

Sowande?

creative myth ... (he) does not equate in a neat arithmetic with any African leader that we know of." He concluded:

... The leader who copies Kabiyesi's self-critique may ultimately be that leader we are searching for. However the 'fun', the song, the dance of the actors fleeing Kabiyesi equate neatly with the experience of African people today.

This message is wrapped up in a complex package that Dunton describes as "multi-stranded" and from which he picked "some typically clumsy language, dependent on forced rhymes and grating puns." In his review of a performance, Osofisan recognised that the piece was full of theatrical vitality - but deplored its lack of contact with the political realities of Nigeria. Certainly the text provides a particular challenge to the reader, and there is a sneaking sense that it would be only too suitable for the sort of forum provided by the L'Aquila Festival, one at which an opera, dance drama or masque are more likely to succeed than spoken drama.

The playwright has appended an Author's Note to the text published by Longman which records that, at L'Aquila, he was asked how far Bertolt Brecht had influenced "the form and structure" of the play. This he describes as "the most relevant question", and indeed the text has enough points in common with The Good Woman of Setzuan and The Caucasian Chalk Circle to make it an obvious one. But, rather than explain his position vis a vis Brecht, Sowande talks vaguely and pompously about orature, which he glosses as "a unique African narrative technique." He concludes vacuously "... in the world of today Brecht would be a brother worthy of a chieftaincy title from the heart of Yoruba theatre." As in the previously cited exchange concerning influence, Sowande appears extraordinarily defensive about the details of cross-fertilization between traditions.



SOWANDE

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November 16, 1993

James Gibbs
8 Victoria Square
Bristol BS8 4ET England

Dear James,

Thank you for agreeing to prepare an entry on Bode Sowande for the third volume of the Dictionary of Literary Biography's Twentieth-Century Caribbean and Black African Writers. Please note that the entry should run between 6000 and 6500 words instead of between 4000 and 5000 words as previously stated. The publisher has given us more space for each of the entries in this volume so you will be able to deal with your author in greater detail.

I am enclosing:

1. a memorandum of agreement which you should sign, address and date;
2. a contributor's questionnaire which you should fill out with your addresses, phone numbers, and fax number;
3. a contributor's style sheet;
4. a sample essay from the first volume in the series.

Please return items 1 and 2 to me at your earliest convenience. If any questions arise while you are preparing your entry for the volume, do not hesitate to contact me at the address above or by phone at 512-472-4712 (home) or 512-471-5522 (office) or by fax at 512-471-4909. Please keep in mind that our deadline is 1 June 1993.

Thanks again for offering to join us in this project.

Sincerely yours,

Bernth Lindfors

P.S. Your letter arrived shortly after I had sent one to you. I trust you don't mind doing Sowande instead of Sofola. You had suggested that I try to find a Nigerian woman to do the entry on Sofola, but I found the next best thing: a Nigerian man. Your name and his got transposed on the list that got fed into my computer. If you'd rather not work on Sowande, I can probably find someone else for you to cover, provided of course that you don't mind being called on (and exploited) in this way.

24 06 93

Dear Bernth,

Many thanks for Tornadoes which I have read and comments on which I incorporated into the text on Sowande which I posted yesterday. A few hours later, I came across my copy of Without a Home. So I would like you to make the following alterations to the text:

re publications p 1:

add publication details ie: Without a Home (London: Longmans, 1982)

Amend paragraph on p. 8 concerning Without a Home: cut last two lines from 'family' put a full stop/ period and insert:

Sowande examines the impact of the separation of his parents on Bafemi Sotomi, a talented painter, and explores the child's spiritual growth under the influence of a mature artist, Bayo Cole, and a man referred to as "the Adept." Some scenes are set in the United Kingdom and some among the rootless children of the Nigerian elite - one of whom gives Bafemi L.S.D.. Though not without incident and narrative interest, the novel shows signs of having been hastily composed and Sowande pays little attention to style or to nuances of meaning. At one point, for example, the narrator informs us that "(Althea) made some hot water and diluted it."

I have not sent a copy of the Sowande text to the publishers. Could I ask you to do that for me - if, after glancing through it, you think the entry looks alright?

I enjoyed writing it, found it quite absorbing, and felt - inevitably - that I could go on and on digging out material. For example, it is clear that Bode wrote Tornadoes in Liverpool and I shall try to contact his brother there to find out date of birth, etc..

It seems a pity that the profiles on African writers aren't cheaply packaged for sale in Africa. Any ideas?

I have not yet responded to Herdeck, and await any advice you might have.

Inevitably there has been a considerable coverage of events in Malawi and Nigeria in the media here - with WS reported as having published a statement in the Sunday papers denouncing the 'cabal' that is 'risking the country's future.'

Perhaps we should arrange for him to visit Bandaland and see what he writes about the old fellow who seems to be clinging on!

The Ghana Dance Ensemble is in London and there is a West Africa Week here in Bristol. However, there are also 'absences': West Africa is complaining that there are no West Africans at Wimbledon - the continent's flag will be carried by players from the RSA!

Meanwhile Rebecca has taken to car to Llangynidr to spend a couple of post-exam days with her friends. She leaves for 2 months in Australia in about 10 days. Growing up.

Have you sold your house yet?

Best wishes

James

PS Do you know Uko Atai in Theatre Arts at Ife (OAU)? A very good fellow. I put Cox on to him to do the Omotoso entry, and if you have a chance - at no expense in time or money to yourself - could you see what can be pulled out of the computer in Kole? On the same track, I am anxious to get hold of material on Efua Sutherland!

Omotoso
Sutherland

August 30, 1993

Prof. Bode Sowande
Dept. of Theatre Arts
University of Ibadan
Ibadan, Nigeria

Dear Prof. Sowande,

I'm still waiting for a good photo of you to insert in the Dictionary of Literary Biography volume on Caribbean and African Authors. We can't go to press until we have suitable illustrations of all the authors included in the volume. Please send me something soon.

