

The Tragedies of Yorùbá's Spiritual Space

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Abstract

In his play The Road, written in 1965, Wole Soyinka, the 1986's winner of the Nobel Prize for Literature, addresses in sombre shades not only to the historical tragedies of the Nigerian space, but also to an obsolete cosmology unable to balance the social structures born in the postcolonial aftermath. Its engagement with rituals and masks, with the distortion of the Christian religion - forcedly imposed within a collective mind not prone to it - transforms the African cosmology in a haunting turmoil of trials and errors. In 1970, after his imprisonment during the Nigerian War, the Nigerian playwright creates a God-like figure in Madmen and Specialists, a tragedy considered one of the gloomiest collections of representations in the history of the African theatre. We will argue that both plays advance proposals of hybrid gods, and both plays end by envisioning failures and death. Through these forms of death, the complex creations of an alienated collective mind strain to shape a space in which the ancient cyclic pilgrimage of old gods and the linear progressive design of the modern gods share a dimension of death and revival around which a new social identity could be interwoven.

Keywords: Obatala's myth, chthonic space, African tragedy, egungun masquerade, Christian religion

Madmen and Specialists is one of Soyinka's four major plays written after his imprisonment (1967-1969) during the Nigerian Civil War. The anomy in which the Nigerian society performs destroys the system in which the history of the country channelled the memory of Nigerian people. Left without landmarks and anchors in this ever-changing habitat, Soyinka's characters turn to gods, only to find them as ineffective as their destroyed philosophy of life. So they attempt to construct a new god, a new language through which to make sense of the uncanny world facing them. For a god made of words, Soyinka employs "a play of words rather than action," as Frances Harding observed (1991: 87-98), and *Madmen and Specialists* translates this very process. The series of dialogues, fragmented by songs and gigs, evolves in a staged discourse in which each stage enriches the previous one, triggering a re-evaluation of the worldview and religious view resonating in each character.

Old Man's son, Dr. Bero, the Specialist (in Intelligence), decided to detain his father in his former surgery and is trying hard to find the meaning of "As", his father's cult, invented by Old Man. The four Mendicants - Old Man's disciples - are physically challenged and social pariahs, therefore prone to embrace any

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theory, religious or otherwise, which could bring them meaning and a sense of participation, accepting passively anything the power of authority would find useful for them to receive. Old Man tried to teach them how to think, and in doing so, challenged these alienated human fragments to redefine themselves. His attempts bring the retaliation of his son, because, as Bero comments,

BERO: Father's assignment was to help the wounded readjust to the pieces and remnants of their bodies (*not their minds*, our emphasis). (...) Instead he began to teach them to think, think, THINK. Can you picture a more treacherous deed than to place a working mind in a mangled body? (Soyinka, 2009: 242)

The new god of a broken world, a world populated by the mangled, deconstructed bodies of the Mendicants, finds its expression in a fragmented language, and new words are invented, defining the god As. Later in the play it becomes apparent that As is a collection of odd words, signifying bits and pieces of concepts and images.

As a social context of As' becoming, the four Mendicants observe and comment, becoming at once passive and active agents, powerful and peripheral (Harding 1991: 89). They are victims, but learn how to become oppressors. They are tragic figures, but in the sadness of their consciousness, they learn how to turn their destiny into a game of fatalities. As Dele Layiwola underlined: "[...] there is no greater delineation of fatalism in the odds and bits of human figures who thrive on the futility of their own drudgery as when they speak and sing and play their antics" (1996: 38).

Amidst these fatalities of the postcolonial world, Old Man acknowledges that he is no longer looking for an entity, already validated, called the Word, instead he strives to create his own self-defining system starting from the "word-ly" deity As, a fierce gloomy god, as Bero explains to his sister, from which escape is impossible, not with a sane mind. "Don't come out," he says, "don't come out from where you're safe. [Quietly.] Or sane" (Soyinka 2009: 241). The fragments of human bodies coagulate in an incongruous dictionary describing this fear of losing the sense of reality, the fear of transforming something known, something tangible through testimonial experience into something akin to a godly birth.

One of the most disturbing images whose representation, even acceptance, becomes possible under the rule of As, is the breach of the cannibalistic taboo. And this breach becomes an exhortation, a ritual, in the name of As.

SI BERO: But at least tell me why? In God's name why?

BERO: No, not in God's name - in the name of As!

