
UNIT 1 AN INTRODUCTION TO NIGERIA AND TO THE YORUBA WORLD

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1.0 OBJECTIVES

I shall begin by spending a little time briefly introducing the history and politics and economy of Nigeria, the homeland of Wole Soyinka, to you. A knowledge of this is essential since Soyinka's literary works have a crucial link to history and politics. His plays provide a commentary, often ironic, on past or contemporary events in Nigerian history and politics and suggest possible alternative modes of operation. This unit also includes a look at the main elements of Yoruba myth and religion. Soyinka's plays are replete with Yoruba mythological figures and without some preliminary knowledge of Yoruba myth and religion, you will feel lost. This unit ends with a look at Yoruba art and the way in which Soyinka distinguishes it from western artistic modes.

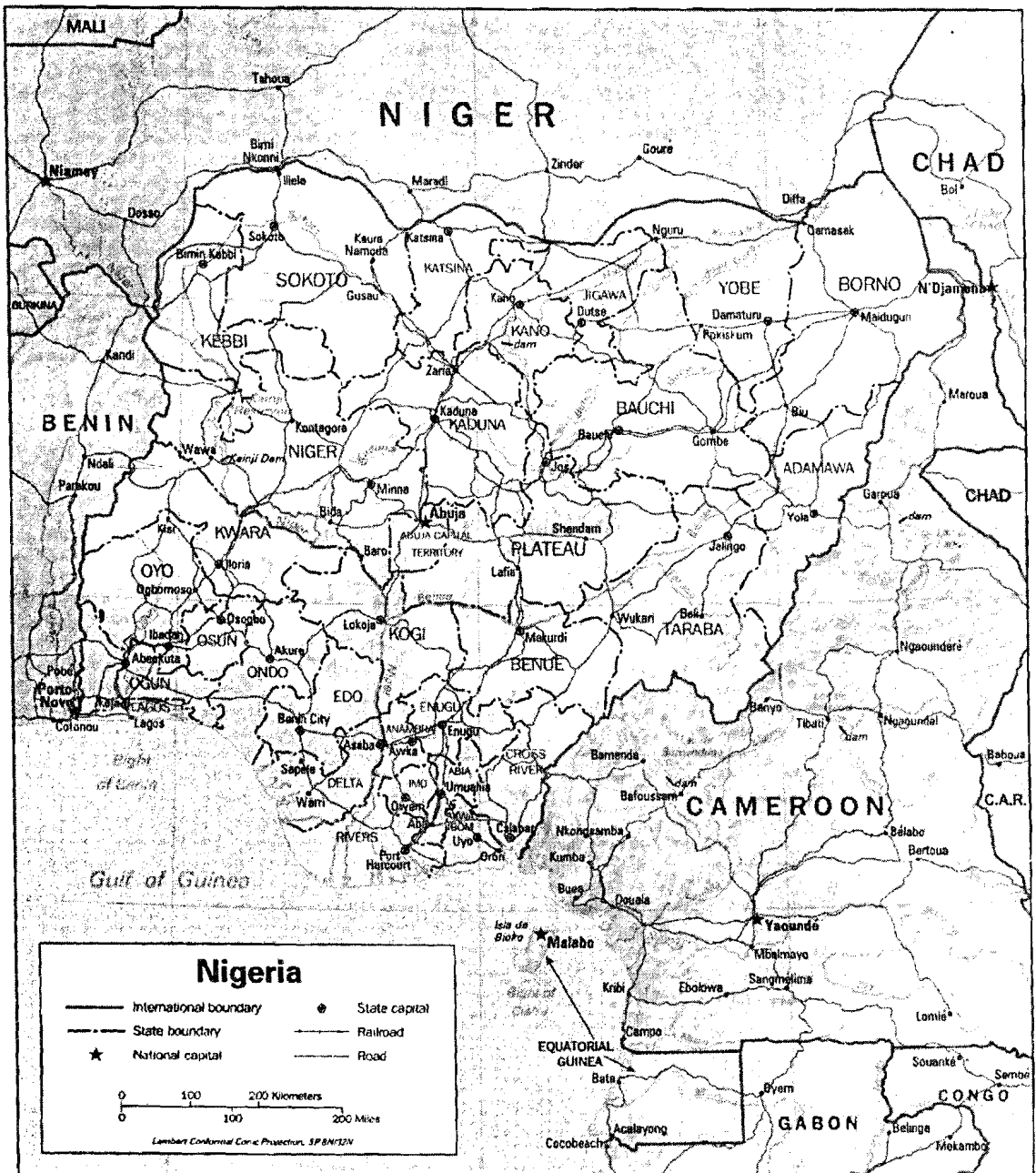
1.1 HISTORY AND POLITICS OF NIGERIA

Nigeria is a federal republic in Western Africa that was formerly a British dependency. Nigeria became an independent member of the Commonwealth of Nations in 1960. The following year it was joined by the northern part of the British Cameroons, a United Nations trust territory. In 1963 Nigeria adopted a republican constitution but retained its Commonwealth membership. It might be appropriate to keep in mind what Wole Soyinka observes in a 1993 interview:

When did Nigeria as a nation come into being? And how did it come into being? Nigeria was an artificial creation, and it was a creation which did not take into consideration either the wishes *or* the will *or* the interests of the people who were enclosed within that boundary. They were lumped together. So, the genesis of Nigeria, as with many African countries, is very flawed. (Maja-Pearce 153)

Western Nigeria is a complex of powerful city states and the first of these is Ife. According to Yoruba mythology it is the centre of the universe. Its ruler, Oni, remains an important figure in Yoruba religion. Oyo challenged Ife's supremacy and became more powerful in the 17th and 18th centuries. In the 1830s the new city

states of Ibadan and Abeokuta were founded as civil war became endemic. (Soyinka has been closely associated with all these states.) In the 1890s the British declared a protectorate over Western Nigeria. Wars and slave trade continued.



Since it was formed by the decisions of the European powers Nigeria was an unnatural creation. It has more than 300 languages although English is the official language. The various linguistic groups naturally have different political, economic, social and religious traditions, much as in the various states and union territories of India. The nations and polities within Nigeria range from the small to the large. The largest of Nigeria's so-called nations are Hausa, Fulami, Kanuri and Tiv in the north, Yoruba and Edo in the south-west and Ijaw, Ibibio and Ibo in the south-east. Of these, Hausa and Fulami have been Muslim for centuries.

The Yoruba and Edo peoples organised themselves into powerful kingdoms, some of which existed before 1000 A.D. In the state of Ife, over eight centuries ago the Yoruba produced some of the world's finest art. The most successful and complex Yoruba kingdom was Oyo, which dominated vast areas before its fall in the nineteenth century. Smaller but nonetheless powerful states succeeded Oyo and

some of these, such as Ibadan, Abeokuta, Ijebu and Lagos, continued to function with British support even after colonisation. For example, in the kingdom of Benin, the rival of Oyo and the centre of the Edo speakers, the wishes of the king were still law to the hundreds of thousands of inhabitants when the British took over the city. Yoruba and Edo had extremely complex religions which permeated through all levels of the society. Despite the work of the Christian missionaries, the traditional religion of Benin and Yorubaland claimed the support of millions. The impact of these traditional religions and myths may be sharply felt in Soyinka's *A Dance of the Forests*.

Now for a little of Nigeria's recent history. In 1966 the army intervened in an attempt to create a unitary government but the regional rivalries deepened. The following year the Igbo officers from Eastern Nigeria declared the secessionist republic of Biafra. This was followed by three years of warfare in which the federal government of General Yakuba Gowon liquidated Biafran independence. Gowon tried to prevent future secession by enlarging the number of regional states to twelve (these were increased to nineteen in 1976) but the government lost the people's support because it was so hungry for power. In 1975, Gowon was toppled by a coup led by Brigadier Murtala Ramat Muhammad. The change was short-lived: the following year Murtala was assassinated. The army continued in power under General Olusegun Obasanjo who instituted measures to restore Nigeria to civilian rule. As a means to this end multiparty elections were held in 1979. These led to the formation of the second republic under President Alhaji Shehu Shagari. In mid 1983 Shagari won a second term. The revenues generated by the 1970s oil boom were drying up due to, as most people believed, flagrant corruption and mismanagement. In a 1993 interview Soyinka said that Shagari's "reign" from 1979 to 1983 was a "disaster.... a zero, a minus" (Maja-Pearce 151). By the end of 1983, the second republic was replaced by a military regime under Major General Muhammad Buhari. Buhari promised that the new Federal Military Government (FMG) would end corruption and strengthen the economy. The currency was devalued, government jobs were cut back and university budgets trimmed. These measures were seen as harsh and they alienated workers, students and the middle class. The immediate expulsion of 700,000 aliens as a result of an order in March 1985 caused friction between Nigeria and other African countries. Moreover, in early 1985, the FMG had issued two divisive ordinances that were bound to be seen as autocratic, unfair and curbing the freedom of the people: the first--criticism of public officials was determined a criminal act and the second--the government could imprison "subversives" without trial.

Not surprisingly Buhari was replaced in a military coup by General Ibrahim Babangida, the leader of the dissenting members of the FMG, and who now promised, like his predecessors, to return Nigeria to civilian rule by 1992. He had the tough task of grappling with Nigeria's deepening economic chaos--a debt of \$25 billion to begin with--for which the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the World Bank promised assistance after protracted and complicated negotiations.

Under Babangida the style rather than the structure of the military government changed. Babangida promised leniency towards dissenters, he repealed the two offending ordinances of Buhari mentioned above and he released more than a hundred political prisoners. He continued to cut back on government expenditure but he diverted more funds to agriculture. He also put into motion the regulation of the monetary currency, the *naira*. Babangida's first few months in power were eased by a slight improvement in the economy, but many of Nigeria's old problems remained. The most critical of these were a) a continued dependence on oil exports, b) existing corruption at all levels, c) overpopulation, particularly in the cities, d) numerous conflicting ethnic groups and e) the friction between the two main

religious systems, Islam and Christianity, although both are replete with Yoruba influences in the way they are practised.

In December 1985 there was an attempted coup by Babangida's friend General Maman Vatsa. In 1986 student disturbances erupted. They began at Ahmadu Bello University and were quelled only after forty persons were killed and twenty campuses closed. Anti-police riots erupted in Lagos. Student protests continued at universities over the FMG's withdrawal of fuel subsidies. The escalation of violence, student protests and the action of workers and religious zealots threatened Babangida's regime and prevented it from fulfilling its plans of a return to civilian rule in 1992. A new decentralised civil service structure was built and in March 1988 elections for the local government councils were held. Plans for the second stage of transition to a civil government were drawn up. In April 1988 elections were held for members of the Constituent Assembly responsible for drafting the new constitution. The FMG based its plans on an improved economy on loans from the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the continuation of a unified government with minimal corruption *under* the broad military command structure.

I have given these details because Soyinka is a writer with a very strong social commitment. He has taken a strong and outspoken stand on many of the political shortcomings of the various military regimes as you will see from the description of his life in Unit 2.

1.2 ECONOMY OF NIGERIA

Nigeria is one of the African states with the most complex, diverse and potentially strong economies, in spite of the shocks resulting from the decline in oil sales. The traditional sector provides enough of the staple foods to keep imports at a minimum. The soils of Southern Nigeria are among the most fertile in the continent. The land in the north is enough for grain, cotton, and peanut cultivation. The drought of the 1970's caused severe damage only to a few districts because of effective water conservation. Thus it seems that many of Nigeria's ills come from corrupt politicians and autocratic military regimes rather than any radical shortage of natural or human resources.

1.3 A GLIMPSE INTO YORUBA HISTORY

From a general discussion of Nigeria I want to move on to a more specific discussion of the Yoruba, the Nigerian ethnic group to which Soyinka belongs, and its history and culture.

The Yoruba is one of the largest ethnic groups of Nigeria. There are approximately fifteen million Yoruba people in south-west Nigeria and the neighbouring Benin and Togo. They are loosely linked by geography, language, history and religion. Most of them live within the borders of the tropical forest belt, but remnants of the powerful Oyo kingdom include groups that live at the fringes of the northern Savanna grasslands. Archaeological evidence suggests that the ancestors of the Yoruba may have lived in this same general area of Africa since prehistoric times. In the mid eighteenth century the slave traders sent slaves of Yoruba descent to the Americas. Some of them resettled in Cuba and Brazil where elements of Yoruba culture and language can still be found.

Traditional Yoruba city states were never single political organisations. They were sub-divided into over twenty-five complex, centralized kingdoms. Of these Ile-Ife is universally recognised as the most senior and the most important Yoruba city. It was founded around 850 A.D. Its rival was the Oyo kingdom to the north-west which was founded around 1350 A.D. The Oni of Ife and the Alafin of Oyo were the most highly respected Yoruba kings in Nigeria (the latter appears in Soyinka's *Death and the King's Horseman*). The other major kingdoms were the Ijesha and the Ekiti in the north-east; the Shabe, the Ketu, the Egbado, the Ijebu and the Awori in the south-west; and the Oado, the Owo, the Itsekiri in the south-east.

For centuries the Yoruba lived in large, densely populated cities which were able to practice special trades. Most of the people commuted to the countryside for part of the year to raise the staple crops--yams, corn, cassava, cocoa (they produced 90% of the cocoa for Nigeria)--on family farms. The economy is structured around agriculture, trade, and handicrafts. Women do not normally work outside the home. They attain social status through their role in the market system rather than through their husband's economic status. Each city-state maintains its own interpretation of history and religious traditions and its unique art style, yet all acknowledge the ritual sovereign of Ife, all consult Yoruba herbalists and divination priests, and all honour the pantheon of Yoruba gods.

The Yoruba towns were either farm-oriented or were located at the crossroads of the trade routes where traders stopped to rest. In most towns the market place was usually located in front of the king's palace in the centre of the town. The towns were founded by Baale (father of the land) who in turn was named king. He was the religious and political leader of the town. It was his job to name the chiefs, Otun, the king's right-hand man and Balogun, the war chief. The king was considered a sacred being, like a living god. He could not be seen or spoken to directly. He could not eat in public. People believed that he did not die--he merely passed on his crown to another Yoruba.

1.4 YORUBA MYTH AND RELIGION

There are a number of conflicting and confusing elements in Yoruba religion. The variety and lack of homogeneity is a result of the differences in religion between the different city-states and even villages. The same deity may be male in one village and female in another. The trickster god may have three different names within the same village. Also, certain elements of other religions, particularly Islam and Christianity also account for the variety.

The structure of Yoruba religion is that of "diffuse monotheism," as one scholar puts it, although given the number of Yoruba gods this does not seem to be a very helpful suggestion. The scholar probably hailed from the west and was trying to simplify Yoruba religion for western consumption. To a person living in India the plethora of Yoruba gods should sound very familiar. Obatala and Olorun/Olodumare/Edumare seem to be the most important gods, the first the god of creation, the second a supreme deity who breathes life into creation. There exist also several hundred lower gods. The pantheon of deities is called the Orisha or Orishala. It is referred to in both the singular and plural. In the oral tradition, there is a tale of the high god or 'Supreme deity' as Soyinka terms it, variously called Olorun or Olodumare or Edumare, asking the Orishala to descend from the sky to create the first earth at Ile-Ife. Orishala was delayed and his younger brother (some say his wife) Oduduwa, accomplished the task. Later sixteen other Orishala came down from the heavens to

create human beings and live on earth. The descendants of each of these deities is said to have spread Yoruba culture and religious principles throughout the rest of Yorubaland. Sometimes Olorun and Orishala/Obatala are seen as one and the same. Obatala is the god of creation, often a sculptor god who has the responsibility to shape human bodies. Physically deformed humans are supposed to be either his votaries or the victims of his displeasure. Olorun/Olodumare/Edumare reserves the right to breathe life into these bodies. Soyinka concludes that the "art of Obatala is thus essentially plastic and formal" (*Myth, Literature and the African World* 140n). Soyinka does not find the concept of Obatala very inspiring. "The unblemished god, Obatala," he writes, "is the serene womb of chthonic reflections (or memory), a passive strength awaiting and celebrating each act of vicarious restoration of his primordial being....His beauty is enigmatic, expressive only of the resolution of plastic healing through the wisdom of acceptance. Obatala's patient suffering is the well-known aesthetics of the saint" (*Myth, Literature and the African World* 143). Rather than Obatala, it is Ogun who sets the springs of tragedy in motion. But more of that when I discuss Ogun.

