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## WE REMEMBER COMRADE MARIEN NGOUBI

THE President of the Peoples Republic of the Congo was tragically assassinated on March 18th 1977. This tragic event was part of a large scale imperialist plot aimed at overthrowing the progressive regime of the Congo.

FORMER President of Congo Messamba Debat was arrested immediately after the assassination. He has since admitted to the existence of a large scale plot to overthrow the progressive government, party and social organisations and to replace them with a pro-imperialist regime. He was sentenced to death.

THE vigilance of the Congolese people permitted them to nip this heinous plot in the bud. Unfortunately, it did not prevent the loss of life of a great comrade and leader.

COMRADE Ngoubi became head of the Congo in 1968, following a victorious democratic revolution spearheaded by workers and other progressive elements. He decisively began to steer the Congolese anti-imperialist revolution towards socialism. He safeguarded the Congo's progressive gains at times of great internal and external menace. The revolution came to be consolidated and advanced through the creation of the Congolese workers party and also other progressive social organisations for workers, women and youth. During the last congress of the workers party, Comrade Ngoubi spearheaded a progressive reform movement aimed at fighting left and right-wing opportunists; in order to guarantee the *marxist-leninist* orientation of the party.

UNDER his leadership, the Congolese revolution gave firm support to all progressive forces, especially to those around it, such as the MPLA in Angola. Such heroic behaviour has always exposed the Congo to bitter imperialist propaganda and activities.

THE assassination has galvanised the progressive Congolese people. It has challenged them to further tasks aimed at safeguarding the revolution. The leader is mortal. He dies. But the revolution and its institutions, the party; these are immortal. The new President of the Peoples Republic of the Congo is Comrade Colonel Joachim Yhombi Opango who previously held the title of Minister of Defence.

\* This is a reprint from *Halgan* (The Struggle: Organ of the Somali Revolutionary Socialist Party, Year J, No. 6, April 1977.

# IDEOLOGY IN AFRICAN PHILOSOPHY AND LITERATURE\*

## PART II

by

Kyalo Mativo

### I

Philosophy has arrogated to itself the right of the first strike in the ideological battle-field for literature on the grounds that "philosophy is essentially an attempt to rise from sensuous to pure, that is, non-sensuous thought."<sup>1</sup> So now, by a philosophical act, the traditional African man has 'sufficiently' been analysed. Moreover, "there is a strong evidence to suggest that the characteristic mode of African aesthetic perception is non-analytic or non-intellectual, but relies on the achievement of rapport with the art object."<sup>2</sup> Therefore the "sensuous thought" and the "non-analytic aesthetic perception" are established permanent peculiarities of the African, so at least the "analytic" and "pure" thought of the 'civilized' man has dutifully concluded. But who is he, this cultured dullard?

In literature, the biblical dictum: "ye shall know them by their deeds" is a double-edged ideological euphemism:

- i) .... if it came to a point at which all the rest of the world was being murdered and I could escape to a little cave and still manage to find a private "explosion", I would do that, and to hell with the rest of the world!<sup>3</sup>
- ii) Those who say that each poet must speak with an individual voice to express his own experiences and interpretation of mankind are following the ruling patterns of western culture. What seems to be less clear is the explanation of why modern African writers cannot express 'the collective African soul'. This is not surprising considering the kind of education they have received at high school or the university and the degree of dynamism of the cultural life of their new milieus, open to external influences that affect their individual character.<sup>4</sup>

\* This is the second of a two-part essay. The first part appeared in *Ufahamu*, Vol. VIII, Number 1.

Thus the ideological struggle in literature congeals finally in this fashion into two schools of African writers: those who are answerable only to themselves and consider their 'creative process' as private property, and those who use their craft for a social purpose. And within the two categories are to be found various degrees of excellence in the respective mode of thought.

It is hardly necessary to point out the antagonistic nature of these two forces. To the untrained eye, the motive force behind the confrontation escapes identification as of ideological belonging. Of course, the delineation of it as such is not the special task of the novices; in fact some of them, Soyinka for example, have gone to the extent of decrying "literary ideology", to borrow a trite phrase. But the familiar faces of John Mbiti, Janheinz Jahn, Mazisi Kunene and now Wole Soyinka (?) are ever always to be found united in the language of metaphysics. They will denounce as foreign western 'analyses' of the "African thinking" in order to "analyse" the "African thinking" in western methods and styles. The language of a Dr. Howard S. Olson is the language of the "educated" African:

*Man is an organic unity, and he will feel  
the pain as his very own no matter where he  
is hit.*

Why? Because if you hit an African on the head he will cry, *alinipiga kichwa* (he hit me my head), instead of *he hit my head*, at least that is what Dr. Olson has discovered in the mind of the traditional African. The conclusion is self-evident:

*This is consistent with the Bantu philosophy  
of wholeness which pervades all aspects of  
life from the individual and the mutual de-  
pendence of the physical members of his body  
to the clan and the inter-relatedness of all  
its clansmen.<sup>5</sup>*

With that petty starting point we enter the pet subject of the "educated" African, the sole structure on which he constructs his "African-ness". The "Bantu philosophy of wholeness" is the essence of his subject matter as expounded by his comrade-in-arms, the western bourgeois ideologue. The difference between the two is actually their unity, the one provides the mental tools by which the other 'disagrees' and 'differs', thereby biting the hand that feeds him, in the Prospero-Caliban fashion:

*You taught me language; and my profit*



*on't*  
*Is, I know how to curse....*<sup>6</sup>

And this is precisely their unity. They are as much united in language as they differ by it; that is to say, the material base conditioning their language, and therefore the ideological content expressed by it, brings them together as members of one and the same stock. But the manner of employment of the language, in other words, the method of approach to this content, is what constitutes their 'difference'. Lewis Nkosi is a typical representative of this class:

*A writer's special commitment is to language and its renewal and to the making of a better instrument for the delineation of human character - it is a commitment to craftsmanship.... I certainly find no contradiction between language as a method or form and the content of what is being expressed.*<sup>7</sup>

Therefore, given this unity of language and content, the African writer's commitment to his master's language is, by self-admission, the commitment to the traditional social values expressed by it. It should be noted here that the word 'language' is used in its double capacity as a means of communication and as a special tool by which ideas are propagated. The latter case takes an ideological form as moulded by the degree of 'sophistication' - for the "educated" African - in relation to the subject matter in question. What is interesting in Nkosi's example is not so much his apparent awareness of the connection between language and ideas, but his unawareness of the full implication of his awareness. Indeed the totality of this relation between language and ideas is better expressed as follows:

*Ideas are not transformed in language in such a way as to lose their peculiarity while their social character exists beside them in language in the way that prices exist alongside commodities. Ideas do not exist independent of language. Those ideas which have to be translated from their mother tongue into a foreign language in order to circulate and thus become exchangeable already offer more of an analogy, but the analogy lies not in the language but in the foreignness.*<sup>8</sup>

The attempt to instill "African-ness" into western social

values comes to an end here. The "educated" African is now left with an empty shell of "commitment to language", and is forced to "escape to a little cave" for ideological safety.

The art of ideological escape is the special talent of one of the most "educated" of the "educated" Africans, Wole Soyinka. The complacency with which he wields what he must consider his invincible artistic artillery is nonpareil, and the aesthetic ecstasy he derives from this peculiar trade admits of no agony. But this brand of sophistication serves more as an indication of the shallowness of the content of his art than a measure of artistic excellence, which he thinks it is.

*When craftsmanship is not at the service of great content, it is a fraud. This is what formalism is - an envelope containing no serious inner meaning, technique for the sake of technique.*<sup>9</sup>

It is not for nothing, therefore, that finesse of form pervades all of Soyinka's works. When a discredited content cannot be displayed in public, it must be camouflaged in sound and fury, and the same is true for lack of clarity of thought; as beer quaffers will tell you, froth is not beer. In making Soyinka our guest of honour, we should remember that ideological battles are usually fought around a central issue, on the 'outskirts' of ideology itself. In African literature, for example, negritude has made itself infamous to some literati by its famous association with ideology, which is why Soyinka's on-going struggle against it has become a personal adventure. But before we come to that, we need to address ourselves to the essence of negritude as such.

## II

It is generally known that the circumstances under which negritude made its debut were historically conditioned. The names of A. Césaire, S. Senghor, Birago Diop, Rabêarivelo and Ranaivo, to mention a few, are more or less accepted as typical representatives of the movement. It was Césaire's *Cahiers d'un retour au pays natal*, however, which established negritude as a force to be reckoned with, even though the book was ignored for eight years after its first publication in 1939.

That the movement was started and propagated by French-speaking African writers is also a known fact. This was not surprising given the French policy of assimilating Africans, and with them, whole African territories into the French cultural and political empire, provoking cultural imperatives, on the

part of the Africans, for self-identification. It is in this light that negritude can rightly be regarded as historically necessary, as a means for cultural diagnosis. It was a negation of all that Europe had paraded as the "standard measure" of excellence in politics, literature and other social aspects of the western society. Negritude offered itself in turn as a standard measure for things African and demanded to be judged as such. The conventional attempt to define it as Senghor does, as "cultural heritage", or as "the totality of the cultural values of black Africa", or yet again as "cultural independence" confines itself to the apparent. The essential role negritude played as a de-colonizing force, a fact hardly acknowledged in the academic world funny enough, cannot be exaggerated. But as a response to a stimulus it did not seek to understand, it was no better no worse than a biological mechanism. In social life, the ability to understand the mechanism behind a stimulus draws the line between social consciousness and blind forces. Any criticism of negritude which leaves out this fact runs the danger of sharing negritude's unhappy end.

Now Soyinka has gone on record as the most vocal critic of negritude. He gives his views on the subject in his new book, *Myth, Literature and the African World*. For a meaningful analysis of these and many of his other views on different subjects, it is necessary to take a brief look at the book.

*Myth, Literature and the African World* belongs to the category of the new intellectual wave which, as Soyinka puts it, "goes beyond the standard anti-colonial purge of learning and education and embraces the apprehension of culture *whose reference points are taken from the culture itself*.<sup>10</sup> (emphasis added). The effort sums up in what he terms "the self-apprehension of the African world," and the approach to this goal finds at its disposal social emancipation, cultural liberation and cultural revolutions, which as a matter of expediency, "retain external reference points against which progression in thinking can be measured."<sup>11</sup> (emphasis added). We are already up against a contradiction: on the one hand there are internal reference points as the centre of attention, on the other external ones enjoying even a higher status. Combating those he accuses of falsely identifying the process of "self-apprehension" with intellectualism, he says in total self-conviction,

*in order to transmit the self-apprehension of a race, a culture, it is sometimes necessary to liberate from, and relate this collective awareness to, the values of others.*<sup>12</sup>

Firmly secured on this rock-foundation are Soyinka's African world-view, African morality, African social values,

African aesthetics, African politics, African literature and - as an ideological substitute - a new mental graft, "social vision", a fulsome pack of the latest academic missiles against targets in the nascent anti-bourgeois ideology. Starting with a categorical rejection of ideological content of literature as posing the danger of "the act of consecration", the African god of creativity proceeds as follows:

*Asked recently whether or not I accepted the necessity for a literary ideology\*, I found myself predictably examining the problem from the inside, that is, from within the consciousness of the artist in the process of creating.... My response was - a social vision, yes, but not a literary ideology. (p.61)\*\**

This question is, according to him, a property of neither "the traditional nor the contemporary writer in African society but of the analyst after the event, the critic." Actually, the problem of ideological content in literature is, to Soyinka, a terminological one taking after European literary history. Already, contemporary African literature is woven around ideological concepts of this nature, with the sorry effect of "putting in strict categories what are essentially fluid operations of the creative mind upon social and natural phenomena." (p.61). The undesired consequences of this characteristic of the "modern consumer mind" is that "the formulation of a literary ideology tends to congeal sooner or later into instant capsules which,

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\* This characterization of ideology in literature as "literary ideology" reveals Soyinka's misconception of ideology. The terminology, "literary ideology" implies ideology belonging to literature, that is, ideology as an integral feature of literature. In this case a precedent has been established to assign to other 'disciplines' *their own* ideology, leading to the existence of various kinds of ideologies as determined by the academic branch in question. We have in fact removed the danger of relating ideology to its source: the material reality of the ideologues. The correct formulation, "ideology in literature", meaning, ideology as expressed in literature - just as we can talk of ideology in philosophy, science, music, etc., relates ideology to its purveyors while making it impossible for them to escape class belonging; for ideology is a property of an economic class expressed in different areas of mental pursuit by members of that class.