Best wishes,

Bernth Lindfors

~~copy~~
copy
revised

Bode Sowande

(1948 -)

James Gibbs

(Bristol)

Books:

Farewell to Babylon and Other Plays (London: Longman, 1979), (Contains

Farewell to Babylon, The Night Before and A Sanctus for Women);

Flamingo and Other Plays (London: Longman, 1986), (Contains *Flamingo,*

Afamako- the workhorse; The Master and the Frauds, Circus of Freedom

Square);

Our Man the President (1981 novel);

Without a Home (1982 novel);

Tornadoes Full of Dreams (Ibadan: Malthouse, 1990);

Arede owo (Lagos: Kraft, 1990)

Unpublished (premieres in brackets):

Unjust Regalia (1969)

Lamps in the Night (1973)

Bar Beach Prelude (1975, BBC)

Beggar's Choice (1976 BBC)

Get a Pigeon for Trafalgar Square (1976 BBC)

Kalakutah Crosscurrents (1979)

Barabas and the Master Jesus (1980)

Ajantala-Pinocchio (1992)

Mammy-Water's Wedding (1992)

In the absence of a full and confirmed list of plays the following should be taken to stand for a very considerable number of produced scripts:

Abiku's Fancies

A Child of the Soil

Caught in the Web (1968)

Paint me Blacker (c. 1970)

African Trances (1975);

Television series:

Acada Campus (weekly 1980/82)

Flamingo (13 part series 1984/85)

Penance (mini series 1985)

My Brother's Keeper (13 part series 1985)

Without a Home (13 part series 1985/86)

Poetry:

"Children of the Sun," *Ife Writing*, 2 (1968), 1;

"Running to the Horizon," *Ife Writing*, 3 (1968), 12-13;

"The Voice of Wisdom," *Mirror News*, 21 March 1968;

Fiction:

"Till Death us do Part," *Eagle* (Onitsha), Nov 1965, 15, 22, 28;

"Boots, Wheels and Lead (from A War in Africa 1967-) *Ife Writing*, 3 (1969),
25-26;

"My Brother for Sacrifice," *What's on in Ibadan*, 14 Sept. 1967, 8-9, 18;

"The Night Before," *Bronze*, 1, 7 (1971), 21-22;

Other:

"Not Influenced by Wole Soyinka," *Daily Times* (Lagos), 29 June 1978, 21.

*Contemporary Dramatic Literature in Nigeria: A Study of Drama as an Agent of
Cultural Awareness*, Ph. D. Thesis University of Sheffield, 1977;

"Open letter to Wole Soyinka," *Vanguard* (Ibadan), 5 May, 1988;

"A Man from whom, much is expected," *Daily Sketch* (Ibadan), 2 September 1988;

"Show Proof of Formal Application," *Daily Sketch*, 14 September 1988;

"History as an Imp: A Playwright's Notes on the Employment of History in his
Most Recent Play," *Nigerian Stage* () 1, 1 (1990), 23-29;

"Promoting the 'Black Athena' and an encounter with Pinocchio," *La Cultura
Italiana e le Letterature Straniere Moderne*, " (Bologna: Longo, 1992),
257-263.

Among the Nigerian playwrights who came to prominence during the 1970s, and have continued to be productive, Bode Sowande is a major figure. He works mostly in English and writes more or less exclusively for a theatre building equipped with modern technology, but he draws quite extensively on Yoruba sources, makes use of Yoruba songs and, in his recent work, moves towards Yoruba-language theatre and flexible staging. His writing shows his preoccupation with the dilemma facing a man of integrity trying to maintain humane values and moral qualities in a corrupt world. For the most part he has used the theatre and his often highly theatrical dramas to call for change, rather than explored means of bringing about change or providing dramatic parables. He repeatedly asks for his plays to be produced without a break, clearly hoping to make as great an impact as possible.

In addition to writing plays, Sowande is a director and he is the founder of a high-profile drama company which has completed many television contracts. These activities have combined to establish him as a significant presence in the Nigerian theatre and to lift him to prominence on an international stage.

Born of Egba parentage and educated at major educational establishments in Nigeria and the United Kingdom, Sowande has held posts in the University of Ibadan's Theatre Arts Department, and in the Nigerian Authors' Association. He has won drama prizes offered by the same Association and his international

standing has been recognised by the French Government, by a London production of one of his plays, and by an invitation to participate in an Italian theatre festival.

From early in his career Sowande has taken an individual line within Nigerian university theatre - and more recently in Nigerian theatre which exists beyond the limits of the campuses. He has been sniped at by the radical left who see him as too much of an academic to take the struggle to the people in revolutionary forms. And he has crossed swords in the Nigerian press about and with the dominant figure in the local theatre in English, Wole Soyinka. However, controversy has not prevented him continuing with his creative writing, and he has established a significant body of work - only some of which has been published. The sense that the privileged must struggle for revolutionary change provides his writing with a particular emphasis, and the background against which he works - Nigeria during the last two and a half decades, inevitably gives it urgency. Critics have drawn attention to more recent plays which show a marked development in theatrical technique, and undoubted evidence of a significant writer at work. His use of Yoruba, one of the areas in which the present writer is not equipped to comment, clearly shows a shift in emphasis which may be connected with his move to off-campus theatre.

By signing an Open Letter 'Bode the Son of Sowande, Egba Omo Lisabi (Egba the child of Lisabi)', the playwright, who was actually born in Kaduna, identified himself with an important Yoruba group, the Egba. He has family links with a major Egba centre, Abeokuta, in what used to be the Western Region of Nigeria, and is the nephew of one of the great Nigerian musicians of recent years, Fela Sowande. During his secondary education at Government College, Ibadan, he showed an interest in writing and when he was about seventeen he had a short story published in *Eagle*, an Onitsha publication. Around the same time he won a T.M. Aluko Prize for Creative Writing.

