

some obscure, which provides a theoretical justification for his own experiments. He has expressed an admiration for elements in Brecht's work on several occasions and has drawn on his poems and plays for ideas and conventions. In *Opera Wonyosi* he made use of *The Three-Penny Opera* as the basis for an attack on the vices of his country and his continent.

The proposal was accepted by the Fund, and Soyinka returned to Nigeria in 1960, the year in which the country became Independent. He immediately threw himself into the creative life of the country, particularly that centered on Lagos and Ibadan, and that associated with University College and the Nigerian Broadcasting Service. He gave radio talks, acted in a production of *The Good Woman of Setzuan*, published poetry, performed at concerts organized by the American Society for African Culture (AMSAC) and became Secretary of the Committee of Writers for Individual Liberty (CWIL). He also wrote plays for radio, television and the stage. As was expected of him by his Rockefeller sponsors and University College, Ibadan, undertook research into West African drama, but writing it up was not given priority.

The Trials of Brother Jero, his best known work of this period, was written, or re-written, at short notice in response to a request for a play which could be performed in an improvised theatre. Drawing on his observation of the separatist Christian churches of Nigeria, on Ijebu folk narratives, and on theatrical conventions which had already been exploited by Brecht, Soyinka put together a vital and vigorous comedy, which contains a stark warning to a country on the eve of Independence,

and a more general message about gullibility and false leaders. The perverse reactions of those critics who regarded the play as an attack on Christianity have not endured. Indeed, because separatist sects are familiar throughout the continent and because the theatrical idioms employed are acceptable and exciting, the play has become a favorite with school, college and community center audiences throughout Anglophone Africa. Productions in London and New York, sometimes with additional, topical references, have shown that the appeal of the piece extends far beyond the continent of its birth. Aware of the vitality which courses through the veins of the central character, and of the advantages of using a popular figure in order to make a series of social and political comments, Soyinka has written at least one other play in which Jero features.

The approach of Independence made Nigerians particularly self-conscious, keenly aware of the possibilities for growth and change offered by the change of status. Soyinka presented two other texts to his fellow countrymen in 1960, the year in which a new birth seemed a possibility: a radio play entitled *Camwood on the Leaves*, and a national drama, *A Dance of the Forests*, which was partly a reworking of a play he had written while in England .

Soyinka has described *Camwood on the Leaves* as an attempt to use the idiom of the masquerade in auditory terms'. Set in a community like that in which Soyinka grew up, in which conflicts between Christian groups and followers of *egungun* processions could divide families, the play explores the relationship between the Reverend Erinjobi and his son

Isola. The drama unfolds with masterly control and telling local detail, accompanied by the effective use of the singing of the dirge 'Agbe'. In the closing moments Isola kills, or 'sacrifices', his father and the dirge wells up.

The play can be seen as a rite of passage with implications for a nation at a time of transition. It can also be regarded as an essay in tragedy: a dramatic statement of particular importance to those, mostly European, observers who had denied the existence of an African sense of tragedy. *Camwood* contains several of the ingredients found in Frank Wedekind's *Spring Awakening*, notably the repercussions of a youthful pregnancy, but the perspective of the community presented in Soyinka's play is distinctively and challengingly different.

After being broadcast during September 1960, *Camwood* lay neglected for many years. Often disregarded by those writing on Soyinka, it deserves consideration particularly for the way it uses radio, for its evocation of a divided community, and for the manner in which it establishes a dialogue between two traditions. Soyinka's own interest in the play led to its publication during 1973 and his decision to stage it at the National Theatre, Lagos, during 1982.

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As the similarities between the titles suggest, *A Dance of the Forests* is closely linked with *The Dance of the African Forest*, extracts from which formed part of the Royal Court Evening. But whereas the London production was directed at the racist regime in South Africa, as presented in Nigeria it was directed at Nigeria, indeed it drew on encounters with the politicians who were about to inherit power from the British. The 'Independence' play showed an awareness of the capacity of leaders to exploit those they lead and warned that euphoria at a change in national status 'should', in the playwright's words, 'be tempered by the reality of the eternal history of oppression'. A major theme in the play concerns the difficulties involved in making 'new beginnings', but there is much, too much, more.

The cast-list includes human beings and supernatural entities, the action incorporates rites, masques, a flash-back, and a series of dances; there are also references to a variety of European dramas. Not surprisingly, Soyinka encountered numerous difficulties in mounting the play. Some of these were the result of extraneous factors (some members of the cast lived in Lagos, some in Ibadan; official support was reduced when the local implications of the play became apparent), others grew out of the text and the demands it made on the cast. As a result, certain elements in the original text had to be abandoned - as the existence of alternative endings in published editions makes clear. *A Dance* remains extraordinarily ambitious, a young man's endeavour, full of themes which were to be more effectively worked out in later writing.

Reviews of the premiere indicate that members of the play's first audiences were bewildered. Soyinka has claimed that it was the culturally alienated - the sort of people who wrote reviews - who found the play difficult, and has maintained that 'ordinary' members of the audience, the cooks and cleaners who allowed themselves to respond to the unfolding of the stage images without intellectualizing, returned to watch the production night after night.

Since publication of the text in 1963, critical debate has continued about the meaning and significance of the play. My own feeling is that it can be helpfully seen as an attempt to combine Yoruba traditions of festival drama with European traditions of dialogue drama, and that the themes of expiation and purification are, with a grim warning about the 'recurrent cycle of stupidities', central. In a world in which envy and wickedness are often dominant, the possibility of establishing harmony may, Soyinka suggests, come from a recognition of past failure, from suffering and from a willingness to assert oneself in a responsible manner on behalf of the community.

A Dance of the Forests reveals Soyinka's ambition and the range of dramatic sources, both African and European, which he can draw on in his creative endeavours. The history of the first production shows the limitations, both human and political, which may restrain him. The critical response indicates the haste with which some critics reject him and the seriousness with which others take him. There has, in fact, been a certain amount of fairly speculative comment about the Nigerian reception of Soyinka's plays in performance. My own limited

observation suggests that text-based critics have often failed to appreciate the delight which Nigerian audiences take in watching Soyinka's plays, and this predisposes me to give some weight to Soyinka's observation about 'ordinary' members of the audience at *A Dance*.

Twelve years after the Independence production, during 1972, Soyinka directed extracts from *A Dance* in Paris, and reports suggest that he brought to the production a very strong hand, establishing a firm sense of ritual and carefully controlled, stylized effects. Since he is an accomplished and experienced director, there is a sense in which his plays exist most authoritatively when he directs them.

Confronting the challenges posed by directing *A Dance* did not sap all of Soyinka's creative energies, and the early sixties continued to be a time of exceptional productivity. He wrote for television and radio, and undertook research into West African drama. Two of his television plays reveal the tremendous range of his writing: *My Father's Burden* is a naturalistic drama in which issues of ethnic differences, corruption and, once again, the possibility of breaking with the past provide central interests in a play set among the bourgeoisie of Lagos.

Night of the Hunted, the first part of a trilogy entitled *The House of Banigéji*, was transmitted during November 1961. An extract from the trilogy had appeared in the Royal Court Evening and part of 'Act 2', or 'Part 2', entitled *The Exiles*, was published during 1962. It seems that the play shows how the curse of a dying mother is fulfilled despite

efforts to evade it by flight from Nigeria to London. Written in a variety of styles, the play was on Soyinka's desk for a long time and, perhaps, never reached a form which satisfied him. It is possible, too, that the conditions under which he worked at the Nigerian Television studio at Ibadan were frustrating: for instance, the transmission of *My Father's Burden* was delayed by an hour due to a power cut, and as a result some members of the potential audience missed the transmission. The importance of the plays for television is that they show a young dramatist anxious to exploit every available means of communicating with his fellow countrymen. *Banigefi* is, in fact, a potentially important text which should be rescued from near oblivion.

During 1961, Soyinka was committed to writing scripts for a weekly radio comedy series, *Broke-Time Bar*, which ran for many months as a cross between a situation comedy and a soap opera. After a time, Soyinka's desire to introduce 'stringent political comment' into the series brought him into conflict with administrators and politicians; he stopped working on the program which itself came to an end. The scripts which I have seen indicate Soyinka's skill at putting together popular comedies, and at creating variations on mistaken identities and farcical confusions.

Broke-Time Bar provided Soyinka with a means of communication and with additional income, it also enabled him to bring together and keep together a group of young people who wanted to become professional actors. *A Dance* had been put on by 'The 1960 Masks', a group largely

made up from the professional classes, Soyinka wanted to go further and to encourage younger people who could give more time to acting. To this end he formed 'Orisun Theatre', a major effort in the campaign to sustain a reliable company of actors - and one which was encouraged by *Broke-Time Bar*.