\*\* Throughout this essay, whenever the focus is on Soyinka, page numbers refer to *Myth, Literature and the African World*, unless otherwise indicated.



administered also to the writer may end by asphixiating the creative process." (p.61) In other words, the "creative mind" is creative by virtue of being free of ideology.

With the "self-apprehension of the African world" as an ideological framework, Soyinka sets out confidently to rid his African world of negritudinal filth. And the academic pillars of his aversion to negritude are visible even in this ideological fog:

- 1) As a contrived "creative ideology", negritude was a false "social vision": "what went wrong with it is contained in what I earlier expressed as the contrivance of a creative ideology and its falsified basis of identification with social vision." (p.126)
- 2) This falsehood was summarized in
  - a) a too simplified version of "social vision", and
  - b) a failure to back-up this claim with effective means.

In the wisdom of the "bard",

*In attempting to achieve this laudable goal however, Negritude proceeded along the route of over-simplification. Its re-entrenchment of black values was not preceded by any profound effort to enter into this African system of values. (pp.126-7).*

- 3) Negritude took European ideas as its point of departure and reference, thus embodying a system of thoughts already infected with racism. Here's the proof,

*It not only accepted the dialectical structure of European ideological confrontations but borrowed from the very components of its racist syllogism. (p.127).*

We need to dwell for a moment on the central issue of these points because Soyinka has a fondness for self-flattery in thinking that by associating negritude with extremely negative aspects of the western culture, he exorcizes himself of his possession by them.

In the first place, it is quite obvious that he has little or no understanding of dialectics, even the word itself carries a ring of negative connotations. This misconception has been bequeathed to him by that French bourgeois charlatan, Jean-Paul Sartre whose "dialectical analysis" of negritude Soyinka quotes with alacrity:

*Negritude is the low ebb in a dialectical progression. The theoretical and practical assertion of white supremacy is the thesis; negritude's role is the negative stage. (p.134).*

The thesis of this statement centers on the assumption that analytical thought is as much a European standard of development as intuition marks the African's mental underdevelopment. But Soyinka's counter-offensive proceeds from purely moral indignation:

*Slavery and colonialism took their basic justification from such palpably false premises. (p.128).*

And then the negritudinal premise, "intuitive understanding is also a mark of human development", was "a romantic ediface", because it left the premise of the "dialectical structure of European ideological confrontation" intact. "Negritude did not bother to free the black races from the burden of its (the premise's) acceptance." (p.128). The "African world-view" in contrast to the teachings of negritude recognizes no "water-tight categories of the creative spirit."

The most telling proof that negritude was based on foreign social values, as Soyinka sees it, is the fact that it was exclusively an intellectual undertaking by the privileged educated few, and Sartre was their European cultural representative. So Soyinka has an unflattering assessment of Sartre as well:

*Sartre ignores the important fact that Negritude was a creation by and for a small elite.... Negritude was the property of a bourgeois-intellectual elite.....,*

and as such represented the

*likelihood that it would become little more than a diversionary weapon in the eventual emergence of a national revolutionary struggle wherever the flag-bearers of Negritude represent the power-holding elite. (p.135).*

This is the classical "thief crying thief." Soyinka's own ideological stand-point has its synopsis too: Negritude failed to scale the heights of African values because it based itself on European ideology. This failure was inevitable given its elitist backbone; and since the members of the elite involved in it were themselves alienated from African world-outlook, negritude



could not represent an authentic African view-point.

Now what is ironic about this argument is that it is applicable to Soyinka's own "self-apprehension". If negritude is guilty of elitism, a European social product, what makes "self-apprehension", which suffers from an advanced case of individualistic romanticism and mythical notions about exclusively African social purity, innocent of European "ideological confrontations"? The absurdity of attacking negritude from an unhistorical view-point leads to an absurd conclusion that all that is European in origin is bad and unacceptable to Africans, and all that is authentically African is holy and valid for all times and places. Illiteracy, ignorance, disease, political and economic oppression are common marks of the African too, and the direct link between these "tribal" marks and "social purity" is invisible only to "Doctors" of Sociology, "Developmental Specialists" and "Creative writers", that new breed of "the new man" known as the "educated" African. But we stray. It is clear that Soyinka is driven cart-style by an urge to re-establish "African values" once for all, to achieve the "laudable goal" negritude failed to accomplish. This attempt stems from a highly developed state of metaphysical thinking which takes reality as a finished product and fixes it at the condition and state of its external appearance.

Negritude went wrong, in Soyinka's own thinking, because it abandoned the task it had promised to tackle, i.e., it shied away from prescribing to the "educated" African the therapeutic cultural drug for his bourgeois ailment. "Self-apprehension" should therefore do the job because a better qualified African cultural doctor has taken over the leadership of the movement. It is as simple as that. The reference to negritude's indifference to the plight of the ordinary African is given here as proof of this new doctor's "concern" for the cultural health of the "masses", but the truth about his real attitude to the "uneducated" African has been put on record. Let it only be recalled that in 1962 when talking about the reaction to his play, *A dance of the forests* by the "masses", he is reported to have said:

*If you allowed them (the uneducated) they always felt the thing through all the way. . . I never asked them what they made of it (i.e. intellectually) you know. The only time when they become quite frankly lazy is when they find that their instincts (voila) to reject what seems strange are supported by a columnist in the paper, they suddenly feel, Oh! yes, we thought that you know, I mean what's all this*

*nonsense, but left to themselves,  
and given the proper guidance, I  
have no doubt at all that we have one  
of the most interesting audiences,  
in any event, in any cultural event,  
here in Nigeria.*<sup>13</sup> (emphasis added).

There is little if any need to draw attention to the paternalizing attitude of the "educated" African who knows how the "uneducated" "feel", what they can or cannot "make of" and rely entirely on "their instincts", especially when "given the proper guidance" to the artistic creation of his educated head. Equally unnecessary is the question what this "proper guidance" constitutes, i.e., guidance by whom and to which destination. Nor is it a matter of contention that the so-called "uneducated" referred to here, are "uneducated" in the special sense that they are not members of the "self-apprehension" secret society. What is needed is a special pair of mental spectacles to see through this mist of academic chaff.

The validity of Soyinka's "criticism" of negritude is necessarily confined within the walls of metaphysics. The appropriate approach in this sphere is always an attempt to reach absolute finality, that is to say, to ascribe to entities an eternal worth. If negritude is divorced from its historical belonging, and Soyinka does just that, its "wrongs" appear so outrageous that the reason eludes one why anybody should have propagated such a movement. But the moment we look at it as a form of social consciousness peculiar to Africa during the colonial period, all the mystery about it and the contradictions it developed in the course of its lifetime dissolve in thin air. Given the colonial reality, there can be no question that the motive force behind negritude was itself a property of colonialism. In this package are to be found western social values such as culture and politics; and directly attached to these as a necessary appendage were members of the African elite whom colonialism has appropriated to itself.

It was inevitable then that, when the moment came for an African cultural reality to be asserted, this became the *historical* duty of the elite. And if we agree, as we should, that negritude - the form in which this duty was carried out - made a positive contribution towards what can legitimately be described as an African self-awareness, then there is little or no sense in a total condemnation of the exponents of negritude. The "dialectical structure of European ideological confrontations", if by that it is understood the means and the method by which the ideals of negritude were expressed, was, for the negritudinists, not a matter of choice, but a cultural imposi-

tion. It was as little a question of contention whether or not to base themselves on European ideas as it is for a chrysalis to free itself from its cocoon; confining as this may be, it is also the initial source of nutrition and protection for the growing insect, a disposable shell once the creature can fend for itself. But a developing insect has only one of two ends: either it successfully describes all its stages of metamorphosis and reaches maturity, or it gets stuck in one of the phases and dies. And what is true of nature applies with equal justice to human society. Criticism of negritude, therefore, has meaning if it takes into account the relation between the movement and the social reality which gave rise to it.

The positive role negritude played in the course of African history therefore cannot be overstated. In fact Soyinka himself finds as one of its merits the attempt to identify itself, albeit it falsely and unsuccessfully, with the "restitution and re-engineering of a racial psyche, the establishment of a distinct human entity and the glorification of its long-suppressed attributes." (p.126). But he logs "this laudable goal" in the metaphysical book of "African system of values". He can hardly conceal his excitement over his discovery that negritude had a capacity, if not the ability to deliver to an "African world-view" the continuous interaction between the dead, the living and the unborn. To emphasize this "African view" he quotes Birago Diop's poem on the subject, which reads in part:

*Those who are dead have never gone away.  
They are in the shadows darkening around,  
They are in the shadows fading into day,  
The dead are not under the ground.  
They are in the trees that quiver,  
They are in the woods that weep,  
They are in the waters of the river,  
They are in the waters that sleep.  
They are in the crowds, they are in the homestead.  
The dead are never dead, (p.132)*

to which he adds revealingly:

*Now such a poem conveys an important, even  
fundamental aspect of the world-view of traditional  
Africa and remains within this mandate. (p.133)*

This of course is an indispensable source of creative inspiration for Soyinka and his play, *A dance of the forests* is a living proof of this. All the relevant questions concerning this "traditional African-view", i.e., its origin, development and eventual death, are evidently beyond the range of academic

myopia.

Negritude set out to achieve only such goals as were attainable within the historical limits of its validity. By 'historical limits' here we mean the socially negative aspects of the relationship between Africa and the colonial powers for which negritude came into being as a negation. A new reality was under way to replace the old. What Soyinka has yet to discover for himself, therefore, is the fact that a social movement, like any other phenomenon of development of things, identifies itself from the outset with the ideal features of the reality in the making in whose name it solicits 'solidarity' and 'support', so to speak, from 'progressive' quarters. Those aspects of this new era which stand out as positive values, ideally conceived, or as negative elements of the old reality, dialectically expressed, become the most potent bargaining chips for the movement. But in positing these positive values as justification for change, the new reality mortgages itself, by the same token, to the phase of development to follow. The abnegation of this debt receives a historical rebuff in the form of internal contradictions, that is to say, the attempt to secure an eternal validity for an existing reality triggers a wave of contradictions within the hitherto "stable" framework, especially when all the essential features of that reality have had time to mature. At this juncture, i.e., at the point where the necessity for change sets in, the rationality for the current entity loses its rationale, and can be maintained thereafter only by rationalization. In the case of negritude, the "restitution and re-engineering of a racial psyche etc.," has had to give away to a round of changes corresponding to the era of changed social conditions. Negritude has thus outspent its force and retired to its proper place in the history of the African people.

All the pillory Soyinka pours on negritude for not coming up with an absolute value misses the target by a wide mark. He takes the shortest road to bourgeois ignorance by his emphasis on the 'failure' of negritude to base itself on African social values. What deserves an all out attack is on the contrary, precisely this doctrine of African social purity; and, admittedly, because negritude lent a helping hand in this venture, we feel justified to join Ezekiel Mphahlele on the subject:

*What I do not accept is the way in which too much of the poetry inspired by it (negritude) romanticizes Africa - as a symbol of innocence, purity and artless primitiveness.*<sup>14</sup>



## III

Once the prerequisites for an advanced degree in the cultural aspect of African societies had been completed, a task to which negritude had given its immense power, the ground had also been cleared for a political awakening. The insistence that Africa had her own cultural basis led directly to the investigation into the social features on which such a claim could justifiably be secured. We are now about to witness a social crime: the negritudinists looked into the cradle of the African society and saw, or thought they saw, the true foundation of African culture. They came up with a package of ancestor worship, social cohesion, communal life, etc., as pivot points for African cultural essence. They failed to realize that these features by themselves, divorced from the manner by which African peoples acquired their subsistence, could not explain the why of this or that African cultural peculiarity. You simply could not say, the unbroken communication between the dead, the living and the unborn was a feature of African cultural expression, you had to ask, how did this come about? In other words, you had to *discover* first and foremost within the material reality of African societies the motive force, the *objective* motive force behind the apparent. But this could hardly be accomplished without first of all establishing a 'position of strength' in the political arena. So the question of independent cultural origin proved in the end to be a paraphrase of political independence; but like all paraphrases, the actual meaning remained, in the new phrase, essentially the same as in the original. And this is what can be described as the 'Fault', not so much of the *negritudinists* as of *negritude* itself.