SI BERO: What?

BERO: The new god and the old - As.

SI BERO: What are you trying to be, Bero - evil?

BERO: Does it sound that bad? It was no brain-child of mine. [...] I'll *bless* (our emphasis) the meal, he said. And then - As Was the Beginning, As is, As Ever shall be... world without... We said Amen... (Soyinka 2009: 241).

Old Man's god is a self-creating god, suffering from the same fragmentation as the language it elicits. Its definition is a series of words, based on abstract concepts, turned over by the world, but accepted and "translated" in fragments of thought, as of bodies, by the Mendicants.

AAFAA: A. As is Acceptance, Adjustment. Adjustment of Ego to the Acceptance of As... B... [His eye roams over the room for inspiration, falls on the Blindman.] Of course, B, Blindness. Blindness in As. I say this unto you, As is all-seeing; All shall see in As who render themselves blind to all else (Soyinka 2009: 246).

Acceptance, adjustment for the Nigerian, the alignment to the new order and levelling the African discourse to the cultural shock of the West, all invest a message, and Soyinka's message is terrifying. Align or perish, seems to demand his newly created God. In order to survive, Africans must renounce and denounce their Ego and become a fragment of the chaos in order to understand the chaos.

AAFAA: C... C? [...] No, nothing from you lot this time. An't see how I can ask the flock to get crippled for some reward in As. [...] D-good-I don't have to go far for that. D, Divinity. Destiny is the Duty of Divinity. D-D-D-Destiny in 3-Dimension. We the Divinity shall guide the flock along the path of Destiny (Soyinka 2009: 246).

Old Man's language ironically mimics the Christian credo, believing without searching that this man-created Divinity will fulfil the duty of harbouring Africa, a three-dimensional understanding of the pain a body (a society) suffers when broken in unrecognisable fragments of thought and dead believes.

AAFAA: E...

BLINDMAN: Epilepsy? [...]

BLINDMAN: For your Divinity to have control, the flock must be without control. Epilepsy seems to be the commonest form.

GOYI: I know what you mean. Taken by spirit, they call it. It's a good circus turn any day (Soyinka 2009: 246).

Soyinka employs these "parodies of Christian liturgy and African ritual idioms" (Jeyifo 2003: 122), elaborating a game of religious control which will prove to be the unstable realm in which "fundamentalist or absolutist modes and system of thought [...] work to normalize warfare, warmongering and gross abuses of power" (122).

The deities of the Yorùbá mythos collapse into an "ironic deflation" (Jeyifo: 122), the new god As, a caustic appraisal of motivating and even ritualizing the hunger for power of the new generation of African leaders. As Biodun Jeyifo argues, "this is the reason why, of all of Soyinka's plays, «Madmen and Specialists» is about the only drama in which the use of festive, carnivalesque modes has a completely unrelieved sardonic edge on it" (122).

Madmen and Specialists poises a certain difficulty for its analysts associated with Soyinka's two-fold approach of the myth, as a concept: the "pristine", autochthonous flowing of mythical discourse, and the universal ritual matrix. Rising between them, searching to balance the void and to mediate in a continuous struggle, the "old ways" of praying, chanting, dancing and impersonating of the egungun performance masks inform the new god, a flowing of words and sounds which transforms a living spectator into a dead ancestor. Old Man, in his attempts to legitimize his god As, cherishes this transition, a "collusion of the audience which effects the transition from representation to reality – from «as» to «is»,” as Frances Harding explains (1991: 95).

The second proposal of a god is to be found in modern Nigeria, more specifically, in its roads, as true death traps. The number of victims claimed by the rough and uncared system of transportation amounts to tens of thousands (Wimborne 1989). The legislation governing the circulation is as frail as the asphalt from which the roads are built, creating the conditions for an underground "industry" of forgery and bribe. Along these roads, thousands of lorries run at dangerous speeds, from and to the market. Old, rusted and on the point of breaking down, they are driven by individuals not rarely without a valid licence (Gibbs 1995).

Against this background, the free-lance drivers of *The Road* inhabit a night-shelter over which an eccentric man, called Professor, reigns with authority. He provides licences, food, palm-wine, hemp, and a purpose to this forlorn and strange human collection. Professor is a former member of the Christian Church, accused of embezzling the Church's funds, and banished from the congregation. He is surrounded by acolytes, who assist him in the scheme he has elaborated for providing some money. He steals the road signs or misplaces them in order to provoke accidents which force the drivers to resort to his spare parts shop. He is also a forger, falsifying driving licences and official documents of transportation. At first sight, Soyinka proposes a whole universe of sins and disrespect for others.