During 1960 and 1961, as a Rockefeller Research Fellow, Soyinka was in a rather unusual position within the structure of University College, Ibadan: he was a post-graduate student at a time when the University College was made up almost entirely of undergraduates or members of staff. The grant provided him with considerable freedom, not least because he was entitled to a Land Rover and a milage allowance. During his time as a researcher, Soyinka observed rituals and performances in Nigeria, Ghana and the Ivory Coast and he attended conferences in Europe and the US. He also spent some time in libraries reading back numbers of *Nigeria Magazine* and *Nigerian Field*, kept abreast of the work Ulli Beier was publishing on Yoruba festivals, and thought about the essential ingredients of African, or more precisely Yoruba, theatre.

Within Soyinka there has always been a tension between the academic and the man of the theater, the critic and the creator, the analyst and the writer. Despite fascinating excursions into academic, critical and analytical writing, he is basically and most importantly a creative writer, and his conduct as a research student indicates his own recognition of his aptitudes.

It was expected that he would write a book based on his research, but this does not seem to have been completed. He did, however, gather material for a paper and for subsequent writing. The paper, confusingly entitled 'The African Approach to Drama', was delivered at a UNESCO-sponsored conference on African culture held at Ibadan during December 1960 and is an artist's manifesto which, in some lights, looks like a research paper. It dispenses with the formalities of academic papers, but draws on reading and observation, and more fundamentally on an essentially comparative approach. Soyinka is constantly seeking and finding parallels, both within and outside the field of African drama; he feels similarities and is sensitive to affinities; he is, ultimately, more concerned to state a position than to argue a case. 'Dramaturgically', Soyinka asserts in the paper, 'the African is an instinctively metaphorical artist, eschewing the plain historical restatement for a symbolic ritual.' Much of the paper is personal, idiosyncratic, impressionistic; it provides useful background to the study of Soyinka's ideas about drama but, as with his other critical writing, it tells us more about his approach to drama than about *The African Approach to Drama*. His drama is, among other concerns, particularly interested in symbolic ritual.

The play which appears to owe most to Soyinka's period as a research student, one which is worth more than any monograph on West African drama which he might have written, is *The Strong Breed*. It contrasts two purification rituals, one highly stylized, the other comparatively unsophisticated. It seems to borrow structural features from Eugene O'Neill's *Emperor Jones* in order to explore the conduct of Eman, a

member of 'the strong breed', one of those who bear the burdens of the community. The chronological sequence of events is scrambled and can confuse, but the dramatic contrasts, the oppressive mood and the challenge to Eman's will which Soyinka establishes help to make this a compelling drama. Though short *The Strong Breed* stands near the centre of his achievement as a dramatist, clarifying ideas about sacrifice which had been obscure in *A Dance*, employing ritual for dramatic effect, exploring the position of the individual, continuing a dialogue with Christianity and with the Western theatrical tradition.

During the early sixties, Soyinka prepared an abbreviated version of the play and this formed part of a film entitled *Culture in Transition*. It has since been produced professionally in New York (1967) and London (1968), has been translated into French and been produced by Nigerian students, and has attracted amateur groups in several Anglophone African countries. Its appeal is not nearly as immediate as *Brother Jero*, but it remains an invaluable introduction to obviously serious themes in Soyinka's work.

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Soyinka managed to combine his own writing with making a contribution to the vigorous development of Nigerian cultural life which characterized the early sixties. He shared in enterprises with other Nigerian literary figures of his generation, such as Chinua Achebe, J.P. Clark and Christopher Okigbo, and with some of them he attended the Writers' Conference held at Makerere, Uganda, during June 1962. There he criticised Negritude - not for the first time, advocating that African writers should accept their African background and feel free to respond to experiences originating outside the continent. In Uganda he embodied this attitude in a remark to the effect that 'The tiger does not proclaim his tigritude, he pounces'. Some critics have demanded that African writers should strive to eliminate non-African images and influences from their work, and have taken Soyinka to task for his attitude. The debate with nationalists, chauvenists and 'decolonisers' - those Soyinka sometimes calls 'Neo-Tarzanists' and at others 'throwback activists' - continues.

In 1962, Soyinka began his career as a university lecturer at University College, Ife. But the following year he resigned, disgusted at the weakness shown by the authorities of the College in the face of political pressure. He has never been averse to making the most of a potentially dramatic situation - some regard him as impetuous - and has always been prepared to put his principles above his well being. The vying for political power between Nigerian political parties and their leaders during the early sixties led to the erosion of academic freedom, and provided a real test of his commitment to human rights.

Temporarily cut off from his base at a university, Soyinka worked with amateur and professional theatre groups to bring together a season of plays in English and Yoruba. He began producing plays which he thought were particularly relevant to his contemporaries and he cultivated links with the vigorous Yoruba travelling theatre companies. He had been interested in these companies for some years, supported their efforts in various ways, and drew inspiration from the skills and styles which they cultivated.

The political and human tensions which Soyinka had drawn attention to in his plays of 1960, such as the gullibility of the people, the hypocrisy of leaders, and the difficulties involved in making a new beginning, became increasingly apparent as the months slipped by. Eventually the Federal Government found an excuse to declare a State of Emergency in the Western Region. To Soyinka and other Nigerian intellectuals, the country appeared to be following the distressing trend set elsewhere in Africa towards repression, a one-party state and dictatorship.

During 1965 he took up a post as Senior Lecturer in English at the University of Lagos. Since the year saw the publication of the first of his play texts, it seems likely that this rapid promotion was based on recognition of creative rather than scholarly achievements. In Lagos, he watched the challenges to democratic institutions grow stronger and, because of censorship, experienced difficulties in communicating his ideas. With 1960 *Masks*, Orisun Theatre and Yemi Lijadu, he gave his genius for satire full-rein in working on a series of revues: *The Republican*, *The (New) Republican*, and *Before the*

Blackout. Through them he attacked a variety of targets, including opportunist politicians, corrupt time-servers and cynical manipulators, exposing clearly identifiable individuals to ridicule and providing a commentary on the state of the nation since Independence.

Some of the sketches from the revues, the more literary ones, were subsequently published under the title *Before the Blackout*. They reveal Soyinka's skills as a songwriter and satirist; his confidence that the writer can sway the wavering and stiffen the resolve of the apathetic. His strategy in the revues was to identify and expose individuals who, in his opinion, had behaved irresponsibly and to pillory them. Critics from the left have sometimes challenged this approach, regarding it as focusing on symptoms and neglecting causes, but Soyinka has changed little over the years. Given the vigour of the Marxist school of criticism in Nigeria and the wide distribution of vulgar Marxists, it seems probable that this debate, like that over Negritude, will continue.

1965, in which *Before the Blackout* was produced, was an extraordinary year for Soyinka. It saw the publication of a first novel, *The Interpreters*; the first reading of a major poem, 'Idanre'; the premiere of *The Road* at the Theatre Royal in London's Stratford East, and of *Kongi's Harvest* at Independence Hall, Lagos. During October the rigged elections in Western Nigeria caused despair among intellectuals, and were followed by the arrest and trial of Soyinka on the charge of holding-up a radio station and stealing two tapes.

Soyinka has described *The Interpreters*, which he must have worked on for an extended period during the early sixties, as 'an attempt to capture a particular moment in the lives of a generation which was trying to find its feet after Independence.' It has a complex structure and dense passages of descriptive prose which have alienated some readers and some critics. The structure may indeed disconcert, but it also intrigues; especially when it is appreciated that narrative in Soyinka's creative world is only one way in which a piece of work may be held together. He has always maintained his right to communicate with different groups at different times, to write adaptations of Yoruba folk songs in Yoruba, and to arrange a pattern of interrelated events for those, perhaps a far-flung elite, who respond to a challenging novel. *The Interpreters* marked an authoritative move into a genre which was new to Soyinka; and, although it has always been attacked and condemned from certain quarters, it quickly established itself as a classic of African writing. The novel's momentum is sustained by the detailed portrayal of life in Lagos and Ibadan, particularly among the academic community, and as a result of vigorous satire at the expense of the world of Nigerian newspapers

Composed, apparently, within a period of twenty-four hours, *Idanre* is a mythological poem on a scale and on themes for which little in Soyinka's previous output had prepared readers. During the early sixties he had continued his experiments with verse and his pieces 'in a black idiom' - often concerned with gyres or cycles of history - had become increasingly assured. He carried over from Yoruba usage a delight in the manipulation of word, image and idiom which sometimes pleases, but

which sometimes becomes bombastic and anarchic. He is a mythopoeist for whom Yoruba, and other, myths provide a means of coming to terms with and communicating experiences.

