burn it. She says “with surprising venom” that the destruction of the “carrier” would relieve only her from diseases: “But just because you are helping me, don’t think it is going to cure you. I am the one who will get well at midnight, do you understand” (54)? In

the later phase of the play, when Ifada, out of a fit of insanity, tries to disarray the effigy, the girl desperately stops him. This effigy subplot in the play serves dual purposes: firstly, it illustrates the superstitious beliefs of the tribe, and secondly, it underscores the redundancy of sacrifice of human beings when the burning of effigy serves the similar purpose of purification. Thus *The Strong Breed* “seems to lean more towards cultural critique than celebratory affirmation” which is “a starker examination of the moral and ethical issues it touches upon” (Quayson 85).

In spite of his criticism of rituals Soyinka advocates traditional wisdom as the primary means to underscore the oral cultural inventory with its embryonic potential to resist the mis-representation or deformation of African culture by colonialism. But Soyinka is astutely vigilant of the uneasy tensions that exist between tradition and modernity, community and individual. According to Crow, the most striking feature of Soyinka as a playwright is his “uncompromising assertion of the paradoxical relationship between tradition and the individual” (89). The redeemer-hero can purge a society of its evils only “by means of traditional wisdom and its customary practices, but it seems that the resources of tradition can only be gained through a heroically individuals experience of personal self-discovery and self-renewal, which at least initially involves rebellion against and even exile from the traditional culture” (Crow 89). Eman escapes the initiation ceremony and even rejects to perform the annual ritual carried out by his family. But his life as a recluse at the outskirts of Sunma’s village following the death of Omae makes him realize the deeper layers of truth that lies behind individual mask. His willingness to save the idiot boy Ifada is probably an expression of his attainment of this humanistic knowledge which is obtained by his intricate journey through the vicissitudes of life.

At this critical moment in the play, Eman’s identification with Ogun, the Yoruba deity who is at once the God of creation and of destruction, is made apparent. Soyinka’s interest in Yoruba myth is found intact in *The Strong Breed* even if he does not evoke it directly. As Quayson analyzes, Soyinka uses the Ogun myth to generate a wide variety of conceptions to do with the self, drama and cultural identity. In Yoruba mythology, Ogun’s role in uniting men and Gods is imperative.

The entry on Wole Soyinka in the *Encyclopedia of African Literature* elaborates the Ogun myth thus:

Ogun's sphere—his specialty, so to speak—is iron and metallurgy. His attribute as worker of iron makes him the one who among the gods undertook the original journey to reunite the realm of the gods with the world of mortals. He forged the first weapon, cleared the path separating gods from humankind, and led the way as the gods journeyed to be reunited with humans. For Soyinka, Ogun's journey symbolically promises a reunion of “self” with “essence,” what we are in reality with what we can be. (“Soyinka, Wole” 728-29)

The purification ritual in the play and Eman's journey towards self-discovery are such attempts to bridge the gap between this world and the other, the natural and the supernatural which the Ogun myth suggests. In his non-dramatic writings, Soyinka explores the nature of the abyss which he calls the “fourth stage” and which is an intermediate realm between the three co-existing realms of the unborn, the living and the dead (Quayson 70-71). As Quayson points out, according to Yoruba beliefs “there is a gap, an abyss between these three realms which needs to be continually bridged by ritual and sacrifice” (71). The purification ceremony that Eman's father arranges every year is meant for hailing all the denizens of the three realms—those who died, those who are living, and those who would await birth (unborn). Eman, in order to fit himself to the very job of re-energizing a community—not necessarily his own—has to complete bridging the gaps between the three realms. In the process, he must undergo tremendous physical and spiritual anguish like that of Ogun. In his intense suffering Eman assumes the role of archetypal heroes who undertook the difficult task for the sake of larger good:

Soyinka identifies a commonality between Ogun and such classical archetypes as Orpheus and Prometheus, who stand for unwavering resolve and the capacity to act in the service of one's vision. Soyinka believes that the inevitable fate of the visionary archetype is punishment and suffering. But the suffering is not altogether bad, because it often accompanies a socially redemptive act

of will. In this way, Ogun symbolizes visionary creativity and leadership. (“Soyinka, Wole” 728)

The mature, enlightened Eman embraces the painful task of ritual sacrifice for the wellbeing of men just like Ogun, the common people’s God. He is driven not by forced subjugation but by voluntary submission in order to save the idiot boy Ifada. As Nayar writes, “Will is central to Ogun’s attempt to bridge this gulf: the gulf is full of dark forces and only a strong individual will can help him bridge it” (232). Eman, a descendant of the “strong breed” family, is a man of firm resolution and will-power who thus befittingly assumes Ogun’s task for the welfare of the community. Quayson has aptly contended that “Ogun’s journey through the abyss of transition is presented as a parallel for the actor [Eman] and his relationship to the community” and in the protagonist’s “entry into and re-emergence from the area of transition, the whole community is redeemed and re-energized with new strength” (72). Eman’s sacrifice incurs the well-being of Sunma’s community which perhaps Eman himself could not realize. Although the chief Jaguna seems to belittle the sublime act of Eman’s self-sacrifice, he is content in the end that the ritual (necessary for the spirits as well as for the new year’s harvest) has been successfully accomplished.

However, the motif of the ritual which is often interrupted, for instance, Eman’s escape from his initiation ceremony, suggests the “difficult process of cultural and social transition” being undertaken by postcolonial societies while the abyss represents an excellent “theatrical metaphor for a social and spiritual state where old traditions are no longer completely intact” (Balme, qtd. in Gilbert 50). There can never be a more apt metaphor for the political upheavals of Soyinka’s Nigeria than Eman’s journey through the dark night in search of self-enlightenment.

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