The Road is a dense theatrical fabric in which the protagonist's inner questionings and obsessions are interwoven with elements of harsh African realities, in a coalescence of multi-layered actions and symbols, the road being the most pregnant, not only as a marker of the journey through life, but also as a signal for the social impact of technology upon everyday Nigerian life.

This rite of passage begins in a shack, and round the corner from a church. "The closed stained-glass window" of the church rests on an inscription: AKSIDENT STORE – ALL PART AVAILEBUL (Soyinka 1973: 151).

The lives of Professor's drivers and his mute protégée Murano, whom he had saved from a wrecked hearse, are a continual waiting. They wait for contracts and for the palm-wine bootlegger due in the evening, and meanwhile gossip, or recount the road's sagas, the great names sacrificed on the shrine of the road. Within this time circle, not unlike the waiting of Beckett's characters in *Waiting for Godot*, in the early hours of the morning, Professor returns to the shack, "in a high state of excitement, muttering to himself: Almost a miracle... dawn provides the

greatest miracles but this... in this dawn has exceeded its promise." (Soyinka 1973: 157). The wonders and the miracles of Professor's mystical visions will continue throughout the play, and as in *Madmen and Specialists*, nothing happens to bring a closure to the search for meaning. The relevance of the character resides not in his becoming as a theatrical figure, but in his former belonging to a Christian rite. A religious individual, as Soyinka constructs him, Professor is deeply committed to substitute a religion for another. And his religion, his god, is the Word, which he describes in a powerful representation, hidden in the fabric of a car accident:

PROF.: There are dangers in the Quest I know, but the Word may be found companion not to life, but Death. Three souls you know, fled up that tree. You would think, to see it that the motor-car had tried to clamber after them. [...] They all died, all three of them crucified on rigid branches. I found this word growing where their blood had spread and sunk along plough scouring of the wheel (Soyinka 1973: 159).

The Road elicited a powerful answer as a critique of Christianity as an agent of change. Most certainly, the character of Professor is as caustic and unforgiveable as any scientist on the verge of lecturing against the dogmatism of religion. As Izevbaye argues, Professor is "trapped in his verbal inquiry into two conflicting theologies of transition, the «Word made flesh» of Christian doctrine, and the «flesh dissolution» of the *agemo* cult." (2004: 480). The road, a hungry and terrifying god, needs sacrifices. As Samson "despondently" urges, "Kill us a dog Kotonu, kill us a dog. Kill us a dog before the hungry god lies in wait and makes a substitute of me." (Soyinka 1973: 198).

The metaphysical death and the transition from a state of individuality to a state of community are both anchored in and translated through the social imbalance and the new psychological and sociological order derived from the transformed Nigeria of the beginning of the 1960s.

The insatiable Nigerian highway, a road to hell and beyond, is appropriated to Ogun, the Yoruba god of iron, the destructive force of a destabilized sense of invasion, an invasion which enrages the desecration of the ritual sites. Within the call of Ogun's destructive forces, a new cult will be born, a cult of death and denial, which proceeds from denying the Western Christian doctrine. As Killam and Kerfoot posit, "the conversion outside of church doctrine" transforms the road in a god and its cult at the same time (2008: 262).

The recourse to ritual has a "therapeutic" effect, a cleansing of the societal psyche in order to alleviate the ordeals of transition from the realm of the dead into the world of the living. As Manjula noted, "Yorùbá culture retains the collective experience as a living reality" (84).

Again, akin to *Madmen and Specialists*, as Soyinka explains in his note "For the Producer," *The Road* employs the masque idiom, "strange to many" (Soyinka 1973: 149). An underlying belief of masquerade resides in the possession of the masquerader by the spirit of the deceased. The dance becomes a waving medium,

at the height of which a true Egungun translator speaks with the voice of the spirit. This cult of the ancestors is envisioned by Soyinka as “a visual suspension of death accomplished through dance” (Soyinka 1973: 149). In the same way, Murano, the mute, translates spoken language in movements, becoming “a dramatic embodiment of this suspension” (149).