From Ibadan, he proceeded to the University of Ife where he read French Literature and Civilization. He has claimed that from 1962, when he became acquainted with French literature, he has been inspired by French writers, or writers who use French, and has named Michel Butor and Eugene Ionesco as favourites. While at University he contributed to *Ife Writing* and other journals - submitting both poetry and fiction, and in 1968 he was awarded a University of Ife Prize for Creative Writing. He was, however, already most active in the theatre. For example when, during March 1969, his unpublished text entitled *Unjust Regalia* was put on by the University of Ibadan Drama Acting Company at the Premier Hotel, Ibadan, Dapo Adelugba recorded in the programme that Sowande had "written over ten plays for the (Company) in the last twelve months and comes over from Ife often to act with (it)." On this occasion he was stage manager.

Sowande has maintained that it was in French sources, such as Michel Butor's probing of the dimensions of time in *La Monification*, that some of the striking features of his play construction originate. However, more than is usual in such cases, there are personal factors which confuse the debate about sources of inspiration and lines of influence. Shared Egba ancestry and a common commitment to emphasising the role of the individual in the process of social change have, if anything, increased rather than lowered the temperature generated by his disagreements with Wole Soyinka.

At Ife, Sowande was a member of the Ori Olokun Acting Company, an enterprising group brought together by Ola Rotimi which earned a reputation in Nigeria and Ghana for the production of such robust plays as *The Gods Are Not to Blame*. Through the dynamic Rotimi, Sowande could see the possibilities, and problems, of combining writing with directing and company management in the circumstances which exist in Nigeria. In many respects, including the attempt to explore ideas about leadership through dramas with popular appeal, the careers and work of the two playwrights can helpfully be compared.

In 1971, "between the tensions of (his) French degree examinations," Sowande wrote *The Night Before*, which can also be said to have emerged from the Western Nigerian farmers' uprising of the late sixties and the brutal suppression of student demonstrations on campuses at the same time. In the course of the play, six students relive significant moments in their careers

as undergraduates and look forward to the future, generally with hope and determination. The dialogue is, for the most part, convincing, and the play generates a certain momentum as graduation dawn approaches. Sowande interweaves the past with the present in such a way as to give depth to some of the characters and provide variety, but he allows himself to be distracted by a love interest which contributes little. When the house lights finally come up, the whole effort seems, despite the vigour of many individual sections, sadly inconclusive.

At about this time Sowande had an important religious experience which he described in a programme note to a later play about the life of Christ. In it he explained that he had had a Christian upbringing but had "refused to be confirmed while at Government College;" in his early twenties he had made increasingly frequent "(excursions) into literature of 'Pagan' worship and nature mysticism," eager to find a God within himself. Of the next development, which took place in 1971 or 1972, he writes

I had no crisis of faith but at the age of twenty-three I went to Osogbo and opened my mind to a 'Mater'. She demystified, in my mind, the exclusiveness of christianity in the celebration of life, which is God. By her sponsorship I was taken to some places which included a shrine. Today she will not remember me - but her calm elucidation of the matter on religion and mysticism helped me - she being fluent in

Yoruba, English and other languages. The morning after my visit to Osogbo I became confirmed as a Christian.

The final, and unexpected, twist in the tail of this account was followed by a description of his concern with the way the "radical crusade of Jesus" had become, in Nigeria, "enshrined into a culture of compromise."

December 1971 saw the formation of Odu Themes and the start of work on *The Night Before* in which the playwright took the role of the man of principle, Moniran. Over the next four years it was transmitted by two local stations - an example of the company's use of television as a source of income and a means self-expression. Though it did not pay particularly well, Western Nigerian Television offered an important source of income to Sowande and his company as they struggled to build careers. For example, between June 1972 and 1978 there were weekly productions on what was Western Nigerian Television and is now the Nigerian Television Authority, Ibadan.

In 1973 *Lamps in the Night* (unpublished) was commissioned by the Western State Government for the State Arts Festival, and from later that year until 1977 Sowande worked on a Ph.D. in drama at the University of Sheffield. He focused very directly on the theatrical milieu from which he had emerged, preparing a dissertation on *Contemporary Dramatic Literature in Nigeria: A Study of Drama as an Agent of Cultural Awareness*. While doing research, he continued with his own creative writing and did some acting. During 1975 he

'rewrote' *Bar Beach Prelude* for the BBC's African Theatre, and followed this with *Beggar's Choice* and *Get a Pigeon From Trafalgar Square* for the same outlet. 1976 also saw the production of his play *A Sanctus for Women*, under the title *The Angry Bridegroom*, at Sheffield University's Drama Studio, *Bar Beach Prelude* directed by Louis Mahoney at the Collegiate Theatre London, and *The Night Before* given a reading under the direction of Charlie Hanson at the Royal Court Theatre, London.

A Sanctus for Women represents a move towards "Yoruba folklore and mythology" as a source for drama, and a rather self-conscious effort to use drama as 'an agent of cultural awareness. Characteristically, there is also evidence of social concern. The plot concerns a "particularly greedy woman," Olurombi, who, having got into debt as a result of poor sales, makes a pact with the spirit of wealth which inhabits the iroko tree: in return for a good income, she promises the spirit her only daughter. Tejumola Olaniyan has argued that the playwright draws attention to the circumstances in which Olurombi finds herself, and describes her as "a victim of an unfeeling, rapacious environment and of business sharks, like Sala and the other creditors, who threaten to eject her from her market stall." Certainly there is a powerful opening scene in which Olurombi's creditors seize her goods, but as the play moves towards its climax, and Olurombi's daughter dances towards her death, the economic factors have less impact than the mythical. Problems of language, already glimpsed in the previous play, come to the fore: in his review, Eustace Palmer

drew attention to the issues raised by market women referring to "a vague sense of optimism" or the "anaemic eclipse of vision." Such expressions, not entirely out of place on the lips of graduating students in *The Night Before*, are inappropriate in the context provided by *A Sanctus*.