The basic pantheon of Yoruba gods is variously estimated at 201, 401, 601 or more. Some of these divinities are primordial, having existed when either Obatala or Oduduwa was creating the earth. Others are heroes, both male and female, who left an abiding impression on the people. Some of the divinities may also be natural phenomena--mountains, hills, rivers--that have influenced people's lives and history. The most popular gods are Sango or Shango (the god of thunder and lightning), Ifa or Orunmila (the god of divination), Eshu or Ishu (the messenger and trickster god), Ogun (the god of iron and of war), Olokun (the god of the sea), Shokpona (the god of the earth) and Oko (the god of agriculture). Fa or Fate is the hidden companion of the gods and of humans.

There is a continuity between the divinities, the kings and the ancestors. The two major gods are Oduduwa and Sango or Shango. They are also believed to have had human forms and to have reigned in Ife and Oyo respectively. The Yoruba still refer to themselves as the children of Oduduwa. Sango or Shango creates thunder and lightning by casting "thunderstones" down to earth. The Yoruba believe that these stones have special powers. Sango/Shango is said to have four wives, each of whom is represented by a major Nigerian river. The chief wife, Oya, is represented by the Niger.

Olorun ("the owner of the sky") or Olodumare/Edumare ("the almighty") is never actively worshipped. Unlike Sango/Shango, Olorun has no shrines and no priests and asks for no sacrifices. Although Olorun/Olodumare/Edumare is much akin to the Judeo-Christian creator of all things, the giver of life and the final judge, the Yoruba ignore him in their day-to-day lives. Some scholars conjecture that Olorun/Olodumare/Edumare may have developed through the influence of Islam and Christianity, as a simulacrum of the gods of those religions. The Yoruba possibly find the concept of an almighty god so overwhelming and remote that they cannot relate Olorun/Olodumare/Edumare to their quotidian reality.

Another important deity is Ogun, the god of war, of the hunt and of iron. *A Dance of the Forests* is the only play of Soyinka's in which Ogun makes an appearance. In Yoruba religion and myth, he serves as a patron deity of blacksmiths, warriors and all who use metal in their work. He also presides over deals and contracts. In Yoruba courts people swear to tell the truth by kissing the machete sacred to Ogun. He also stands for courage in battle and the spirit of pioneering, and he brings good luck to hunters. The Yoruba consider Ogun fearsome and terrible in revenge. If one breaks a pact in his name, swift retribution will follow. However, as Soyinka points out, Ogun's justice is "transcendental, humane but rigidly restorative," whereas

Sango/Shango's justice is "primarily retributive" (*Myth, Literature and the African World* 141). Legend has it that the Orisha were trying to carve a road through the forest. Of the Orisha only Ogun could accomplish the task because only he had the proper implements. Thus he should have been the king of the Orisha, but since he did not care for the position it went to Obatala. Some versions of the Yoruba religion combine Ogun with the trickster god Eshu. Ogun is associated with both creation and destruction and Ogun festivals include animal sacrifices and processions marked by metal-tipped palm fronds to please or to appease him.

Ogun seems to be a particular favourite of Soyinka's. In terms of Hellenic values he sees Ogun as a combination of the Dionysian, the Apollonian and the Promethean "virtues." To Soyinka, Ogun is, in many ways, the "first artist and technician of the forge," a creature who "evokes Nietzsche's Apollonian spirit, a 'massive impact of image, concept, ethical doctrine and sympathy.' Obatala is the placid essence of creation; Ogun the creative urge and instinct, the essence of creativity" (*Myth, Literature and the African World* 141). We may recall that Prometheus, son of Iapetus, was the figure in Greek mythology who in one version of the creation myth, formed humans in the likeness of gods, using the clay and water of Panopeus in Phocis (Robert Graves, *The Greek Myths* 1:34). Prometheus was also believed to have stolen fire from the gods to give to the mortals and was punished by Zeus for his pains. Soyinka sees Ogun as "the first actor--for he led the others...(the) first suffering deity, the first creative energy, the first challenger, and conqueror of transition. And his, the first art, was tragic art..." (*Myth, Literature and the African World* 145). In an interview he says that he found Ogun not just a warrior but a creative influence, "by implication the father of poetry", and very liberating, "having grown up in a narrow form of Christianity" ("Wole Soyinka on Yoruba Religion").

Significantly, the Yoruba pantheon has no evil gods. The trickster god, Eshu, is merely mischievous. Legend has it that posing as a merchant he once sold magnificent gifts to a man's two wives. The ensuing battle for the husband's favour tore the family apart. Eshu is also the guardian of houses and villages. In this role he is called "Baba" or father (the same as in Hindi or Bengali). Eshu is also the god of Ifa, a sophisticated and complex divinatory tool, some call it a form of writing, which uses nuts, signs, and increasing squares of the number four to predict the future. Geoffrey Parrinder claims that Ifa is "the only instance of writing practised in modern times" among the non-Christian and non-Islamic peoples. It has remained enormously popular till today.

Festivals are an integral part of Yoruba life. The three main celebrations take place in July (in honour of Ifa), in September (in honour of Orun) and in January. The last is called Bere and is the most important festival. It marks the end of harvest time. In all the festivals, processions and performances take place, but in the Bere festival, the fields are ritualistically set alight to celebrate and illuminate the fruits of the soil. The Yoruba New Year takes place in March, when the villages and towns take part in communal purification rites, helping each other to confess their sins and starting the new year afresh together. Soyinka's *A Dance of the Forests* is modelled on this New Year festival.

The Yoruba treat their ancestors with great respect, which is only to be expected in a culture with only oral records of the past. Anthropologists debate whether the rituals dealing with ancestry are religious in nature or simply a mark of respect. At least a few Yoruba tribes believe that their ancestors become demi-gods after death, but only once they have assumed the persona of the true deity. This belief resembles another facet of Yoruba faith--the phenomenon of possession--in which mediums take on the characteristics of one or another of the gods. The characteristics of some of the main gods are so well known that mediums as far off as Haiti can loll back

their heads and cross their legs in the same way when possessed by, say, Sango/Shango the lightning god. The earth is seen as the home of the ancestors' remains. When offerings are made to earth they also become offerings to the ancestors to make them comfortable in their new home. The dead ancestors are thus viewed as religiously significant and close to the earth.

Wole Soyinka describes the Yoruba religion as a "liberating" one because it is so open to other religions and so tolerant of them. "The Oba would go to a mosque even if he was a Christian," he says. "Traditional religion is not only accomodating, it is liberating because whenever a new phenomenon impinged on the consciousness of the Yoruba...they do not bring down the barriers--close the doors....They do not consider it a hostile experience. That's why the corpus of Ifa is constantly reinforced and augmented....You have Ifa verses which deal with Islam, you have Ifa verses which deal with Christianity." For example, the myth of Moremi who sacrificed the only son to save the town has clear parallels with the story of Jesus. Soyinka claims that the Yoruba "had no hostility to the piety of other people" because they had the ability to see other beliefs as other systems and not as "pagan" or "kafir" or superstitious mumbo-jumbo. Soyinka is implying that Islam and Christianity do not possess the same tolerance towards other religions as does the Yoruba faith. We in India can see a link between Soyinka's view of Yoruba religion and the words of Ramakrishna Paramhansa who said all religions are but different paths to the same godhead. (Significantly, in the passage I quote from Geoffrey Parrinder above, the word "pagan" is used, but I have substituted in my paraphrase the more tolerant description "non-Christian.") Soyinka terms all religions as "metaphors for the strategy of man coping with the vast unknown."

1.5 YORUBA ART

The Yoruba were famous for their art and craft. Their wood sculpture remains famous to this day. Everything in this society is carved out of wood: doors, drums, ritual masks. The doors are often covered with carved panels of scenes of everyday life, of history or of mythology. Even the hinge posts are carved with figures, making them look like totem poles. The masks are simple facial carvings that represent different types of Yoruba society--the trader, the servant or the seducer.

In *Myth, Literature and the African World* (1976), Soyinka writes, "Yoruba traditional art is not ideational...but 'essential.' It is not the idea (in religious arts) that is transmitted into wood or interpreted in music or movement, but a quintessence of inner being, a symbolic interaction of the many aspects of revelations (within a universal context) with their moral apprehension" (141).

About Yoruba music Soyinka says that it tries to return to the roots of language and expression. Words are not seen as alien to music: the "nature of Yoruba music is intensively the nature of its language and poetry, highly charged, symbolic, myth-embryonic....In cult funerals, the circle of initiate mourners, an ageless swaying grove of dark pines, raises a chant around a mortar of fire, and words are taken back to their roots, to their original poetic sources when fusion was total and the movement of words was the very passage of music and the dance of images" (*Myth, Literature and the African World* 147).

Both religious ritual and music play a large part in the creation of Yoruba drama, as Soyinka evocatively explains in *Myth, Literature and the African World*. Soyinka links the birth of Yoruba drama to the Ogun mysteries. No "copying of actuality" or straightforward mimesis of the seen world is required here. Yoruba theatre,

particularly Yoruba tragedy springs from what Soyinka terms a sense of transition, a transition from the immortal to the mortal. However, the "element of eternity which is the gods' prerogative" is not sensed as something exclusive to the gods or excessively remote from human experience as in the Christian world view. The Yoruba concept of time being, as I understand it, not exclusively linear or teleological, accounts for what Soyinka terms "contemporaneous existence." To the Yoruba, "present life, contains within it manifestations of the ancestral, the living and the unborn" (*Myth, Literature and the African World* 143-4). And these manifestations are contained in a vital, living way rather than in the form of diffuse abstractions. These concepts will become a little easier to understand once we look at the way they are realised in *A Dance of the Forests*.

Soyinka describes Yoruba tragedy as being "the anguish" of the "severance" between gods and mortals. He calls this "the fragmentation of essence from self" (*Myth, Literature and the African World* 145). The music of tragedy is "the stricken cry of man's blind soul as he flounders in the void and crashes through a deep abyss of a-spirituality and cosmic rejection. Tragic music is an echo from that void; the celebrant speaks, sings and dances in authentic archetypal images....All understand and respond, for it is the language of the world" (*Myth, Literature and the African World* 145).

It is important to realise that the anthropomorphic gods are in no way seen as remote--the Yoruba thus feel free to indulge in "camaraderie and irreverence" when they speak of the gods. The Yoruba religion stresses "the innate humanity of the gods themselves, their bond with man through a common animist relation with nature and phenomena" (*Myth, Literature and the African World* 145).

Soyinka has spoken of Yoruba drama and its links with religious ritual from a philosophical viewpoint. In *Decolonising the Mind: the Politics of Language in African Literature* (1986), the writer Ngugi Wa Thiong'o speaks of the roots of African drama in more material terms. According to Ngugi, African drama springs from many different sources:

- a) harvest rituals, such as the rite to bless the magic power of tools
- b) fertility rites and ceremonies which "celebrate life oozing from the earth, or from between the thighs of humans and animals" (36)
- c) ceremonies to bless spears, warriors and other defenders of the community. These songs and dances would act out battle scenes. They had a story and a chorus to underline the fate of evil doers, thieves and idlers.
- d) rituals to mark the different stages of life, such as the ceremonies for birth, circumcision, marriage and burial of the dead. These rituals could appease the occasionally hard-hearted gods who were represented in these rituals by men in masks. People came to believe that "Nature, through works and ceremony, could be turned into a friend" (36).

Some of the dramas could take weeks, even months to be performed. The Ithika in Kenya which is held every twenty-five years takes six months to perform.

In pre-colonial Africa, drama was not an isolated event, according to Ngugi. It was an essential part of the "rhythm of daily and seasonal life of the community" (37). Often it drew its energy from other activities. It provided entertainment as well as "moral instruction." Even more than this it was "a strict matter of life and death and communal survival." It could take place anywhere, not necessarily on stage.

For Ngugi the "real language" of African theatre can be found in "the struggles of the oppressed," the struggles which give birth to "a new Africa" (60). "The peasants and workers of Africa," Ngugi continues, "are making a tomorrow out of the present of toil and turmoil." The theatre which uses this language will find a response not only "in the hearts and minds of the participants" but also "in the hearts of those living outside the immediate environment of its physical being and operation" (60) i.e., in urban African audiences or in non-African audiences.

1.6 LET US SUM UP

Nigeria was originally a British dependency; it became independent in 1960. It is an artificial creation where people of conflicting religions and ethnicities were forced to live together. Yoruba is one of the largest ethnic groups of Nigeria, loosely linked by geography, language, history and religion, and it is the group to which Soyinka belongs. The structure of Yoruba religion has two supreme gods, Obatala and Olorun, the creator and the breather of life, as well as a number of important other gods such as Ogun and Eshu. Ogun, the god of war, of the hunt and of iron is Soyinka's favourite. He represents to Soyinka, the struggle of the artist to create. Soyinka describes the Yoruba religion as tolerant and accomodating. There is a close relation between mortals, ancestors and the gods. The gods are not seen as evil or distant from mortals. According to Soyinka, Yoruba tragedy springs from the anguish that comes about as a result of the mortal's separation from the immortal. Yoruba people feel free to laugh at their gods and be irreverent about them. Festivals are very important in Yoruba religion. Drama came from these festivals and rites, such as harvest festivals and fertility rites, and ceremonies such as those to bless warriors. *A Dance of the Forests* is modelled on the Yoruba New Year festival. Soyinka describes Yoruba art as "essential" in that it expresses "the quintessence of inner being."

1.7 GLOSSARY

monotheism:	doctrine that there is only one god
Dionysian:	of Dionysus, the Greek god of wine, suggesting the power of emotion, or a lack of intellectual control
Apollonian:	of Apollo, the Greek god of the sun, suggesting intellectual control
Promethean:	like Prometheus, a character in Greek mythology, who, in one myth, formed humans in the likeness of gods, and in another myth was supposed to have stolen fire from the gods to give man

1.8 QUESTIONS

- Q.1. Why is Nigeria an "artificial creation"?
Q.2. What, according to Soyinka, is the link between Yoruba religion and Yoruba tragedy?

- Q.3. Write a short note on Yoruba religion.
Q.4. What are all the different things Ogun represents to the Yoruba people and why is he Soyinka's favourite god?

1.9 SUGGESTED READINGS

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UNIT 2 WOLE SOYINKA'S LIFE AND WORK

Structure

- 2.0 Objectives
- 2.1 Wole Soyinka's Early Life and Works
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2.0 OBJECTIVES

We now move on to Wole Soyinka's life and his work. Along with biographical details this unit also mentions Soyinka's literary output so one gets the sense of the way in which his literary career unfolds. Contemporary developments in Nigerian politics are also mentioned because as stated earlier, politics is what Soyinka's work



springs from, and changes in the political situation affect both his life and his work. For example, he has to seek political asylum in the United States and this in turn affects the way he writes about Nigeria in his work. All three, his life, his work, and Nigerian politics, must be seen as a totality and not as separate elements.

Akinwande Oluwole Soyinka (pronounced Shoy-ING-ka) was the second child of Samuel Ayodele and Grace Eniola Soyinka. He was born on the 13th of July, 1934. He spent his childhood in Abeokuta, on the Ogun river, in Western Nigeria. From 1954 to 1959 he was in England studying at the University of Leeds and then later in London, working. In 1960 he returned to Nigeria to do research, write and direct plays. Since the '60s he has published novels, poetry, autobiography, plays which have established his international reputation. He visited Europe and America frequently and finally moved to the latter to escape tyrannical political regimes in Nigeria. In 1986 he won the Nobel Prize for literature. Today, he is known as one of the foremost African writers, having written around twenty books in such various genres as drama, poetry, novels, autobiography, memoirs, criticism and political commentary.