In a way, Murano represents a fixed moment in time, a moment in which nothing happens, but which is, nevertheless, crucial for the evolution of the others characters. They all return to Murano as to the origin of time, the suspension between life and death, the moment from which life or death will come. As Soyinka writes: “[Murano] functions as an arrest of time, or death” (Soyinka 1973: 149). His “agemo” phase, the phase of “flesh dissolution,” represents his choice, death, or “the transition from the human to the divine essence.” This transition, as Soyinka underlines, is a core concept of the Ogun festival.

Viewed this way, Professor’s Quest symbolizes also a philosophy of death, or better said, of reclaiming its essence. Professor’s search for meaning and a new god ends up in death and tragedy, and one reason for Soyinka’s choice would be Professor’s involvement in orchestrating the egungun masquerade, ascribed and restricted to the will of the ritual representatives. But Professor’s hunger for knowledge is overwhelming, and as he himself puts it:

PROF.: I only sought to make my meaning clear, and I could not escape the source of my own sense of wonder...” (222)

Professor’s firm belief that death cannot be the ultimate answer, that death’s revelation is not necessarily “total or not at all” (227), borders a sacrilege in the eyes of the established gods, becoming a ritualistic performance challenging the laws of the ancestors and their deities.

The ritual is interrupted, seemingly due to mere chance, when Kotonu, following the intervention of “a miracle,” escapes death by the rotten bridge, drives his wagon into the celebrating participants at Ogun’s festival and hits a possessed Murano, deeply under the effect of his egungun mask.

An eccentric mind and attitude, not formally educated, but in the usage of convoluted words, and exhibiting an assuredness masquerading knowledge, Professor is “a recognizable Nigerian comic type” (Crow, Banfield 1996: 90-92). He is the “authentic” seeker of knowledge and the wisdom coming with it, but also prone to a “high state of excitement”, psychologically permeable to “almost a miracle...” or, in another reading, to that mysticism he claims to have abandoned. Used to “a mystery in everything a new discovery every hour” (Soyinka 1973: 157), what creates his sense of wonder, of being the chosen one, is his investment with the power of translating the happenings of the miraculous type, as he himself ascertains:

PROF.: I should be led to where this was hidden, sprouted in secret for heaven knows how long... for there was no doubt about it, this word was growing, it was growing from earth until I plucked it... (Soyinka 1973: 157)

His quest for the Word transforms reality into merely (pathological) dreaming, for “indeed anything is possible when I pursue the Word” (157). His assertion is, as Brian Crow and Chris Banfield underline,

emblematic of the complexity of visionary questing, both for the character and his audience. Professor is indeed in the right place, but has been deceived by appearances,- on the other hand, having «sight and vision only for the Word», he is quite likely to lose his way, as he himself admits (Crow, Banfield 1996: pp. 90-92).

The audience is conjured to accept the authenticity of Professor's inner construction of a philosophic fabric, which is meant to sustain his godly Word, his quest for the meaning of life and death. For Professor, the Word is not only a god, it is a religion, with disciples and human shrines in which the Word resides. And such a shrine becomes Murano, because he is without a tongue, “deep, silent but deep” (Soyinka 1973: 186). But, as Professor warns:

PROF.: Oh my friend, beware the pity of those that have no tongue for they have been proclaimed sole guardians of the Word. They have slept beyond the portals of secrets. They have pierced the guard of eternity and unearthed the Word, a golden nugget on the tongue. And so their tongue hangs heavy and they are forever silenced (Soyinka 1973: 186).

In his journey, Professor searched for the Word within so many spaces and contexts, and his final speech is the profession of his credo, and, at the same time, a legacy; a legacy attesting for the birth of a new way of perceiving the world and of achieving a level of knowledge which transcends the void separating life from death, the dream from the road. Facing death, Professor “makes a vague gesture of the hand, like a *benediction* (our emphasis)” and proclaims:

PROF.: Be even like the road itself. Flatten your bellies with the hunger of an unpropitious day, power your hands with the knowledge of death. In the heat of the afternoon when the sheen raises false forests and a watered haven, let the event first unravel before your eyes. Or in the dust when ghost lorries pass you by and your shouts your tears fall on deaf panels and the dust swallows them. Dip in the same basin as the man that makes his last journey and stir with one finger, wobbling reflections of two hands, two hands, but one face only. Breathe like the road. Be the road. Coil yourself in dreams, lay flat in treachery and deceit and at the moment of a trusting step, rear your head and strike the traveller in his confidence, swallow him whole or break him on the earth. Spread a broad sheet for death with the length and the time of the sun between you until the one face

multiplies and the one shadow is cast by all the doomed (Soyinka 1973: pp. 228-229).