Sowande has had two novels published, both of which, judging from summaries, share qualities with his plays. His first, *Our Man the President*, shows the courage of a group of young idealists determined to prevent the subversion their country's presidential election. Olaniyan summarises the action as follows:

Before they know it, Man Adamu (a dauntless social critic) and his young fire-eating colleagues get themselves involved in an international, hair-raising drama of political intrigue, espionage, blackmail and cold-blooded murder. At the end of it all Adamu (has) to contend with a forceful, induced insanity, but his friends (do) not let this go unavenged. In the gripping finale, their organised hit-squad ruthlessly guns-down the obscenely rich Aloba, a representative of the ruling cabal, who, for Adamu's group, is the devil incarnate.

This suggests that the novel is entertaining, escapist political writing, and reflects a tendency frequently encountered in Sowande's work: the conviction that it is a positive contribution to enshrine simplistic solutions in fiction.

As might be expected ideologically-oriented critics deplored the lack of class perspective in the novel. The same group, a vigorous presence on the Nigerian literary scene, reacted in a similar way when faced with Sowande's next novel, *Without a Home*. This is an exploration of the life and achievements of Tunji Sotomi, masterbuilder, specialist in environmental design with a mission to establish "modern agricultural communes in alliance with a foreign company." Despite his concern and his plans, Sotomi is singularly unsuccessful in creating a home for his own family, and this is clearly revealed. In a move typical of Sowande the greedy are exposed for their inhumanity.

These ventures into prose fiction appear to be distractions from Sowande's true vocation - the theatre. On his return to Nigeria from Sheffield, and after his appointment to a post in the Theatre Arts Department at the University of Ibadan, he provided new material for Odu Themes. This included the unpublished *Bar Beach Prelude*, a work which he described as an exploration of "the economic use of time and space" and which he linked with the ideas of a "poor theatre" and an "open space" associated with Jerzy Grotowski. In his review of the premiere, Jide Osikomaiya suggested that he could see traces of Soyinka's influence on *The Night Before*, "particularly glaring ... by his use of the flash back in dialogue and action" - indeed any one who has read *The Interpreters* (Soyinka, 1965), *The Road* (Soyinka, 1965) and *The Night Before* must be struck by similarities of ground covered, and choice of experiences highlighted. Sowande, however, in a typically tortuous style which

characterises some of his public utterances and occasionally inhibits the dialogue he writes, maintained

... a claim of influence of Soyinka on me denotes a conscious attempt on my part to respond, to reflect on, and adapt Soyinka's theatre technique.

From this dubious point of departure - there had been no suggestion of, for example, adaptation - he went on to claim that the influence was from French writers such as Butois, and he threw in his interest in the work of Eugene Ionesco. His reply concluded: Osikomaiya "should please know that Wole Soyinka has not influenced me."

Sowande's claim was dismissed by Kole Omotoso in the same paper later in the month. Writing under the title "Bode Sowande's ancestors - the Gauls," a reference to the history books used in Francophone Africa which allegedly began "Our ancestors, the Gauls....," Omotoso was scathing in his rejection of Sowande's claim and, unrepentant, Osikomaiya repeated it at greater length in a review of the published text of *Farewell to Babylon*. But, in fact, at no point did he or any of those involved approach the issue of influence seriously. The exchange was, however, not without importance on several counts: it showed Sowande's sensitivity on matters of influence, and his particular touchiness where the radical left and Soyinka were concerned. It also revealed the combative spirit frequently unleashed in the Nigerian press.

Another of the texts that Sowande had worked on while in the United Kingdom was *Afamako - the workhorse* (presented 1978), a play about, but not for, exploited workers. The text calls for staging which allows the presentation of the factory floor, the accommodation in which a worker, Kadiri, and some of his family live, and, on a higher level, a spacious executive office. The levels mark off the hierarchy and the space available to each indicates relative wealth. Kadiri and his family live in a "small cubicle," face the problem of poor housing, and suffer because of inadequate family planning provision - incidentally the play sends out very muddling messages about birth control. *Afamako* explores the plight of the workers in a society with exploitive factory owners, and corrupt managers, and without adequate labour organisation or welfare provision. Extensive use is made of chants most of which would doubtless be effective in production and some strong situations are created. For example, in the closing moments the mood shifts from celebration to defiance, and, never one to miss a dramatic twist, the sound of Kadiri's voice mingles with the agonized cries of his wife in the throes of a miscarriage. Once again, there are passages of dialogue which bring the play to a grinding halt: for example Kadiri's daughter says "I suppose he finds it degrading to have a child and then beg to maintain it." As with much of Sowande's work, one can be impressed by his awareness of the resources available to the dramatist, and one can appreciate that he wants to advocate a progressive line. Sometimes, however, it feels as if the writing lacks discipline.

Farewell to Babylon (first produced Ibadan 1978, published 1979) uses two of the characters, Moniran and Onita, who had appeared in *The Night Before* and sets them in a context which recalls the Agbekoya farmers uprising in the Western Region of Nigeria during the late sixties. The author described the play as "a testimony to the lives of those who live under the dictatorships that grow like the hydra, especially in the Third World; " he claimed that it "witnesses a triumphant thrust within Babylon...." Moniran is committed to bringing radical change while working for Octopus, an arm of the security forces, and Onita, in a more obvious gesture of solidarity, has joined the rebellious farmers.

