

Yoruba Cosmology and Mythology in Wole Soyinka's *The Road*

Dr. Sangeeta Jain

Associate Professor in English, DAV PG College, Varanasi.

drsain191@gmail.com

Abstract

Wole Soyinka has made Yoruba Culture the backbone of his literary output to create the African Hermeneutics for the world to understand the hitherto Dark Continent - Africa in its indigenous perspective. Yoruba culture separates the cosmos into two worlds:

- The human world
- The world of deities

The human world contains manifestations of the ancestors, the living, and the unborn. In the Yoruba world a community's collective sense reflects the complex ties to the ancestral community and to the unborn community. Ancestral spirits enter the person who wears the masque, which acts as the bridge between the worlds of the dead and the living .

Yoruba myths are stories about the efforts made to cross these gulfs between human and divine existence and between the existence of dead, living, and unborn. Ogun, the god of iron and of metallurgic lore and artistry, was the first to succeed in conquering the gulf. Ogun is also, Soyinka explains, "the god of creativity, guardian of the road, explorer, hunter, god of war, custodian of the sacred oath."

Professor the protagonist of the play *The Road* is symbol of Ogun's duality. As on one side he is an explorer of the unexplored and on the other side he is an exploiter. He is a Sunday school teacher and also the god of death i.e. Ogun. Professor tries to bridge this gulf through his 'part psychic, part intellectual grope towards the essence of death.' The present paper elaborates how ingeniously Wole Soyinka utilises his deep sense of Yoruba culture in this play *The Road*.

Keywords: Yoruba, Ogun, African myths, Hermeneutics

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The first African to receive the Nobel Prize in 1986 for literature is Akinwande Oluwole Babatunde Soyinka, known as Wole Soyinka. The conferring of Nobel Prize to an African writer is a presumption that Anglo-centric world or European world has accepted the existence of indigenous literary and cultural treasures of African world hitherto popularised as Dark continent. Now African literature has been introduced under the rubric term of New Literatures in English as part of the syllabus of English Literature courses. Thus the emergence and acceptance of African literature in international literary coterie is the visionary approach of African writers like Wole Soyinka, Chinua Achebe and many other prolific poets, novelists, dramatists writing in many African and European languages.

Soyinka, a playwright, poet, novelist and political activist, is native of Nigeria of West Africa and belongs to Christian Yoruba tradition. He went to England for higher Studies and returned to Nigeria in 1960, the year Nigeria attained Independence from British colonization. He established two theatre companies – the 1960 Masks and the Orisun Theatre. His plays draw on Yoruba dramatic and cultural traditions. His famous plays are *A Dance of the Forests*, *The Road*, *The Lion and the Jewel* along with many poetry collections and two novels. The formidable task for African playwrights, is to convey the emotions, customs, rituals and daily life of the Africans in an alien tongue ie English. Wole Soyinka is a real master of English language, well versed in all its nuances. Soyinka thinks in images and his narratives and poems are elaborate formulations of imagery. Soyinka inherited both Christian and Yoruba religious traditions.

Yoruba Cosmology and Mythology

Yoruba cultural practices have received so much literary attention in the recent times that none of the African community has received. The words of a notable historian sum up the influential grasp of Yoruba “there is perhaps no other single African people who have commanded so much attention as the Yoruba ” and because of “their artistic intelligence, military prowess, cultural adaptability, and ability to manage modernization processes, and the crucial role of their educated elite, the Yorùbá have earned their place in the academic spotlight”.(2) Scholars and critics contemplate on the scripted works of Yoruba culture and discover that the Yoruba have projected themselves as being “exceptionally prolific” among West Africans in their recreation of written historical literature. The amalgamation of rich history and accessibility of sources have made the Yorùbá a relatively popular ethnic group to study within and outside Africa. (3)

Yoruba culture separates the cosmos into two worlds:

- The human world
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The human world contains manifestations of the ancestors, the living, and the unborn. In the Yoruba world a community's collective sense reflects the complex ties to the ancestral community and to the unborn community. Ancestral spirits enter the person who wears the masque, which acts as the bridge between the worlds of the dead and the living . For the Yoruba, the gods represent infinity, as humans represent worldly transience. The Yoruba cosmology differs from European cosmology which is concerned with the purely conceptual aspects of time and separates time into past, present and future. But time is concretely realized in Yoruba life, culture and religion. In other words we can say future life, present life, and past life contain within it manifestations of the ancestral, the living, and the unborn. All are vitally and intimately perpetually in action within life, beyond mere abstract conceptualization. But there exists the abysmal gulf between the world of deities and the human world as well as the past, present and future worlds. Yoruba people are aware of this gulf between himself and the deities, between himself and the ancestors, between the unborn and his reality, essential gulf that lies between one area of existence and another. This gulf must be incessantly reduced by the sacrifices, the rituals, the ceremonies of appeasement to those cosmic powers which lie guardian to the gulf. This gulf between all areas of existence is supposed to be the fourth space- transition space. Who covers and crosses this gulf?