Chronological List of Wole Soyinka's Major Works (genre in parenthesis only if not mentioned in title)

A Dance of the Forests 1963 (play)
The Lion and the Jewel 1963 (play)
The Swamp Dwellers 1963 (play)
Before the Blackout 1965 (play)
The Interpreters 1965 (novel)
The Road 1965 (play)
'Idanre' and Other Poems 1967
Kongi's Harvest 1967 (play)
The Trials of Brother Jero 1969 (play)
Madmen and Specialists 1972 (play)
The Man Died 1972 (prison notes)
A Shuttle in the Crypt 1972 (poetry)
Bacchae of Euripides: a Communion Rite 1973 (dramatic adaptation)
Camwood on the Leaves 1973 (play)
Season of Anomy 1973 (novel)
Death and the King's Horseman 1975 (play)
Myth, Literature and the African World 1976 (non-fiction)
Ake: The Years of Childhood 1981 (autobiography)
Opera Wonyosi 1981 (play)
"Shakespeare and the Living Dramatist" *Shakespeare Survey* 36 1983 (lecture cum essay)
A Play of Giants 1984 (play)
Requiem for a Futurologist 1985 (play)
Isara: A Voyage Around Essay 1990 (autobiography)
Mandela's Earth and Other Poems 1990
A Scourge of Hyacinths 1992 (play)
From Zia, With Love 1992 (play)
Art, Dialogue, and Outrage: Essays on Literature and Culture 1993
The Open Sore of a Continent: A Personal Narrative of the Nigerian Crisis 1996
Burden of Memory, the Muse of Forgiveness 1999

2.2 THE FIFTIES

Family, Birth, Childhood and Early Education: From the first volume of Soyinka's autobiography, *Ake* (1981), we learn of his Yoruba parents and the place he lived in. Ake, in the Abeokura region. At this time Nigeria was still a British

dependency. His father, Samuel Ayodele, was a teacher and later a headmaster of a school. His mother, Grace Eniola, dubbed "wild Christian" in Ake, was born into the large and influential Egba family which pioneered the spread of Christianity through Western Nigeria. They were also well-known for composing music which fused the Yoruba and European traditions. His great grandfather, the Rev. J.J. Ransome-Kuti, was politically inclined, and in 1905 became famous for preaching at St. Paul's Cathedral. Soyinka's uncle was a public figure and his aunt was for many years a leading figure in the women's movement in Nigeria.

His mother was a huge influence on Soyinka. She was a teacher, a performer and a political activist; she also ran a shop opposite Alake's palace. She made sure that her son was exposed to all aspects of the Yoruba life as well as being aware of politics in the larger world outside. (Ake had been a major base for European colonial activities in Western Nigeria since 1842.) There was quite a contrast between the life in Ake and the society of Soyinka's father's home town, Isara, in the Ijebu region. Isara was relatively isolated from the Christian influence and the people there had little contact with white traders, and so the Yoruba influence, both culturally and spiritually, was marked.

Soyinka, like other Yorubas, has three names: Akinwande Oluwale Soyinka. A Yoruba child is born with one name, "Amutorunwa," christened with a second, "Abiso," and has an attributive name, "Oriki." In Soyinka's case, "Olu," used as a compound in Oluwale, originally belonged to a child of high or princely birth. "Akin," in Akinwande means strength or the strong one. Soyinka's parents' adherence to the traditional naming procedure suggests the traditional base of their family. Predictably, perhaps partly as a result of his mother's family's political influence and Christian religion, Soyinka went to St. Peter's Primary School rather than a local Yoruba school. He also spent a year in the grammar school of which his great uncle was in charge.

In 1946 he entered the elite government college at Ibadan, the capital of Western Nigeria. He wrote sketches for the college drama group and won prizes for the poems he recited at the arts festivals. In 1950 he passed his School Certificate examination and went to work as a clerk in Lagos. He read his short stories on the national radio and from then moved on to pioneering Nigerian radio drama.

In October 1952 Soyinka entered the newly-established University College at Ibadan. There he read English, Greek and History. He was extremely active in a number of student activities outside the classroom. He played the lead in a number of theatre productions. He co-founded the fraternity "The Pyrates" and edited the student publication, *The Eagle*. Along with his academic work he continued his creative writing.

After passing the Intermediate Arts examination Soyinka went to the University of Leeds in October 1954. While working for an Honours degree in the School of English, he had G. Wilson Knight, the famous Shakespearean scholar, as his teacher. Wilson Knight was also active in directing a number of classical and modern plays with the students. While at Leeds Soyinka acted with the university theatre group and had his short stories published in the student literary magazine. His interests varied from singing in a rag revue to politics. He was particularly conscious of any racist behaviour. In 1957 he was awarded an upper second class Honours degree.

This period is crucial as being the period of his literary apprenticeship. He drafted two important plays, *The Swamp Dwellers*, a sombre play where the protagonist is caught between the poisonous old order of the rotten swamp and the soulless new order of urban life, and *The Lion and the Jewel*, one of the most sparkling and

successful of his early plays. The latter was read on behalf of the Royal Court Theatre, in Sloane Square, London, and the young playwright was invited to be a part of the activities of the Royal Court Theatre as a script reader.

In 1958 Soyinka moved to London where he taught, did broadcasts and wrote. The theatre was very much a part of his life. Under the leadership of whom he would later call "that remarkable theatre-manager George Devine," Soyinka was introduced to the early work of the innovative and experimental playwrights John Osborne, Edward Bond, Arnold Wesker, N. F. Simpson, John Arden and Harold Pinter who were later to become icons, as well as the work of those he called "stylistic and ideological pariahs:" Samuel Beckett and Bertolt Brecht (Maja-Pearce 2). He directed a group called the Nigeria Drama Group in a production of *The Swamp Dwellers* in December 1958 as part of the annual University of London Drama Festival. In February 1959 both *The Swamp Dwellers* and *The Lion and the Jewel* were produced at the Arts Theatre, Ibadan, to an enthusiastic audience. Also in 1959 Soyinka composed a song against British colonial violence in Kenya. In November 1959 he directed "An Evening" of his own work in the theatre where plays like *The Invention*, a satire about how an accidental missile explosion eliminates the dark pigment in African skin, were performed. Soyinka was becoming more and more agitated about racism, about apartheid and increasingly interested in the techniques employed by Black American playwrights and fiction writers to deal with the issue of racism. It was at this time that he was gradually evolving into a playwright who employs the idiom of African art to write plays in English, plays that respond to contemporary events, plays that are highly politically conscious, without being mere propaganda pieces.

2.3 THE SIXTIES

In 1960, hearing that Nigeria was to become independent, Soyinka returned to Nigeria. From 1960 to 1962 he was travelling all over the country on a Rockefeller Foundation grant in order to study the traditional drama of Western Africa. This was an enormously fruitful and productive time. As he travelled Soyinka studied the extended dramatic structure of the Yoruba religious rituals and the festival performances. The harvest festivals, the initiation ceremonies, the rites for the dead, all these involved community participation in highly structured rituals that extended over days or even weeks. These rituals used music, dance, masquerade and symbolic acts to link living and unseen forces. We can see the influence of these dramatic rituals in *A Dance of the Forests* and other plays. It is also important to note that Soyinka imbibed the dramatic structure of these ritual performances, a structure that incorporated elements like the masquerade and the play-within-a-play, songs and dances. This sort of structure was quite different from the shapes of plays belonging to the western theatre tradition, particularly the classical tradition, which he had studied and seen performed in England.

At this time Soyinka was also attached to the English department at the University of Ibadan. He had friends in the radio and television business as well as among editors of journals looking for Nigerian writers. Soyinka joined and became the leader of this community of artists and young, creative people. In 1960 *The Swamp Dwellers* was broadcast along with two new radio plays, *Camwood on the Leaves* and *The Tortoise*. Soyinka also took part in radio talks and discussions. He wrote a T.V. play called *My Father's Burden*, and a stage play, a one-act farce, called *The Trials of Brother Jero*. All the plays were produced and, in fact, *The Trials of Brother Jero*, a satire on the Bar Beach sects at Lagos and the story of a wily religious charlatan who outwits his disciples and creditors, has remained one of Soyinka's most popular plays.

Soyinka formed a group called "1960 Masks" with some friends who were experienced amateur performers. In 1960, in Lagos and Ibadan, *A Dance of the Forests*, the play in our syllabus, was produced by this group. This was a revised version of an earlier anti-apartheid play called *The Dance of the African Forest*. In this production Soyinka played the role of Forest Father. This, the group's first stage production, was addressed to Nigeria at the time of Nigeria's independence (October 1, 1960). In this play Soyinka deliberately challenged Nigerians' expectations concerning their country's future in the political sphere. In the field of aesthetics, he challenged his compatriots' assumptions about the form taken by Nigerian theatre written in English.

While the play is undoubtedly complex and confusing, it established Soyinka as the enfant terrible of African theatre. He was seen as a writer who delighted in shocking, unsettling and confusing his audience, an independent thinker, an ambitious playwright, one who set out to pillage and combine, often uncomfortably, both Yoruba and western dramatic traditions, and a man of undoubted theatrical skills. The relationship between Soyinka and the Nigerian public remained ambivalent, however. This is something I shall examine in greater detail later.

In 1961 Soyinka wrote scripts for a popular weekly radio series called *Broke-Time Bar*. He tried to introduce hard-hitting social and political comment, and this was not very well-received. Soyinka ceased to write for the series--this was one of his early brushes with the establishment. In the same year he was committed to prepare a trilogy of plays for television, *House of Banijegi*, which was only partially realised, and *The Night of the Hunted* and the last, which had no name and only two episodes and was not produced. In the same year Soyinka attended conferences in Italy and the United States. His poetry was published in Sweden. Soyinka also presented a film about Nigerian culture which was sadly reduced to "Culture in Transition" and which contained an abbreviated version of his play *The Strong Breed*, a play about the persistence of scapegoat sacrifices in certain African communities.

He continued to be a regular contributor to Nigerian controversies through the press. To a certain extent, he manipulated the media to influence the people of his country. He attacked a powerful movement called Negritude, he jeered at the expatriate literary critics, he complained of press censorship (this was a time of political violence, victimisation and repression in Nigeria). In 1963 the "1960 Masks" produced a satirical revue written by Soyinka. He got the post of lecturer in English at University College, Ife; however, he didn't last long. In 1963 he resigned along with other faculty members in protest against the state of Emergency that was imposed by the Western Nigerian chief, Awolowo. Soyinka continued his literary criticism in talks and essays.

In 1964 there was a strike and talk of a revolution. Soyinka advocated a people's uprising and worked towards it. At this time there were a number of plays that brought together Nigerian theatre in English with Nigerian theatre in Yoruba. Soyinka contributed *The Lion and the Jewel*. A new group was formed by a band of theatre enthusiasts who were hopeful of becoming professional called "Orisun Theatre." Here the productions were more professional unlike the amateur "1960 Masks."

In 1965 political violence erupted in Western Nigeria. Ministers were murdered and party arson was rampant. Soyinka valiantly produced *Before the Blackout*, an attack on opportunist politicians, corrupt time-servers and conscienceless manipulators. In August that year there was a national crisis. Soyinka's *Kongi's Harvest* was produced in the Federal Palace Hotel, Lagos. In September 1965 Soyinka travelled

to Britain to read a long poem, "Idanre," as part of the Commonwealth Arts Festival. He acted in an advisory capacity on the production of his metaphysical-satirical play, *The Road*, a play about the meaning of death in a purposeless and transitory existence, which was presented on the fringe of the festival at the Theatre Royal, Stratford. He also took part in a recording of *The Detainee*, a political piece written for the BBC. It warned people against one-party states and dictators. It was broadcast to a large part of Africa although it was not published. In 1965, back in Nigeria, Soyinka was appointed as senior lecturer at the University of Lagos. In this year he published his major novel, *The Interpreters*, which some claim to be the first really modern novel to come out of Africa. There were elections in Nigeria, marred by violence, and Chief S.L. Akintola was declared the winner. Instead of the winner's victory address, the Nigerians heard part of a tape which began, "This is the voice of Free Nigeria" and went on to advise Akintola and his "crew of renegades" to leave the country. Was this a private broadcast? A prank? A rehearsal for an overthrow of the government? Listeners were intrigued and a warrant was issued for the man who was behind it all--Wole Soyinka.

In the trial that followed the arrest, a trial that was occasionally as farcical as parts of *The Trials of Brother Jero*, but which, nevertheless, could have brought a heavy sentence, Soyinka pleaded "Not guilty." He was eventually set free on what some regarded as a technicality. His jubilant supporters hoisted Soyinka on their shoulders and carried him from the court. This trial naturally brought Soyinka a great deal of publicity for some weeks.

The years 1966 and 1967 were turbulent ones for Nigerian politics. At first there was a coup of the radical and progressive officers. Then a counter-coup brought Yakuba Gowon to power. There was a secession of the region of Biafra and Nigeria drifted into civil war. Despite the political upheavals, Soyinka was as productive as ever. He wrote poetry ("Massacre October '66" and "For Her Who Rejoiced") and essays and directed plays like Lindsay Barrett's *Home Again* and Arthur Miller's *Crucible*. Soyinka also completed and submitted for publication the important works, "And After the Narcissist?" (a work of criticism), "Of Power and Change," (a piece of political comment) and "The Fourth Stage: Through the Mysteries of Ogun to the Origin of Yoruba Tragedy" (an important piece of dramatic theory which is included as an appendix under the title 'The Fourth Stage' to his later work *Myth, Literature and the African World*, 1976). Predictably, Soyinka was not silent on the political front either. In his numerous contributions to the Nigerian press he campaigned for appropriate peace initiatives in the north and a cease-fire in the war against Biafra. He also published a furious indictment against those he called "patriots and other sordid racketeers." He was arrested and detained without a trial in August 1967 partly because of the indictment.

Soyinka was detained for twenty-seven long months, fifteen of which were spent in solitary confinement, in the Kaduna Prison. He describes his prison experiences in *The Man Died* which was published only in 1972. The title refers to the fact that the government kept Soyinka incommunicado in an effort to silence his rebellious voice. All the time that he was in prison Soyinka wrote poetry with a quill and cell-manufactured "ink" in between the lines of printed books. He also completed preliminary writing for plays and a novel. Despite the long confinement, the man's spirit could not be broken nor could his hand be stayed.

2.4 THE SEVENTIES

Once released in October 1969 Soyinka was appointed the director of the school of drama at the University of Ibadan. At this time Soyinka produced his play, *Kongi's Harvest* (a play about the tyranny and cruelty rampant in postcolonial Africa) giving

it an anti-military, anti-Gowon slant. The following year Soyinka prepared the screenplay of *Kongi's Harvest* for a film company. In March and April, 1970, Soyinka acted the lead role of Kongi in front of the film cameras. A few months later, in July, at Soyinka's initiative, the Theatre Arts Company and a department of Theatre Arts was established in Ibadan. Soyinka was invited to the Eugene O'Neill Centre in Waterford, Connecticut in the United States. He took with him an incomplete manuscript of his play *Madmen and Specialists* which he may have begun in prison. While in the United States he added to the script, reworked it and presented it at the Centre and to local black communities. In March 1971 he presented a revised *Madmen and Specialists* back home in Ibadan. The same year, he left Gowon's Nigeria for a "brief exile," which he spent mainly in Europe.

Between 1971 and 1974 Soyinka travelled in many parts of the world, delivering lectures, writing essays, compiling a book of African poetry, writing *The Man Died* and a second novel, *Season of Anomy*, in addition to three important plays. The first of these, *Jero's Metamorphosis*, was like the sketches of the '60s, only longer and more elaborate in form and pessimistic in tone. *The Bacchae* was written on commission from the National Theatre in London and was a radical rewriting of the ancient Greek playwright Euripides's masterpiece. *Death and the King's Horseman* was written while Soyinka was a fellow at Churchill College, Cambridge. It was based on a historical event. At the same time, 1973, as the fellowship at Churchill College, Cambridge, Soyinka was Visiting Professor at Sheffield University, England.

In 1974 Soyinka left Europe for Accra, Ghana. He became the editor of Africa's leading intellectual magazine, *Transition*, and used it to support socialist revolutionary movements in Africa and to attack tyrants like Bokassa and Idi Amin. Around this time he changed his name to Ch'Indaba. He became engaged in a debate with those who regarded him as a reactionary figure because they wanted to radically decolonise African literature. In spite of this ongoing debate, Soyinka joined in the inauguration of the Union of Writers of African Peoples and was elected its General Secretary.

In July 1975 there came another change in the Nigerian political scene: Gowon was overthrown in a coup and Murtala Muhammad came to power at the head of a military government. In December of that year Soyinka returned home and within a month, in January 1976, he was appointed Professor at the University of Ife. Soyinka's alliance with the establishment was an uneasy one, particularly after the assassination of Murtala Muhammad during an attempted putsch. Olusegun Obasanjo then became head of state. Soyinka's *Myth, Literature and the African World*, a collection of lectures delivered in England in 1973, was published in this year. It is an invaluable reference book for those unfamiliar with African drama and the African world-view and written, as he explains, tongue-in-cheek, in the Preface, as a response to those academics in England who "did not believe in any such mythical beast as 'African literature'" (vii).

Nigeria was passing through very trying times. The rise of oil prices in the '70s created an oil-boom economy, and suddenly everyone was out to make a quick fortune. Political corruption was blatant; inequalities in wealth rampant. Intellectuals and artists believed that theatre, like the other arts, should contribute to positive social thinking and a better community sense. To this end, Soyinka took on certain civic responsibilities, such as improving road safety and involving himself in the administration of the second Black and African Festival of Arts and Culture which was held in January, 1977.