The distinction is a historical one. The exponents of negritude became aware of an existing problem between them as Africans and the western social values they had been taught to accept as theirs as special Africans, i.e., by virtue of their western education. They said to their western counterparts, well, we do not want to be described as 'special' Africans, we are simply Africans, so if you want us to be a part of your society you must accept, not just our educated selves, but also our traditional society with all its tom-toms, poverty, diseases etc., that is to say, we must be treated as equals on a cultural level.

The emergence of African independent states was the natural child of this cultural phenomenon, which is not to say that negritude was responsible for African political independence, but that it cannot be left out as a contributing factor. Anyway, in politics as in literature, we spoke European languages and assimilated, or rather, maintained European social elements: Ezekiel Mphahlele, Peter Abrahams, Mongo Beti, Ferdi

nand Oyono, Camara Laye, and others spoke the 'official' languages spoken in the newly independent African states. The right conditions were then available for examining in earnest the African social order.

It took but a glance at the African communal setting to come to the conclusion that it was being disrupted and even removed altogether to be replaced by an 'unknown' value. So Chinua Achebe resorted to the power of the pen to mourn the death of harmony in the traditional African society. Okonkwo dies by the disgraceful use of his own hands as a symbol of a greater social tragedy African societies were experiencing. But then that adopted child of colonialism has reached puberty and moved unsteadily to the administrative throne of colonial machinery. Little wonder, therefore, that Obi, Okonkwo's grandson by his son Nwoye who had joined Christianity in open defiance of African ancestors, is *No Longer at Ease*. How can he? Frustrated, disillusioned and inward looking, he has embarked on a long journey to the unknown, and the internal turmoil occasioned by this state of personal non-belonging, finds a ready vent in the "good life" of women, bribery and fund embezzlement as an act of "self-apprehension". The dilemma of the "educated" African in a social setting which is still basically communal comes into full light here and constitutes his 'alienation' in so far as his 'education' uproots him from this setting, forces him to deny it and attempts to integrate him with the life-style he cannot lead 'normally' in his original background.

The "educated" African then finds himself rediscovering and hardly retrieving the lost self. But watch, his journey is now acquiring a definite destination in the form of re-initiation into the tribal setting. So now, his starting point becomes his destination and destiny. Thus Mongo Beti sends Jean-Marie Medza on a *Mission to Kala*, to a rugged and unschooled village to retrieve his cousin's wife. In the company of Zambo, another cousin of his, "Duckfoot-Johnny", Petrus "Son-of-God" and Abraham the "Boneless wonder", the aim in life is objectified once again in women and wine, a task Jean-Marie is unqualified to tackle. He gets tangled in the process but in the end nevertheless "blessed" with a woman. At any rate, the realization of his inadequacy and of his ignorance of his own people's way of life is more than worth the embarrassment he has to bear in the dramatic scenes of social experiences.

The plight of Jean-Marie Medza is the common mark of the "educated" African. Having had to leave his village life in order to go to school, he always returned an ignorant man, self-styled in vanity, elevated in pride and boastful of his high academic achievements, even if he had failed his examinations, like Jean-Marie. And this is the reality of colonialism in



Africa. It left no stone unturned in its tireless efforts to produce its own kind on the African 'racial psyche'. And when in the course of time this new creature rediscovers his 'roots' back in the traditional debris of his own people, he finds himself actually asking political questions. The first stage in a series of phases of social awareness, as this relates both to the particular case of the individual and the general consciousness of the people, has thus been reached, and now the truth can be inscribed boldly on the political banner:

*The tragedy which our people is suffering today is that of a man left to his own devices in a world which does not belong to him, which he has not made and does not understand. It is the tragedy of man bereft of any intellectual compass, a man walking blindly through the dark in some hostile city like New York. Who will tell him that he can only cross fifth avenue by the pedestrian crossings, or teach him how to interpret traffic signs? How will he solve the intricacies of a subway map, or know where to change trains?<sup>15</sup>*

But even if he were well-equipped with the techniques of survival in a metropolitan jungle like New York, would that necessarily mean he can then transform this jungle into a socially habitable place? For we are talking here not about an economic structure already at variance with the laws of development, but about ways and means of creating one whose realization is itself a historical necessity.

When the existing contradictions within African society came to a head, and were therefore registered in the conscious mind of the "educated" African, the natural response was to stage a 'protest' in literature. It was an outburst of an ang man, here crying in the wilderness and there delivering summon of social purity. The failure to analyse and understand the social force behind these contradictions was the special featu of this 'protest'. Soyinka for one moved with characteristic pomposity to announce "the end of humanity": "the situation in Africa today is the same as in the rest of the world;" said he "it is not one of the tragedies which come of isolated human failures, but the very collapse of humanity."<sup>16</sup>

Sure, there was a 'collapse of humanity' taking place. But the question is, which 'humanity' was collapsing? To the bourgeois ideologue, this question does not exist because he *knows* that there is only one 'humanity', the 'humanity' of whi he is an economic member, i.e., bourgeois 'humanity'. Where

Mongo Beti recognizes, in the African problems, a variant of definite historical factors inseparably bound up with colonialism, Soyinka sees "the very collapse of humanity"! When then the question concerning the solution of African political problems came up, the Soyinkian approach could very easily be seen taking the form of 'human redemption'. And what was true of colonialism is equally applicable in the era of neo-colonialism and imperialism.

Tragically, however, by virtue of his trade, many an African writer still views himself in isolation, a detached observer whose business is to comment on events taking place around him. The name of Wole Soyinka is ever always a depressing example:

*In new societies which begin the seductive experiment in authoritarianism (notice the all too familiar western political tongue), it has become a familiar experiment to watch society crush the writer under a load of guilt for his daring to express a sensitivity and an outlook apart from, and independent of, the mass direction.<sup>17</sup>*

But what conditions the writer's 'independence', and what makes his 'sensitivity' and 'outlook' so important that when he expresses them "independent of, the mass direction", they cannot be "crushed"? Who does he think he is that his own views cannot be questioned for good or bad reasons? This is the creature present Africa has to struggle against. But he continues:

*The revolutionary mood in society is a particularly potent tyrant in this respect....*

(But my dear Sir, just now you have been blaming the "flag-bearers" of negritude for stifling "the eventual emergence of national revolutionary struggle". How does it come about that this same revolutionary mood is now a "potent tyrant"?)

*..... and since the writer is, at the very least, sensitive to mood, he respects the demand of the moment and effaces his definition as a writer by an act of choice; (which means that) the writer must for the moment at least postpone that unique reflection on experience and events which is what makes a writer - and constitute himself into a part of that machinery that will actually shape events, (therefore) the African writer found that he could not deny his society; he could,*

*however, temporarily at least deny himself.*<sup>18</sup>

This amounts to saying, and we have heard it over and over from bourgeois academic chairs, that individualism is the stuff of which writers are made, and that, as far as established social systems are concerned, change brings with it negative demands on the writer which he can only obey by denying himself as a writer, "temporarily at least". When this same reasoning comes from an African writer, there can be no doubt about his bourgeois mental conditioning. One wonders why, in the age of African liberation, a writer cannot join the revolutionary mass?

The defence put up by Soyinka and his ilk for the writer's "sensitivity" and "independent outlook" is in fact defence for the status quo; whether this is done in the name of social harmony, or for the "restitution and re-engineering of a racial psyche", the end result is the same.

It must be said here in this respect and as a prologue to an analysis of this mental case of the "educated" African, that the so-called social harmony of African societies has long lost its credit. Colonialism smashed and subordinated it under itself. This happened as follows: The mode of production of the communal African societies, which was at the time aimed at immediate social needs was turned into one based on exchange, that is, one corresponding to colonialism itself. The 'uncivilized' were thereby 'civilized', so that the commercial factor became the motive force for social production. But then the mental expression of the totality of this reality was foreign to the African societies because the economic base for it was an arbitrary intrusion. From the economic stand-point alone, it is obvious that the social harmony which characterized African societies prior to colonialism must have had 'something' to do with the people's mode of production, since, by deduction, the mode of production corresponding to colonialism brought disharmony with it.

#### IV

The "educated" African's 'concern' for African social harmony is an element of what Soyinka calls "African world view", by which he understands all those aspects of African societies whose existence he exclusively associates with the existence of traditional Africa. Existing reality here appears him as given once for all, and therefore not subject to redefinition; and to petrify this reality is the business of African culture as a genuine function peculiar to the African way of life and distinct from the "European habit of world redefinition". As he puts it,

*For cultures which pay more than lip-service to the protean complexity of the universe of which man is himself a reflection, this European habit of world re-definition appears both wasteful and truth-defeating. (p.49)*

There is something pitiable about this ignorant utterance; it is like watching a fist-fight between two blind people, each throwing a jab totally in the dark hoping to knock down his opponent purely by chance. In the case before us, the contention is between African bourgeois intellectualism and its western counterpart, each claiming to represent 'authentic' world view in relation to itself. By which criterion each judges the other and itself, this is the 'light' denied the two blind combatants. But here is an example of the "African world-view" in action:

*A break-down in moral order implies, in the African world-view, a rupture in the body of Nature, just like the physical malfunction of one man. (p.52).*

Which is to say, morality and nature have a value of equal magnitude, i.e., permanence. The romantic expression of this notion runs as follows:

*Where society lives in a close interrelation with Nature, regulates its existence by natural phenomenon within the observable processes of continuity - ebb and tide, waxing and waning of the moon, rain and drought, planting and harvest - the highest moral order is seen as that which guarantees a parallel continuity of the species. (p.52).*

By correlation, therefore, where society does not live "in close inter-relation with Nature," decadence exists as a result. Only one question needs to be asked here: what makes one society live "in close inter-relation with Nature" and another at variance with it? The "educated" African suffers from a chronic allergy to questions of this kind. But the point at issue is just this delineation of that which determines the values on which morality, social harmony, etc. are based.

A society whose very existence depends on the vagaries of natural phenomenon, the type Soyinka is advocating here, is no better no worse than a slave, because like a slave it has no full command of its life. All the political and social humiliation Africa has suffered in the hands of western powers rests squarely on this point. This the "educated" African does not understand. It never occurs to him that a social order can



exist which is both technologically developed and socially cohesive, one in which a "break-down in moral order" is taken to be a moral order. Of course their failure to understand this fact is quite understandable: it stems from their 'knowledge that economic development means western kind of development. Outside this framework there is only "authoritarianism", the monster that "crushes the writer", you see. So the best alternative is that provided by African traditional societies, quod erat demonstrandum!

And then, because the "educated" African does not want to be "misunderstood" as advocating social backwardness, he hastens to plead innocent of the crime; Soyinka is on the line

*The African world-view is not, however,  
even by implication stagnant... (p.53).*

But wait a minute. Have we not just been told that "a break-down in moral order implies, in the African world-view, a rupture in the body of Nature..." remember? Even if you modify the statement to the effect that the moral order in question is that which corresponds to a society living "in close inter-relation with Nature," or to put it more intelligibly the moral order corresponding to any given social set-up, still the fact that an irregularity in that moral order registers disorder in nature itself, not only implies but in fact presupposes static nature and consequently a stagnant mental reflection of it. What you are saying in effect, whether you know it or not, is that, since traditional African societies live "in close inter-relation with Nature", and nature is a permanent value, this relationship is therefore a permanent one, because then, should any of the elements constituting this relationship acquire a variable quality, for instance, a "break-down in moral order" this permanence is disturbed, i.e., there is "a rupture in the body of Nature..." How can an exponent of this view plead innocent of advocating a stagnant world-view? The "educated" African is totally unaware of his own contradictions.