In the Yoruba pantheon the first actor, who conquered this transitional gulf was Ogun , after the demonic test of the self-will. “Only after such testing could the harmonious Yoruba world be born, a harmonious will which accommodates every alien material or abstract phenomenon within its infinitely stressed spirituality. The artefact of Ogun's conquest of separation . . . was iron ore, symbol of earth's womb-energies, cleaver and welder of life. Ogun, through his redemptive action became the first symbol of the alliance of disparities.”

Nothing saves man (ancestral, living, or unborn) from loss of self within this abyss but a titanic resolution of the will. In the area of the living, when man is deprived of monstrosity, when catastrophic failures (the material of drama) have squeezed and he loses all self-consciousness and pretensions, he comes closer to the spiritual periphery of this gulf. It is at such moments that he moves ahead through the gulf of transition, by dissolving his earthly self , learning to triumph over subjugation through the agency of will. It is this experience gained through the tragic experience that the modern tragic dramatist portrays through the medium of action by reconstructing the tragic drama, reflecting emotions and will of the first active battle. Ogun is the first actor in that battle, and Yoruba tragic drama is the re-enactment of the cosmic conflict where Ogun dominates with his indomitable will. Thus Yoruba myths are stories about the efforts made to cross these gulfs between human and divine existence and between the existence of dead, living, and unborn. Ogun, the god of iron and of metallurgic lore and artistry, was the first to succeed in conquering the gulf. Ogun is also, Soyinka explains, "the god of creativity, guardian of the road, explorer, hunter, god of war, custodian of the sacred oath." *Ogun is* Soyinka's favourite god as it represents the duality of creation and destruction, life and death altogether. Ogun is represented with a 'carving of a snake eternally devouring its own tail.' Soyinka is fascinated by this Ogun's ambivalent representation because as god of war, Ogun is destructive force and as god of Iron and Metallurgy, Patron of Hunting and Guardian of the Road, he is also the creative force. Therefore, he embodies the essence of creative and destructive principles. Soyinka utilises Ogun's dualistic representation in this play *The Road*

because Soyinka thinks human beings have the power of both creation and destruction, therefore human beings are reincarnation of this ambivalent god Ogun.

The Road (1963) is a complex tragi-comedy with mythic plot, and weaves many diverse thematic strands into one complicated dramatic form. It interpolates traditional Yoruba cosmology, mythology, rituals and postcolonial issues with western dramatic form and style. It is a superb accomplishment of Soyinka as a dramatist and brilliantly exposes the profoundly pessimistic view of human condition. Professor the protagonist of the play *The Road* is symbol of Ogun's duality. As on one side he is an explorer of the unexplored and on the other side he is an exploiter. He is a Sunday school teacher and also the god of death i.e. Ogun. Professor tries to bridge this gulf between life and death, the transition phase through his 'part psychic, part intellectual grope towards the essence of death.' Professor searches for the mysterious 'Word' putting a magnifying glass over newspapers. He is also in search of the essence of 'Death', causing accidental deaths on roads by uprooting the milestones, to run an 'Aksident Store' collecting the leftovers from accident sites. He also forges the licence for the inexperienced truck and lorry drivers. He keeps mute Murano- the embodiment of death, to know the mystery of death.

As a dramatic narrative *The Road* revolves around some African drivers, driver trainees, passenger touts, a politician and a policeman. The play is divided into two parts. The first expository part reveals the poor illiterate African drivers, trainees, touts enacting Professor and, on his presence, pleading him to forge duplicate licences to drive lorries. The drivers' celebration of the Ogun festival in the play is a ritualistic side of the Yoruba tradition celebrated annually in the world of Yorubaland to pacify Ogun to avoid the impending danger of accidents on the road. The drivers are the worshippers of Ogun as Ogun is the dwelling deity of the road. The drivers' festival celebrated in the play is a dramatic representation of the Ogun festival wherein they offer dog's meat to road to dispel accidents on road. If drivers fail to appease the ruling deity, the deity will cause accidents and claim human life as sacrificial scapegoat. The drivers know that the ruling deity of the road is Ogun and Ogun's favourite food is Dog. When drivers had a narrow escape from an accident on the road they feel that the deity of road Ogun needs sacrifice for appeasement so they want to offer dog's meat as Samson says:

Samson: When other drivers go out of the way to kill a dog, Kotunu nearly somersaults the lorry trying to avoid a flea-racked mongrel. Why, I ask him, why? Don't you know a dog is Ogun's meat? Take warning Kotunu. Before it's too late take warning and kill us dog. (Soyinka:1973:165)

Kill us a dog, kill us a dog. Kill us a dog before the hungry god lies in wait and makes a substitute of me [...] Dogs intestine looks messy to me he says [...] Ogun likes it that's all. It is his special meat. Serve Ogun his titbit so Ogun won't look us one day and say Ho ho you two boys look juicy tome. The one who won't give Ogun willingly will yield heavier meat by

Ogun's designing. (The *Road* 188-9)

Professor causes a number of accidents by uprooting the signposts on the roads. So roads acquire the status of symbolic hell where bloody dead people are lying and Professor moves around dead bodies like god of death Ogun quenching his thirst for the essence of death and thereby quenching the thirst of the deity of road metaphorically as Samson says 'He was moving round those corpses as if they didn't exist. All he cared about was re-planting that sign-post' (Soyinka:1973:167). The road and the spider are the metaphors of death waiting ready for their prey, the moment one is stuck in their deadly plan, the death is inevitable as Kotunu states 'The road and spider lie gloating, then the fly buzzes along like a happy fool...' (Soyinka:1973:178).