Sowande has devised some tense situations and shows a growing awareness of the theatrically effective - for instance in the scenes in which Jolomi appears. However the writing lacks subtlety and there are obtrusive and clumsy attempts to involve the audience - for example in the singing of "We shall overcome." Much of the plotting is ponderous and the explosion of hatred which leads to the murder of Onita is inadequately prepared for. The closing moments are among the most unsatisfactory as Moniran emerges as one of the men behind a *coup d'etat*. The play more or less ends with this coup - which brings the promise of parliamentary elections, but the development is unexpected and unconvincing. It is easy enough to *put a coup on stage*, but it is quite another to convince the audience that Moniran and the others have been taking the steps necessary to *stage a coup*. Those on the left pointed to the

"excessive" amount of attention given to the "romantic individuals" in the play and to the neglect of the farmers. Certainly the ideological commitment that the work proclaims does not seem to have been carried through into the structure of the piece.

The growth of Odu Themes is indicated by the fact that this production required a cast of about thirty - five times the size of that used in *The Night Before*. During the years between the two productions, against a background of changing political circumstances and while the playwright was employed in a demoralised and divided University Department, Odu Themes was involved in providing weekly television drama. Later this took the form of *Acada Campus*, which was followed in turn by *My Brother's Keeper* and *Without a Home*. The local television service was anxious to have a certain proportion of drama produced in Nigeria, inevitably the burdens of producing the series and mini-series were considerable. However expectations were low and audiences easily satisfied.

By this time, Sowande had brought three of his plays together and offered them to a publisher. Unlike some of his contemporaries in Nigerian university theatre, such as Omotoso and Femi Osofisan, Sowande placed his material with a British publisher, Longman. In the context of the on-going debate about publishing strategies and the radical note struck by Sowande's plays, this was a controversial and contradictory decision that can be seen as further

evidence of the unusual niche which he occupied. In 1979 the volume came out in the Drumbeat series and since then it has been distributed widely - certainly far more widely than plays published in Nigeria.

Sowande developed his international links, not only through his publisher's distribution network but also through productions. For example, *The Master and the Frauds* was performed by the Ecolint Theatre Workshop in Geneva during May 1979. Prefaced by the statement "I hate tragedies which celebrate the sacrifice of the 'noble' hero," the play celebrates the life of "the master," Pa Seyidi, who, at nearly sixty, has taken a "sabbatical" from "welfare activities" in order to live in servants' quarters and try to influence "the frauds" around him. He comes into contact with two young men, Suberu and Gambo, and a petty trader, Raliatu. In the course of the play various social problems, such as lynching and bribery, are encountered, and the old man, once an activist now regarded as a madman by some, seeks to influence the younger generation and to advance the cause of civilised values and honesty. For example, he intervenes to rescue a thief from being beaten and he ensures that a corrupt Trade Test Instructor is arrested for accepting a bribe. However, resentment at his clumsy attempts to do good builds up and the "noble" old man is killed by Suberu and Gambo; however, for no very clear reason, Raliatu commits herself to taking up his cause. We are asked to accept that she has even achieved some insight since, before denouncing the murderers to the police, she says: "At least I know why I seek justice." The thinking behind

the play is muddled, the plot devices creak - as when Pa Seyidi steps forward to inform the audience about his plan to entrap the corrupt Inspector, and the final sequence is unconvincing. All this detracts from some vigorously conceived episodes.

Two productions at the Arts Theatre, University of Ibadan, during 1979 showed the range of Sowande's interests. The first, *Kalakutah-Crosscurrents* was inspired by the experiences of the Afro-Rock musician and champion of populist causes, Fela Anikulapo-Kuti, and the second, *Barabas and the Master Jesus*, brought the religious note, often touched on in Sowande's plays, to the fore. For this Odu Themes drew in pupils from Holy Trinity Grammar School which meant the cast-list numbered nearly eighty; Sowande played Nicodemus.

Work on the weekly instalments of *Acada Campus* for many months from 1980 kept Sowande away from the stage, but in 1982, and to mark the tenth anniversary of Odu Themes, *Flamingo* (published 1986), the third part of the trilogy that began with *The Night Before* and continued with *Farewell to Babylon*, was produced. It had been written against the background of the corrupt Shagari regime which took office in 1979, and it is set shortly after a successful coup. Through a series of well-conceived dramatic episodes, it shows how corruption flourishes and how it infects even those who start off with principles. Moniran appears, once again a man of principle in a sea of corruption, and once again the focus of part of the drama. However, in a

sequence which involves that old stand-by of melodrama, a poisoned goblet, he is murdered by Nibidi, a university friend who had appeared in *The Night Before*. This death - which more or less coincides with a popular uprising - prompts a companion (who was also an informer) to draw her pistol on the corrupt, invite the police to join her (they do!) and deliver a suitable homily over Moniran's corpse. Presumably these conversions and this homily are meant to inspire a new generation of activists, but it all seems rather trite.

Omotoso, whose point of view has already been indicated, saw in the February 1982 production of the play the hand of those "people who eat aristocratic dinners to the accompaniment of democratic conversations which paint the future of the county in magnificent phrases." Chris Dunton, author of a major study of Nigerian theatre in English, is concerned about the superficiality of the play's examination of the "nature of collective action," and Sandra L. Richard, who has looked at Sowande and his contemporaries, remained critical of the work because, she argues, the playwright's "choice of realistic drama extends the experience of impotent passivity to the theatrical experience." What is in danger of being asserted in this judgement is a prescriptive approach, and what may be lost is recognition of the vigour of the opening episodes and the deft touches with which Sowande paints in endemic corruption. It is tempting to see both these positive and negative qualities as the legacy of writing for television: that medium encourages the creation of brief, pointed scenes (the opening sequence), it also forces the exhausted playwright

back on tried and tired devices (the poisoned goblet), and assumes a rather distant audience which will be flattered by an appeal to its liberal sympathies and not look too closely at motivation (the ending).