It is now clear that the defence for African "social harmony" is a tactical weapon for the defence of the existing social and economic relations within bourgeois confines. The campaign in the African front is being carried out safely by "educated" African in "African world-view". In appearing to take issues with the western world, the "educated" African creates a deceptive impression that he is challenging his master voice. The substance of the matter, however, is registered in the romantic moral niceties he paints on his own society: the social 'harmony' of the traditional African society is pitted against the social decadence of the western world as a warning against 'technological gadget'.

The campaign works in the following manner: if it can successfully be shown that the African moral order, which is responsible for the African social cohesion, or at least relates positively to it, is itself a natural order, that is to say, is nature's own order, the original pattern of things in keeping with which society "regulates its existence.... within the observable processes of continuity", a strong case has been made in favour of maintaining that state of affairs which guarantees this set of social values. We have thus fixed all the social relations pertaining to it. The "educated" African will of course deny that this is his intention, and he is right! He has no *conscious* intention of fashioning a static picture of his society, he simply does so *objectively*, that is, his 'observations' about African traditional life has the effect of fixing it at the traditional level; this is what he cannot be expected to see. In essence the "educated" African carries out his mission in the same manner that the tse tse fly carries sleeping sickness. Like the blood-sucking insect - and the similarity is not accidental - he acts only in response to an inner urge for 'self-expression' which happens to be materially determined.

The average "educated" African proceeds cautiously and 'thoughtfully' in the execution of his mission. The exception is once more Wole Soyinka. Boastful, arrogant, 'cock-sure' and complacent, he strides forward aggressively smirking with the self-emulative air of a god-king. And since the well from which he draws his creative inspiration swarms with traditional Yoruba gods, we must follow him there if only to witness the birth of the god of African literature.

## V

As already indicated, *Myth, Literature and the African World* is a formal portraiture of Soyinka's own 'thoughts' in keeping with the political demands of the present world in general, and those of Africa in particular, that the 'creative' writer emerge from the ideological safety of his artistic cloister and take sides. Soyinka's response to this demand takes the form of equivocation. He wants to take sides, and then he does not want to take sides. In the former mood he extends a romantic arm to the traditional African society, and in the latter, he yields readily, body and soul to the seductions of the bourgeoisie. Confused, contradictory and occasionally ideologically incoherent, he nevertheless succeeds in amassing an arsenal of various methods, techniques, strategies and tactical manoeuvrings necessary for the ideological immunity he seeks to create for himself. Starting from what to him is the most distinctive aspect of the African world - equal only to



ancient Greece - he activates the dead, communicates with the unborn and guards the living against foreign social impurities and especially the marxist taint. To do this he has had to denounce ideology as such, and espouse a type of neo-negritudinism: 'psyche': 'self-apprehension'.

There are three deities in focus here: Ogun, Obatala, and Sango, represented in drama by the passage-rites, of hero-gods defined as "a projection of man's conflict with forces which challenge his efforts to harmonize with his environment physical, social and psychic." (p.1). As is always the case with things African seen through the academic spectacles of the "educated" African, each and every one of these gods has a "functional" value. The tragic rites of Sango, for example, represent "a deadly conflict on the human and the historic plane, charged nonetheless with the passion and terror of supernatural, uncontrollable forces." (p.8). And since this conflict implies an injustice, Sango can be seen as the embodiment of "the moral code of society." (p.9). Obatala, by contrast, is a "gentler sector of the arc of the human psyche" (p.13). His virtues comprise "patience, suffering, peaceableness, all the imperatives of harmony in the universe, the essence of quietude and forbearance; in short, the aesthetics of the saint." (p.1). Ogun, the third god is a creature - oh pardon - a creator of many qualities. "He stands for a transcendental, humane, but rigidly restorative justice": "'protector of orphans', 'roof over the homeless', 'terrible guardian of the sacred oath'." (p.26). And that is not all : he is also "the master craftsman and artist, farmer and warrior, essence of destruction and creativity, a recluse and a gregarious imbibor, a reluctant leader of men and deities."\* (p.27). But the lowest common factor of these gods is that they are all subject to attacks by "human weakness" following which they are "placed under an eternal obligation of some practical form of penance which compensates humanity." (p.13). We are also told that these gods have a philosophical function as well. Traditional drama, for example, whose *dramatis personae* are the gods themselves in the human form, employs sound, light, smell and motion to define space:

*Sound, light, motion, even smell can all  
be used just as validly to define space. (p.39).*

And who needs technology when African myth achieves just as much as any scientific invention?

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\* Zeus, the Greek god-king, is also said to have been a 'recluse' and a 'reluctant Leader of men and deities', in addition to being, Like Ogun, the god of war. What a fortuitous similarity!

*The assimilative wisdom of the African metaphysics recognises no difference in essence between the mere means of tapping the power of lightning - whether it is by ritual sacrifice, through the purgative will of the community unleashing its justice on the criminal, or through the agency of Franklin's revolutionary gadget. (p.49).*

The finest piece of "the assimilative wisdom of the African metaphysics" is yet to come. Take, for example, the historical evidence that myth represents a social novelty corresponding to the historically determined low economic productivity of the human society. The passionate cry of the "educated" African is predictable: Nonsense!

*This is an interesting example of what results when scholars subvert their intelligent deductions to imperatives of alien and jealous gods, .... (i.e.) Marxism. (p.32).*

The target is George Thomson for his daring venture into the sacred world of the deities with the criminal intention of domesticating them.

Before we give Thomson's *correct* analysis of myth and ritual, we wish to make a point of order. Just because Thomson is European and Soyinka African, it does not necessarily follow that the former is wrong and the latter correct on that account, which is what a typical Africanist or a western liberal would have us believe. This attitude is not only condescending, it is confining and retrogressive; not that European thinking is unrestrictive and progressive, but because we are dealing here with an ideological question which recognises no racial qualities or geographical boundaries. The core of the matter is not *who* says what, but *what* is said. The passive in this case becomes the positive approach. If we quote European works extensively, it is because that is where most of the research has been done. What is written by Africans today tends to follow conservative patterns of the western ruling ideology, understandably because that is the source of material support for the African 'writers'. Which is why the little ideologically progressive work that has been done by Africans is so rare and difficult to come by that we are forced to do without it for most of the time. Time will come when more and more African intellectuals will begin to see that racial belonging has no part to play in ideology, and that, on the contrary, ideological standpoint has the effect of unifying different

races on a class basis, then there will be no excuse to rely heavily on European works.

The difference between Thomson's analysis of myth and ritual, and that of Soyinka is therefore an ideological difference. Thomson proceeds in the following manner:

*Myth was created out of ritual. The latter term must be understood in a wide sense, because in primitive society everything is sacred, nothing profane. Every action - eating, drinking, tilling, fighting - has its proper procedure, which being prescribed, is holy. In the song and dance of the mimetic rite, each performer withdrew, under the hypnotic effect of rhythm, from the consciousness of reality, which was peculiar to himself, individual, into the subconscious world of fantasy, which was common to all, collective, and from that inner world they returned charged with new strength for action. Poetry and dancing, which grew out of the mimetic rite, are speech and gesture raised to a magical level of intensity. For a long time, in virtue of their common origin and function, they were inseparable. The divergence of poetry from dancing, of myth from ritual, only began with the rise of the ruling class whose culture was divorced from the labour of production.<sup>19</sup> (Emphasis added).*

This analysis is of course quite unacceptable on the bourgeois ideological front, and Soyinka, in his capacity as a competent representative of this class, tells us why:

*George Thomson...comes very close to giving a perceptive description of the process by which the office of the protagonist actor transcends the actual conflict of the ritual and conveys the deeper experience of a challenger of the transitional abyss. But he shies away finally from the fullness of his obvious illumination, and retracts in mid-word the observable reality of the protagonist-audience relation. (Then this stroke of genius): This is an interesting example of what results when scholars subvert their intelligent deductions to*

*imperatives of alien\* and jealous gods,  
in his case Marxism. (p.32).*

He is especially incensed by the issue Thomson raises at the end of the passage, to the effect that, at a definite historical point, there occurred a differentiation of the arts corresponding to class formation. Here our friend finds himself completely disarmed, and has to beat a tactical retreat,

*We shall leave the latter Marxist  
speculation alone, as being outside the  
scope of this subject. (p.33).*

His attention is rather arrested by "the integral nature of poetry and dancing in the mimetic rite", and the existence of an "inner world" into and from which the individual withdraws and returns, "communicating a new strength for action." This inner world is "the primal reality, the hinterland of transition," and Thomson's definition of it as fantasy "betrays a Eurocentric conditioning or alienation." (p.33).

Having dispensed with the offensive "Marxist speculations", this "super-educated" African offers his own 'proper' analysis of the subject:

*The community emerges from ritual experience 'charged with new strength for action' because of the protagonist's promethean (well, mind you, this is not Eurocentric conditioning or alienating, not when Soyinka uses it) raid on the durable resources of the transitional realm; immersed within it, he is enabled emphatically to transmit its essence to the choric participants of the rites - the community. (p.33).*

Since the ideological conclusions deduced from this type of "analysis" are supposed to be African in nature, as constituent elements of "the African world-view", we owe it to African posterity to set the records straight, here and now.

The existence of gods reflects a certain low level in the development of man's consciousness. And because social

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\* Thomson is writing about myth and ritual in the ancient Greek society, i.e., the cultural background of his own society. One wonders how this can be described as 'alien'! Alien to whom? To the Greeks or to western societies? Certainly not to traditional African societies because that is not Thomson's subject matter.



practical activity is the source of consciousness, a fact the "educated" African has yet to understand, a society abounding with tribal gods betrays itself as a hopeless victim of blind forces of nature, and this means practically that man is still incapable of taking his own destiny in his own hands. But then, since the existence of a thing implies its non-existence, it follows naturally, that there was a time in the history of man when there were no gods. Consequently, it is obvious that tribal gods are not an immanent cultural aspect of traditional African societies; for their appearance was a conditional probability, so to speak, that is to say, they came into being only after certain material conditions, of which traditional theatre was itself a derivative, had been fulfilled. Their appearance was not *historic*, but *historical*; not in the sense of a conscious action on the part of man that influenced traditional drama, but as a result of his practical activity as was historically demanded of him by the necessity to produce, preserve and reproduce his own kind. The non-existence of gods corresponds to the period when man's activity was taken up completely with collecting and hunting for his food. At this time "artistic expression" was nothing more than a weapon for the acquisition of means of subsistence. Arnold Hauser, who has done extensive research in this area, has had this observation to make:

*In this time of pure practice, everything was often centered around sustenance, and nothing justifies us to assume that art served any other purpose apart from direct acquisition of means of subsistence.*<sup>20</sup>

Actually, close examination of primitive art provides proof of this. One of the common traits of this art is the fact that images are usually pierced with spears and arrows, which can mean nothing if not the wish, on the part of the 'artist', to be successful in his hunting expeditions. There can be little doubt, therefore, that magic and sorcery have their origin in the practical business of staying alive. The primitive artist had as the ultimate aim, not aesthetic gratification, but the material effect of his work; he nevertheless experienced "a certain aesthetic fulfilment"<sup>21</sup> in the process.