Yoruba people believe in mask culture. They build masks of their ancestors, worship them. They have masks of their ruling deities also. They also believe that when a person wears a mask of either ancestral deity or divine deity, mask comes to life and the person wearing the mask feels possessed. How do they worship ancestors and how do they perceive connected with them? The ancestral spirits are revered through the *Egungun* cult. They believe that through this cult the living gets the protection and blessings of their ancestors. It is an evidence that the existing generations of the living are not alone rather their ancestors continuously observe the actions of the whole community collectively. The *Egungun* society has got the status of the custodian of the ancestral spirits. In its entirety basically this cult is an assurance to people about individual immortality. It is also an attempt to reduce the terror of death through the dramatic manifestation of the ancestral spirits in the world of Living. Only particular ancestors have masks dedicated to them because a masque is carved only when "the *Ifa* Society, a cult of divination, decides which dead are to have masks dedicated to them. A member of the *Egungun* is secretly

appointed to be mask keeper and dancer.”(...) Soyinka has utilised this mask as a vehicle or mechanism through which gods and spirits express their premonitory or laudatory visions to their successors in the world of the living. There are special ceremonies devoted to this invocatory act where the dance of possession occurs.

The dance of possession is believed to be an event when gods participate in human affairs and make their presence felt through human agency. In the act of possession, the spirit of the masque is said to enter the mask wearing dancer’s body, whose own spirit departs temporarily and he is believed to be possessed by the dwelling spirit of the mask. Thus, gods actively engage in human affairs to predict about future, the unknowable. In this play also there are several acts where characters wear masks, feel possessed and remove the mask. The play ends with the Egungun Ritual which is believed to have enormous influential powers for the Yoruba people. Through Egungun Dance ritual, Yoruba people worship ancestors’ spirits. Who becomes Egungun? Any selected individual dresses from head to toe, completely covered, acts as Egungun, who experiences mystical possession, performs ritual dance. Any disturbance to the ritualistic dance is supposed to be sacrilege, that might result in the end of life. Professor who keeps mute Murano captive, his non-observance of the Egungun ritual results in his death. After his death the Egungun spirit departs and the mask along with the raffia falls on the earth as it represents the departure of the Egungun spirit.

Another incorporation of Yoruba rituals is the inclusion of Agemo and Alagemo in the play *The Road*. Agemo is the sacred text, is the deity – the supreme god, is also a ritual of the dead in Yorubaland. In this play, it appears as the Agemo preface poem through which Soyinka enfolds that dance is a transition phase – it’s a religious cult of flesh dissolution and it has various forms. This Agemo cult chant is spoken by the Alagemo, a carrier of the Agemo masquerade in the preface poem. It dominates the mood of the play. It is a symbol of death, the central message of the play. In the Preface Poem of *The Road*, the Alagemo has been summoned from the other world:

I heard! I felt their reach
And heard my naming named.
The pit is there, the dagger fell right through
My roots have come out in the other world.
Make away.

[...] Agemo's hoops
Are pathways of the sun.

This spirit of death haunts all the characters in this play. The Preface Poem foretells the mystery and the numerous deaths in *The Road*. The essence of this spirit of Agemo (death) is what Professor wants to find out in his pursuit for the Word. Murano, in whom the Word reposes, has experienced both life and death. He thus becomes the Agemo spirit which Soyinka introduces into the main body of the play. His muteness i.e. inability to reveal the the Word accounts for the Yoruba belief that death reveals itself only in one's own death. This belief is made explicit in the ultimate death of Professor at the end of the play.

The Yoruba world view of the continuity between life and death is a major source text in the creation of *The Road*. It is the major force behind Professor's quest for the meaning of the Word which is interpreted by critics as a quest for the essence of life. "Now, / Gone, and Here the Future" shows the link between the living, the dead, and the unborn as encapsulated in the Yoruba cosmology that death is not the end of life. Professor's futile quest to understand death as guided by his incomplete knowledge of Yoruba world view results in his own death at the end of the play which shows the inability of humans to decipher the mystery of death and cyclic nature of human life. Wole Soyinks has weaved Yoruba Cosmological worldview and ritualistic belief system into the western dramatic mode to represent the African hermeneutics to the world successfully in the play *The Road*.

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