In December 1976 Soyinka's *Death and the King's Horseman* was produced, followed, in 1977, by his *Opera Wonyosi*, an adaptation of Brecht's *Threepenny Opera*. *Opera Wonyosi* attacked, often in song, a number of African tyrants and many of the values, or rather, non-values, of oil-boom Nigeria. This was a large-scale production, held in a well-equipped theatre building. Plans to present the play in Lagos, however, were thwarted by certain reactionary forces. Soyinka then formed a new group called the Guerrilla Theatre Unit of the University of Ife. For this group he began writing little plays or playlets to be performed on the streets, in the marketplaces and in lorry parks--very akin to Indian street theatre. Two such playlets or "hit and run pieces" as they were called, under the title *Before the Blow-Out* followed up the careers of the crooks and charlatans introduced in the *Opera Wonyosi* and in this way commented on the contemporary events surrounding the preparations for a return to civilian rule.

In 1979 Soyinka directed and acted in *The Biko Inquest*, an edited version of the trial of Steve Biko, the South African leader who died in police custody. All the parts were played by black actors. The work was an expose of the inhumanity and deceit inherent in the apartheid of South Africa. The piece was also relevant to Nigeria where police atrocities and a corrupt judiciary were omnipresent. In September and October 1979 Soyinka directed *Death and the King's Horseman* in Chicago. The production was very well-received and another performance was held in Washington D.C. Soyinka was highly acclaimed in the United States, but the picture was slightly different in Nigeria. Although Soyinka made a number of trips back to Nigeria, his people felt he had deserted them at a critical time: Nigerian elections were on. In October Shahu Shagari was elected President. The opposition, the United Party of Nigeria or the UPN, declared that Shagari had won by unfair means. Soyinka's affiliations were with the UPN. Although Soyinka was attracted to the radical socialism of the People's Redemption Party (the PRP), he never joined that party. He said he considered himself a "self-suspended member," since he challenged the attitudes and actions of some of its leaders.

2.5 THE EARLY EIGHTIES

Soyinka was the chairman of the Oyo State Road Safety Corps, a result of his long association with civic upliftment and his belief that art and artists could make a difference to society. All of 1980 he was very busy with the activities of the Road Safety Corps and in the university life at Ife. The Vice Chancellor of the university, Tunji Aboyade, was his close friend and hunting companion. In December he delivered a lecture on the topic, "The Critic and Society: Barthes, Leftocracy and other Mythologies," which continued his debate with the Leftist critics.

In 1981 Soyinka was a visiting professor at Yale University in the United States. He returned to Nigeria frequently. Back in Ife there were a number of pressing public issues: acute water shortage, the collapse of the hostel, overcrowding in student rooms, attacks on the Vice Chancellor, the deaths of four students while taking part in a peaceful demonstration, even ritual murder. Besides being involved in these crises, Soyinka also wrote a brief sketch attacking the racketeering in rice in Nigeria. This play which was presented in the heart of Lagos as part of a demonstration.

In January 1982 Soyinka launched *Ake: The Years of Childhood*, his colourful, funny and intense autobiography of the first eleven or so years of his life, in Abeokuta. This book was begun in Accra and completed after Soyinka's return to Nigeria in 1976. Hailed as a major literary achievement, the work carries enough evidence of Soyinka the dramatist, particularly in its characterisation and dialogue. There is the

description of Mrs. Odufuwa, Soyinka's godfather's wife, visiting their home. Soyinka admired her as "quite simply and without dispute from any but the blindest man with the coarsest sensibilities, the most beautiful woman in the world" (*Ake* 99). She had a trick of giving each child a nickname and the one she chose for Soyinka was Lagilagi, the Log-splitter. However, Joseph objects to the name being inappropriate because Soyinka "cannot *la* anything. He is so lazy he can't move a fly off his nose until it has begun to produce maggots." Adding insult to injury Joseph points to Soyinka's younger brother Dipo and says, "Look at his brother, almost three years his junior. He is far tougher than the one you've named Lagilagi. I bet Dipo can already lift that axe and split wood with it." Soyinka's mother, Wild Christian, joins in at this point: "All he does is sneak off into corners by himself--reading, always reading. He pretends to be busy with books because he cannot tackle anything else." When Soyinka's sister sniggers, "If you touch him he will faint, then die altogether of fright....let him run under the skirts of his books," and Joseph says "Dipo can give him a thorough beating," Soyinka is impelled to salvage his honour in front of the woman he so admires (he calls Mrs. Odufuwa his "future wife") by beating his younger brother to pulp (*Ake* 99-102). *Ake* is also the work of a man long criticised by fellow Nigerians for being "too European," but the book is full of Yoruba rhymes and phrases, translated only in footnotes, and in no way has Soyinka tried to give his family a Euro-friendly gloss to make them more accessible to the white reader. In fact, at one stage Soyinka recalls the conversation he has with his great-grandfather Ransome-Kuti about the relative merits and demerits of the African schools versus the schools run by the whites. Ransome-Kuti is very surprised that Soyinka has shifted his allegiance from the African AGS schools to those run by the whites: "They teach you to say 'sir' in those schools. Only slaves say 'Sir'. That is one of their ways of removing character from boys at an impressionable age--Sir, sir, sir, sir, sir! Very bad...." (*Ake* 185). When Soyinka explains that the schools run by the whites offer scholarships, Ransome-Kuti thinks he can understand why the boy prefers them. *Ake* proved to be very popular in the United States and England. *The Evening Standard* (England) called it "a major contribution to contemporary English literature that will surely number among the classics of childhood," while the *Village Voice* (U.S.A.) described it as a "superb act of remembrance...dazzling reading."

Soyinka took advantage of the launch of the book to continue his attack on Shagari's government. He listed as the ironic "achievements" of the ruler the Bakolori Massacre, the subversion of the Kano state government, the destruction of the offices of the *Triumph* newspaper, Shuguba's deportation, the storming of the elected legislature, the depletion of the national wealth of Nigeria, the butchering of Bala Muhammad, and the deaths of students, athletes and youth workers at the hands of the police.

In March and April, 1982 Soyinka staged an early radio play of his, *Camwood on the Leaves*, at the National Theatre in Lagos. This play proved that he was interested in more subtle forms of consciousness raising than strident and vituperative social criticism. On 18th August, 1982, Soyinka was once again in England, this time delivering the Stratford-on-Avon lecture on "Shakespeare and the Living Dramatist." Influences of Shakespeare can be seen in a number of his plays, including *A Dance of the Forests*. In December of the same year the African service of the BBC broadcast Soyinka's half-hour radio play, *Die Still Rev. Dr. Godspoke!* This play was concerned with the widespread influence of metaphysicians and parapsychologists in Nigeria. In early 1983 Soyinka directed a full-length play, *Requiem for a Futurologist*, and toured with it. This play made fun of the credulous and exposed charlatans in much the same way as *The Trials of Brother Jero*. The play was occasionally accompanied by agit-prop sketches: *Festac 77*, *Green Revolution*, *Ethical Revolution* and others, known collectively as *Priority Projects*.

Here the means of social criticism were spectacle, simple dialogue, hard-hitting lyrics and good music. In July 1983 the songs were recorded and released on a record titled *Unlimited Liability Co.* The title song was one which critiqued the Nigerian government tongue-in-cheek as a badly-run company led by a chairman who lacked the will and the ability to control corrupt directors. The record was sold and broadcast before the August national elections. A little before election day another Soyinka song, "Take the first step," replenished the ammunition of the opposition parties in their campaign to beat Shagari and his National Party of Nigeria (NPN) at the polls.

The elections were predictably violent and turbulent in some states. The results revealed Shagari as the victor once again. Soyinka went to London and through the British press and the African service of the BBC he described the background to the elections, including the manipulation of the western press and the distortions in the official results. He predicted that there would be "a coup or a civil war or a combination of both." Soyinka returned to Ife in spite of threats of police and libel action against *The Man Died*. His predictions were proved right when, on 31 December, 1983, Shagari was overthrown by a coup which brought Muhammad Buhari to power. The abuses of the Shagari government which Soyinka had already pointed out--a vastly corrupt administration, irregularities in the marketing of rice, the construction of a new capital at Abuja--were now cited by the coup makers. Soyinka was, by his own admission, "in the thick of the '83 election" (Maja-Pearce 151). Although Soyinka applauded Buhari's anti-corruption stance, he did not agree with the sweeping ban Buhari imposed on all political parties.

During 1983-84 Soyinka had worked on a film, *Blues for a Prodigal*, which was originally planned, in Soyinka's words, as a "straightforward propaganda film...an almost unambiguous call to arms"(Gibbs 17.) However, after the December coup of the Shagari government, the approach was modified. In February 1984 came the verdict on *The Man Died*: despite the new government, the book was banned. In May 1984 a production of Soyinka's play *The Road* opened in Chicago (where *Death and the King's Horseman* had been so well-received in 1979) and, in December 1984, Soyinka's *A Play of Giants* premiered at Yale University, where he had been a Visiting Professor in 1981. Like *Opera Wonyosi*, *A Play of Giants* is a severe attack on contemporary African dictators like Jen-Bedel Bokassa, the malignant dictator of Central Africa of almost comic-opera proportions, Idi Amin of Uganda, Macias Nguemo of Equatorial Guinea and, of course, General Yakubu Gowon of Soyinka's own Nigeria.

In 1986 Wole Soyinka was awarded the Nobel Prize in literature, to many the ultimate accolade that can be won in one's lifetime. However, Soyinka was not one to let any honour bestowed by the west muffle his tongue or blindfold his conscience. In his acceptance speech, "This Past Must Address Its Present," Soyinka launched a searing attack on the ingrained racism in many of the heavyweights of western culture, Locke, Voltaire, Hegel, Hume, Montesquieu. He felt their works ought to be stamped with the warning, "THIS WORK IS DANGEROUS FOR YOUR RACIAL SELF-ESTEEM" (Maja-Pearce 21). He is amazed that the work of the ethnologist Leo Frobenius, "a notorious plunderer, one of a long line of European archaeological raiders," who laments that the beauties of Yoruba art be left to such "degenerate and feeble-minded posterity" as the Yoruba people, is still revered, even by black scholars (Maja-Pearce 18-19). Such an outspoken attack is typical of Soyinka's courage of conviction and reminds us, what an important agent of social change the artist can still be if he or she is not afraid to speak out.

2.6 THE LATE EIGHTIES AND THE NINETIES

In 1988 Soyinka was appointed Professor of African Studies and Theatre at Cornell University. *Isara: A Voyage Around Essay* the sequel to *Ake: The Years of Childhood* appeared in 1990 as did *Mandela's Earth and Other Poems*. *From Zia, With Love* (1992) is a cutting expose of contemporary Nigerian politics and society. It is written in much the same vein as Soyinka's earlier play, *Requiem for a Futurologist*, except that the mood seems to be even darker. Soyinka's disenchantment and disillusionment with Nigerian political leaders is by now quite deep-rooted. This is undoubtedly a result of his long political activism, of being able to see these leaders from close quarters. The play *A Scourge of Hyacinths* was also written in the nineties. *The Open Sore of a Continent: A Personal Narrative of the Nigerian Crisis* (1996), an impassioned examination of the contemporary political turbulence in Nigeria, appeared in 1996. In this Soyinka describes what he calls "my 'Rambo' departure from the Nigerian nation space." In this book Soyinka's fury is focussed on a single day--June 23, 1993--and on one man--the brutal military dictator, General Sani Abacha whom Soyinka describes in 1997 as "the most ruthless, unconscionable dictator we have ever known in Nigeria." It was on that day that the country's free and fair elections were annulled and the victor, Moshood Abiola, imprisoned. "Under a dictatorship a nation ceases to exist," says Soyinka in *The Open Sore*. "All that remains is a fiefdom, a planet of slaves regimented by aliens from outer space." Although in Nigeria the opposition has been exiled, imprisoned or driven underground, Soyinka hopes that they are quietly mobilising. The book was named one of the twenty-five best books of 1996 by the American publication *The Village Voice*.

Soyinka fled to the United States in 1995, fearing he was about to be arrested. That self-imposed exile lasts to this day. In March 1997, he was charged with treason. Authorities under the dictator Sani Abacha claimed Soyinka and fourteen others were behind a series of bombings. Since Abacha's death in June, military ruler Abdulsalami Abubakar has freed hundreds of political prisoners, scheduled elections and promised a return to civilian rule. Abubakar dropped the charges against the fifteen people, saying it was a reconciliatory gesture. While Soyinka said "the right thing had been done," he refused to return to Nigeria. Soyinka now spends most of his time in the United States. He has been a Professor in African American Studies at Emory University, Atlanta, U.S.A since 1996. He travels to England and other parts of Europe to deliver talks or to conduct poetry workshops. In a 1993 interview with 'Biyi Bandele Thomas he speaks forcefully about the mess Babangida created in Nigeria--"a divided army, a divided nation, and all because of the...quirks, of the irrationality of one individual and his tiny junta" (Maha-Pearce 148). At one point he laments "something is certainly required, call it ethical rearmament, call it human rearmament, we certainly need some kind of rearmament. And it can only begin with an improvement in the quality of the life of the people, with an evident commencement of transformation of the physical environment, and of course a reduction of corruption" (Maja-Pearce 157.) So we see that the issues that so ignited the young Soyinka are still close to his heart--the amelioration of the lot of the common person, civil liberties, a minimal degree of corruption on the part of the ruling classes accompanied by a large dose of efficiency. He is pragmatic enough to know that no corruption is an impossibility. As he says in the same interview, he'd prefer "a competent crook rather than an incompetent, inept angel" as the head of state (Maja-Pearce 156). He tells John D. Thomas in 1997 that it is his "commitment to the cause" in Nigeria that allows him to teach only a single semester at Emory and to leave the other semester entirely free for his own work. The former military ruler Olusengun Obasanjo won the Nigerian presidential elections in Spring 1999. At the time of this manuscript going to press, he is still the President. For Nigeria, Africa's

most populous country, ruled by the army for the past fifteen years, civilian rule appears very distant. Soyinka's decision not to return is perhaps a wise one in the circumstances.

2.7 LET US SUM UP

In this unit we have taken a look at Soyinka's family, his childhood and the four main decades of his eventful life, a life which continues to this day in exile in the United States. Soyinka's family, particularly on the maternal side was a remarkable one and his mother and maternal relations played an important role in his childhood. He was Christian and partly English-educated but he was closely in touch with all things Yoruba. His years in England (he went there on a scholarship) in the late fifties proved to be very fruitful. In Leeds he learnt all about the western theatre tradition, and in London he had hands-on experience working in the Royal Court Theatre. This was the period of his literary apprenticeship, and he drafted and produced two of his early plays, *The Swamp Dwellers* and *The Lion and the Jewel*, in London and in Ibadan, Nigeria.

1960, the year of Nigerian independence, had Soyinka writing and producing *A Dance of the Forests* for the occasion of Nigeria's independence. He travelled all over Nigeria on an American grant studying the traditional drama of Western Africa and the ceremonies and rituals associated with Yoruba festivals--all these were to influence his work. He taught at the University of Ibadan and formed a theatre group called "1960 Masks" which staged *A Dance of the Forests* with Soyinka himself playing Forest Father. Soyinka wrote scripts for radio and television critiquing social ills and wrote to the newspapers at any hint of political controversy. In 1965 Soyinka published his first novel, *The Interpreters*, which some claim is the first really modern novel to come out of Africa. From 1965 onwards there was considerable political unrest in Nigeria with widespread violence. Soyinka, at this time a senior lecturer at Lagos, was arrested for broadcasting a message which advised Akintola, the winner of the elections, to leave the country. After a farcical trial Soyinka was released. In the sixties he remained very productive despite the political turmoil, writing and publishing essays, and staging plays by Miller and Barrett. He was arrested and detained without a trial for twenty-seven months partly because of a furious indictment he wrote of the political regime. Even when in solitary confinement in Kaduna Prison Soyinka did not stop writing. When he was released he was appointed the director of a school of drama at Ibadan. He acted in and produced *Kongi's Harvest*, created a department of Theatre Arts in Ibadan, and travelled to the United States and produced *Madmen and Specialists* there and back home in Ibadan.

In 1971 he left on a brief, self-imposed exile from Gowon's Nigeria and spent the next three years travelling in many parts of the world, lecturing, writing essays, compiling a book of African poetry besides writing plays (*Death and the King's Horseman*, *Opera Wonyosi*) and a second novel. The rest of the decade was spent in Ghana, Nigeria, the United States and Europe, writing plays, having them produced, editing the leading African intellectual magazine *Transition*. All the while governments were being formed and overthrown in a crisis ridden Nigeria.