In *Idanre* he works particularly on stories associated with Ogun, Atunda, Sango, Oya and the Idanre Hills, and within a tradition which, he argues, is resilient and syncretistic, a tradition in which new experiences are easily incorporated within an old framework. To illustrate the context in which he writes, Soyinka has pointed out that a statue of Sango, god of lightning, stands outside the offices of the Nigerian electricity supply company, and Ogun, the daring pioneer who made a road through a swamp which divided gods from men, is regarded as 'the primal motor mechanic'. Ogun, compounded of opposites, powerful, promethean, daring and dangerous to know, is Soyinka's patron deity.

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Soyinka read *Idanre* at the Commonwealth Arts Festival, held in the United Kingdom during 1965. *The Road*, though not an official Nigerian entry in the Festival, was given a professional production at the Theatre Royal, Stratford East, London, to coincide with the Festival. Actors from a variety of backgrounds took part and Soyinka contributed advice. The critics were divided in their response, several were taken aback by the play's mixture of the satirical and the spiritual, by its buried story line, and by its use of Yoruba ritual, but there was a widespread feeling that the production was stimulating and theatrically diverting. A few committed themselves to the opinion that Soyinka had made a major contribution to English-language theatre.

Literary critics have subsequently worked through the text and some have tended to become embroiled in trying to explain the meaning of particular passages. Soyinka himself has drawn attention to the origin of the play in his interest in Professor's investigations into the transition from life to death, the groping to define the essence of death. He has also said that it was originally conceived as a film.

The Road is profoundly influenced by a Yoruba sense of the continuity between life and death, and of the limits which are felt to be set upon man's knowledge of the universe in which he lives. Songs and rituals constantly break through the surface of the drama and draw attention to this Yoruba dimension. But in other respects *The Road* is the product of Nigeria's experiences during the middle of the Twentieth Century, and reflects the roles played by drugs and thugs, corrupt policemen and

unscrupulous politicians. Some of Soyinka's critics have commented on the obscurity and complexity of this play, but others - notably some on the left - have responded favorably to its treatment of economic and social issues.

While in London to take part in the Commonwealth Arts Festival, Soyinka played Konu in a BBC recording of a radio play he had been commissioned to write, *The Detainee*. This unpublished two-hander set in a prison in a recently independent African country reflects the profound concern with which African intellectuals viewed the developments which had followed independence in many African countries. The imaginary state in which *The Detainee* is set bears a number of resemblances to Ghana, which Soyinka knew at first hand, and which, under the leadership of Kwame Nkrumah, had carried many of the hopes of the continent. The introduction of repressive, anti-democratic measures had marked the end of Nkrumah's honeymoon with African intellectuals, and in *The Detainee* Soyinka set out to show that the reality of independence had fallen short of the dream. The playwright's prognostications had been proved right: the hopes which had accompanied independence had been proved false. Independence was not a horn of plenty but a Pandora's Box full of political monsters and diseases.

Soyinka's second stage play of 1965, *Kongi's Harvest*, also draws on contemporary political developments; it combines particular and topical allusions with comments applicable to various countries.

The play was, apparently, inspired - or 'triggered' - by Hastings Banda, President of Malawi, saying that he wanted a particular opponent

brought to him dead or alive. Other African leaders evoked by the text include Nigerian politicians and, more controversially, Kwame Nkrumah. But perennial Soyinkan concerns, such as his interests in the possibility of change and in the conflict between the forces of life and the forces of death, lie at the heart of the play.

The 1965 production in Lagos seems to have emphasised certain links between the megalomaniac Kongi, autocratic ruler of Ismailand, and Nkrumah, whose introduction of detention without trial and whose acceptance of the growth of a personality cult had disappointed those such as Soyinka who had been impressed by his Pan-Africanist ideas and his role in leading Ghana towards Independence. The play is built, in a manner characteristic of Soyinka, around an interrupted ritual, in this case the ritual associated with New Yams, and casts Kongi as a barren, hate-filled tyrant determined to usurp the right of Oba Danlola to receive 'the first fruit' of the new crop of yams and 'draw the poison' from it. Danlola resists the political pressure from the new head of state and supports the vital challenge to Kongi launched by Daodu and Segi. Daodu, an educated farmer and Oba Danlola's heir, and Segi, the mysterious owner of a nightclub and the organizer of a women's group, arrange for Kongi to be shot during the New Yam Festival, but their plan goes awry when the assassin is himself killed. Segi then improvises a conclusion to the main part of the play, a ceremonial dance in which Kongi is presented with the assassin's head, a gesture which shows, I think, that Kongi is a harvester of death. This, at least, is the ending of 'Part Two' in the printed version of the play; in his productions Soyinka has experimented with a variety of stage action at

this point. And he has on occasions omitted the final section of the published version, 'Hangover', in which three of the characters respond to the public humiliation of the despot.

Some critics have condemned the play for what they regard as its disrespectful portrait of Nkrumah, others for Soyinka's failure to clarify the narrative line ('What exactly are Daodu and Segi planning?'). Soyinka has also been accused of other crimes with an ideological dimension, of mystification, of selecting an elitest hero (Daodu) rather than a man of the people, and of adding yet another seductive superwoman (Segi) to his list of female stereotypes.

Shortly after returning to Nigeria from the Commonwealth Arts Festival, Soyinka was tried for holding up a radio station and stealing two tapes. The trial grew out of an incident in which an intruder, angry at the way in which regional elections had been conducted and the way S L Akintola had been declared the winner, entered the radio station at Ibadan and, at gun point, forced the Acting Head of Programs to remove Akintola's taped victory address and substitute a tape which he had brought with him. According to an observer sent to cover the trial for Amnesty International, the intruder's tape began 'This the Voice of Free Nigeria' and went on to advise Akintola and his crew of renegades to quit the country'; the opening sentences of the intruder's tape had been broadcast before a vigilant employee of the broadcasting service interrupted transmission. The Nigerian police declared Soyinka a wanted man and, in due course, he gave himself up, was denied bail, and, with legal help, defended himself against the charges brought against him.

The court-room exchanges and 'back stage' dramas - Soyinka went on hunger strike at one point - guaranteed extensive newspaper coverage, and placed the playwright firmly at the center of the national stage. Eventually, on the grounds that there were material contradictions in the evidence against him, he was acquitted and carried shoulder high from the court.

Soyinka is a political activist as well as a writer: he regards it as his duty to take a part in influencing the direction taken by Nigeria. He articulated his commitment to political action in his seminal address to the First African-Scandinavian Writers' Conference, held at Stockholm during 1967. Towards the end of his paper he declared: 'The artist has always functioned in African societies as the record of the mores and experience of his society and and as the voice of vision in his own time.' Over the years Soyinka has taken various roles in national life, and in statements, papers and essays he has contributed to the debate about the role of the writer. The 'full story' of the radio station hold-up, or 'tape fiasco', has not yet been told, and Soyinka has been reluctant (see *The Man Died*) to comment on the judge's verdict. However, the kind of action taken by the intruder at the Radio Station seems to me to be in line with the role Soyinka has advocated.

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The months between Soyinka's acquittal on the charge of holding-up the radio station and his re-arrest during August 1967 in connection with an open-letter he wrote about the Nigerian Civil War were momentous ones for Nigeria. There was a coup by radical and progressive officers which had the support of many Nigerian intellectuals, but which was subsequently presented to the nation as having been master-minded by a tribal faction. This was followed by a counter-coup launched by conservative forces which brought Yakubu Gowon to power.

During 1966, Soyinka revised his production of *Kongi's Harvest* and went with it to Dakar for the Festival of Negro Arts. There he was awarded a prize for *The Road*, gave a paper on the Nigeria stage entitled 'A Study in Tyranny and Individual Survival', and sat on the panel concerned with African film. But his doubts about the philosophy which provided a theoretical justification for the festival - Negritude - remained. Soyinka elaborated on his earlier criticism in an essay entitled 'And After the Narcissist?' which drew attention to the self-regarding and derivative nature of the racial philosophy, and subsequently, over a period of several years, explored differences and common ground in conversation with Leopold Senghor.