During 1984/85 a thirteen-part television series entitled *Flamingo* was transmitted, and this was followed by *Penance*, a mini-series (1985), *My Brother's Keeper* (another thirteen-part series, 1985), and *Without a Home* (yet another thirteen-part series, 1985/86).

There were occasional breaks from the rigours of the television schedule. For example in June 1985 Sowande delivered a paper entitled "The Fount of Inspiration for the African Playwright" at the Twelfth L'Aquila Festival, and a group, advertised as being from the Department of Theatre Arts, Ibadan, presented *A Sanctus for Women* and a new work, *Circus of Freedom Square*. The second of these plays, put on in Nigeria later the same year, was innovative in several respects: it broke away completely from any thing remotely televisual in manner, made extensive use of Yoruba songs and stories, and involved members of the cast in playing several roles. Behind it all is a fairly simple process whereby the ruler, Kabiyesi, learns that

Those between me and the people are my greatest danger. Now I know.

I must finish the drama. And tomorrow I must begin to screen all my middlemen.

In a 1993 Programme Note, Sowande described circus as "a morality play" and "a parable of leadership," insisting that Kabiyesi "is a 'composition' of a creative myth ... (he) does not equate in a neat arithmetic with any African leader that we know of." He concluded:

... The leader who copies Kabiyesi's self-critique may ultimately be that leader we are searching for. However the 'fun', the song, the dance of the actors fleeing Kabiyesi equate neatly with the experience of African people today.

This message is wrapped up in a complex package that Dunton describes as "multi-stranded" and from which he picked "some typically clumsy language, dependent on forced rhymes and grating puns." In his review of a performance, Osofisan recognised that the piece was full of theatrical vitality - but deplored its lack of contact with the political realities of Nigeria. Certainly the text provides a particular challenge to the reader, and there is a sneaking sense that it would be only too suitable for the sort of forum provided by the L'Aquila Festival, one at which an opera, dance drama or masque are more likely to succeed than spoken drama.

Sowande has appended an Author's Note to the text published by Longman which records that, at L'Aquila, he was asked how far Bertolt Brecht had influenced "the form and structure" of the play. This he describes as "the most relevant question", and indeed the text has enough points in common with *The Good Woman of Setzuan* and *The Caucasian Chalk Circle* to make it an obvious one. But,

rather than explain his position *vis a vis* Brecht, Sowande talks vaguely and pompously about orature, which he glosses as "a unique African narrative technique." He concludes vacuously "... in the world of today Brecht would be a brother worthy of a chieftaincy title from the heart of Yoruba theatre." As in the previously cited exchange concerning influence, Sowande appears extraordinarily defensive about the details of cross-fertilization between traditions.

During 1986 Sowande established Odu Themes Meridian, "a studio for performing and visual arts" at Orita, Ibadan, where in addition to mounting productions, the group organised weekend revues and a children's theatre. For productions, audiences were drawn in on a subscription basis - a system used by John Pepper Clark-Bekederemo's Pec Theatre in Lagos, but one which tends to make the theatre the exclusive preserve of the well organised and the relatively wealthy. In the following year Sowande gained further local recognition by winning the Association of Nigerian Authors drama prize for the first time.

Sowande spent three months early in 1958 in France, and on 5 May, shortly after his return, he had an "Open Letter to Wole Soyinka" published in the *Vanguard*. It came at a time when Soyinka, long a controversial figure, was under attack from some quarters for having accepted a post as head of the Road Safety Commission. Rumours were circulating that he had thereby lost the

freedom to comment on the regime's record; there were also allegations that there had been misuse of funds. The fact that Soyinka's post was unpaid and the accounts had been repeatedly audited did not stop the rumours from spreading. Sowande began his letter by repeating some of them and charging Soyinka with "losing his sensibility." He moved on to Soyinka's action in taking a *Guardian* cartoonist to task, seeing it as "over-reaction," and went on to charge the laureate with "wining and dining" in 'Wonyosi' social circles and with wearing his Nobel prize "like a chieftaincy title." He then took him to task for his comment on a television interview that he did not understand the controversial Structural Adjustment Programme (SAP) then being implemented in the country. After asking "is the poet in you dying?" he concluded: "The words of this letter diminish into insignificance against the groans of suffering masses who once thought you a poet of the people." The force of this attack was somewhat diminished when Sowande apparently reported that he had been visited by an Aunt who reminded him that the Sowandes and the Soyinkas were related and that he should cease quarrelling with his kinsman.

In a discursive reply, printed in *The Guardian* on 19 August, Soyinka suggested that the Aunt was fictitious, invented because Sowande was negotiating to prepare a programme of dramatic sketches on road safety and needed to build bridges with the head of the Road Safety Commission. This unsubstantiated charge was set in the context of an article suggesting that Sowande was in a national tradition of "deriving joy from the masochistic exercise of self-

wastage" - by which he meant the cynical and systematic undermining of the achievements of fellow countrymen. He attacked his critic at his weakest points - for example over the comments on SAP, which came in answer to a question asked in the dying minutes of an interview. He then charged Sowande with repeating and indeed fabricating rumours and repudiated the charges against him vigorously. He accused Sowande of seeking to clothe himself in "the Mantle of Political Virtue," and concluded with heavy sarcasm that Sowande had offered a "necessary and salutary" lesson: he is "a false evangel" who has been exposed, he has provided an example to society "of what it should not be - a community ruled by loud-mouthed opportunists who stoop to the most degrading activities of slander..."