In the eighties Soyinka undertook a number of civic responsibilities such as being Chairman of the Oyo Road Safety Corps. He divided his time between Yale, where he was Visiting Professor, and Nigeria. He published *Ake*, the vivid account of his childhood, wrote and broadcast radio plays, worked on a film, and managed to be in the thick of the 1983 Nigerian elections as well. While his account of his prison

experience, *The Man Died*, was banned, his plays were being produced quite regularly in the United States. He returned to Ife from London in 1983 despite threats of police and libel action against *The Man Died*. In 1986 he was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature and launched a scathing attack on racism and the misrepresentation of Africa by European scholars in his acceptance speech.

In the late eighties and nineties Soyinka continued to teach in the United States and to write scathing political critiques both in the form of fiction and non-fiction. In 1995 he fled from Nigeria to the United States fearing political persecution. Despite the present Nigerian government's pardon of the 1997 charge of treason, he refuses to return. At present he is on the faculty of Emory University, U.S.A., teaching only a single semester so that he can write ceaselessly for the cause of freedom and an able democracy in Nigeria.

2.8 GLOSSARY

Pariah:	social outcast
Pillage:	plunder
Enfant terrible:	literally French for "unmanageable child"; a person of startlingly unconventional behaviour and ideas
Negritude:	The quality or characteristic of being a Negro (Black); affirmation of the value of Black or African culture, identity, etc.

2.9 QUESTIONS

- Q.1. What are the ways in which Soyinka's family and childhood influenced him?
- Q.2. What did Soyinka learn from his apprentice years in London and from touring Nigeria on a Rockefeller grant? Suggest briefly how disparate elements are blended in his work.
- Q.3. Write an essay on Soyinka's political activism.

2.10 SUGGESTED READING

Gibbs, James. *Wole Soyinka*. London: Macmillan, 1986.

Thomas, John D. "A Dramatic Life." Online. Internet. 1 Sep. 1998.

Soyinka, Wole. *Ake and Isara*. London: Minerva, 1991.

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UNIT 3 *A DANCE OF THE FORESTS*: SUMMARY

Structure

- 3.0 Objectives
- 3.1 Summary of Part One of the play
- 3.2 Summary of Part Two of the Play
- 3.3 Summary of the Play-Within-A-Play: *The Court of Mata Kharibu*
- 3.4 Let Us Sum Up
- 3.5 Glossary
- 3.6 Questions

3.0 OBJECTIVES

In this unit I have summarised the two parts of the play as well as the play-within-a-play. This is to help you keep track of the often confusing plethora of characters and incidents that unfold in this play. Since the characters double up and take on two roles, the possibility of losing one's sense of direction increases. This unit can also be used as a means of ready reference while one is studying the next unit, the critical analysis of the play. I have highlighted the names of characters on their first appearance--beware, the names too often sound alike! Try not to confuse the characters like Adenebi and Obaneji.

3.1 SUMMARY OF PART ONE

The play begins with a short prologue spoken by *Aroni* the lame one which establishes the connection between the two sets of characters placed in the two different time frames of the play, the first the present, during the Feast of the Human Community and the second the past, during the reign of *Mata Kharibu*. *Aroni* also briefly introduces the concepts of *Ogun* and *Eshuoro* and how they are presented in the play. By way of transition to Part One *Aroni* speaks of the totem pole, the "symbol of the great re-union" that *Demoke*, the son of the *Old Man*, has been chosen to carve.

After the prologue the *Dead Man* and the pregnant *Dead Woman* appear on stage and wonder whether they have come to the right place. They ask for help and directions to *Adenebi* the Council orator, *Demoke* the carver, *Obaneji* and *Rola* the courtesan, all of who refuse. Thus within the first few minutes of the play we have met almost all the main characters. As a result of the behaviour of the living characters the two dead characters feel they should not have obeyed the summons to appear in the world of the living. After the exit of the dead pair the four living characters sit down and start talking. They talk among other things of the totem that *Demoke* has carved and which is now the centre of attraction. The reappearance of the dead pair makes the living wander off stage in order to avoid contact.

The next section (there are no acts and scenes in this play--stage settings denote changes in locale) is an exchange between *Aroni* the lame one and *Murete* a tree imp about the festivities and rituals that are about to begin to celebrate the gathering of the tribes, among them the welcoming of the dead. *Aroni* wants to extract

information from the mischievous and unwilling witness, *Murete*, as to who it has seen passing by him (*Murete* is hidden in his tree home). We learn that the dead pair has been sent by *Aroni* as a result of the request of the living for some representatives of their illustrious ancestors. *Aroni* informs *Murete* that one of the four living characters who has passed by *Murete*'s tree is a servant of *Ogun*.

Once *Aroni* exits and *Murete* disappears inside his tree to continue spying, *Agboreko*, the Elder of the Sealed Lips, enters and tries to coax *Murete* out of the tree and extract information, only to be told that he has to return later. Next it is *Ogun*'s turn to enter and get information from *Murete*--this he does by the simple means of forcing a lot of alcohol down *Murete*'s throat. We learn from *Ogun* that it is *Demoke* the carver who is *Ogun*'s servant among the living characters. There's also some talk of *Eshuoro*, a wayward cult-spirit, whom *Murete* drunkenly threatens to bite if he comes anywhere close. Before leaving *Ogun* says that he will not forget that *Demoke* had injured the araba tree, *Eshuoro*'s favourite, while carving the totem pole.

After *Ogun*'s exit the four living characters we have encountered before, *Demoke*, *Obaneji*, *Rola* and *Adenebi*, reenter and begin their conversation by conjecturing about the identity of the two dead persons. *Obaneji* reveals that he knows quite a bit about people's secrets because he has been a senior filing clerk for the Courts. *Rola* begins to taunt him but *Adenebi* interrupts and says there should be no unpleasantness since they have to spend time in each others' company. *Obaneji* explains some of the interesting parts of his job, such as the records for motor lorries, for which he owns a passion. There was one such lorry, the Incinerator, for which the concerned official took a substantial bribe and changed the capacity from forty to seventy. Once it caught fire only five of the seventy on board managed to escape. All of the passengers were on their way to the gathering of the tribes.

Obaneji asks *Adenebi* to find out some information for him. The characters launch into an argument as to how the bribe-taking official ought to be punished. *Demoke* says he'd much rather die from a fall from a great height as did his assistant on the totem pole rather than be burnt to death like the unfortunate lorry passengers. *Adenebi* refuses to answer how he would wish to die. *Rola* answers *Obaneji*'s question with a kiss. When *Obaneji* refuses to respond to her advances she taunts him saying he is not a man. *Obaneji* retorts by saying that she is so promiscuous and so cruel that the graveyard is full of her lovers. As a result of this exchange *Demoke* guesses that *Rola* is none other than the infamous *Madame Tortoise*. He confesses that she dominated his thoughts when he carved the totem. *Rola* attacks *Obaneji* for revealing her identity. *Adenebi* is disgusted to be in her company and shocked at her brazenness. *Rola* asserts that she regrets nothing and if her lovers killed themselves that was their problem. She is proud to have used her physical assets to acquire wealth. *Adenebi* accuses her of ruining thousands in order to amass her riches. *Demoke* asks *Rola* if she was aware of the legendary *Madame Tortoise*.

The dead pair enters and the Dead Man speaks of how he'd always wanted to return here to his home. *Demoke* wants to know if the carver who fell to his death from the totem blames *Demoke*. The dead pair leaves in despair of being saved by the living, saying, "May you be cursed again."

After they leave *Demoke* confesses that he pushed his apprentice, *Oremole*, off the totem pole. Unable to bear being taunted by the boastful *Oremole*, servant of *Oro*, and "fawner of *Eshuoro*," and unable to tolerate being prevented from trimming the araba tree, *Demoke* pushed *Oremole* off the pole and then cut off his head.

A man's voice is heard calling Demoke, and Obaneji leads them away in the wrong direction. Ogun enters and admits that he imitated Demoke's father's voice just now. Ogun takes Demoke's crime on his own shoulders because Oro is his enemy and Oremole was Oro's follower. It was Ogun who made Demoke raise his hand because Oremole would not allow Demoke to bow the araba tree's head and master wood with his iron axe. Ogun tells Forest Father, masquerading as a human being (Obaneji) that he'll not desert his son at the moment of trial and punishment.

As Ogun leaves the Old Man enters with two councillors and lots of beaters. The Old Man asks after his son Demoke but the councillor tells him that he has seen Adenebi, not Demoke. Adenebi enters and says he hears they're looking for "some shady characters." The Old man says yes. They have no cages or nets to capture them--just driving them away will be enough. The Old Man says they have to drive away their guests because the wrong people have come--statesmen were asked for and executioners came instead.

The Old Man orders petrol to be poured all over the forest because the dead cannot stand the smell. Then he changes his mind, realising that the whole forest would be burnt down. Instead, he orders that an old wagon, the Chimney of Ereko, be driven through the forest, polluting it with smoke. The Old Man is sure no ghost can survive the Chimney's smoke.

Adenebi is confused by the Old Man wanting to drive away the very guests he has invited. He recalls the ambitious plans for the gathering of the tribes--the building of the totem pole, the bringing home of the "scattered sons" of their "proud ancestors," be they sages, conquerors, philosophers, mystics, warriors, even from hell if need be. The Old Man says that their plans have misfired and instead of great people, "slaves and lackeys" have come to accuse their hosts in the land of the living and undermine the whole celebration. Adenebi goes on and on about how he had expected the great heroes of old to appear while the Old Man restlessly waits for Agboreko to come and report what information he has got from Murete. Agboreko enters and reports that the dead pair, so full of their own woes, has been taken under Aroni's wing so they won't trouble the living. The dead pair is closely related to Madame Tortoise. Murete has refused to reveal where Aroni will hold his court. The Old Man asks Agboreko if Oremole, Demoke's apprentice, is among the dead and if the dead pair will accuse Demoke on Oremole's behalf. Agboreko does not know. The Old Man then asks if Forest Father works along with Aroni, and Adenebi asks about Forest Father and the others are amazed that he does not know of him. Agboreko leaves to try and get more information from Murete. As Adenebi leaves he tells the Old Man that he saw Demoke in the forest and that there were two others, besides himself, with Demoke. When the Old Man asks him if he heard anything or met anyone else, Adenebi says there were two "unpleasant looking" "mad creatures" who followed them around and made him sick. He also discovered that the woman with them was Madame Tortoise. In order to avoid being seen with such a disreputable woman, he left. The Old Man becomes very agitated to learn that his son is in the company of Madame Tortoise and he conjectures that the fourth person (Obaneji) must be Eshuoro, thirsting for the blood of the slayer of his servant, Oremole. He calls out to Agboreko who enters almost immediately. The Old Man and Agboreko conjecture who the fourth living being could be. The Old Man is convinced it is Eshuoro while Agboreko surmises that it could even be Forest Father himself. The Old Man becomes impatient and agitated, and Agboreko tries to calm him down by reciting proverbs.

The beaters enter along with the flogger who clears a space for his whip which he then freely uses. The dancer, the dancer's acolyte and the Dirge-man begin their work. The Dirge-man asks for room for the dead and Agboreko makes his prophecy

with the help of the divination board, the bowl and kernels. But his prophecy--"The loft is not out of reach when the dust means to settle"--does not satisfy the Old Man. The Dirge-man and Agboreko take turns in making a number of statements referring to figures in Yoruba myth. The Dirge-man repeats his request for leaving the dead enough "room to dance." The Old Man makes fun of Agboreko's meaningless platitudes ("Proverb to bones and silence" is a particular favourite). Suddenly a lorry appears, its headlights flashing--it is the Chimney of Ereko. Agboreko mistakes its roar for thunder. It is now Agboreko's turn to laugh at the Old Man for believing he can get rid of the dead with such toys.

The crowd panics at the sight of the Chimney and tries to flee. Adenebi is knocked down and trampled. He cries out for Demoke and Madame Tortoise, whom he now terms his "friends." An assortment of forest creatures and spirits pass across the stage grumbling and holding their noses because of the petrol fumes from the lorry.

Obaneji, Rola and Demoke enter. Obaneji once again asks Adenebi if he has found out the information he required—who was responsible for the deaths of the sixty-five lorry passengers. Adenebi says he wants to be left alone. Obaneji, Rola and Demoke go to the welcoming of the dead. After hesitating, Adenebi runs after them.

3.2 SUMMARY OF PART TWO

Part Two begins with Murete grumbling to himself because he can't drink the milk of the palm tree in which he lives. He is about to leave for the human celebrations when Eshuoro grasps his throat from behind. Eshuoro asks him to swear that Murete hasn't seen him. Eshuoro wants to know if today is the day for Aroni's ceremony of the welcome of the dead—a ceremony which will be a lesson for the humans. Eshuoro says that the humans have spoilt too much of the forest by their greed and thoughtlessness and today must be a day for the forest to fight back. He has no patience for Forest Father and Aroni's "gentle rebuke(s)." Murete is not bothered because he feels the forest claims its own victims; its recompense is given or forced out of the humans.

Eshuoro has decided that even if Aroni lets the human witnesses go, he won't. Eshuoro is furious at the way the humans have destroyed the forest. He wants justice. He is particularly incensed by the totem pole which he calls "the centrepiece of their (the humans') vulgarity." Murete insults him and says that it is an offering of which even Forest Father would have approved.

Murete runs off as Eshuoro threatens him with a branch. Eshuoro then dances and rants in fury. He is particularly angry with Demoke who carves and defaces trees. He threatens that he and Oro will have their revenge. He rushes off the stage.

In another part of the forest the Forest Crier comes in with a scroll and strikes his gong. The Forest Spirits listen to him either from their hiding places or out in the open. The Forest Crier informs all the forest creatures that tonight is the welcome of the dead. He clarifies that only those spirits of the dead that are specifically summoned can be seen or heard this night.

Forest Father and Aroni enter and exchange a few words about how tame the human witnesses have become and how they do not suspect Forest Father's identity. As the play-within-a-play begins, Aroni reminds Forest Father that they have gone back eight centuries, perhaps even more.

3.3 THE PLAY-WITHIN-A-PLAY: THE COURT OF MATA KHARIBU

The scene that is gradually lit up is the court of Mata Kharibu. The King and Madame Tortoise, soon to be his Queen, the Court Poet (Demoke) and his young scribe are present on stage. Mata Kharibu is very angry; Madame Tortoise gay and flirtatious. The poet tries not to respond to her coquetry. The conversation is entirely between Madame Tortoise and the Court Poet. Madame Tortoise says that she is sad because she's lost her canary which has flown off to the roof. She orders the poet to fetch it. The poet's novice immediately offers to go. The Court Poet doesn't want him to go because a soldier fell to his death from the same roof two days ago, but Madame Tortoise overrules him.

After the poet follows his scribe out, a chained warrior is pushed in. It is the Dead Man. Mata Kharibu slaps him and accuses him of being a traitor. The warrior has persuaded his soldiers not to fight an unjust war on the king's behalf—this is his treason.

The Physician (the Old Man) tries to persuade the warrior to agree to Mata Kharibu's war, calling it not a war to gather a woman's trousseau but an affair of honour. The warrior refuses to believe that it is honourable to steal another chieftain's wife, as Mata Kharibu has done, and then to declare war on that chieftain in order to recover the abducted woman's goods. He tells the Physician to return to the king. Even when the Physician says posterity will call the man a traitor and hints at the warrior's vulnerable pregnant wife, the warrior refuses to give in. His first loyalty is to his men. The Physician asks him if he has the right to risk the lives of those men by convincing them that they should disobey Mata Kharibu. The warrior realises that Mata Kharibu is worried about a possible revolt among his men—hence this effort to persuade or threaten the warrior.

The Historian (Adenebi) then enters with a scroll and tries to persuade Mata Kharibu to be more severe with the warrior who refuses to admit to what he calls the eternal necessity of history: war. He cites the example of the ancient Greeks and Trojans where the Trojan War was the one thing that immortalised that period in history. The Historian is convinced that only a man with slave's blood could refuse to fight.

As Mata Kharibu vows to be rid of all such men as the warrior, the Soothsayer (Agboreko) enters. He predicts a lot of bloodshed in the coming battle. Mata Kharibu is pleased because it signifies a great battle and orders that the warrior and his followers be "sent down the river" or drowned. A Slave Dealer offers not only his boat but also to take the men off Mata Kharibu's hands. The Physician pleads that the men be put to death immediately rather than face the hellish torments to which the Slave Dealer will subject them. While the Physician, the Historian and the Slave Dealer argue amongst themselves, Mata Kharibu shouts at them for making a marketplace of his court and storms off. Just before leaving the stage he admits to the Soothsayer that he knows that the battle will be lost but he has to fight it anyway because the indications of democracy and independence among his subjects have frightened him. The Soothsayer falsely reassures him. As the King leaves the Soothsayer says men will by their nature seek power over each other, and the King cannot control this.