Once they had taken shape, having arisen from practical art, magic and sorcery underwent further modifications and gradually became technique, mere formality, ritual. It was necessary at first to describe a formative phase in order to consolidate themselves, to prove themselves socially useful before they could be allowed to become conventional. Then followed an epoch during which the two intrinsic aspects of art - a) similarity and imitation, and b) creative realization of entity - were developed and extended to the dramatic form

of motion, activity, performance, hence the mimetic rites and cult dances. But if, as no doubt the "educated" African would readily agree, all forms of expression in the traditional social organization have a "functional value", what was the functional value of mimetic rites and cult dances, apart from their 'healing' effect as Professor Kunene would say? Given the necessity for physical survival, the direct relationship between means of subsistence and the technique by which these means could be acquired, cannot escape the attention of a genuine inquirer. In this respect there is but one possible answer, to wit, that the mimetic rites and dances were based on the movements and activities of the animals to be hunted down for food; they were the sum total of similarity of the appearance, and imitation of the movements of the animals, on the one hand, and the creative realization of the purpose for which the rites and the dances were objective means, on the other.

In the passage of time, among different clans, different kinds of animals or plants came to be regarded as akin to the members of the clan in question, in recognition of the special qualities of the animal or plant as a source of food. The social manner of expression of this 'akin-ness' with the natural object, was to perform ceremonies around it, with the intention of increasing its number. Thus totemism was born. If the totem was an animal, its characteristics - habits, gestures, cries and movements - were mimicked in order to bring it into control, the intention being to make it always available in time of need. But then, later when the techniques of hunting and laying traps improved, the original purpose of the performances turned into their opposite, they went conventional, a perfected art of mimicry that had lost its social purpose, an antiquated means of acquiring subsistence. Initially mimetic rites and dances were undertaken as preparations for the special task of hunting. Man knew what he wanted from the objective world, but lacking the necessary technique to effect his will, the rites and dances became his 'technology'.

From here the transition was made to the substance of things, to tradition, signs, concepts, symbols, etc. The artform leaned heavily to the abstract. But why? How were the conditions for this cultural phenomenon created?

*The eruptive revolutionary step stems from the fact that, instead of gathering and capturing his means of subsistence, man now produces them himself. With the domestication of animals and plants, animal husbandry and agriculture, he begins his triumphal advance on nature, makes himself more or less independent of the whims of fate, of chance and*



*accident. 22*

But then, through his own productive activity, man had no sooner achieved a measure of independence from nature in general than he found himself faced with a new phase of dependence on specific aspects of it, the elimination of which presented a challenge to, and required an increased productivity of his labour. The transition from foodgathering and hunting to the domestication of animals and plants brought with it the consciousness of man's reliance on the weather. Rain and drought were analogous to good luck and misfortune respectively, and this in turn conjured fear of death, mystery, etc. And with this fear, the idea of demons and evil spirits also came into being, and man accordingly became preoccupied with blessing and curse, hence, with the ideas of the unknown, of the ultra-mundane powers. The age of spirit-worship, of belief in the existence and eternity of the soul and of the cult of death, had finally arrived. Now man needs idols, charms, and *gods*, in order to rid himself of his fear, and also as a source of consolation for the ordeals he had to endure.

The ideas of life after death and of the undying soul, as well as those of the continuous communication between the dead, the living and the unborn, are as separate and different in practice as they are united in origin. The former, associated with Christianity, and the latter regarded by the "educated" African as a property of "the African world-view" have their origin in the necessity for man's physical survival. Thus, what has become known as Dualism is nothing other than the antagonism between ideas and reality, spirit and body, soul and form<sup>23</sup>, and its existence has been given expression in man's artistic and philosophical concepts.

It should be obvious now that spiritual ceremonies, ritual theatre, myths, epic poetry, drama, gods and everything that goes under the name of art, all about which Soyinka has poured so much ink in his "creative process" have a concrete material base. But when these ceremonies eventually realized themselves as formalities, they were turned into occasions for sharing a common meal. Here under the "Chairmanship" of the chief of the tribe, the dead, the living and the unborn 'gathered' for a "Thanksgiving", to express their oneness, which is nothing but a reminiscence of a real social set-up not quite buried in the past.\* Just as much as a grown-up may recollect his childhood, so may a society. Nowhere is this fact better expressed than in Soyinka's own play, *A dance of the Forests*, \* The American "Thanksgiving Day", for example, is a reminiscence of a real event in American history that has gone conventional, traditional, and therefore a social rite in its right; but in practical terms, it is socially unnecessary in a society where you buy your own dead turkey from a grocer instead of hunting for it.

and this is one of the few *objective* merits of the playwright.

Myths were created in the same manner. In primitive societies where labour was collective as a matter of necessity, the failure of that labour to achieve the desired aim was attributed to the power of resistance on the part of the subject of labour. This conflict between subject and object, i.e., between labour and the subject of labour, was regarded capable of being removed through magical mimetic acts.

Similarly, drama is a sequel of mimetic rites and dances. The initiation of the members of a tribe, designed as means of maintaining continuity of the life of the community by symbolic reincarnation of the ancestors into the novices, grew into periodical performances of ritual drama. The idea here was to reinforce the authority of the ancestors by entrusting them with the power of bringing rain, good harvest and any other form of good luck to the community. But with the emergence of myth as an independent entity detached from ritual, the dramatic property of initiation became dominant. And since agriculture was, for many societies at different times, the material base for social activity, there developed among these societies the world over, a custom known as "Carrying out Death and Bringing in Summer". Naturally this custom was mainly prevalent among peoples living in temperate zones where "Summer" and "Winter" signified life and death in that order; its variants in communities living in tropical lands took shape in relation to the rainy and dry seasons. The specific features of this custom therefore differed according to geographical location of the people under consideration.

The manner in which this custom was expressed among African societies has many versions. Through his "creative process" Soyinka has, without the express purpose, spoken adequately, if romantically, for the Yoruba. The *material origin*\* of the custom, its development among various peoples in different parts of the world and the modifications it acquired in the process, not to mention the many social uses into which it was put in each and every one of the societies where it was practised, all this remains totally alien to Soyinka. We present here, from a personal experience, the form in, and the social use for which it was performed among the Kamba people hardly fifteen years ago.

The framework of execution of the custom paralleled very closely those of the "tribes" on record, with the exception that

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\* And this is the point of emphasis, not the custom as such, because more of its various features is better known in European and American than in African communities.

the regulating factor with the Kamba people, as already noted for people living in tropical lands, was the rainy season. When, following an adequate rainfall, the maize crop - the Kamba people's staple food - was knee-high, and the first weeding had been completed, young men organized themselves into a "hunting club" and went into the mountains to hunt down "Death". The role of "Death" was played in real life by a mountain-hog known as KITHANGAITI, which was subsequently killed, its intestines pulled out and the undigested contents gathered in green leaves. At sunset, the young people roamed the fields spreading the "sacrament of life", the mountain-hog's intestinal contents, on the young maize crop. This was believed to bring fertility to the crop as well as destroy destructive insects. Later in the evening, to celebrate the event, there followed a feast, in which the most delicate dishes, prepared by young girls, were brought out to the open-air celebration field called KINY'AKA. The 'winner' here, the girl whose dish surpassed all others in texture, appetizing smell, 'architectural' design and taste, received no coronation, but special attention in the dancing that followed the feast. Not uncommonly, the whole event ended in sexual pairing and/or eventual matrimony for some of the pairs. And here again, as with the known case the sanction for sexual union was made symbolic fertility of nature itself, a crude attempt to enhance the potency of those forces in nature responsible for man's material existence, by sexually stimulating the power of self-reproduction in man himself. The word "self-reproduction" carries more than its biological meaning. The dialectical relationship between man's self-reproduction in labour and its correlation in the sexual sector could only be thus expressed embryonically, at this premier level, as a premiere, as a precursor to its present form in modern economic production. Marx and Engels were the first to see this inter-relation in the societies they studied.

*The production of life, both of one's own in labour and of fresh life in procreation, now appears as a double relationship: on the one hand as a natural, on the other as a social relationship.*<sup>24</sup>

With this background to the origin of tribal gods and traditional drama in relation to primeval societies, we are now better equipped to look at their influence on each other as time went by. A classical case has been made, in this respect, of the worship of Dionysus, the Greek god of all that is taken to be positive about man: beauty, relaxation, (wine being an agent of this), kindness, humility etc. At Thebes, in ancient Greece, where the worshippers of this god were exclusively women, a violation of the procedure by which the rite was performed, was a tragedy, and the offender was accorded a tragic treatment. We are forced to give a Greek illustration of

this point because Soyinka has categorically chosen to Africanize a Greek play based on this subject, as an expression of his western cultural link and a practical demonstration of the commitment to his principle of retaining "external reference points against which progression in thinking can be measured."

But as a preparation for the task, let us first recall and keep in mind the three parts of the clan rite of "Carrying out Death and Bringing in Summer", these are:

- i) Exodus to the woods to escort "Death" to its death,
- ii) execution of "Death" and
- iii) return in victory (bringing in Summer), followed by celebrations.

Essential too is the common-place material origin of the custom, the indispensable connection, unknown though it is to the metaphysical mind of the "educated" African, between man's cultural expressions and his physical and biological activities. We are saying here in a few words what barely amounts to a simple fact: the fertility of the soil was the necessary concern of those tied to the land.

In ancient Greece, when the custom lost its individual character as a necessary undertaking and turned into an empty tradition, the exodus aspect of it translated into a hymn known as the DITHYRAMB in honour of Dionysus. The execution of "Death" became a day of passion. And since death is the limit of destruction, disintegration, decay, and therefore the cause of sorrow, mourning and sadness, this part of the ritual culminated in *tragedy*. The development of these two derivatives of the ritual in the Greek society matured into drama as it was subsequently handed down to other European societies. It follows therefore that the evolution of the art of tragedy is an historical description of the development of the societies where this art-form acquired a definite category of its own as a cultural property of a definite class of people.

Tragedy, in the 'classical' meaning of the word, is a cultural dish fit for kings, queens, princes, princesses, dukes, duchesses and a whole cluster of social leeches who assign to their cultural tastes a universal validity-badge. In point of fact we dare to say, there is nothing tragic about the primeval communal society, firstly because the very concept presupposes a divided world of individualism. The idealistic conception of reality, not as it actually is, but as it is deemed to be, is a mental specialty of the aristocratic class. The predecessor of tragedy, and therefore, its opposite in historical terms is the collective mime of the communal man corresponding to the magic rites of the totemic clan. Which is why, long after the transition from the collective to individualized cultural activity, tragedy still maintains, in its effect, a sense of communal feelings, a touch of common fate in shared circumstances.



Macbeth, King Lear, Oedipus, to mention a few examples of what has been imposed on the "educated" African as the highest perfection of tragedy, may all 'touch' us, not because there is something common between us and their royal highnesses, but because, in their flesh and blood, they are common. And this, the mere biological existence whose propagation is the original motive force for social activity, is the historical meeting point between kings and the common man.

Secondly, at this low economic production, owing to the fact that the totality of man's normal activity is consumed in the acquisition of means of subsistence, communal society falls short of the material advantage of a class society to see itself in terms of tragedy. We shall explain: Where an individual's physical survival depends practically on his co-operation with the other members of the community, the cultural expression corresponding to this social structure is a reflection of a common plight which, to the community, appears as a *common-place* aspect of their 'normal' life. The Swahili idiom, *kifo cha watu wengi ni Siku Kuu* (common death - literally, the death of many people - is a holiday) is the comic version of tragedy in a communal society. Conversely, in a class society, tragedy is a mirror of the vicissitudes of the life of an isolated individual; only thus is tragedy "tragedy". In drama there is no such thing as mass tragedy, as this would then take the character of a farce.

Tragedy comes into being in human history with the class society, with the emergence of the economic conditions which give rise to a leisured and idle class, with the consolidation of individualism. Tragedy here expresses 'missed' opportunities of an individual member or house-hold of this class, a fall from privilege, the property of this class, to the common bottom line of the toilers. It is the failure to achieve high ideals which this class promises itself, or to maintain the social status already acquired, that is reflected in the form of tragedy. The modifications of this aspect of drama, and the social meaning it has come to carry in different societies in the passage of time, is of course another matter altogether. The western version of tragedy is instilled in the unsuspecting mind of the "educated" African as the only one there is, the only 'true' tragedy.