During this period he directed plays by local and foreign playwrights, and channelled a considerable amount of creative energy into poetry. In 1966 he celebrated the 'First Rite of the Harmattan Solstice' with a small, mimeographed collection of his verse, some of which may have been composed some years before. The titles suggest that some of these

were written in Yoruba and in the form of Yoruba *oriki*. Soyinka's poetry became more directly concerned with events in Nigeria during the latter part of 1966. In his first published collection of verse, *Idanre and Other Poems*, he subtitled one section 'October '66' and included in it poems which embody responses to scenes of violence and reports of massacres. These he placed in a wider context; for instance in 'Harvest of Hate', meditating on the way the current situation had arisen, he wrote:

Now pay we forfeit on old abdications
The child dares flames his fathers lit
And in the briefness of too bright flares
Shrivels a heritage of blighted futures

The relatively private response to events represented by the majority of the poems in the collection was complemented by outspoken contributions to the press. Public controversy was nothing new to Soyinka: he had revelled in the brisk exchanges of student politics, and taken part in debates during his undergraduate days. Starting shortly after his return to his native land, he had written to the press on a variety of issues, including the quality of the first festival organized by AMSAC, the hazards encountered on Nigerian roads, the state of emergency, the need to adapt African dances for the stage, Ahmadu Bello's *My Life* and the way his review of it was edited, preventive detention, and the sentencing of five northern women to one year in prison and eighty strokes of the lash for 'insulting behaviour'. His poem 'For Segun Awolowo', in memory of the son of a leading Western

Region politician, also appeared in the press; though complex and metaphysical it was widely appreciated.

During November 1966, following the massacres of Igbos and the announcement that a group of Yoruba traditional rulers was about to set out on a nation-wide peace mission, Soyinka wrote an open letter to the newspapers. He made it clear that he regarded the peace mission as a purposeless charade, a confusionist tactic that would try to cover with words wounds which only actions could heal. He coupled his criticism of the *obas* with an attack on members of the Yoruba community in Zaria for the 'un-Yoruba' manner in which they had expressed their thanks for being protected during disturbances.

The response of one of the *obas* responded by saying that 'Soyinka is a carbon-copy of Shakespeare. He is rather the modern Shakespeare of our time and he is entitled to his opinion.' Another cut in venomously and with the confidence which comes with age in some communities: 'Soyinka', he said, 'is not seriously wishing to help the country. Being a small boy he could be childish in ideas.' In the correspondence columns of the newspaper during the days which followed the publication of the open letter there were more critics than supporters of Soyinka's position.

Undaunted by the reaction to his first 'open-letter', Soyinka wrote again during August 1967. At this stage the times were even tenser and the author's style was appropriately more acerbic. By 4 August, when the article appeared, Biafra had seceded from the Federation, there were 'Igbos Must Go' demonstrations in Lagos, and rumours were

circulating that Igbos were planning to blow up the city, and *The Sunday Sketch* had reported the capture of Nsukka. Official accounts however were still talking of the conflict as 'police action'.

Soyinka's piece, entitled 'Let's Think of the Aftermath of this War', was an appeal for a truce and a demand for plain speaking. It was also an attack on those he regarded as exploiting the confusion and chaos. He described them as:

the now familiar brigade of professional congratulators, opportunists, patriots and other sordid racketeers who are riding high into positions of influence on the wave of hysteria and tribal hatred.

Soyinka was detained shortly after the letter was published and a series of accusations were made against him. Although he spent twenty-seven months in prison, he was never charged and, it seems, he was victimized because he raised his voice in the interests of peace and diplomacy.

Soyinka has described his experience of detention in his prison notes, *The Man Died*. This book should not be regarded as a comprehensive, factual account of the entire period Soyinka spent in prison, but as a celebration of a creative response to detention. It contains thoughts about the nature of tragedy, poems, tributes to the resilience of fellow prisoners, grotesque, amusing, poignant descriptions of people and events. There are also some sketches of the artist as a political prisoner.

While Soyinka was in prison, *Idanre and Other Poems* was published by Methuen, and *The Forest of a Thousand Daemons: A Hunter's Saga*, a translation of D.O. Fagunwa's *Ogboju Ode Ninu Igbo Irunmale*, appeared from Nelson. Work on the translation had been in progress for a number of years and indicated Soyinka's anxiety to make a distinguished Yoruba novel accessible to a wider readership. As a translator Soyinka is concerned with communicating the spirit of the original rather than with producing a faithfully literal version, and the book provides a focus for his ideas about language and the issues raised by translation.

Shortly before his arrest, Soyinka had despatched an essay entitled 'The Fourth Stage: Through the Mysteries of Ogun to the Origin of Yoruba Tragedy' to D.W. Jefferson who was editing a *festschrift* in honour of G Wilson Knight. It is not clear when this essay was composed or whether it was written with Jefferson's collection in mind. Although sometimes tending towards an affectionate parody of Wilson Knight's style, it provides considerable insight into the principles on which Soyinka has constructed his tragedies, principles which exploit the common ground between African and European experience. Central to Soyinka's thinking about tragedy is the ritual root of the form and a selection of myths associated with Ogun, particularly the stories of how he built a road to link men and gods, and of how, confused and drunk, he killed many of his friends and supporters. Soyinka maintains that Ogun worshippers re-enact the deity's crossing of the 'transitional gulf'. In this essay, as elsewhere, Soyinka can be seen establishing his ideas in the course of a dialogue or a debate, and finding within the traditions of the Yoruba people elements which echo his deeply held feelings. He recognises, for

example, that creative and destructive impulses are closely allied, and are found together in the truly creative.

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On his release from detention, Soyinka returned to the University of Ibadan as director of the School of Drama, and took over a production of *Kongi's Harvest* which was in rehearsal. He gave the production an anti-military slant, and those who had previously recognized Nkrumah in Kongi now saw a portrait of the head of the Nigerian military junta, Yakubu Gowon. In a programme note, Soyinka emphasised that the play was about a condition, 'Kongism', rather than about an individual. He maintained that 'there are a thousand and more forms of Kongism - from the crude and blasphemous to the subtle and sanctimonious.'

During the early months of 1970, Soyinka worked on a film version of the play. He 'opened out' the text, reshaped the plot, and provided opportunities for spectacular shots of Abeokuta and of Olumo Rock which rises above the town. He played the role of Kongi himself, communicating an acute sense of spiritual exhaustion and occasionally calling to mind Mobutu Sese Seko of Zaire. Soyinka had long been interested in film as an art form and as a means of communication, but he was unhappy with the version of the film which was eventually released. He went so far as to dissociate himself from it - describing his performance as Kongi as 'the extent of (his) participation'. The film never made as deep an impact as the American and Nigerian backers, Calpeny-Omega, hoped it would, but, despite dismissive comments to the contrary, it is technically quite acceptable. And thematically it is generally faithful to Soyinka's scenario: the final image is not quite what he seems to have had in mind but the implication, that Kongism has not been dethroned and will not easily be overthrown, comes across.

By July 1970, the shooting of the film had finished and Soyinka had obtained support from the University of Ibadan for proposals to establish a performing company attached to the University and to upgrade the School of Drama to a Department of Theatre Arts. With some of those who were to become deeply involved in the company and the Department, he responded to an invitation from the Eugene O'Neill Center at Waterford, Connecticut, to stay at the Center and work on a bitter, sardonic, play which he had thought about and perhaps partly scripted while in prison, *Madmen and Specialists*. In the excellent working conditions provided at the Center, Soyinka worked with a freedom that had rarely if ever been possible in Nigeria, passages were re-written over-night, roles were expanded or reduced, sections were cut out, new material was added.

Soyinka seems to have used the play as a means of as 'exorcising' his civil war experiences, and it has been described by Abiola Irele, as embodying 'a passionate and consuming obsession with the problem of evil'. This should not be taken to suggest that the play is entirely bleak, humour breaks through from time to time, although it is often grim or 'sick': smiles tend to come through clenched teeth. After putting on the play at the Center and in some predominantly Black neighborhoods in the United States, the group returned to Nigeria, where a revised version was staged during March 1971.

The invitation from America provided evidence of the growth of his international reputation not only as a writer, but increasingly as a director. Over the years, Soyinka has built up a company of reliable,

versatile performers who are in tune with the kind of theatre he wants to create, and he was able to draw them together at Waterford and to alter his scripts in rehearsal to accommodate particular talents, and to cope with cast changes. Si Bero, for instance, was originally a mother-figure not a sister-figure in *Madmen*, the alteration being necessitated by a change of actress.

After the Nigerian production of *Madmen* and on the eve of the release of the film of *Kongi's Harvest*, Soyinka left Nigeria for what he intended should be a 'brief exile' in Europe. He was away, in fact, for five years, during which time he resigned from his post at Ibadan and wrote, published, or prepared for publication an impressive list of titles: *A Shuttle in the Crypt* (1971), *The Man Died* (1972), *The Bacchae of Euripides* (1973), *Jero's Metamorphosis* (1973), *Season of Anomy* (1973), *Poems of Black Africa* (edited, 1975), *Death and the King's Horseman* (1975) and *Myth, Literature and the African World*, a collection of lectures delivered 1973-74 but not published until 1976. He also acted in Joan Littlewood's Paris production of Murderous Angles.