So become the serpent, the python celebrated at the end of Soyinka's novel, *The Interpreters*, the sculpture of a man in search for the determinants of his destiny, and a way to escape the cyclic concept of history. The ouroboros, the tail-devouring snake, marks the "doom of repetition," as the Quest of the Word would bring only the repetitive death. The murder of the archetypal father – the mentor, the provider – and with it, the sin of questioning the right of being a god are driven by fear, the fear for seeing too closely things believers in old gods should not see. The ultimate secrets of life, including the unknown of death, the essence of the Word, mean the annihilation of any creative act. Therefore, when Say Tokyo Kid kills Professor in a ritualistic anguish, he becomes Ogun's seeker, the creative force rising against the self-destructive principle. Professor's Quest dies with him because his Word is "the smear of blood on [one's] brain", because it is marred by the tracks of lorries "pregnant with still-borns." (Soyinka 1973: 195, 196)

His Word proves itself to be linked to death and earth, and is to be found "where ascent is broken and a winged secret plummets back to earth." (Soyinka 1973: 180), in those horizons where new gods such as As and the Word try to dance the same old ritualistic dances only to end sacrificed to the circular anomy of a disintegrated Nigeria. Soyinka's characters' aborted attempts to return to the safety of their past define and translate in the modern rituals of the road the tragedies of Yorùbá's spiritual space.

Soyinka's two plays, *Madmen and Specialists* and *The Road*, present distinctive perspectives not only on the conflict between the religious philosophy of the West and of the Nigerian space, but also on the coping processes redefining the post-colonial society. Meanings are to be found by the seekers of knowledge, argues Soyinka, by the African scientists and thinkers, in the ritualistic world of the Yorùbá exhortation of old gods and in the adjustment of the social to a changed system of creeds.

One answer to the dissolution of the old world, of the pre-colonial Africa, is a redefinition of the concepts and the re-creation of a new philosophy of life, meant to make space for technological progress, represented by the road, the new god of death, and for the quest itself, but without forgetting the roots nourished by the ancestors, whose power to retaliate remains unchallenged.

The second answer employs the recognition of death as a phase of life, through which the thinker must discern and engage the fragments of reality between death as complete absence and death as perpetual beginning. Both answers are answers of words, not of action, and their meaning is either lost, beaten by the sheer sound of them, as in *Madmen and Specialists*, or a forced mystical commixture striving to become the language of a new god as in *The Road*.

Professor of *The Road* explores both the Christian religion, and the egungun mask, in his rich register of prophetic resolutions. An insane researcher of the essence of death, and as such, of the meaning of life, Professor challenges the

attempts of Old Man at reconstructing the new from the ancient. As James Gibbs underlines, “the Word is therefore connected with death and the earth” (1996: 95).

Both main characters of Soyinka’s plays are perceived as psychotic, but their abnormal psychic seems to be the only one capable of reaching beyond the realities of the road, and the sufferings of the ordinary man, two faces of the same post-colonial reality, which Eldred Durosimi Jones called “the erosion of humanity in a well-organized, tightly controlled authoritarian society” (1973: 91).

The significance of the egungun masks and the arresting stage of the ritualistic dance mandate a separate analysis, but undeniable is their usefulness in describing what Wole Soyinka named “The Fourth Stage” of an act of creation, the stage in which the testimony of the ancestors becomes the language in which the present African thought is translated. This stage of temporal transfixion is the medium in which the new gods could be born or made, but the mistake of minimizing or transgressing the voice of the old gods brings the abortion of any attempt and a death sentence for Soyinka’s “spiritual voyagers”, as Derek Wright names Old Man and Professor (1993: 90).

Modern African philosophy charges the African intellectuals with promoting the nostalgia of ancient myths of “primitive cultural unanimity and for opposing false unitary, totalitarian concepts of African society to the West pluralisms” (Hountondji 1976: 161-66).

Soyinka’s characters counter-attack by transforming the ritualistic chaos of the anomic African space in a realm of searches and reformulations. Even if they end in death, their proposals for an authentic post-colonial pantheon ultimately represent choices, attempts to understand the alienating experiences Nigeria has suffered.

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