## VI

European drama, says Soyinka in an extravagant simile, is like a steam-engine which welcomes on board, on its journey, cultural passengers of various hue; these include allegory, naturalism, surrealism and others. But at some point it derails briefly along "constructivist tracks" from where a "neo-classic" engine tows it back to the first station. "This for us, is the

occidental creative rhythm," he explains, "a series of intellectual spasms which, especially today, appears susceptible even to commercial manipulation." (p.38). And this "series of intellectual spasms", which is nothing but sub-categories of one world-view, contrasts dramatically with the African drama. This is the whole difference "between one culture whose very artifacts are evidence of a *cohesive* understanding of *irreducible truths* and another, whose creative impulses (i.e., intellectual spasms) are directed by period dialectics." (p.38). (Emphasis added). The former case represents "a belief in culture as defined within man's knowledge of fundamental unchanging (!) relationship between himself and society and within the larger context of the observable universe; the latter, the 'abandonment' of it, leading inevitably to the "wasteful and truth-defeating European habit of world re-definition." (p.49).

The degradation of 'true' tragedy, charges Soyinka, has become a preoccupation of "the Marxist view of man and history", (p.47) which creates "a gulf between man and his physical environment and declares the gulf unbridgeable." (p.48). Never mind that he gives not one example to support this obviously speculative allegation. Anyway, this "Marxist view" along with another anti-tragic view which "speculates that there has been a decline in tragic understanding" (p.47-8) are but "two faces of the same European tradition: one which assumes and seeks to transcend a gulf between man and the essence of being, thought, feeling, etc., between object and the pure state of being; and the other which, claiming to rectify the anti-social pursuit of an intangible kingdom by this and other schools of world-perception, legislates a gulf between man and the materiality of his environment and proceeds to employ consciously mechanistic devices to widen the unproven, purely hypothetical abyss." (p.48).

We need not be delayed by Soyinka's speculations, all the more as he does not possess an iota of understanding of dialectics against which he is determined to struggle to maintain the "finesse" of African literature. Like a warthog, he relies entirely on impression of power, in his case, "creative power", which he administers through very specialized, almost technical English words - mind you, not the use of language, but of words. Never anywhere does he show an inkling of an understanding of the connection between man's material, i.e., economic interests and the various kinds of consciousness ensuing from, and reflecting those interests in the form of ideology. To him there exists a *racial* difference between cultures, by virtue of racial belonging, because one is European, say, and the other African, the one representing "a cohesive understanding of irreducible truths," and the other characterized "by period dialectics." This is what distinguishes the "educated" African from the rest of humankind as we saw in the case of Kunene's "African philosophy"; it is a new breed growing wild in the western academic

jungle and threatening to arrest African liberation with a backward and reactionary "world-view" erroneously designated as "African".

That which appears as fixed differences between European and African societies, are but historical variations of one and the same thing, social production. The only real difference between societies emanates from their economic structures, not as an original finality of being, that is to say, not as a self-contained entity that moulds its own features as it sees fit, but as an economic mould, either as this emerges objectively from the bowels of human history, or as it is consciously reconstructed and changed by man himself, of both.

Clearly then, drama, like any other manifestations of consciousness appears in history at a definite stage in the evolution of man. Drama has unfortunately claimed the lion's share in the history of western literature, essentially because this is the area "men of letters" have chosen as a vantage-point in their ideological struggle against new challenges. Soyinka, who plays the role of ancient Greece's ambassador to Africa, is distinguished in this sphere in what he tried and failed to achieve in his efforts to Africanize (Yorubanize?) the specific features of Greek drama. Ogun, the Yoruba god whose functions are variously given as "embracing" creativity, guardian of the road, workmanship in metallic lore and artistry, etc., can only be understood, for example, in the language of Greek deities:

*Ogun is best understood in Hellenic values as a totality of the Dionysian, Apollonian and promethean virtues. (p.141).*

And there is always more than meets the eye when it comes to Soyinka's literary commitment. He has a sharp taste for Greek cultural aliment; apparently he does not place ancient Greece within the western cultural alliance with which he takes issue! Our venerated friend has produced an Africanized version of one of the most talked about Greek plays, "The Bacchae" of Euripides, as a proof of the 'depth' of his "education". Lesser men may merely talk about the play, Soyinka 'co-authored' it.... in 406 B.C. Let us first look at the original.

Pentheus, the young king of Thebes is jealous of the gods, as Soyinka would put it. His scorn for, and dislike of Dionysus find their expression in his desire to see the Bacchantes - female worshippers of Dionysus - perform their secret rite in honour of the god. This amounts to an insult to the deity, and has to be made good for worse. Dionysus himself accepts the challenge and actually offers to lead Pentheus, disguised as a Bacchant, to the scene of action. Perched on a pine-wood from where he can feed his eyes on the forbidden

fruit, Pentheus suddenly registers a shock of his life: Dionysus lowers the branch of the tree on which the culprit is sitting and exposes the intruder to the Bacchantes who unleash their wrath on him licking him clean with sticks and stones. The tree itself is torn down and the sinner literally disintegrated into pieces. His mother, Agaue, and her two sisters, Ino and Autonoe, are the leading activists in the destruction, in fact it is Agaue who plucks off the victim's head and rushes back to the city to decorate the palace with it. But as the Bacchantes rejoice in their triumph, Cadmus, Agaue's father, arrives with the dismembered remains of Pentheus. The subsequent discovery that a mother has unwittingly sacrificed her own son to a god leads to her exile and life-long grief.

The three parts of the custom of "Carrying out Death and Bringing in Summer" can easily be discerned here: 1) Carrying out "Death" - "Death" represented by Pentheus - is modified to allow Pentheus to be led by the nose by Dionysus, 2) destruction of "Death", the killing of Pentheus, and 3) bringing in Summer, Pentheus' head.

It should be noted that there were many versions of the myth on which this play was based. In Macedonia, for example, the part of "Death" was played by a snake, in Crete by a bull and in Orchomenos by an ivy, and in a few other places by a fawn. Incidentally, the ivy and the fawn are known to have been totemic objects, thus establishing a direct connection between the myth and primitive methods of ordinary survival. To Soyinka, however, all this essential background to the play is Greek even though he sees nothing Greek about the play itself. So why did he re-write it? Well, first of all there is the element of 'man's harmony with nature', his pet subject, which the play appears to emphasize by dramatizing the tragic consequences of challenging the super-natural powers responsible for it. So the original hymn of the Bacchantes in honour of their god, which runs in part:

*Blessed are they that lead pure lives and have  
learned by God's grace mysteries, sanctified,  
made clean, joined in a holy band which roams  
on the hills with fleet foot, filled with  
breath of Bacchus... And with wands high in  
the air, all heads crowned with the ivy, they  
adore him, Dionysus,*

has had to be reformulated and inoculated with the African harmony with nature:

*Blessed are they that bathe in seminal river  
Who merge in harmony with earth's eternal seeding.*<sup>25</sup>



Then there is the 'African' cultural peculiarity where the dead and the living and the unborn maintain an unbroken communication:

LEADER: *Tribute to the holy hills of Ethiopia  
Caves of the unborn, and the dark ancestral spirits  
Home  
Of primal drums round which the dead and the living  
Dance. I praise the throbbing beat of the hide  
The squeal and the wail of flutes....*<sup>26</sup>

The familiar tone of a western audience defining for the "educated" African what an African theme of a play equal to the original "Bacchae" should be, is unmistakable. Well, the National Theatre of Great Britain was intent on getting the full worth of its sagging Pound, which, by the way, is another reason for the existence of Soyinka's "Bacchae". And still another reason, a philosophical one:

OLD SLAVE: *What does it mean life? Dare one  
Hope for better than merely warring, seeking  
Change, seeking the better life? Can we  
Control what threatens before the eruption?  
Dare we surrender to what comes after, embrace  
The ambiguous face of the future?*

Philosophical did we say? Listen more carefully:

*.....It is enough  
To concede awareness of the inexplicable, to wait  
And watch the unfolding.....  
(Emphasis added).*

"It is enough to concede ... to wait and watch". Or is it? And if one is not yet convinced of man's passive role in his history, that is, his dependence on chance and super-natural powers, here's a better argument:

SLAVE: *For there are forces not ruled by us  
And we obey  
Trust them. Though they travel inch by inch  
They arrive.*

Well then, what shall we call these invincible forces to which we must resign ourselves meekly and sit idly by "to wait and watch the unfolding"?

OLD SLAVE: *They lack a name. (Nonetheless) we will call them  
Spirits  
Gods.*

SLAVE: *Principles,  
Elements*

SLAVE: *Currents  
Laws, Eternal Causes.*

And whence these 'Principles', 'Elements', 'Laws', etc.?

SLAVE: *..... they are born in the blood  
Unarguable, observed and preserved  
before time....  
No divine revelation at the altar.  
It is knotted in the blood, a covenant  
from birth.<sup>27</sup>*

Reduced to normal language this "philosophy of life" turns into an ideological stand-point whose reactionary essence is self-explanatory. The "progression in thinking", which, if you remember, we have been told "can be measured" by retaining "external reference points", takes this structure:

PREMISE: Human life is an amalgamation of uncontrollable forces, spirits, gods, principles, Elements, etc., constituting eternal causes of things.

ARGUMENT: Owing to the omnipotence of these forces, man possesses no means by which to effect change or influence the course of events. He cannot 'know' what the future holds, and therefore must not try to seek change for a better life, "surrender to what comes after" or "embrace the ambiguous face of the future".\* In other words, he must do nothing about the social conditions under which he finds himself, except to maintain them, no matter how miserable these may be. But why?

CONCLUSION: Because the forces responsible for his social conditions are predetermined in time as freedom, are entwined in the very nature of birth itself. He need only "concede awareness" of them, obey them, trust them and wait to watch them unfold in his favour.

In short, social revolutions, in which man seizes events and, by a conscious act, shapes his own history, are, in Soyinka's 'philosophy', unnecessary. This is the ideological meaning of Soyinka's 'thinking'. And it is not that he makes characters say something so that he can make a positive point by presenting a counter-argument; no, what comes from the characters is Soyinka's final version of his "African world-view",

\* Thus "confirming" John Mbiti's "discovery" that "African peoples have no 'belief in progress'" (see part I of this article) Funny that Soyinka finds Mbiti's view repugnant!

a curious mixture of bourgeois world-view and mystical notions of the "educated" African.

Whereas, for Euripides, in the original play, blind faith in external forces to man, gods, spirits, etc., is not only irrational, but actually harmful, as Cadmus puts it in his rebuke of Dionysus in relation to Pentheus' death:

*Gods should not be like mortals in  
vindictiveness,*

for Soyinka, external forces (Destiny is his favourite word) are irreproachable. Man is powerless against them, even their actual operation is unfathomable by him. In Soyinka's version of the play, Cadmus suffers from a temporary lack of faith in gods in view of Dionysus' foul play on Pentheus:

*.... I no longer understand  
The ways of god,*

but he recovers immediately and apologizes:

*I may blaspheme;*

then follows redemption administered by Tiresius:

*Understanding of these things is far  
beyond us,*

and executed by the slave:

*for there are forces not ruled by us.....*

Apart from the innate theme of the play, there are also undisguised political motives behind Soyinka's reproduction of it. His commitment to "Democracy", by which he understands only what his "education" has forced into him an obvious example. In "Madmen and Specialists" for instance, the old man has a political lesson for Dr. Bero:

*You cyst, you cyst, you splint in the  
arrow of arrogance, the dog in dogma,  
the tick in heretic, the tick in politics,  
the mock of democracy, the mar of marxism.....<sup>28</sup>  
(Emphasis added)*

Bourgeois "democracy" is of course the measure of "civilization" and of the extent to which the "educated" African is "genuinely educated". He must prove his allegiance to it if he is to qualify as a member of the "civilized humanity".