The latter part of his exile was spent in Ghana where he edited *Transition* and where he was a prime mover in the formation of the Union of Writers of the African Peoples (UWAP).

The energy which went into this extraordinary record of creativity was released by the experiences of the Nigerian Civil War, by the circumstances of his exile, and by his continued, but distanced, contact with Nigeria. *A Shuttle in the Crypt*, a volume of poetry, is a 'map of

the course totted by the (poet's) mind' during his imprisonment. One of the most controversial features of the collection is the extent to which it draws on Western modes and archetypes, particularly in the section which contains the creative interaction of the prisoner with such figures as Hamlet, Joseph, Ulysses and Gulliver. Some critics have argued that the tribulations of incarceration drove Soyinka back on his foreign sources of inspiration, others that the imprisonment represented an abyss into which the poet, like Ogun, descended, and in which, again like Ogun, he triumphed by asserting himself.

The Man Died carried Soyinka's fame and opinions far beyond the literary circles which reacted to *Shuttle*: it was read as a contribution to Nigerian studies, widely reviewed and much discussed. Apparently, it was conceived as two books, and can be seen as an unusual, perhaps unique combination of a hard hitting political expose and prison memoir, with poetry and literary thoughts. Soyinka wrote part of the book to straighten the record regarding the background to his imprisonment, but other elements in it reveal the range of his interests and the variety of his concerns. Central to the political aspect of the book is the reference to the Third Force which Soyinka, apparently, supported. The significance of this group has not yet been adequately indicated. Indeed historians and political scientists who have written about the Civil War have generally found little or no space for discussion of the group, its political philosophy, *modus operandi*, or its impact.

Soyinka boldly - or rashly - 'named names' in the book and Rex Collings, a London publisher and friend, took some risk in publishing it. Sales

in Nigeria were not as high as had been hoped, partly because of the distribution problems which affect the book trade in that country, partly because booksellers were discouraged from stocking it. Some years later another effort to keep the book from the Nigerian reading public was successful when court action by Femi Okunnu - one of those named - against the African publisher, the University of Lagos Press, resulted in an order to withdraw all copies from the shops. By that time, however, *The Man Died* had become an established part of the literature on the Nigerian Civil War. (The court case was eventually settled many years later and Soyinka was ordered to pay Naira 250 in damages.)

Soyinka's book is provocative and couched in characteristically strong, sometimes hyperbolic, terms. Though these terms are not out of place in the hectic badinage which is the current coin of much Nigerian public debate, they seem self-indulgent when encountered beyond the nation's boundaries. The title, incidentally, is taken from a telegram concerning the fate of an innocent man at the hands of the agents of the new 'rulers' of Nigeria. It also calls to mind Soyinka's conviction that the man dies in all who keep silent in the face of tyranny.

Season of Anomy, Soyinka's second novel, takes central concerns from The Interpreters and selects a new moment at which to consider the choices confronting those working for change. Fast moving, readable, mythological - links are established with the myths of Orpheus and Euridice - the novel considers the claims of a harmonious community (Aiyero), the appeal of a cold-blooded assassin (Isola Demakin), and the responses of the 'artist'/'media man' (Ofeyi). Critics have objected to

the presentation of the major female characters, to the use of a Greek mythological source, and to the lushness of some of the writing. Some have tended to play down the forceful evocation of the brutality of civil war and the intellectual debate about the responsibility of the individual contained in the novel.

Soyinka spent most of 1972 in Europe and during the academic year 1973/74 he held a fellowship at Churchill College, Cambridge. While there he delivered a series of lectures which were subsequently published under the title *Myth, Literature and the African World*. They combine lucid criticism of specific texts with discussions which reveal the scope of Soyinka's acquaintance with literary and theatrical traditions, and his search for an indiosyncratic perspective. The lectures were given in the Anthropology Department - a fact which provides an insight into the authorities' attitude to African studies, and reveals that the struggle to have African creativity recognized had yet to be won in certain contexts. The existence of these contexts explains the polemical nature of some of Soyinka's arguments in his lectures and the attempt they represent to articulate ideas about existence, drama and morality. Isidore Okpewho tentatively concludes that 'in one sense (Myth is) a commendable effort toward Africa's "self-apprehension" (as Soyinka indeed claims), in another sense (it is) a learned waste of time.' But this is too glib - it fails to place the lectures in context, or to recognise the amount of clear, forceful criticism of African literature and drama contained in the volume.

While at Cambridge, Soyinka returned to an episode which had been suggested to him in about 1960 as suitable material for a drama: the interrupted ritual suicide of the king's horseman at Oyo during the mid-forties. Soyinka was able to write the play quickly and it was given a group reading at Cambridge. Initially entitled *Death and the D.O* the text was published as *Death and the King's Horseman*, and in 1976, after

Soyinka had returned to Nigeria, given its premiere. Three years later, in 1979, Soyinka directed a production at the Goodman Theater in Chicago, which transferred to the John F Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts in Washington D.C.. American interest in the play has remained high and during 1986, Soyinka directed a production in one of the theatres at the Lincoln Centre in New York.

Response to the Nigerian production and to the text in Nigeria has tended to be dominated by the feeling that the concern with the 'feudal' values of the court at Oyo is irrelevant, and that tensions between the classes should have been presented. In America the reaction was more encouraging. Despite difficulties in drawing the performances he required from his American casts, Soyinka has found that his presentation of African society and of the issues confronting it was widely acceptable. The decision to transfer the first production to Washington D.C., for example, indicated the feeling of influential individuals that the play deserved a wider and more cosmopolitan audience than it could play to in Chicago.

In his 'Author's Note' to Horseman Soyinka writes about the importance of the play's 'threnodic essence' and the need to avoid the 'reductionist tendency' which analyses it in terms of a 'clash of cultures'. Despite this Note the play does confront issues raised by the interaction of the prejudices which were cultivated at the outposts of the British Empire with the Yoruba world view. The movement of the Horseman, Elesin, towards death, and his failure to commit suicide at

the appropriate time provides considerable dramatic interest, and provides a sharper dramatic focus than the metaphysical dimension.

Death and the King's Horseman combines powerful dramatic verse and some impressive characterisation, with a structure which incorporates contrast and juxtaposition. It explores the complexities of situations, ambiguities and uncertainties in human relations, and refuses to opt for the easy rhetoric of the anti-colonial struggle. Some have praised the play as a penetrating examination of responsibilities and as a worthwhile examination of the notion of honour. Others have drawn attention to the way in which Soyinka 'recreates' Olunde, Elesin's son, who kills himself to salvage his family's reputation. Unlike the figure in the sources, Olunde is presented as a medical student, foreign educated: yet another of Soyinka's elitist heroes, a recruit to the ranks of the lonely saviours. This line of criticism frequently fails to take into account the almost inevitable concentration on the individual in those dramas which seek to affect the emotions of individuals.

While in exile, Soyinka fulfilled a commission from the National Theatre in London to prepare an adaptation of *The Bacchae* of Euripides. He had first worked on an adaptation of this play, which he regarded as a flawed masterpiece, while an undergraduate at Ibadan, and his mature work drew on long acquaintance with the text, as well as on his thinking about the nature of Ogun. He also incorporated ideas from his reading - some of it among Marxist analysts - about the social and economic conditions which provided a background to the play. Soyinka's version

Pentheus emerges as a 'colonial' figure, obsessed with 'order'; and Dionysus, 'the god of the people, as an Ogun figure. Those familiar with earlier plays recognized Soyinka's characteristic emphasis on cultural coincidences, on the need for a sacrifice to be willing, and on the renewal which comes through ritual death. While those who knew 'Idanre' and 'The Fourth Stage' drew attention to the extent to which the new version repeated previously expressed ideas about Ogun.

The National Theatre entrusted the production of Soyinka's *The Bacchae of Euripides* to a young director, Roland Joffe, who has since made a reputation as a film director. A distinguished cast was assembled and the production was widely, though not always favourably, reviewed. It was suggested in some quarters - and this seems to have been Soyinka's opinion - that Joffe's production was out of sympathy with basic elements in the adaptation, and that the performers were ill-equipped to cope with the demands made on them. *The Bacchae of Euripides* presented by the National Theatre did not mark - as some had hoped it would - the arrival of Soyinka in a major London theatre. But the text provides an opportunity to observe the points of convergence and separation between the Greek original and the Nigerian adaptation, and a comparison brings out important aspects of Soyinka's abilities and sensibilities.