After the Soothsayer exits, the Physician and the Slave Dealer continue their quarrel. The latter furtively slips the Historian a bribe so that the Historian will support his

claim that he has a new boat in which the slaves can travel in comfort. The Historian does the needful. After the Slave Dealer leaves happily, the Historian invites the Physician to his house to have a glass of sherbet and to discuss the implications of the coming war which will be fought, he says, like all other wars, over nothing.

After their exit, the Court Poet enters with a canary in a gold cage. As soon as Madame Tortoise sees the bird she decides she no longer wants it. When she asks after the poet's assistant she is informed he fell—not to his death, but he did break his arm. The Court Poet's asides become more and more insulting. Madame Tortoise, who cannot hear them, says the poet bores her and should leave. She then clears the entire court except for the warrior and his guard. She tries to flirt with the warrior but he will not respond. He begs her to keep her distance otherwise he might be tempted to punish her for the evil she has brought on his men. This only encourages her further.

Madame Tortoise tries to entice the Warrior by saying that he may become King since Mata Kharibu is a fool and that he may taste untold pleasures if he yields to her. The warrior merely yells for the guard who enters following a dishevelled pregnant woman--the Dead Woman. Even before the pregnant woman can beg Madame Tortoise for mercy the latter tells the warrior that he has the choice of being made a eunuch or being sold as a slave. When the warrior does not answer Madame Tortoise orders the guard to carry out her sentence, and the pregnant woman faints. The lights go out and come on again to show Aroni and Forest Father staring at the scene.

Eshuoro strides onto the stage proclaiming that the warrior was a fool and a coward. He threatens Aroni to beware of slighting him. He wants immediate redress of the assaults on him. He is convinced that his follower Oremole (Demoke's assistant on the totem pole) has been murdered. Forest Father reassures him that nothing has been forgotten. Ogun enters and tries to silence Eshuoro by saying that Demoke followed his orders and that he will answer for him. Ogun even taunts Eshuoro that Demoke has done him a favour by acting as his barber. Was he sleeping, Ogun asks, that he could not save his follower as he fell to his death? Eshuoro, goaded beyond endurance, tries to attack Ogun but Forest Father prevents him. Forest Father warns the two not to behave like spoilt humans and excite his anger. He asks Aroni to proceed. Forest Father wants the humans to "discover their own regeneration"—either to change their destructive ways or to follow the same path. Ogun begs for his servant (Demoke) to be released, but Aroni claims he needs him most of all. Eshuoro says he is impatient but Aroni says he must wait. The living ones will speak for the future themselves. When Eshuoro asks why they are so ready with a solution Forest Father says that Eshuoro had thought of the same remedy and hence came himself and would not allow any others to come in his place. Forest Father asks for the questioner to be called and orders that none interrupt the proceedings.

There is a change of scene, and in the damp and drizzly atmosphere the Questioner asks the Dead Woman who sent her and why she came before her time. The Dead Woman replies that a woman without a womb sent her and as for the reason, she wants to ask that of Forest Father. The Questioner says she should not have come but lived to rear the child in her womb. The woman answers that she was weak. The Questioner asks her if the woman without a womb was also weak like her. The Forest Father is more gentle with her. He asks her to rest and quieten her spirit, disordered by the suddenness of her death. He says he has news of another son who has come from very far.

The Dead Man then enters, saying he has led three lives but his first life still obsesses him. The Questioner, seeing his well-fed appearance, asks him if he has a

happy tale to tell. The man says he has been searching for Forest Father ever since they cut off his manhood because Forest Father means home and restful sleep. Forest Father calls him by his name, Mulieru, and recalls his journey by ship till he was sold as a slave for... A bottle of rum, answers the Questioner. So even though the man looks sleek and well fed, he is as well fed as a gelded pig. The Questioner accuses the man of surrendering his manhood too easily and says instead of desiring sleep he should wander even longer. Aroni enters and rips off the Questioner's mask—it is Eshuoro. He (Eshuoro) immediately runs off. Forest Father is merely amused and asks for the earthly protagonists to be called.

The Interpreter enters, leading in Demoke, Rola and Adenebi. Forest Father looks closely at the Interpreter, wondering if he has been sent by Eshuoro, but Eshuoro enters and says that he needs no slaves to carry out his plans. Aroni enters and leads off the Dead Woman on Forest Father's orders and the Interpreter masks the three humans. The masks wear the same expression—that of resigned passivity. Forest Father announces the moment of the welcome of the dead. The Dead Woman enters, no longer pregnant, but leading the Half-Child by the hand. For each spirit that is called, one of the three humans becomes agitated. As the Spirit of the Palm speaks, saying how his colour has changed from white to red and how those guilty will be punished, the Half-Child turns around, trying to guess which of the masked figures has spoken. Then the child leaves his mother's hand and plays a game of "sesan" while a Figure in Red dogs his footsteps. When the child appeals for help no one responds. The child chants that he fears he will be born dead. The Spirit of Darkness then joins in with the Spirit of the Palm saying how "they'll be misled" and doomed. The Spirit of Precious Stones says how he lures them into the pit promising wealth but gives them death instead. The Spirit of the Pachyderms complains of the theft of ivory, and the Spirit of the Rivers weeps for humans' ruthless exploitation of their natural environment out of greed. The Spirit of the Sun complains of untimely eclipse, and the Spirit of Volcanoes says that he is winded and unable to belch lava. The Ant Leader complains of millions of his brothers being trod underfoot even though they guard the wisdom of Mother Earth. All the ants speak up, complaining of the destruction that follows in the wake of "progress"—"the good to come." Aroni shouts and asks them for what unfortunate future they rise to speak. As the ants vanish, the Figure in Red confronts Forest Father who unwillingly gestures at the Interpreter for the humans to be unmasked and to see with their human eyes.

As the humans are unmasked the first of the Triplets enters—it is a gangling, headless figure that proclaims that it is the End that will justify the Means—if anyone finds the Means, that is. As the Interpreter dances with it, the Second Triplet enters, an overblown, drooling head. It says it is "the Greater Cause," excusing all the present's crimes for the illusion of a better tomorrow. The Interpreter dances with both the Triplets and then the Second Triplet, after sniffing at them, asks who the humans are. Forest Father calls them "weak, pitiable criminals," and terms the Triplets "perversions" born of the power the corrupt hold over each other. The fanged and bloody Third Triplet then enters and says that it is Posterity, nourished by blood and violence.

As the Figure in Red rips off its hood, Eshuoro is revealed. He tries to catch the Half-Child but Ogun prevents him and says that he has no right to claim him because he played too many roles for his own good. Telling Eshuoro to beware of the mask "lined with scorpions," Ogun exits. Eshuoro once more tries to get the Half-Child who moves to his mother saying he has found an egg as smooth as a pebble. Eshuoro gleefully chants that a serpent that will swallow him will be born of that egg. The Half-Child spins around till he is giddy. As he chants his fear the Dead Woman joins him in his chant saying she too fears the loss of another child.

Then a long section follows which is completely without words in which Eshuoro and Ogun both try to get the Half-Child by playing a game of "ampe." The Interpreter, throws off his mask and reveals himself as Eshuoro's Jester, and the Third Triplet also join in. Eshuoro and the Third Triplet throw the Half-Child between them, trying to catch him on the point of two knives like circus acrobats. Demoke rushes forward to intercept the child as the deadly game continues, but Eshuoro tricks him. Ogun then comes in, pulls the Interpreter aside, catches the Half-Child and passes him to Demoke. Demoke is confused as all the others watch him. He attempts to restore the child to its mother, but Eshuoro blocks his way and appeals to Forest Father. Ogun appeals against him.

Forest Father then makes his longest speech, more to himself than to the other characters, saying that he will be troubled no further by the follies of his creations. He knows it is futile to teach humans the wickedness of their ways and to show them a picture of their lost innocence. He cannot intervene in earthly affairs, but if he does not continue to teach humans he will be accused of being ineffectual. He keeps hoping against hope that his labour will not be in vain. He asks Aroni if Demoke knows the meaning of his act. Aroni tells Demoke that he holds a doomed thing in his hands and that he cannot reverse a deed that happened many years past.

Once again there is a dumb show where Demoke gives the Half-Child to the Dead Woman who leaves with him. Forest Father too leaves, whereupon Eshuoro yells in triumph and rushes off stage, followed by his jester. The Triplets follow, grinning from ear to ear.

A silhouette of Demoke's totem is seen, with the villagers dancing around it. There is no contact between the villagers and the three human protagonists. The Jester enters with a leap, puts the sacrificial basket on Demoke's head and performs a wild dance. Eshuoro enters with a club and he and the jester relentlessly try to drag Demoke to the totem. Rola and Adenebi, as if in a trance, are made to sprinkle libation on the scene. Demoke fades and reappears at the foot of his totem. He begins to climb it and disappears from view to the beat of the drums. Eshuoro sets fire to the tree with a brand. Ogun enters and catches Demoke as he falls. The lights go out. As the lights come on gradually Eshuoro is shown frenziedly dancing with his jester. Dawn is breaking. Ogun enters carrying Demoke. He is armed. Ogun puts Demoke down on the ground, leaves his weapons beside him and flees. Eshuoro flees after his jester as the first of the beaters enters. It is now full dawn. Agboreko and the Old Man enter, a drunk Murete dragging them on. The Old Man rushes towards Demoke his son who opens his eyes.

The Old Man asks Demoke what he has seen. Agboreko asks him to leave Demoke alone, saying the truth will be out in due time. The Old Man tells Demoke that he had searched for him all night knowing that one of his companions was the infamous Madame Tortoise; she is the one who never dies, adds Agboreko. The Old Man says he was also bothered by the identity of the fourth companion whom he could not place. He sees that there are only three of them, and he asks Demoke if the fourth revealed himself. Demoke says the fourth companion was Forest Father himself. Agboreko says that they thought it might have been Eshuoro. The Old Man asks Demoke if he saw the lame one, and says how stupid they were to think that they could pit their wits against Aroni (the lame one). Agboreko says they paid a high price for their newly-acquired wisdom and the Old Man shows the injury on his face and says that behind every sapling that hit them in the forest there was Aroni's hand. Demoke wonders if they could take Murete's help in finding their way out of the forest. The Old Man speaks of the sacrifices that have been made and the expiation asked for, but Demoke feels the three have suffered enough in this one

night as they relived their past lives. The Old Man eagerly asks if there was a "kernel of light" in all their suffering, some grain of wisdom, some faint ray of hope. Rola enters at this point, looking chastened. As Agboreko says he did not expect to find her alive, even though Madame Tortoise has the reputation of outlasting them all, Demoke asks him not to call Rola that because they have all been changed by the rigours of that night. Agboreko eagerly asks him if he has learned anything wise, anything of the future, but the play ends with Agboreko's old, trite, tired cliché, "Proverb to bones and silence."

3.4 LET US SUM UP

This unit gives a detailed summary of the play under three headings, Part One, Part Two and the Play-Within-a-Play. The first part of the play introduces the three chief (living) characters, Demoke, Rola, Adenebi and the mysterious Obaneji, tells us about the festival of the Gathering of the Tribes that they are about to attend, and also the two (dead) characters who have been summoned to this festival and yet are not made at all welcome by the living characters. We are told about the magnificent totem pole which has been erected for the festival. The atmosphere is one of mystery and confusion. We get the sense that each character has a secret which he/she wants to hide from the others. We also get the sense that the four living characters are very different from one another--their constant bickering also attests to this fact. We are also introduced to two other characters, the Old Man and Agboreko, who are in search of the four living characters for different reasons and yet keep missing them.

In Part Two there is a confrontation between Murete and Eshuoro: the latter seeks vengeance because his tree has been violated and his follower killed in the construction of the totem pole. Murete refuses to co-operate and to tell him where to find the culprit.

The Play-Within-a-Play takes the action back many centuries to the court of Mata Kharibu. The four living characters now play new roles in this court and the two dead characters are presented as a heroic warrior and his hapless pregnant wife who are both wronged by Mata Kharibu and his sensuous and remorseless consort, Madame Tortoise. The play-within-a-play is Soyinka's way of presenting the fact that old sins cast long shadows. He seems to be saying that there are a number of cruel and bloody acts of injustice in Nigeria's past that the newly-independent Nigerians would do well to remember so that they do not commit the same grievous errors of judgment all over again.

The play then returns to the present with a tremendous amount of spectacle. Eshuoro has finally caught up with his quarry and he thirsts for vengeance. Ogun tries to protect Demoke, his follower. A number of spirits, of the forests, of the palm, of the rivers etc. appear and speak of the ways in which they have been exploited by human greed to the Questioner (who is actually Eshuoro in a mask) and the Interpreter. There is a game played with the Half-Child in which Demoke tries to rescue the child and restore it to its mother, the Dead Woman. Forest Father makes a long speech, mostly to himself, about the futility of trying to teach humans the folly of their deeds. Demoke climbs the totem pole as an act of expiation for the sins of the community even though he knows he will spin off it to his death. Sure enough, he falls--but he is saved by Ogun. The play ends with the Old Man and Agboreko questioning Demoke as to what he has seen and learnt from the events of the night, but Demoke is unable to explain.

3.5 GLOSSARY

Plethora:	excessive fullness
Gelded:	castrated
Expiation:	payment of penalty, making amends for
Amass:	accumulate
Cliche:	phrase used too frequently
Dishevelled:	untidy
Disreputable:	not respectable
Flirtatious:	behaviour that invites or pays attention merely for amusement.
Flogger:	one who beats with a whip
Futile:	useless
Goad:	torment; urge someone by annoyance to do something
Incinerate:	burn
Platitude:	very ordinary remark, usually solemnly spoken
Scribe:	writer, keeper of records
Totem Pole:	pole with image of natural object, especially animal, assumed to be emblem (visual sign) of clan or individual.
Trousseau:	brides clothes
Vulnerable:	open to injury

3.6 QUESTIONS

- Q.1 What is the significance of the play-within-a-play?
- Q.2 Why does Soyinka have the characters, Demoke, Rola, Adenebi, Agboreko, the Old Man, the Dead Man and the Dead Woman, play double roles?
- Q.3 What is the significance of Demoke trying to rescue the Half-Child and of climbing the totem pole?

UNIT 4 CRITICAL COMMENTARY ON *A DANCE OF THE FORESTS*

Structure

- 4.0 Objectives
- 4.1 Things To Be Kept In Mind
- 4.2 Issues
- 4.3 Structure
- 4.4 Character
- 4.5 Language
- 4.6 Non-Verbal Techniques
- 4.7 Western Influences on the Play
- 4.8 Soyinka and Postcoloniality
- 4.9 The Politics of English
- 4.10 Soyinka's Nativism
- 4.11 Soyinka's Obscurity
- 4.12 Let Us Sum Up
- 4.13 Glossary
- 4.14 Questions
- 4.15 Suggested Readings

4.0 OBJECTIVES

In this unit we have a detailed critical analysis of the play under the sub-headings 'issues,' 'structure,' 'character,' 'language' and 'non-verbal techniques.' This unit also analyses the evidence of western influences at work in this play. The last four parts of this unit deal with Soyinka's relation to postcoloniality, the politics of his decision to use English rather than any Yoruba language, his possible nativism and the charge of obscurity that is levelled against some of his work, *A Dance of the Forests* being no exception.

4.1 THINGS TO BE KEPT IN MIND

There are a number of things that have to be kept in mind while studying this play. The first is that all our knowledge of western canonical drama, the drama of Sophocles, of Shakespeare and of Shaw, must be seen as being of very limited relevance to this play.

Soyinka is well aware of the western dramatic tradition as a result of his Nigerian education and his higher studies in Leeds, but he is also consumed by the need to write African drama, be it in a language foreign to it--English. He sets himself the formidable task of incorporating Yoruba drama, developed as it is from religious ritual, and Yoruba music and dance with a language that is foreign to it. He also alters the traditional western concept of the well-made play. Notions of a three or five act structure, of a linear development of the plot, of characterisation that is dynamic and inherently consistent, of the arousal of certain emotions that are suitable to a certain genre of drama (i.e., pity and fear for tragedy, laughter and

good-humoured tolerance for comedy) none of these are seen as crucial to the type of drama that Soyinka is creating.