Euripides is also said to have been a democrat among other things, as Arnold Hauser, the 'social democrat' describes him: "He is a man of letters and philosopher, democrat and people's friend, politician and reformer, but at the same time a classless and social iconoclast, just as his teachings are."<sup>29</sup> Given his 'views', we are justified to conclude that that is how Soyinka sees himself. But Euripides' political persuasion had a meaning appropriate only to the reality of his society in his time:

*Euripides is by persuasion indeed a democrat, but that means practically only that he is against the old aristocratic state rather than that he is for the new bourgeois one.*<sup>30</sup>

For Soyinka, on the contrary, matters stand exactly in the opposite relation: his commitment to "democracy" means practically only that he is for the old bourgeois ideology and against the new progressive one. Therefore, it can be said in this case that Euripides was in his time revolutionary, or "radical" if you prefer, Soyinka in his, reactionary. And which is more, as a philosopher Euripides was always in the forefront of the latest ideas of man in relation to his society, his role in nature and his influence on his own development. With Soyinka, as we have seen, man is an easy prey to 'Destiny', accident, chance, whatever the name fits the circumstances; the old man is not done with his derision:

*..... oh how dare you raise your hindquarters you dog of dogma and cast the scent of your existence on the lamp post of Destiny you HOLE IN THE ZERO OF NOTHING.*<sup>31</sup> (Emphasis added, capital letters in the original).

And again in *A dance of the Forests*, as Demoke, the carver, holds the "Half-child" in his hands in a momentary indecision whether or not to hand it to the "Dead woman", this piece of ancestral wisdom from Aroni, the lame spirit:

*Demoke, you hold a doomed thing in your hand. It is no light matter to reverse the deed that was begun many lives ago.*<sup>32</sup>

In other words, what has been "preserved before time", "knotted in the blood" as "a covenant from birth", man has no power to change. At the court of Mata Kharibu, for example, the court 'Historian' has an unhistorical lecture to give:



*War is the only consistency that past  
ages afford  
us.... The cause is always the accident your  
Majesty, and war is the Destiny.*<sup>33</sup>

Those, as we can discern them, are the main reasons why Soyinka found "The Bacchae" an irresistible source of inspiration. They constitute a wholeness of his "creative process", a totality of his 'thoughts' as expressed through his works. The consistency, the only one for which he can claim credit, is "social harmony and cohesion", which for him exist as a discrete quality of traditional African societies. It is his political relish, available only in the general stores of the "African world-view". And the threat to this African social purity comes from the undemocratic and "authoritarian" practice of "Marxism". But what good is it? The African social values are permanently rooted in the changeless life-style of the African societies. In "Madmen and Specialists", the blindman can formulate it better:

*... what we have we hold. What though  
the wind of change is blowing over this  
entire continent, our principles and  
traditions - yes, must be maintained.*<sup>34</sup>

But to the relevant question: what kind of "principles and traditions....must be maintained", and how do these stand in relation to change and development, not to mention from where, to which direction and what type of wind of change is blowing, there is total silence.

True, on the face of it, there is harmony and cohesion in traditional African societies. But it is one thing to recognise them in these societies, and quite another to come to the conclusion that they are traditionally African. Where harmony and cohesion appear to be established qualities, they define only an ephemeral stage, a reality that is on its way out. For at this stage they describe a very low level of social production. They are made possible by mutual inter-dependence and co-operation between members of the community. Communal ownership of the means supportive of man's livelihood is the economic structure on which social harmony and cohesion of the traditional African variety is based. We make bold once again to borrow a scientific formulation of this truth;

*Co-operation in the labour process such  
as we find prevalent at the onset of man-  
kind, among hunting societies, as in the  
agriculture of Indian communities, rests,  
on the one hand, on common ownership of the  
conditions of production, and on the other,*

*on the fact that the individual has as little cut himself off from the umbilical cord of his tribe or community as the individual bee has torn itself from the bee-hive.*<sup>35</sup>

A mind that desires to maintain social harmony but fails to see the connection between this and the existing mode of production is a confused mind typical of a spoiled foster child. The "educated" African is an adopted baby of colonialism. On discovering his false natal identity, he gropes and scratches in the dark in search of his true parentage, failing which he plunges into the mystical world of "social harmony". His craving for 'authentic' social values, is nothing but self-absolution of the sins of "civilization".

The task at hand is not the formal statement that African traditional societies are characterized by social cohesion, but an investigation into the objective laws responsible for different qualities of societies at different stages of their development. You do not simply say, this society has these qualities, full stop. You have to show how the observable qualities have come about. For this you have no alternative but to look into the very material existence of the society in question. In the present Africa, this is an economic, and therefore a political question.

The dialectical analysis of social questions starts off by focusing on the general laws in operation in things finite. These laws, unlike Soyinka's spirits, principles, elements and currents, are accessible by scientific means. Gravitational pull, Quantum mechanics, transmutation of 'elementary' particles, cell-formation - these are general examples in which the forces in action have their parallel also in the development of the human society. The social relations in the society in question, and the extent to which these relations are a function of a wider economic framework, cannot help being analysed. Once then the objective laws of development in society have been traced back to the economic base as the initial "launching pad", man cannot afford

to wait

And watch the unfolding.<sup>27</sup>

On the contrary, it becomes a matter of necessity for him to take action to change his lot by acting on, and according to these laws, consciously employing them in his own interest, turning their unfolding for themselves to the unfolding for him. "Social harmony and cohesion" at this point must give way to the "chaos" of revolutionary change.

Similarly, the understanding of the objective laws governing the natural phenomenon we call 'gravity' enables man

to turn, say, a waterfall into a source of hydro-electric power, a river into a supply of water for irrigation, etc. In this way man masters and controls nature.

## VII

We have seen how, having rejected ideology in literature as posing the danger of "the act of consecration", Soyinka replaces it with what he terms "a social vision", which he relates more or less directly to "the African world-view". But then a closer look at his philosophical altercations vis-a-vis "Marxism" has shown that, far from being an ideological conscientious objector, he represents most dramatically bourgeois ideology. This proves that by 'ideology' he understands only anti-bourgeois ideology, which leads us to the conclusion that his diatribe against 'ideology' is a form of defence of bourgeois ideology.

There is no denying, however, that incorporating ideology consciously in literature bears a mark of arbitrariness. But this is always the case with new social forces. Established structures have the bearing of authority of custom, even long after their validity has expired, and this makes it difficult to remove them immediately. The contention between old and well-established social forces, and new and weak ones arising therefrom, is centered around the question of the justification for the existence of this or that reality. Ideologically stated this question assumes standard features of judgement.

Since ideology is the ideal mental grasp of social relations, and if, as is the case, the ruling ideology is the ideology of the ruling class, it follows that the justification for that ideology is the justification for the continued rule of that class. "Social vision" and "African philosophy" as advocated by the "educated" African are subjective mental fabrications, because they lack an objective social foundation, one that is historically defensible. The criterion for the correct ideology depends on whether or not a given set of ideas offers the best facilities for solving existing social problems and providing a framework for non-antagonistic social relations in the subsequent stages of the development of a society. In the special case of the present African reality, a formulation of this criterion must include a separate clause stating whether or not the ideology under consideration frustrates or enhances African liberation. This is the reason Soyinka rejects 'literary ideology', because to accept it would mean to apply it consciously in his "creative process", which would amount to making a political statement along African liberation lines.

Recognising the weakness of his "social vision", he sets about to solicit, and where necessary, annex territorial support

from other African writers. Thus he sees "social vision" in Yambo Ouologuem's *Bund to Violence*, but gives up the attempt in Alex la Guma's *A walk in the Night* and immediately stumbles into an irony in rejecting as "social vision" the "social visionary" works of Alan Paton and Peter Abrahams. Lesson one in Soyinka's "social vision" thus ends with a contradiction. Had he added to his creative talent also the ability to see the subjective character of his "social vision" he would have spared himself the ignominy of failure. For where individual writers construct in their own heads what they *individually* deem to be the proper "social vision", the best result possible is a romantic notion of a social organization quite at variance with the objective laws of social development.

But Soyinka is a determined and ingenious visionary, endowed with an ingenious method of striking a creative consanguinity in the most unlikely places. He has for instance managed to discover "social vision" in Sembene Ousmane:

*Sembene Ousmane's God's Bits of Wood leaves one in no doubt about its literary qualities, and combines revolutionary fervour with a distinctly humanistic vision. (p.66).*

The international respect\* for Africa's most progressive artist undoubtedly accounts for Soyinka's retreat in the face of Sembene's conscious employment of ideology in his works, precisely the "literary ideology" Soyinka has dismissed as an "act of consecration". Sembene himself has gone on record to make it clear that he uses ideology as a social weapon against existing economic and political establishments in Africa; he sees the role of the African artist as that of disclosing "problems of a historical nature in order to help (develop) the consciousness that a people have in their own history and struggles." And his own contribution to this glorious aim he describes as follows:

*I can only incorporate into my work the reality of the struggle of the African masses towards their own liberation. 36*

Here, there is none of that romantic self-indulgence about "social vision", but a clear-cut ideological candidness we find in *God's Bits of Wood*, *Xala* and Sembene's other works. But through the misty eyes, of a pedant, Soyinka can only see in Sembene

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\* We have had occasion elsewhere to point out that most of western and Africanist admiration for Sembene is based on the one hand on complete ignorance, on the part of his admirers, of his ideological standpoint (or/and of the admirers' own), and on the other, on what they consider "an element of entertainment".



what his "social" and "humanistic vision" calls for:

*It (God's Bits of Wood) is a work which reaches beyond mere narrative in its meticulous delineation of human solidarity, and it attains epic levels. As with all good epics, humanity is re-created(!). The social community acquires archetypal dimensions and heroes become deities (ah-ha). Even Penda the prostitute is apotheosized. (p.117).*

This academic prancing attempts but fails to reduce Sembene into a cultural spokesman for bourgeois 'artistic' tastes. Since Soyinka seeks an ideological confrontation, we shall, for an elaboration, accept the challenge and meet him in *God's Bits of Wood*.

Set on the political map now occupied by Senegal and Mali, which formerly existed as the Federation of French West Africa, comprising also Ivory Coast, Upper Volta, Niger, Benin (formerly Dahomey), Guinea and Mauritania, the story is about the Dakar-Niger railway workers' strike which took place from October 10th, 1947 to March 19th, 1948. The moving force of events and the pivot point of all the activity are the people themselves, ordinary people as they *are*, shaping their own history, not as figments of the imagination, i.e., 'deities'. In the special circumstances as historically determined, the real people Sembene is dealing with here are workers and peasants, whose action constitutes a political statement in the language of a general uprising within an organized framework for a clearly defined cause.

The revolutionary power of this form of political cooperation, which Sembene undoubtedly understands and enhances, is the theme of his book. The individual acts of bravery, audacity or steadfastness for the realization of the set goal, is a complementary, not the key issue of the social force, so that when Penda falls as a result of her personal contribution to the struggle, she does not become deified in the act. Rather, her death is the social price for a just social cause, and Sembene makes no attempt to elevate her to the status of a goddess. He operates from a clarity of thought, from a historical understanding of the forces at play in the development of societies and the serious business of changing or challenging established social structures.

Soyinka, on the other hand, starts as always from a nebulous standpoint of a mystic, from total blackness as far as the laws of social advancement are concerned. His inability

to function outside conventional academic analysis is responsible for his misinterpretation of Sembene. He carries his gods effortlessly in his head, as an African bull bears easily the weight of its hump. Thus, for example, he describes Bakayoko, the protagonist in the novel, as "a promethean creation, a replacement for outworn deities....", rather than an ordinary down-to-earth locomotive driver, a simple worker worrying about normal material problems, which is how Sembene presents him. But Soyinka needs this mystical distortion of real people you see, so as to make Sembene's work acceptable to his particular mode of thinking, in his capacity as the cultural attache for the international bourgeoisie. Ironically - and so what is new with Soyinka? - he does this by squeezing out those aspects of the book he recognizes as 'African' in essence, and parades them before his western audience as 'proof' of 'true African-ness'.\* The revolutionary side of it our friend chooses to ignore, or obscures with religious intonations.