While in Europe, Soyinka remained in touch with events in Nigeria with the result that some of his work from his period in 'exile' is a contribution to the debate about Nigerian issues. In the middle of 1972 a member of the Gowon junta was given the task of clearing the prophets and leaders of separatist sects from Bar Beach, Brother Jero's old

stamping ground near Lagos. Soyinka seems to have already entertained thoughts of bringing Jero back onto the stage - a play entitled *The Exodus of Brother Jero* had been announced at one point, and the junta's clearance scheme together with the spate of public executions which were being carried out in a panic response to a rise in the number of armed robberies in the country, provided a situation which Soyinka could work a play around. He called the new drama *Jero's Metamorphosis* and in it combined broad comedy at the expense of recognisable types with a clever, subversive attack on the Nigerian military regime.

In the course of the play Jero, alert, subtle, manipulative, uses blackmail and his wits to bargain his way into a powerful position. He becomes the leader of the Church of the Apostolic Salvation Army and obtains the 'spiritual monopoly' in the National Execution Amphitheatre which is to be built on Bar Beach once the prophets have been removed.

Soyinka sent copies of the play to people he thought might direct it and clearly hoped for a Nigerian production. As far as I have been able to ascertain, there wasn't one until the middle of 1981 - by which time the soldiers were safely, if temporarily, back in their barracks. One of the reviews of that production was headlined "Corruption Glorified in *Jero's Metamorphosis*" - a perverse response which shows that even the straightforward Jero plays can be misunderstood..

While following Nigerian affairs with great intensity and responding to specific episodes, Soyinka in exile was also able to cultivate his sense of the experiences which unite the African continent. There is every

indication that he welcomed the task of editing a volume of poems from Black Africa for Secker and Warburg - a volume which runs to 378 pages, and contains an 'Introduction' and about 240 poems. The collection differs from earlier anthologies of African verse and makes a Pan-Africanist point by arranging the poems according to theme rather than by the nationality of the poet. One intriguing feature is to be found in the biographical notes at the end of the volume: there Soyinka has indicated the towns in which most of the contributors were born, but he writes discreetly, or perhaps secretively, that he was himself born simply 'in Nigeria'.

This major collection, the result of wide reading and careful selection, shows the points at which black African experiences in different parts of the continent touch, and brings together traditional verse with the work of several generations of writers. In the 'Introduction' Soyinka confronts the issue of outside influences on African poets, and argues that in poetry, as in fields of major technological development, there has been outside influence and this is not necessarily bad. He makes the point in relation to freedom fighters:

To recommend, on the one hand, that the embattled general or the liberation fighter seek the most sophisticated weaponry from Europe, America or China, while, on the other, that the poet must totally expunge from his consciousness all knowledge of a foreign tradition in his own craft, is an absurdity.

In these lines it is possible to hear, once again, distant echoes of Soyinka's exchanges over Negritude and his debate with those who demand 'the decolonization of African literature'. Much of his writing over the years has been given an edge, and made more difficult to follow, by being part of a debate, or a contribution to a series of debates.

After leaving Cambridge, Soyinka took up the post of editor of *Transition*, a magazine devoted to "Culture and the African Creative Scene" which had been founded in 1961 and had been edited from Kampala, Uganda, by Rajat Neogy. But with the rise and tyranny of Idi Amin, Uganda could no longer provide a base for either Neogy or a publication devoted to freedom. Soyinka was Guest Editor for volume 46 (1974) and in an editorial struck a distinctive note - carrying over concerns which had been apparent in *Horseman*. He wrote:

Peoples who have experienced the humiliation of imperial attitudes on their own soil must recognise that any pretence towards decolonisation is a gesture of betrayal as long as vestiges of such attitudes remain on the liberated soil. Attitudes are directly related to values. The African people, minus such national leaders as are hopelessly seduced by their own image of the black colonial governor, must know that the values of the outgoing imperial powers must be replaced by an ethically appropriate system of values and social structure, if the work of true liberation is to be completed.

Soyinka's policy pushed forward the cause of liberation by focusing on the positive achievements in Guine-Bissau and of Amilcar Cabral, and then by boldly exposing tyranny and failure in Ethiopia and Uganda. *Transition* number 46 carried an article on the (1973) famine in Ethiopia, and a subsequent issue documented the extent of the bloodshed caused by Idi Amin. On the literary side, Soyinka published an article by some of his severest critics, Chinweizu, Onwuchewka Jemie

and Ihechukwu Madubuike, and replied to them in a typically spirited article entitled "Neo-Tarzanism: The Poetics of Pseudo-Traditionalism".

With issue number 50, Soyinka sought to reflect the new direction in which he was taking the publication by changing the name to *Ch'Indaba*, an invocation composed of '"Indaba" - the Great Assembly, Council, Colloque (Matabele) and "Cha" - to dawn (Swahili).' But his efforts were to no avail: stories linking the American Central Intelligence Agency with associations and congresses for cultural freedom began to appear, and *Transition's* financial support was seen to have come from a polluted source. Attempts were made to find alternative funding, but these were unsuccessful: *Transition/Ch'Indaba* 'died' and African intellectual life has been the poorer ever since.

One of the last issues of *Transition/Ch'Indaba* printed a preliminary 'Declaration of African Writers'. Dated March 1975 this looked forward to the inaugural meeting of the Union of Writers of African Peoples (UWAP), scheduled to take place during June 1975. Soyinka had been an active member of a campaigning writers' group in Nigeria during the early sixties and had carried on his interest in creating a writers' organization which would fight for human rights and promote the development of literature. He took a leading role in the formation of UWAP and was elected Secretary General at the Inaugural Meeting. The extent of the Union's activities have not been fully documented, but Soyinka wrote, spoke and organized functions in the name of the Union during the years which followed. For instance he wrote an open letter to Leopold Senghor objecting to the banning of the film *Ceddo*, and he

wrote to Arap Moi demanding the release of the imprisoned Ngugi wa Thiong'o; he organized a press conference at the time of the Second Black and African Festival of Arts and Culture (FESTAC), and he spoke at a public meeting called to celebrate the removal of Idi Amin.

UWAP came into existence because of Soyinka's vision, passion, enthusiasm and energy. It seems to have been inactive in recent years, and this may be because Soyinka's own commitments, first in Nigeria and more recently in a variety of countries, gave him little opportunity to provide the day-to-day leadership which the Union requires.

In December 1975, Soyinka, speaking on behalf of the Cabralist Movement for African Alternatives, welcomed the stand taken on Angola by Murtala Mohammed, who had overthrown Gowon during the previous July. The new junta provided a leadership under which Soyinka, for all his dislike of military rule, felt he could live and work. He returned to Nigeria and in January 1976 took up a professorship at the University of Ife. In certain respects, he began to work within the establishment. Soyinka enjoyed only a few days of Murtala's brief but, for many, golden reign: in February the leader was shot dead during an attempted putsch. He was succeeded by the uncharismatic Olusegun Obasanjo.

When, on March 3rd, Samora Machel put Mozambique on a war-footing against Rhodesia, Soyinka celebrated by writing a major poem, *Ogun Abibiman*, which runs to 22 pages in the Staffrider edition and is dedicated to the dead and maimed of Soweto. The poem, which brings

together Ogun and Shaka, ends with Ogun in the ascendant, but the cycle of history has, since 1975, rotated several times: there was, for example, the 'betrayal' of the signing of a non-aggression pact with South Africa - the Nkomati Accord, and there was the death of Machel.

During December 1976, Soyinka produced *Horseman* at the University of Ife, but the play seems to have been out of tune with the times. The Nigeria to which Soyinka had returned was a country in which the rich were richer and the poor poorer than before, in which the economy had been distorted by the oil-boom - or 'oil-doom' - years, and in which the voice of the left was louder and more articulate than ever before. The arts festival, FESTAC, which took place early in 1977, provided Soyinka with many insights into the extent to which corruption and inefficiency had come to characterise his native land. In the hope that something could be salvaged from the occasion, he became involved in the organization of the Festival, but he eventually resigned, frustrated and angry. It had become clear that the 'cultural jamboree' was being run for the benefit of contractors and business people, rather than for artists, or for performers; the festival was not for those interested in the contribution which the arts could make to the nation or the continent.

Although he had resigned from his official Festival post, Soyinka did not boycott the celebrations entirely: he delivered a paper at the Colloquium on Black Civilization and Education which constituted one of the less spectacular, less extravagant and more productive aspects of the Festival. He spoke on "The Scholar in African Society", injecting

notes of controversy and idealism into his speech, alluding to diplomatic dramas and stressing the social obligations of the academic community. He defined the black scholar as 'a historicized machine for chewing up the carcass of knowledge to regurgitate mortar for social reconstruction', and addressed himself to the vexed question of a language for the continent. After reviewing the debate up to 1977, he asked the assembly whether it joined him 'in calling upon (African) governments to commence the teaching of Kiswahili in all the schools on this continent?' No answer is recorded. It seems that to date plans to adopt Kiswahili as the continental language remain pious resolutions: Soyinka is a notable advocate of the proposal, but at present there is no sign that Africa will summon up the political will to support his line.