What Soyinka does see as important is conveying the Yoruba world view, which he sees as very different from the western world view, to his audience. Some of the aspects of this world view, as discussed in earlier units, include an irreverent, casual and friendly attitude towards the gods, the lack of a sense of remoteness from eternal beings, a widespread tolerance towards people of other faiths, a respectful attitude towards ones ancestors, and a sense of there being more to life than merely the physical or material or even visible. At the same time, Soyinka acknowledges that there is something in the figures of Yoruba religion and myth, there is something in the complicated details of Yoruba ritual that find expression in Yoruba drama to which even non-Yoruba, indeed, non-African audiences can relate. This he sees as a type of consciousness that lies beneath the layers of cultural and social and political conditioning we receive.

Now, we may agree or disagree with this viewpoint. Indeed, a number of contemporary critics have criticised Soyinka for what they call his "nativism." "Nativism," as defined by Edward Said, is the tendency to "leave the historical world for the metaphysics of essences...in a word, to abandon history" ("Yeats and Decolonisation" 38). That is, in a nutshell, to privilege metaphysics over history. Anyway, we shall discuss this debate at greater length at the end of the critical commentary.

4.2 ISSUES

Some of the issues of this play are a) Nigerian independence b) the relation of tradition to history c) the relation of the artist to politics

a) Nigerian Independence

This play was performed as part of the celebrations of Nigerian independence. Franz Fanon effectively describes the drama of decolonisation:

Decolonisation never takes place unnoticed, for it influences individuals and modifies them fundamentally. It transforms spectators crushed with their inessentiality into privileged actors, with the grandiose glare of history's floodlights upon them. It brings a natural rhythm into existence, introduced by new men, and with it a new language and a new humanity.

Decolonization is the veritable creation of new men. But this creation owes nothing of its legitimacy to any supernatural power; the 'thing' which has been colonized becomes man during the same process by which it frees itself. (28)

In this play the three living characters, Demoke, Rola and Adenebi, in a way go through this process of decolonisation, exemplifying in microcosm what Nigeria has to undergo on a macrocosmic scale. When we meet them they are only too willing to protect their own skins and to blame others rather than themselves for their woes. Demoke lies about killing Oremole, Rola shrugs off the death of two of her paramours, Adenebi denies any responsibility in the lorry accident that was caused by a government official accepting a bribe and resulted in seventy people being burned to death. However, in the process of reliving history Rola is chastened and Demoke confesses his guilt, helps restore the Half-Child to its mother and undergoes the expiation ritual of climbing the totem pole even though it may result in his death.

Characters who were willing to stay on the periphery now come centre stage, as Fanon predicted.

This is the positive side of decolonisation. However, Soyinka does not want to present a uniformly enthusiastic and optimistic play, signalling that by becoming independent, all of Nigeria's political ills were ended. In a 1993 interview he tells 'Biya Bandele-Thomas how shocked he was to meet the ministers of Independent Nigeria:

Within five minutes, I knew that we were in serious trouble. It was clear that they were more concerned with the mechanisms for stepping into the shoes of the departing colonial masters, enjoying the same privileges, inserting themselves in that axial position towards the rest of the community. I saw the most naked and brutal signs of alienation of the ruler from the ruled, from the very first crop. There were one or two exceptions, of course. And then I realised that the enemy within was going to be far more problematic than the external, easily recognisable enemy. (Maja-Pearce 145)

It is in this frame of mind that Soyinka begins composing *A Dance of the Forests*.

In the beginning of the play we are told that all the people are going to an important festival, the ritual gathering of the tribes. This play, as mentioned earlier, is modelled on the Yoruba New Year festival which takes place in March and which includes purificatory rites in which people help one another to confess and to begin the new year afresh. The occasion of Nigerian independence would also be the beginning of a new era, a fresh start. This play was first performed as part of the Nigerian independence celebrations. This celebration is one in which people from the past have also been invited. As mentioned in the earlier section on Yoruba religion, ancestors are crucial to the Yoruba world view because they are seen as links between the mortal and the immortal gods. They can intervene on behalf of the mortals. However, in this play, the living characters neither recognise nor offer help to the Dead Man and the Dead Woman who have invited to the festivities. In fact, a number of characters say that the wrong people have been invited to the festival. In fact, they reject them outright. This shows that the living characters are unable to distinguish between the good and the evil characters in history and that they do not want to accept their contribution in the cycle of historical injustice. The brave warrior who fought against the tyranny of Mata Kharibu (who reappears as the Dead Man) and his helpless, pregnant wife (who reappears as the Dead Woman) can hardly be termed thieves and traitors.

The identification, "the enemy within" in Soyinka's phrase, is shown to be problematic through the ruse of having the element of the masquerade. As in crime fiction, in this play too not everyone is what they purport to be. The Old Man fears that Eshuoro is in disguise among the group of four living characters in order to wreak vengeance on his son, Demoke, who is in hiding after killing his apprentice. Adenebi is in some way responsible for the lorry accident that killed sixty-five people but wants to evade responsibility. Thus although the four living characters want to flee the society of the Dead Man and the Dead Woman, it is really each other they ought to avoid. The enemy is within their circle, within themselves. They have to acknowledge their own culpability, instead of putting the blame on something or someone external. Soyinka underlines the fact that the enemy lies within by having the four living characters, double up as four characters in the past in the court of Mata Kharibu. Rola becomes Madame Tortoise, Adenebi the Historian, Agboreko the Soothsayer and Demoke the Court Poet. Perhaps Soyinka is suggesting, in the context of the independence of Nigeria, that there is no point in putting all the blame

on the colonial power and believing that Nigeria will be magically cured of all her ills once she is independent.

b) The relation of tradition to history

By having the four living characters double as in the play-within-a-play in Part Two, Soyinka is perhaps saying that history repeats itself in the most distressing way. Human nature is only fitfully able to ameliorate itself, to learn from its own mistakes. The warrior and his wife who made the supreme sacrifice of their lives are not welcomed or celebrated in the new age--they are treated with suspicion or indifference or their identity is misrepresented. Madame Tortoise is a type of shallow and flirtatious woman who uses her sexual charms in a completely ruthless and self-seeking way--she is quite content to let men risk their lives trying to rescue her canary from a rooftop. The absurdity of the request--canaries are birds and so have no need of being rescued from heights; a bird's life is far more important than a human being's--underlines the callousness of the character. Rola, among the living characters, displays the same self-seeking ways. She feels she is irresistible to all men--any man who resists her must necessarily be less than a man.

c) The relation of the artist to society

We have seen through our discussion of Soyinka's political activism that he did not believe in the artist living in an ivory tower and composing works that had no relevance to society. Apparent in almost all Soyinka's major plays is the belief, that art can make a difference to society and that the artist has an extremely crucial role to fulfil--he/she cannot avoid his/her responsibility of exposing social ills.

In a number of Soyinka's plays there is an artist or a craftsman figure. In *A Dance of the Forests* this figure is Demoke. We are told that he is a carver (and in the court of Mata Kharibu he appears as a poet)--he has been responsible for carving the totem pole for the festival of the gathering of the tribes. Demoke has pushed his apprentice Oremole to his death from the top of the pole. This act has come about partly because of the vertigo Demoke feels once he climbs high. However, at the end Demoke pays the price for his deed by trying to save the Half-Child from Eshuoro. He climbs the totem with the sacrificial basket clamped on his head by Eshuoro's jester and spins off the top, only to be saved by Ogun, the patron of carvers and iron workers. Critics have pointed out that Demoke, like the hero of *The Strong Breed*, has to go through a purification ritual in which a strong sense of African tradition will help him only if it is coupled with a sense of self, of accepting a challenge, of facing one's fears. In this purificatory ritual the character always runs the risk of death. Once it is accomplished, however, whether the character survives or dies, the entire community undergoes a change. In *A Dance of the Forests* the gain seems to be a recognition of the history and an attempt to reconcile the past with the present and to knit the two together, rather than deny or falsify the past, which was what was happening at the beginning of the play with the rejection of the Dead Man and the Dead Woman. The figure of Forest Father too may be identified with the artist in general and with Soyinka the playwright in particular, but I discuss this resemblance later.

4.3 STRUCTURE

The structure of this play has nothing in common with the usual five-act structure of traditional western drama. It is divided into two parts. The first part deals with the adventures of the characters as they get to know one another and, led by Forest

Father himself, disguised as Adenebi, move towards the forest and the celebration of the gathering of the tribes. At the same time Ogun and Eshuoro are on the lookout for Demoke. Murete is forced by both to reveal all that he knows. The Old Man, Demoke's father, and Agboreko, both try to find Demoke and save him. In this scenario, the invited guests from the past, the Dead Man and the Dead Woman, are ignored by all the characters. The second part takes us in a flashback to the court of Mata Kharibu where the characters we have already been introduced to double up as characters from the past--apart from, of course, the Dead Man and the Dead Woman, who play themselves as they were when they lived, the brave warrior and his pregnant wife. However, after the scenes from the court of Mata Kharibu, the dramaturgy becomes a little confused as we have a succession of different choruses, the spirits, the ants, and the masque of the Triplets. Disguise and masquerade take the place of regular story telling, and the story does not really move forward. The tempo relaxes, only to pick up again as Demoke intervenes in the game of ampe to restore the Half-Child to its mother and to undergo the expiation ritual of climbing the totem pole. Dawn breaks, Ogun leaves, Eshuoro and his jester flee, and Agboreko and the Old Man come across Demoke and hear a little of the happenings of that strange night. The play is thus part reality, part something beyond material reality as we know it, part ritual, part straightforward narrative. The movement is circular, to a certain extent, to suggest the cycle of sin that is carried on from the days of Mata Kharibu to the present and which is hopefully broken by Demoke's selfless act of expiation on behalf of the entire community.

What is striking about the structure is the contrast Soyinka sets up between the past and the present, between the living and the dead, between sombre or chilling moments and between moments of light-hearted tomfoolery. Femi Osofisan describes how the sumptuous spectacle in a Soyinka play alternates with "moments of dark caricature," and "electric caves of tension yielded to open planes of laughter and celebration" (Maja-Pearce 48). Such contrast may be seen in Part One of the play in the juxtaposition of the comic baiting of Murete by Ogun with the anxiety of the Old Man searching for his son and the darker and more secretive interaction of the four characters, Demoke, Rola, Adenebi and Obaneji, in the forest.

4.4 CHARACTER

In characterisation too Soyinka uses the method of contrast. In all his plays there are characters who are strong, fecund, full of spirit, never at a loss for words, and not always moral or trustworthy. They defend the right to life and to joy. They are Ogunian characters, "alloys of contradictory essences" like the god Ogun as Femi Osofisan puts it, who are both creative and destructive, both unscrupulous and brave, both fierce and gentle. Demoke, Rola, and, to a lesser degree, Murete, fall into this category. Sometimes the characters grow and are chastened as a result of their experiences. This happens to both Demoke and Rola. In opposition to this group are the more stuffy, serious characters, completely lacking a sense of humour, and often full of the sense of their own importance. They are the embodiments of sterility, emptiness, parsimony. They are men of order, order that stunts, curbs and cripples. Invariably these characters are outwitted by the former group. Agboreko and Adenebi and even the Old Man to a certain extent fall into this category. Lastly there are the demagogues who are obsessed and blinded by a lust for power, power at all costs. Mata Kharibu is the obvious example of this, as is Eshuoro. Eshuoro's negative energy which is directed only at vengeance, is contrasted with Ogun and Forest Father's more compassionate and forgiving stance. Unlike Eshuoro, they seek to understand, to give humans the benefit of the doubt, not merely to condemn and to punish.

Soyinka himself admits that Ogun is not really a character but a force or a principle, even though he makes his only appearance in Soyinka's plays here. He tells Ulli Beier that through Ogun he wants to refer to "the mystery of creativity itself":

...which is almost a dare, a challenge of nature secretaries. One goes out almost in the same way in which Ogun cleared the jungle--because he had forged the metallic instrument. He is very much the explorer. The artist is in many ways similar; each time, he discovers a proto world in gestation; it's almost like discovering another world in the galaxy. The artist's view of reality creates an entirely new world. Into that world he leads a raid; he rifles its resources and returns to normal existence. The tragic dimension of that is one of disintegration of the self in a world which is being reborn always, and from which the artists can only recover his being by an exercise of sheer will power. He disintegrates in the passage into that world. He loses himself and only the power of the will can bring him back. And when he returns from the experience, he is imbued with new wisdoms, new perspectives, a new way of looking at phenomena.

Soyinka continues, "I was using Ogun very much as an analogue: what happens when one steps out into the unknown? There is a myth about all the gods setting out, wanting to explore and rediscover the world of mortals. But then the primordial forest had grown so thick, no one could penetrate it. Then Ogun forged the metallic tool and cut a way through the jungle. But the material for the implement was extracted from the primordial barrier." "This I took," Soyinka concludes, "as a kind of model of the artist's role, the artist as a visionary explorer, a creature dissatisfied with the immediate reality--so he has to cut through the obscuring growth, to enter a totally new terrain of being; a new terrain of sensing, a new terrain of relationships." ("Wole Soyinka on Yoruba Religion.")

Apart from Ogun representing the artist, Demoke, who is protected by Ogun also has the qualities of the artist in him and like the artist has to undergo experiences which will leave him a new and more enlightened person. Thus he undertakes the challenge of saving the Half-Child.

4.5 LANGUAGE

There are many different kinds of speech employed by Soyinka in this play.

Apart from the ones already mentioned, Agboreko speaks like a typical village elder, relying on his proverb-filled utterances to suggest the gravity and wisdom that he sorely lacks: "proverbs to bones and silence" is a particular favourite. Adenebi speaks like a bureaucrat; his speech is as narrow and close-minded as his attitude ("We perform all the formalities.") Rola and Madame Tortoise's speech is coquettish, swiftly changing to a vicious vulgarity when they are spurned or thwarted. When Obaneji throws her off, saying, "I have a particular aversion to being mauled by women," Rola spits out, "I suppose you weren't born by one. Filth!" and later she chants, "He'll die in his bed but he'll die alone/ He'll sleep in his bed but he'll sleep alone" (21). Murete's speech is full of deliciously imaginative and uninhibited graphic insults. "You...mucus off a crab's carbuncle", he tells Eshuoro, "You stream of pus from the duct of a stumbling bat" (43). Towards the end of the play the language takes on a heightened poetic quality, befitting the dignified anguish of the Spirits of the Rivers, Volcanoes, Precious Stones, Palm, Darkness and others. Even the ant leader and his followers are given considerable time to

speak of the way in which their species has been decimated ("I am the victim of the careless stride" 68). Their voices gradually swell to represent what Franz Fanon terms the "wretched of the earth," only here it is not only the coloniser and the imperialist who is wreaking harm, but the indigenous inhabitants of the colonised land:

We are the headless bodies when
The spade of progress delves....
Down the axis of the world, from
The whirlwind to the frozen drifts,
We are the ever legion of the world,
Smitten, for--'the good to come.' (68)

4.6 NON-VERBAL TECHNIQUES

Language is not the only thing Soyinka relies on for effective theatre. Rites, rituals, gestures, music and dance are important elements that he borrows from the Yoruba tradition and incorporates into his play. Aristotle in his *Poetics*, chapter 6 (c. 330 B.C.) does mention spectacle and melody as two of the six crucial elements of tragedy (the others being plot, character, diction and thought). Spectacle and melody formed important means of arousing the emotions proper to tragedy, pity and fear, although Aristotle seems to clearly prefer them being aroused by "the very structure and incidents of the play" rather than by spectacle (chapter 14). Greek theatre certainly had more ritual, music and dance than did later centuries of western theatre. Gradually, the shift, at least in twentieth century western theatre was to words. This is something Soyinka balances out by returning to the roots of drama in ritual, gesture, music and dance. His plays are meant to be staged and seen rather than read. Femi Osofisan says it is "the mechanics of performance, the persuasive brilliance of the acting, the seductiveness of the successive spectacles" (Maja-Pearce 47-48) that remain in one's mind after the performance of a Soyinka play rather than the play's "message." There is the game of ampe that the Interpreter and the Triplets play and to which the Half-Child is drawn. A seemingly innocuous children's "foot-slipping" game is given a sinister twist as we realise that if the Half-Child is carried off by any of the Triplets (one of whom is Eshuoro in disguise) or the Interpreter (Eshuoro's jester), it will not be reunited with its mother and it will once more miss a chance to be born. There is Eshuoro's wild dance as he thinks Demoke will fall to his death and the murder of his follower and Demoke's apprentice, Oremole, will be avenged. There is the expiation ritual carried out by Demoke.