Sowande maintained the momentum of this controversy at the beginning of the next month in "A Man from whom much is expected" shifting the grounds for his attack and burrowing into the details of the contract for Odu Themes Meridian to mount road safety drama sketches at a passing out parade of "Corpers" held on 11 August. The issue became one of dates and places, approaches, negotiations and cheques - with single signatories, delivered to him at his home! In all this Sowande saw the devious hand of the machiavellian laureate out to trap him. One can read the episode, as Sowande, does as a devious plot to ensnare someone who has dared to criticise Soyinka, or see in the handwritten notes and cheques delivered to homes the operation of an unbureaucratic organisation working against the clock and dependent on people

taking action rather than sitting behind desks waiting for invoices to be raised and for memoranda. to be typed.

In the course of his defence, Sowande made use of clumsy irony, and high-flown rhetoric. Also, as a brief, typo-ridden quotation from near the end of his riposte indicates, he wrote with messiahanic fervour, presenting himself as the beneficiary of divine intervention:

Acquarious looms large on the horizon in the splendour of a new age and the vibrations around us are so intense telling us to give birth to a new self, a new nation. I have felt the intensity of this vibration. It has assured me of Divine protection against all dangers in the process of this experience. Oh, such a bright future this nation has, only after we have turned back to truth irrespective of who we are.

Divine protection did not prevent the publication of a businesslike letter from Y. Ben-Ifode of the Federal Road Safety Commission (FRSC) dated 5 September, which provided a detailed account of dates, documents, cheques and visits. The Sowande letters were, Ben-Ifode said, available for inspection at RSC offices. The Editor of *The Daily Sketch* allowed the leader of Odu Themes Meridian to have the final word but it only served to muddy the water further: Sowande accused the FRSC of changing the dates on letters, seemed to think that because documents were handwritten rather than typed they had less authority, and appeared to believe that there was something significant in

that he had never visited a FRSC office - but conceded that he had visited the FRSC organiser at his office.

I have met those who considered that the financial management of the FRSC was exposed and Soyinka discredited by these allegations. But I suspect that no one changed sides. As far as I can ascertain, the newspapers did not send journalists to inspect the documents, and, just as important for the present purpose, there was no coverage of the dramatic sketches presented by Odu Themes Meridian at Abuja. This important initiative in road safety drama and the response to it went largely unexamined, though there is a reference in Ben-Ifode's letter to four out of the ten commissioned sketches being presented to an audience "drawn from among Drivers' Unions, Motor Owners Associations, Government drivers, Armed Forces drivers, etc." Apparently "a survey conducted later by the FRSC research team (showed) that Bode Sowande's team was well rated." The rest of the sketches and the recordings for television were still awaited.

This exchange of letters indicates the existence of a tremendous depth of resentment, with influences of all sorts, professional, political, and personal playing major roles. Undoubtedly Sowande was, at this point, a comparative novice in the conduct of public debates relationship, emerges as somewhat uncertain of himself, but, like the heroes of his own plays, terribly earnest.

During 1989, *Tornadoes Full of Dreams*, commissioned jointly by the French Embassy, Lagos, and the Ministry of Culture, Paris, to commemorate the French Revolution was put on, and the following year, possibly reflecting a change of policy, was published by Malthouse of Ibadan. Both the review of the production by Niyi Osundare and the critical evaluation of the text by Dunton draw attention to the advance that the play marks in Sowande's development as a playwright. Its complex structure incorporates scenes set among the slave traders on the Guinea Coast in the eighteenth century, the sufferings of the Middle Passage, events in San Domingo triggered by the French Revolution, episodes in France, commentary on events by the spirits of Napoleon and Nkrumah, and a "drama of reincarnation" in which the contemporary equivalents of the slave traders are paraded.

Composed partly in Liverpool *Tornadoes Full of Dreams* was "made possible," Sowande writes in an "Author's Note," "by the generosity of such works as *The*

Black Jacobins by C.L. R. James and Thomas Paine's classic *The Rights of Man* and other numerous books and archival materials." He described his reaction to the French revolution as "peculiarly African" and indicated that his play explored the "irony" that the freedoms which the Revolution had "released" in France were denied to the Africans in San Domingo.

Dunton regards the play's greatest strength as lying "in the plotting of its central narrative material, which sets up a series of tensions and establishes a powerful sense of potential, self-liberating action..." In substantiating the assessment that the play "marks a turning point in Sowande's dramatic career," Osundare drew attention to "the depth of characterisation, orchestration and poetic amplitude." He also expressed approval of the collaboration for the premiere with the musician Tunji Oyelana, and the play's vision, the "belief in a positive transformation of the world."

Clearly the text as it stands requires liberation through production and performance. This is particularly true of the final sequence, the "drama of reincarnation," which is more akin to a pageant or to agit-prop theatre than to conventional stage plays. Through spectacle and speech, Sowande comments on the contemporary African situation, the debt burden is literally presented on stage, and the issue of reparations to those who had suffered during the "black holocaust" is raised. An astute director with access to extensive resources might make a telling spectacle of the text, and an inspired musician

might transform the somewhat inept lyrics into a meaningful musical component of the production. Indeed Oyelana, it seems, achieved this. In the rest of the play there is a healthy liberation from the self-imposed limitations of much historical drama, but the writing occasionally sounds like a parody of period plays. For example, in the extended exchange between slave traders near the start of the play - which Osundare describes as "yawnful," there is an affected use of titles. This is continued in the dialogues between Napoleon and Nkrumah which hold up the action at various points - and which Dunton criticises for their "haziness." In them Sowande substitutes for any deeper characterisation the exchange of appellations such as "African friend" and "my friend of Corsican origin" which soon begin to weary the ear. The dialogues were not included in the first production.