During 1976 Soyinka adapted Brecht's *Threepenny Opera* under the title *Opera Wonyosi*, literary 'The Fool Buys *Wonyosi* - *wonyosi* being a particularly expensive lace which was very popular with wealthy Nigerians. In some respects the work can be seen as a response to those who had condemned *Horseman* as well as a reaction to the brutalised society to which he had returned. The Nigerian version follows Brecht, and therefore to some extent John Gay's *Beggars' Opera*, but Soyinka added new characters and sequences which radically transformed the source and gave the work a distinctively African and Nigerian flavour.

Soyinka's script contains allusions to continental and local scandals, to, for example, the outrageous extravagance of Jean-Bedel Bokassa's coronation, and to the mysterious deaths associated with the marble

deposits at Igbetti. Some of these are attacked in effective musical sequences or in memorable songs. In a sense this might seem to be the kind of production which the left would have welcomed, and to some extent they did: it was vigorous and accessible theatre. But, in the words of Biodun Jeyifo, it fell short of what was desired because it lacked 'a solid class perspective'. This absence was to be expected in view of the work's origin in an early Brecht script and in view of Soyinka's rejection of a perspective based on class as the providing the answer to all questions about human behaviour. Soyinka's response to Jeyifo's criticism, an important document in his encounters with the left, is to be found at the beginning of the Collings edition of the play. But his more recent creative work, particularly his agit-prop theatre, his popular, satirical music and his ventures into film-making must also be taken into account when describing his 'response'.

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It was planned that *Opera Wonyosi* would move on from Ife where it was premiered to the National Theatre in Lagos, but the production was deemed unsuitable and the invitation was withdrawn. The scale of the piece meant that it could not easily be accommodated in other venue. Partly because of the effectiveness of this 'censorship' and partly because he wanted to communicate with the general public, Soyinka's next productions were in an agit-prop style. He wrote *Home to Roost* and *Big Game Safari*, known collectively as *Before the Blow-out*, which provided a commentary on current affairs, particularly on the preparations that were being made for a return to civilian rule. These sketches, which are suitable for performance in almost any open space and require few properties, follow the careers of some of the characters introduced in *Opera Wonyosi* as they return to Nigeria to fight for their place at the table of delights which would be laid for the politicians who were successful in the forthcoming elections. The opportunists were getting ready for the blow-out.

The sketches, performed by a new group, the Guerrilla Theatre Unit of the University of Ife, reveal that Soyinka still had something to learn about using performance arts to make an impact on his fellow countrymen. They are written in English and, although many of the effects created are easily appreciated, some of the humour assumes a fairly advanced knowledge of the language. Their importance is as an indication of the direction towards popular, political theatre in which Soyinka was moving.

During 1978, while working with the Guerrilla Theatre Unit, Soyinka also directed *The Biko Inquest*, a version of the proceedings in a South African court edited by Jon Blair and Norman Fenton, and a major indictment of the South African police state. Soyinka designed an effective set for the production and stepped in at an advanced stage in the rehearsals to avert possible disaster by taking over a major role. The production was subsequently televised and taken to New York for a festival (1980) - evidence of Soyinka's anxiety to use the media to take his theatre to a large audience and of his concern to broaden the experience of those who were working with him.

Soyinka's concern about his country and his continent did not only find expression in theatrical activities. He had long been distressed by the number of people killed on Nigerian roads and by the appalling risks which all those who travel by road take. In a newspaper article he asked that 1979 should be designated 'The Year of the Road', and he became an active campaigner for road safety, putting forward proposals and accepting certain responsibilities. This might seem a meekly virtuous, thoroughly uncontroversial activity, but in the context of the cross between a race track and a battleground that Nigerian roads sometimes resemble it was no easy undertaking. Unroadworthy vehicles, unlicenced drivers, reckless nihilists behind steering-wheels, irresponsible, inept, ill-equipped, inefficient road-maintenance engineers, and profit margins which depend on high speeds, low maintenance costs and overloaded trucks make the Nigerian roads a formidable challenge.

Over the years Soyinka has put vast resources of energy into patrolling roads, writing about roads, and framing proposals to make the roads of Nigeria safer. He has composed leaflets and, at one point, was said to be working on a road safety film, applying his talents and skills in an effective manner towards an end with obvious benefits to society. On the road, in handling officers and the press, Soyinka's conduct has been high handed on occasions, and has attracted criticism from inside and outside the Road Safety Corps.

In the period immediately before the October 1979 election, Soyinka was in Chicago working on the production of *Horseman* for the Goodman Theatre. But he returned home from time to time and followed what was happening closely. As a result of the elections, or rather as a result of a particular reading of the provisions of the Constitution, Shehu Shagari became President of the Second Republic of Nigeria. It was a new beginning, ending thirteen years of military rule in a nation that had not yet been independent for twenty years. But the very announcement of Shagari's 'victory' provided serious grounds for concern.

In Oyo State, within which both Ibadan and Ife are situated, Bola Ige, a member of the Unity Party of Nigeria and an old friend of Soyinka's, was elected Governor. Soyinka accepted from him the chairmanship of the Oyo State Road Safety Corps and threw himself into its crusade. He also worked closely with Tunji Aboyade, the Vice-Chancellor of the University of Ife and another companion of long standing. Nigerian university students have frequently, and often with some cause,

protested vigorously and violently against university authorities and Abovade's problems at Ife were acute. The student halls were overcrowded, power was only supplied intermittently, and water was sometimes so scarce that it was sold by the bottle.

During December 1980, Soyinka delivered his Inaugural Lecture, a professorial obligation. Like much that he had written before, it was stimulating and exciting, but savoured more of the creative writer than of the academic. Entitled 'The Critic and Society: Barthes, Leftocracy and Other Mythologies', it regurgitated Barthes's concepts so thoroughly as to make them unrecognisable - merely a starting point for an enquiry. The critics whose work was examined were predominantly those of the Nigerian left, but Soyinka also commented scathingly on some European and American critics.

In 1981 Soyinka was a visiting professor at Yale University, which had already awarded him an honorary doctorate. It was anticipated that he would direct a new work, *A Play of Giants*, subtitled 'a fantasia on an Aminian theme', but other commitments prevented the realization of this project. The play, which was published in 1984 and eventually produced at Yale in 1985, forms part of a specific campaign against Amin - who had begun his reign of terror in Uganda during February 1971, and part of a more general concern with responsible leadership in Africa. It is a ferocious attack on a selection of the tyrants who had taken power in Africa: Idi Amin, Macias Nguema, Jean-Bedel Bokassa and Mobuto Sese Seko. Some of those, from the Eastern and Western blocks, who fish in

troubled African waters are attacked, and the gullibility of those who are manipulated is exposed.

The drama, which is set in the 'Bugaran Embassy' in New York and has been linked with plays by Jean Genet, is somewhat static, more concerned to make satirical points than to maintain dramatic momentum. It ends with Kamini, the Amin figure, turning the fire power with which he had been supplied by the world powers (and which he had smuggled into the Embassy in diplomatic bags) on the United Nations' Building. *A Play of Giants* recalls *The Invention* in being a political drama first presented to a non-Nigerian audience by a non-Nigerian cast,, and in being so bitter that the attack sometimes proves wearisome. It is iconoclastic theatre, non-Naturalistic, grotesque, reminiscent of *Ubu Roi*, and linked at many points with the lives of the powerful tyrants who had emerged in Africa. Indeed, power and its exercise has long fascinated Soyinka, and *Giants* is just one in a series of works which examine the theme.

Soyinka began writing his autobiography in Ghana during the *Transition* period and with encouragement from Collings. The story of his first eleven years was completed at the beginning of the eighties and published under the title *Ake: The Years of Childhood*. It is a dramatist's autobiography, filled with vividly realized characters, neatly shaped episodes and effective dialogue. The mature Soyinka was clearly prepared to fill out specific recollections and produced an entertaining book which contains a wealth of information about the families and communities which nurtured him. The apparent totality of the recall should not mislead the reader into regarding the book as the final, authoritative account of Soyinka's childhood: *Ake* reveals a dramatist's recognition of the need to simplify and highlight.