Sembene emphasizes that the workers' struggle does not cease with the attainment of better employment terms and payment, rather that these immediate demands are but a tactical means for the ultimate goal of overthrowing the economic system based on exploitation. And even though the circumstances of the struggle are directly related to colonialism, this is not in itself the final target, but the capitalist system of which colonialism is an outgrowth. What then appear to be final aims are in fact stages of the struggle for the total liberation of the African people. The legal 'loop-holes' which exist within colonialism in the form of civil liberties or rights of speech and assembly, are the ways and means the system makes available for its own destruction. All this notwithstanding, Soyinka detects in the workers' strike a reinstatement of 'African so-

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\* This appears to be Soyinka's new political direction in relation to the African liberation. His latest long poem, "Ogun Abibiman", for example, is said to be "a narrative on, and for, South Africa." Divided into three parts, a) Induction, b) Shaka, c) Sigidi, it is a "commitment to war", inspired by Machel's placing of Mozambique on a war footing with Rhodesia'. Once again, Ogun, the Yoruba god of 'war and creativity' is here; Shaka comes in as a mythical African personality, not as a real person. Quite characteristic of Soyinka, he sees no relationship between the liberation struggle in Southern Africa and its historical and political background. He shows no understanding of the economic system which gives rise to war, much less distinguish between wars of liberation and those of aggression for plunder and domination. These relevant facts have to be considered before "commitment to war". (see *Africa Magazine*, No. 72, August, 1977). Soyinka's effort at self-purification is quite obviously a failure.

cial values', in his own words:

*An egalitarian discipline has been enforced upon the community by the goals and ordeals of the strike, by the knowledge of colonial indignity with its imposition of an inferior status on the indigene, its wage-discrimination and inadequate social facilities. In spite of the talk of books, the widening of foreign knowledge and the usual paraphernalia which accompany the process of external indoctrination (this refers to Sembene's Marxist ideology), the emphasis of social regeneration is carefully laid on the intrinsic ethical properties of existing society, their adaptation and universal relations. (p.188) (Emphasis added).*

The special peculiarities, which must always be taken into account in any analysis of a society, is what arrests Soyinka's attention as the central point of Sembene's book. He remains on the whole quite hostile to the general ideological framework within which Sembene writes, and this is only natural for an ideologue who scorns "literary ideology". Sembene on the contrary lays bare the economic forces responsible for African social problems; nowhere does he state, even by implication, that "social regeneration" lies with "the intrinsic ethical properties of existing society." Far from it, he is all too aware that these so-called 'intrinsic ethical properties' can be a hindrance to social progress. The main emphasis is not on ethnic qualities or even 'national pride', the stress is unambiguously on class interests. It is not so much a question of a nation oppressing another, even though this is the manner in which the problem manifests itself, the question is that of a class exploiting another. This is exactly the language Lahbib, a representative of the workers, uses to tell M. Dejean, a high official in the railway enterprise, what the strike is all about:

*Monsieur le directeur,..... you do not represent a nation, but simply a class. We represent another class, whose interests are not the same as yours. 37*

That might as well have been addressed to Soyinka. Whereas for Sembene African traditional values, important as they are, occupy a secondary place in his works, the key link being the people's participation in the process of their own liberation using practical, not mythical means for the purpose, for Soyinka myth replaces reality; even actual events are transformed into mythology, and then dished out as 'African social values'. It

requires no genius to see that, when the time comes for the distinction to be made between those who are for, and those who are against the liberation of Africa now under way, either in effect or as a conscious act, African posterity will place Soyinka quite clearly on the negative side. Why? What are the objective conditions responsible for his reactionary views? How can such a prominent writer remain so ignorant of, and insensitive to the political reality of the African people?

In the first place we must recall the effect of colonialism on the African writer. The former discovered the latter in the 'African jungle' and adopted him, as already implied, took him into his fold and made him the legal heir to the cultural wealth of colonialism. Becoming aware of his sudden fortune, the average African writer simply had no need to understand the circumstances which placed him above the common plight of his own people; his own personal growth was therefore arrested. He aped his masters in any conceivable way, thought like them, spoke like them, ate like them, in short led their lifestyle. Then came 'a change of fortune', so to speak, when, owing to the social changes in Africa, this favourite child of colonialism, became 'enlightened'. It was too late for him. While he was dining and wining with his foster parents, Africa had taken a giant step forward and landed in the liberation era. To catch up with this new social mood, this prodigal son came trailing behind gasping with theories about "social vision", "self-apprehension", gods and the like, hoping to attract attention to himself and make himself a worthy child of Africa.

But will Africa accept him? In as much as he represents the total sum of the 'creative sufferings' of the "educated" African, his own contradictions are Africa's own in this new era. To the extent, therefore, that the "educated" African brings to the fore these contradictions that are objective, which is the other reason for his stagnant views, he helps to delineate them, isolate them and make it possible to tackle them one by one. In criticizing the "educated" African, therefore, we are simply defining the extremely difficult and contradictory conditions under which the liberation of Africa is being carried out. This helps to point out Africa's lack of the necessary facilities for her own liberation; from here it will be a question of devising methods for the acquisition of these facilities, which includes bringing about the appropriate conditions for their full use.

Meanwhile, the ill-fated "educated" African stands fatefully at the cross-roads of two unfriendly worlds of which he has dual citizenship. On the one hand, there is the traditional African world, on the other the world of his education. Here, like the ravenous jackal in the anecdote, he straddles on both foot-paths in the hope that what the predator missed he will



catch with one or the other of his legs. The tragic result of this adventurous technique of hunting is recorded in mythology, its lesson, however, has been lost in translation - from myth to reality.

The contradictions we encounter in Soyinka's 'thoughts' are reflections of the contradictions among the African people today. These culminate in his person as total ideological confusion, forcing him to seek refuge in coded English words in an attempt to cover his lack of clarity of thought, the final goal being to reserve for himself, or at least maintain what his western patrons have made him believe is a royal literary eminence. We quote again the old man's curse on Dr. Bero as an example of the most colourful juvenile ostentation in meaningless words:

*You cyst, you cyst, you splint in the  
arrow of arrogance, the dog in dogma,  
the tick of a heretic, the tick in poli-  
tics, the mock in democracy, the mar of  
marxism, a tic of the fanatic... a dot on  
the i of ego, an ass in the mass, the ash in  
the ashram, a boot in kibbutz, the pee  
of priesthood, the peepee of perfect  
priesthood...<sup>29</sup>*

No wonder he has won himself, from his western liberal herd, a verocious pride of full-pledged academic disciples whose language he "enriches" as a bonus to the ideological affinity. At the mention of Soyinka in any but an adoring tone, they will instantly bare their teeth, twist their tongues inside out like an epileptic cow, and spurt out a patronizing torrent of thoughtless yodel in defence of their godhead: 'if you don't understand Soyinka, it's your fault, after all he doesn't write for African illiterates. As a dramatist, he has to use theatrical language for people who understand it. Whatever you may say or think about him is subjective. We of the victorian back ground understand him, and that's all that counts'. And come to think of it they are right. In them he has an automatic audience, one he can always fall back on whenever the traditional African market experiences a depression. It was not for nothing that Fanon characterized this genre of the "educated" African as "White Skin, Black Masks" or words to that effect.

So now, having gone all the way out to reject western cultural values, relegating them to the sub-category of "points of reference", Soyinka finds himself rewarded with liberal kisses and praise for upholding western cultural values, and archaic ones at that. And why not? He says for them 'free of charge', what they would have to spend a political fortune to say themselves. But it is only fair that Tiresias, the "Blind-

seer", in Soyinka's own *Bacchae* should have a piece of tongue to spare too:

..... Your tongue runs loose  
 Makes a plausible sound and might  
 Almost be taken for sense. But you  
     have none.  
 Your glibness flows from sheer conceit.  
 Arrogant, over-confident and a gift - yes -  
 A gift for phrases, and that makes you a great  
 Danger to your fellow men. For your mind  
 Is closed. Dead. Imprisoned in words.<sup>38</sup>

It may be an unconscious self-purgation or a tongue-in-cheek self-rebuke, or even a way of focusing attention on his 'special talent' in the coinage of words; but it speaks for those of us who find Soyinka's verbosity humourless and irritating.

What the prodigious African revolutionary, the late Amilcar Cabral, said on the subject of ideology in relation to the liberation movements themselves applies in double sense to the "educated" African:

*The ideological deficiency, not to say the total lack of ideology..... which is basically due to ignorance of the historical reality.... - constitutes one of the greatest weaknesses of our struggle against imperialism, if not the greatest weakness of all.*<sup>39</sup>

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Footnotes:

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4. Virgilio de Lemos, *Ibid.*
5. Olson, Howard S. on "Philosophical Implications of Some Swahili Idioms" in *Jarida la Taasisi ya Uchunguzi wa Kiswahili* (Journal of the Institute of Kiswahili Research),

- University of Dar es Salaam, Tanzania; vol. 46/1, March 1976; p.60.
6. Shakespeare, William. "The Tempest", Act 1, Sc. 11.
  7. Nkosi, Lewis in *The Writer in Modern Africa*, edit. Per Wastberg; p.48.
  8. Marx, K. "Grundrisse der Kritik der politischen Okonomie", Dietz Verlag Berlin, 1974; p.80.
  9. Fedin, Konstantin in *On the Art and Craft of Writing* Progress Publishers, Moscow, 1972; p.250.
  10. Soyinka, Wole. *Myth, Literature and the African World*, Cambridge University Press, London; p.viii.
  11. *Ibid.*
  12. *Ibid.*
  13. Nwoga, D. Ibe on "The Limitations of Universal Literary Criteria" in *Ufahamu*, vol. IV, No.1, 1973; p.23.
  14. Mphahlele, Ezekiel. *African Writing Today*, ed. E. Mphahlele; p.249.
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  16. *The Writer in Modern Africa*, ed. Per Wastberg; p.16.
  17. *Ibid*; p.15.
  18. *Ibid.*
  19. Thomson, George. *Aeschylus and Athens, A Study in the Social Origins of Drama*, Lawrence and Wishart, London, 1973; p.59.
  20. Hauser, Arnold. *Sozialgeschichte der Kunst und Literatur* Verlag C.H. Beck, Munchen, 1973; p.4.
  21. *Ibid.* p.7.
  22. *Ibid.* p.10.
  23. *Ibid.* p.14.
  24. Marx and Engels, *Selected Works*, Progress Publishers

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25. Soyinka, Wole. *Collected Plays 1*, Oxford University Press, 1974; p.275.
  26. *Ibid.* p.248.
  27. *Ibid.* p.292-3.
  28. Soyinka, Wole. *Collected Plays II*, Oxford University Press, 1974; p.275.
  29. Hauser, Arnold. *Sozialgeschichte der Kunst u. Literatur*, p.97.
  30. *Ibid.* p.99.
  31. Soyinka: *Collected Plays II*; p.275.
  32. Soyinka: *Collected Plays I*; p.71.
  33. *Ibid.* 51.
  34. Soyinka: *Collected Plays II*; p.270.
  35. Marx, K. *Das Kapital*, erster Band; Marx-Engels Werke, Bd.23, Dietz Verlag Berlin, 1972; pp.353-4.
  36. Ousmane, Sembene. see *Africa Magazine* No. 71, July, 1977.
  37. Ousmane, Sembene. *God's Bits of Wood*, Anchor Books, Doubleday and Co. Inc. Garden City, New York; translated by Francis Price; pp.276-7. An obviously shallow translation, consciously or otherwise, but one that leaves the main thrust of Sembene's original work relatively intact.
  38. Soyinka: *Collected Plays I*. p.258.
  39. Cabral, Amilcar. *Revolution in Guinea: Selected Texts*, translated by Richard Handyside, Monthly Review Press, New York and London; p.92.

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