Even more worrying than the lack of texture of imaginary exchanges is the lack of consistency and attention to detail. For example, Sidney, a British slave trader, having decided to capture Akinlade - who is involved in supplying a coastal traders with slaves, treacherously, and rather unconvincingly, decides to shoot him in order to capture him: the stage directions require that Sidney "whips out" a concealed weapon, fires and then "Blows the nozzle of the pistol with his breath. He puts the pistol away." This last is a piece of cowboy bravado which has been seen in a hundred "shootouts": it does not take into account the kind of pistols available in the seventeenth century, and establishes irrelevant associations with the stars of the silver screen. In

a subsequent scene on Sidney's slave ship, the Captain is told that ninety of his cargo of slaves have died and that there are five pregnant women. He says that "on any voyage the pregnant is a huge loss" and the implication is that they are thrown overboard. No explanation for this way of thinking is offered, indeed such information as is provided - about the need for profit and the length of time which passes after the voyage before women start conceiving - suggest that a pregnant woman would represent a particularly good investment. In a scene set some years later, Talbot, long the owner of a plantation on St Domingo, confirms to Magdalena, his mistress and the mother of his mulatto children, that he has sold her and their children. He jeeringly recalls that she had threatened to kill him if he ever did this and points out that she will have no opportunity to poison his food. He then says "Fetch me water, Magdalena." She does so, he drinks it and he dies, poisoned presumably. One can understand why the playwright included these elements: he wanted to show the treachery and inhumanity of the traders and the resourcefulness and determination of Magdalena. But the episodes do not pass scrutiny in the study, and would not go unnoticed in the theatre; they undermine any feeling that this is a thoughtful, informed, internally consistent treatment of history in dramatic terms. These critical comments should not be taken to suggest that the play as a whole was unappreciated, for example, sometime after it was presented France's Minister of Culture honoured the playwright with the title *Chevalier des artes et des lettres*.

based on a folk story, the production apparently made extensive use of music, song and dance, to tell the story of Akinla, whose boat capsizes and who tumbles through the window of Mammy-water's house under the sea. Despite his links with dry land, Akinla falls in love with Mammywater, but expectations of living happily together are threatened when the environment greedy businessman Adagun-Odo disposes of waste in the sea. Drama appears to be being used as an agent of cultural and environmental awareness.

International attention continued in 1992 with a production of *Flamingo* at the Gate Theatre in London, and the performance of *Ajantala-Pinocchio* at the Chieri International Festival held in Italy during July. Ajantala of the title of this unpublished play is defined by Soyinka in subjective but helpful terms in the notes to his poem "Idanre" as "Archetype of the rebel child, iconoclast, anarchic, anti-clan, anti-matriarch, virile essence in opposition to womb-domination." Pinocchio, in a sense a rebel child from a different tradition, reappeared in a paper entitled "Promoting the 'Black Athena' and an encounter with Pinocchio", dedicated "to Bologna in her celebration of the ninth centenary of the university." The first part of the address touches on the issue of the African contribution to Europe, and the second part makes use of Carlo Collodi's novel. Sowande writes: "Through this allegory we begin to see the morale of a frank portrait of the world culture in our present history." Pinocchio clearly learns a number of lessons and, in Sowande's

words, comes to recognise "the difference between illusion and actuality, between falsehood and truth."

At the end of February and in the middle of March 1993, Odu themes Meridian arranged an "Theatre Outreach Festival" in which *Circus of Freedom Square* was performed with *Arede Owo* and a programme of poems entitled "Kaleidoscope." Poets represented included, according to the programme, Niyi Osundare, Isi Omoifo, Tanure Ojaide and Okot p'Bitek.

Despite the overviews provided by Dunton and Richards, and despite the watching brief kept by such local critics as Osofisan, Omotoso and Osundare, the published material on Sowande remains scanty. This is in contrast to the theses prepared for universities in Freetown, Ibadan, Leeds and Lagos which have addressed such issues as the presentation of "inspiring positive types," the "role of the resident playwright within the repertory system," and "mythopoeia and contemporary Nigerian theatre." Together with a substantial number of Sowande's texts, these remain unpublished.

From the brief account of Sowande's work provided here, it will be apparent that there has been considerable evolution in the scale and style of his theatre: he has undertaken significant experiments with language and made forays into different kinds of didactic or inspirational drama. The variety of approaches adopted by those active in Nigerian campus and off-campus

theatre is suggested by those mentioned above, men such as Clark-Bekederemo, Omotoso, Osofisan, Rotimi, and Soyinka. Within this context, Sowande has made a distinctive impact, and, being among the youngest in this group, will continue to contribute to an evolving theatrical tradition. His dogged perseverance with his theatre company, now over twenty-one years old, will also ensure him a significant place in the theatre in Nigeria. Only a very formidable individual could hold together a company for so long in circumstances such as have prevailed in Nigeria, and Sowande, despite the sensitivities I have drawn attention to, clearly has the necessary qualities.

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To the editors: I am aware that the account of the debate provoked by the Open Letter of 5 May 1988 may have taken rather too much space. I regard it as an illuminating anecdote, but if it is considered to be too long I suggest something like.

During the middle of 1988, Odu Themes Meridian was approached by the Olu Agunloye on behalf of the Federal Road Safety Commission to produce some sketches for a passing out parade and for subsequent use on television. This development, which Sowande responded to with caution, provided an opportunity to use drama as a means of raising public awareness and improving public safety. At least four sketches were presented during August and the FRSC was happy with them, but unfortunately there is little evidence to hand about their form or content. Indeed the whole project was overshadowed by an exchange of "Open Letters" between Sowande and Soyinka, the head of the FRSC, in the months between May and September of the year in question. Underlying the conflict, which was acrimonious, seems to have been a variety of tensions, both personal and political, and a challenge by Sowande for recognition of his achievements in the Nigerian theatre and for his right to the moral high ground.