The impact of the autobiography in Nigeria has not been as great as might have been expected because of problems of distribution and, until the paperback was issued, of cost. Some of the most important Nigerian writing on *Ake* has been from a particular angle, concerned, for instance, about Soyinka's version of political developments in Abeokuta or about his presentation of women. In the United Kingdom the book was quite widely and generally favourably reviewed, but it made a much greater impact in the United States where it found an enthusiastic readership, and drew the author and his resilient African world to the attention to a new public.

During 1982 Soyinka worked, once again, in a variety of contexts and wore a variety of hats. For instance, in January he launched *Ake* at

Abeokuta, using the occasion to attack Shagari's government and draw attention to the political violence and the injustice which was apparent in the country; during March and April he staged his early radio play, *Camwood on the Leaves*, at the National Theatre in Lagos; in the middle of the year he delivered a paper on 'Shakespeare and the Living Dramatist' at a conference held in Stratford-upon-Avon; he also fulfilled a commission to write a radio play for the BBC, (*Die Still Rev Dr Godspoke!*). These and other engagements showed Soyinka to be a fully fledged international figure with a deep involvement in Nigerian affairs and a commitment to a wide variety of practical, academic, social, and creative projects.

During the following year, *Die Still* was developed, and, under the title *Requiem for a Futurologist*, widely toured within Nigeria. Drawing inspiration from a text by Jonathan Swift about an almanack maker John Partridge, the play mingles satire and social comment with metaphysical speculation. While not vintage Soyinka, *Requiem* provides evidence of Soyinka's continued concern and creativity. It was toured with a series of sketches, entitled *Priority Projects* which made a considerable impact: they used spectacle, simple dialogue, pungent lyrics and effective music to draw attention to the corruption, mismanagement and hypocrisy in the country.

Soyinka released the songs which made a major contribution to *Priority Projects* on a long playing record, together with a *chanson a clefs* entitled *Unlimited Liability Company*. This constituted a witty and

telling attack on the widely discredited government which Shagari headed.

The record was sold, sung and danced to in the weeks before the national elections of August 1983. In those states which opposed Shagari the record was broadcast, reached a large section of the population, and seems to have become an anthem of the opposition. Soyinka continued his campaign up to the last minute, his 'Take the First Step' - an invitation to vote against Shagari and his party, being released a few days before polling took place.

Millions voted against Shagari, and many were convinced that Shagari had been voted out. However, he was declared the winner - a sequence which recalled for many the 1965 election! Soyinka's reaction was to make for a microphone: he flew to London and gave an interview to the BBC in which he described the background to the elections, the way the Western press had been manipulated, and the distortions apparent in the official version of the results. The interview was broadcast by the BBC to Europe and Africa - a voice of free Nigeria, heard by millions, uninterrupted.

Shagari's second term was short, ended by a *coup* which brought Mohammedu Buhari to power. Soyinka was initially prepared to give this new military regime a chance to prove its worth, but he quickly became disillusioned; he was distressed by its intolerance of opposition and its repressive tendencies and so began saying so.

On July 13th 1984, Soyinka celebrated his fiftieth birthday. A symposium was held at Ife, providing opportunities for colleagues, friends and critics to assess his achievements as a dramatist, novelist, poet, film-maker, political activist and social commentator. The left was well represented, asking whether Soyinka was progressive or reactionary, urging a move towards greater 'audience consciousness' and a 'transparency which is simple but delicate', drawing attention to his penchant for histrionics, and requiring that as an artist he should go 'beyond the rot'.

The celebrations included a showing of a rough cut version of *Blues for a Prodigal*, a film designed initially to expose the violence and corruption which characterised the Shagari government. *Blues* is, in fact, something of a disappointment: it slides occasionally below B-movie standards, searching for an idiom in which narrative and political comment can be effectively brought together. There are also technical weaknesses - which may be the result of the small budget and of having to shoot part of the film under the occasionally vigilant eye of antagonistic political opponents. Soyinka, like some of the others working in film in Nigeria, is still seeking to come to terms with the cinema; he is aware of the enormous potential of film as a means of communication, anxious to develop a characteristic approach to the medium, troubled by problems of finance and technical support.

When, at the beginning the following year, Soyinka attempted to screen *Blues* in Lagos, the print was seized by officers of the National Security Organization: Buhari was not prepared to allow the showing of

a film directed primarily at the regime he had toppled. During the months which followed, Soyinka attacked the regime on a number of counts, particularly for Decree 20, which meant 'death by retroaction' for a number of criminals held in prison, for the 'deafness' of the leaders and for the detention of columnist-educationist Tai Solarin.

The 17th of June found Soyinka, mobile as ever, in London where he spoke on "Climates of Terror", a title which enabled him to draw together apparently disparate ideas and experiences, to challenge, provoke and entertain his audience. In the question and answer session which followed, he spoke about the Nigerian situation, and about the future. He said: "The dam must burst...a people like ours cannot be held down."

During early August, Soyinka severed some of his links with the University of Ife. A programme of poetry, music and drama, and a number of farewell speeches revealed the esteem in which he was held; the departing professor spoke of his feeling for Ife, his decision to purchase a plot of land in Abeokuta, and the tensions among the academic community. He designed the house he intended to built at Abeokuta and during the years which followed he devoted time and energy to the construction of what he regarded as a centre for creative people rather than a home

The end of the month saw yet another *coup* in Nigeria. Led by Major-General Ibrahim Babangida, who had been involved in planning previous *coups* - the dam had not burst, but a sluice-gate had been opened. In

September, Soyinka combined approval of the first few steps taken by the new regime, with advice to the new junta about the dangers which might come from the indiscriminate release of political detainees.

His departure from Ife, assumption of academic responsibilities at Cornell University and work on a production, in French, of *The Metamorphosis of Brother Jero* with a theatre group in Martinique reflected the shift of the focus of part of his life. One effect of the move was to bring him to even greater international prominence. During the year following his resignation he was president of the International Theatre Institute, was runner up (to Max Frisch) for the Neustadt International Prize for Literature, was awarded the Mattei Prize for Humanities, and was elected a corresponding member of the East German Academy of Arts and Letters. He also became an honorary member of the American Institute of Arts and Letters.

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Soyinka's career in the mid-eighties appears to contain familiar ingredients there are national and international concerns, academic and creative projects. But the proportions have altered somewhat since he is no longer attached to a Nigerian university, and since, in 1986, he was elected President of the International Theatre Institute. His election was, it seems, in recognition of his achievements as a widely produced playwright.

Based part of the year at Cornell University at this stage, he fulfilled various ITI obligations, lecturing and taking responsibilities connected with an international theatre festival held in Baltimore - where there were Russian objections to the presentation of *Animal Farm* by the British National Theatre. Tested in the fire of Nigerian politics, experienced in the diplomatic moves which go into the smooth running of African arts festivals, Soyinka found himself caught up in the tensions of the cold war pressures.

In the same year, moving confidently where Nigerian affairs were concerned and speaking boldly on familiar issues, he joined with Chinua Achebe and J P Clark, in petitioning Babangida to spare the life of Major-General Mamman Vatsa, a poet-soldier accused of plotting a *coup*. The approach was unsuccessful. A month later, he delivered a provocative paper - on critics once again - at the Second Stockholm Conference for African Writers. Often on the move, his stature recognized by the ITI, Soyinka remains true to Ogun, a pathmaker, asserting himself, moving confidently into new areas of creative

endeavour, the major black African playwright, a poet and novelist of distinction, a critic of significance, and a political activist who has responded with eloquence and courage to the developments which have taken place in Nigeria during the last thirty years.

The announcement that he had been awarded the 1986 Nobel Prize for Literature was made on 16 October. The citation described Soyinka as "a writer who in a wide cultural perspective and with poetic overtones fashions the drama of existence", which as *The Times* pointed out, may sound more perspicuous in Swedish. Soyinka expressed the opinion that the prize was not an award for himself "but to all the others who (had)laid the basis and were the source from which (he) could draw. It is", he observed, "the African world which can now be recognised".

Soyinka was informed about the award in France when he flew in from the United States *en route* to a drama festival at Limoges. After giving the world press the quotes it needed for the 'story' about the first African to win the Nobel Prize for Literature, he cut short his visit to Europe and returned to Nigeria for what a Kenyan magazine described as 'a hero's welcome'. Minutes after his arrival he was informed that the country's military leader had made him a Commander of the Federal Republic. Soyinka commented: 'Babangida's government is one of the best we have had in years, although of course I don't agree with them about everything.'

In the months following the award of the Nobel Prize, Soyinka directed *Horseman* in New York, gave readings, lectures and interviews. he also wrote what he described as 'scraps of poetry...chapters of this...sketches of that' and accepted a commission from the Royal Shakespeare Company in London to prepare a script of *The Blacks* by Jean