Frantz Fanon in *The Wretched of the Earth* has some telling remarks to make on the African's very special relation to dance:

On another level we see the native's emotional sensibility exhausting itself in dances which are more or less ecstatic....The native's relaxation takes precisely the form of a muscular orgy in which the most acute aggressivity and the most impelling violence are canalized, transformed and conjured away. The circle of the dance is a permissive circle: it protects and permits. At certain times on certain days, men and women come together at a given place, and there, under the solemn eye of the tribe, fling themselves into a seemingly unorganized pantomime, which is in reality extremely systematic, in which by various means--shakes of the head, bending of the spinal column, throwing of the whole body backwards--may be deciphered as in an open book the huge effort of a community to exorcise itself, to liberate itself, to explain itself. (44)

Soyinka's stage directions describe Eshuoro and his jester performing a "wild dance," the "Dance of the Unwilling Sacrifice," before Demoke climbs the totem pole. In the background are the silhouettes of the villagers, also dancing (72). Eshuoro keeps on dancing, even as Ogun saves Demoke as he spins off the totem pole. Eshuoro and his jester flee from the stage only as dawn breaks and Agboreko, the Old Man and Murete enter. As a result of this ritual and this dance, knowledge comes to the living characters--knowledge of Obaneji's true character (he is Forest Father and not Eshuoro as Demoke's father had feared). When the Old Man speaks of sacrifice and expiation, his son bursts out, "Expiation? We three who lived many lives in this one night, have we not done enough? Have we not felt enough for the memory of our remaining lives?" (73) However, neither Demoke nor Rola, who is significantly described as "chastened" can say any more about what they have learned. The community is cleansed by this ritual, and its eyes opened, but whether the effect will be either widespread or long-lasting no one can say.

4.7 WESTERN INFLUENCES ON *A DANCE OF THE FORESTS*

As a result of Soyinka's education in Nigeria and Leeds and his work in London, Soyinka was intimate with the western dramatic tradition. We can see some influences of this tradition, faint though they are, in *A Dance of the Forests*. They are faint because of Soyinka's determination to bring the Yoruba world view and Yoruba drama to the notice of the world.

When the Spirits and the Half-Child speak, their utterances are very much like choric passages in the Greek tragedies of Aeschylus and Sophocles:

Half-Child: I who yet await a mother
 Feel this dread,
 Feel this dread,
 I who flee from womb
 To branded womb, cry it now
 I'll be born dead
 I'll be born dead....

Spirit of Darkness: More have I seen, I, Spirit of the Dark,

 Naked they breathe within me, foretelling now....

Half-Child:...Branded womb, branded womb...

Spirit of the Palm: White skeins wove me.

Spirit of the Darkness: Peat and forest....

Half-Child: Branded womb, branded womb. (64-65)

The Half-Child is reminiscent of the apparition of the bloody child the witches conjure up in Shakespeare's *Macbeth* IV. I. 77ff, to signify the "unnatural" or Caesarian birth of Macduff. The character of Murete seems to be a combination of the two creatures in Shakespeare's *The Tempest*, Ariel and Caliban. Forest Father's role in getting the four living characters together and thereby setting in motion the cycle of sin and expiation is reminiscent of the character Prospero in Shakespeare's *The Tempest*. It is he who manufactures the illusion of a shipwreck in order to set right past wrongs and reclaim his lost dukedom. The mood of Prospero's speech, "I have bedimm'd/ The noontide sun, call'd forth the mutinous winds....But this rough

magic/ I here abjure;" (V. i. 41ff) is echoed in Forest Father's speech towards the end of the play, where he speaks more to himself than to the other characters:

Trouble me no further. The fooleries of beings whom I have fashioned closer to me weary and distress me. Yet I must persist, knowing that nothing is ever altered. My secret is my eternal burden--to pierce the encrustations of soul-deadening habit, and bare the mirror of original nakedness--knowing full well, it is all futility. (71)

There is one important distinction to be made here, though. While Prospero makes a number of references to grace, to prayer and to "heavenly music," Forest Father does no such thing. Soyinka creates the impression that there is no higher deity on whom Forest Father depends. The Christian world view does not enter *A Dance of the Forests*, unless one wants to see a likeness between Demoke's sacrifice on behalf of the community and the sacrifice of Jesus.

Just as Prospero is often identified with Shakespeare (an artist too is a sort of magician) and his words ("But this rough magic/ I here abjure;...I'll drown my book" V. i. 50ff) identified with Shakespeare's valediction to the Elizabethan stage (*The Tempest* is believed to be his last play), so here we can see a link between Forest Father and Soyinka. In fact, Soyinka played the role of Forest Father in one of the first productions of this play. Soyinka too creates creatures whose "fooleries" distress him. Even though he knows that "nothing is ever altered," and history repeats the same follies and crimes and human beings are rarely the wiser for experience, like Forest Father he too must persist in his endeavour to pierce the audience's layers of "soul-deadening habit" with his plays.

4.8 SOYINKA AND POSTCOLONIALITY

Sub-Saharan Africa seems to be in a sorry state. Civil wars, social strife, a succession of military dictatorships, economic stagnation, natural catastrophes such as famines and droughts leading to large-scale epidemics--all these do not make for ideal living conditions, to say the least. However, Africa's colonial past continues to be an important factor of the present-day malaise. What Crow and Banfield term "the disruption of African history" by the European imperialists is a crucial cause of the current chaos. As we have seen in the formation of Nigeria, these African countries were artificial creations by the imperialist powers who often cared little about the range of languages, cultures and religions they were grouping together as a result of these artificially imposed national boundaries. Disruptive ethnic rivalry, economies crippled by imperialist demands, large-scale foreign debt--all these are crutches which few countries can outgrow in order to develop in a healthy manner. These are conditions in which few would expect the arts to flourish, but paradoxically it is these African countries that have produced the works of writers as diverse as Ngugi wa Thiong'o, Hubert Ogunde, Ama Ata Aidoo, and, of course, Wole Soyinka. One crucial way in which colonialism did not affect Africa was that it did not succeed in completely erasing indigenous culture from the continent. The celebration of seasonal rituals, of the New Year, of Ogun mysteries, of folk and travelling theatre (such as that of Hubert Ogunde, Baba Sala or the Ghanaian Concert Party), the wealth of the oral tradition (as used by J.P. Clark in *Ozidi* and Efua Sutherland in *The Marriage of Anansewa*), the reinterpretation and recuperation of past history and tradition (as in Ebrahim Hussein's *Kinjeketile* and Ngugi wa Thiong'o and Micere Mugo's *The Trial of Dedan Kimathi*)--all these are alive and kicking for the African writers to reject or accept or blend into existing western artistic traditions. And it is to Soyinka's credit that he has been among the

most innovative to blend existing Yoruba myth, ritual, festivities and celebrations along with elements of popular theatre in his drama that is written in the language of the imperialist--English.

An important distinction that Franz Fanon makes between colonisation and decolonisation and one which I think Soyinka tries to illustrate in his play is the fact that with decolonisation individualism should be ideally replaced by a sense of the community.

Fanon writes,

The native intellectual had learnt from his [colonial] masters that the individual ought to express himself fully. The colonialist bourgeoisie had hammered into the native's mind the idea of a society of individuals where each person shuts himself up in his own subjectivity, and whose only wealth is individual thought. Now the native who has the opportunity to return to the people during the struggle for freedom will discover the falseness of this theory. The very forms of organization of the struggle will suggest to him a different vocabulary. Brother, sister, friend--these are words outlawed by the colonialist bourgeoisie, because for them my brother is my purse, my friend is part of my scheme for getting on. (36)

In the first part of *A Dance of the Forests* Demoke and Rola are obsessed with saving their own skins and have no sense of solidarity. It is Forest Father disguised as Obaneji who keeps stopping their squabbles and reminding them that they must get on with one another. However, at the end of the second part Demoke willingly risks his life to undergo the expiation ritual on behalf of the community. When his father talks of expiation at the end of the play his reply is significant:

Expiation? We three who lived many lives in this one night, have we not done enough? Have we not felt enough for the memory of our remaining lives? (73)
Note that he speaks not of himself alone but of Rola, Adenebi and himself--"we three"--of the community, in short, not of the individual.

4.9 THE POLITICS OF ENGLISH

The language that Soyinka uses, English, and his decision to stay in self-imposed exile in the United States are issues which continue to excite criticism. Ngugi wa Thiong'o made the landmark decision to write only in his own Gikuyu rather than English because he felt this would best address the needs of his people. In *Decolonising the Mind*, Ngugi writes,

...it is precisely when writers open out African languages to the real links in the struggles of peasants and workers that they will meet their biggest challenge. For to the comprador-ruling regimes, their real enemy is an awakened peasantry and working class. A writer who tries to communicate the message of revolutionary unity and hope in *the languages of the people* becomes a subversive character....For him there are no 'national' accolades, no new year honours, only abuse and slander...from the mouths of the armed power of a ruling minority--ruling, that is, on behalf of U.S.-led imperialism--and who see democracy as a real threat. A democratic participation of the people in the shaping of their own lives or in discussing their own lives in languages that allow for mutual comprehension is seen as being dangerous to the good government of a country and its institutions.

Ngugi, writing exclusively in Gikuyu, does this; Soyinka living in the U.S. in self-imposed exile and writing in English does not. Although in some of his writings and interviews Soyinka is as outspoken as Franz Fanon about the atrocities of imperialism (see his Nobel Prize acceptance speech which I have quoted earlier, for example), it is also true that Soyinka wants to open the eyes of his fellow Nigerians to the atrocities they are committing both politically and socially. To him, colonialism is not a catch-all for all the ills of his country. Also, it is obvious that Soyinka does not want to lose his western reading public by not writing in English. His aim seems to be to spread knowledge of Yoruba culture and civilisation outside Africa rather than to address the Nigerian peasant or worker in Yoruba. He did boast that the ones who came to see *A Dance of the Forests* night after night were the cooks and cleaners who worked on the Ibadan campus rather than "Dr. PhD, or Lawyer LLB or Minister MHR" with their European-style expectations of the well-made play. However, the fact remains that Soyinka by writing in English is definitely giving less to those Nigerians who know only Yoruba. All they would get from his plays would be the non-verbal element, (and I am not denying that this is a powerful part of his plays), but not the whole effect.

In *Decolonising the Mind* Ngugi writes,

The oppressed and the exploited of the earth maintain their defiance: liberty from theft. But the biggest weapon wielded and actually daily unleashed by imperialism against that collective defiance is the cultural bomb. The effect of a cultural bomb is to annihilate a people's belief in their names, in their languages, in their environment, in their heritage of struggle, in their unity, in their capacities and ultimately in themselves. It makes them see their past as one wasteland of non-achievement....It makes them want to identify with that which is furthest removed from themselves....It makes them identify with that which is decadent and reactionary, all those forces which would stop their own springs of life. It even plants serious doubts about the moral rightness of struggle. Possibilities of triumph or victory are seen as remote, ridiculous dreams. The intended results are despair, despondency, and a collective death-wish. (3)

Not for a moment am I saying that Soyinka's own situation is typified by these lines. But it is true that any faith he may have had in Yoruba has definitely been eroded. I am not denying that he and his family have not been harassed by political regimes in Nigeria. Details of such harassment are outlined by him in the 1993 interview he gave to 'Biyi Bandele-Thomas. But the fact remains that despite the Abubakar regime's pardon and withdrawal of all charges of treason against him (by the former dictator, Sani Abacha) has been effected (October 1998), he is still not ready to return home.

4.10 SOYINKA'S NATIVISM

Soyinka relates to what Said calls "nativism," that is, a tendency to "leave the historical world for the metaphysics of essences...in a word, to abandon history," which I have summarised earlier as the tendency to prefer metaphysics over history. In other words, nativism is a tendency to be more interested in seeing certain essential traits being enacted age after age, in civilisation after civilisation, rather than to show how contingent the forces of history are, to prefer philosophical generality over historical specificity. These are factors that critics and intellectuals,

particularly those belonging to the younger generation of Nigeria such as Biodun Jeyifo, hold against Soyinka. It is true that Soyinka has gone on record to say that specific historical incidents like the independence of Nigeria or Nigeria's history as a colonised country do not obsess him (see his comments on *A Dance of the Forests* in a 1966 interview in *Spear* where he says that the play was "not a play about the Nigerian situation; it was the general thing" or the Author's Note to *Death and the King's Horseman* where he denies that the play is about the "clash of cultures." How can it be, he argues, when Pilkings was not a summation of British or European culture but a distortion of it. So, in effect, there weren't two cultures in the play but only one). However, one should not overinterpret these remarks. A person who ignores history cannot possibly bring to bear the knowledge of a number of incidents in Nigeria's past as does Soyinka in play after play. One has only to read *A Dance of the Forests* or *Death and the King's Horseman* or *Kongi's Harvest* to see that he draws many of the incidents of his plays from actual historical events. Moreover, in his relentless critique of tyranny and injustice he does not let anyone off the hook. In *Death and the King's Horseman*, it would be much simpler to lay the blame on the District Officer, Simon Pilkings, and leave it at that. Instead, Soyinka does the more subtle thing of having Elesin himself partially responsible for his doom. One suspects that the supporters of the 'Soyinka as a nativist' cause are unwilling to be termed politically incorrect and thus do the fashionable thing--damn the playwright for ignoring history when in fact he pays close attention to it. The only thing one can rightfully claim is that Soyinka has the tendency to distil messages of universal humanist significance from the very contingent events of history. He does not give due respect to the contingent nature of history. But to say that he ignores history would be a misrepresentation.

4.11 SOYINKA'S OBSCURITY

For all its merits, *A Dance of the Forests* is a flawed creation. It is difficult to sort out, especially towards the end of Part Two, what Soyinka is driving at. The passages in which the different spirits speak of the way in which they have been exploited sound too long-drawn out. Part One and those sections of part Two which deal with the court of Mata Kharibu are well worked out and gripping theatre. However, the intensity seems to diminish somewhat with the extended chorus of the spirits, the chorus of the ants and the masque of the triplets. The end, from the moment the characters start playing ampe, is, once again, very gripping and intense.

When unfavourable reviews appeared of this play, Soyinka fought back saying that he did not mean for his creation to be completely comprehensible. He challenged the notion that any play could or should be completely "understood." He wanted to produce "exciting theatre"; he was content to "set a riddle" which would excite the audience to think for itself. The audience ought to dispense with their tutored responses and expectations; instead they ought to respond to the rhythms and the moods of the play. His plays ought to be felt "through the pores of the skin." This is all very well, but one cannot help feeling that the effectiveness of the play as well as the playwright's intention of making a difference to society cannot be best served by obscurity. This is of course not to diminish the enormous courage of conviction Soyinka has shown in his work and his unrelenting efforts to make art be a vehicle of social change, of the removal or at least the lessening of human obtuseness, of the hope he expresses time and again that life can change without being blind to its many searing anomalies and injustices. And the fact that he does this without his art sinking to the level of propaganda or becoming sickeningly sentimental is evidence of his consummate artistry.

4.12 LET US SUM UP

In the drama of Wole Soyinka we see the difficult and sometimes flawed mixing of Yoruba rituals, dramatic techniques, music and dance with a language foreign to it: English. Notions of a linear plot, psychological characterisation, the arousal of emotions peculiar to particular genres of theatre have limited relevance in the study of Soyinka's plays.

The issues explored in *A Dance of the Forests* are Nigerian independence, the relation of tradition to history and the relation of the artist to politics. In the first issue, Soyinka wants Nigerians to admit their own history of violence and injustice, take responsibility for it, and not put all the blame of the country's ills on colonisation. In the second, through the duplication of characters in the play-within-a-play, Soyinka seems to suggest that history repeats itself and human beings do not learn from their own mistakes: there is very little difference between Rola and Madame Tortoise, for example. In the third, Soyinka believes that art can make a crucial difference to society. He does not believe that the artist can remain immune to the ills of society.

The structure of this play is not like the usual three or five act structure we are used to in western drama. The play is part reality, part something beyond reality. It travels backward and forward in time and along with the doubling of characters we have other signs of circularity. This suggests that the chain of violence, injustice and retribution is carried on from generation to generation. The structure works through the contrasts Soyinka sets up between living and dead, past and present, tragedy and laughter.

The characterisation in the play does not depend on psychological realism or inner consistency or growth--all the things we expect from traditional western theatre. In characterisation too there is a contrast set up between characters who are quick-witted, sharp-tongued, witty, full of life and energy but not necessarily entirely good (Demoke, Rola, Murete) and between those characters who are embodiments of sterility, emptiness, parsimony (Agboreko, Adenebi). There is a third category: the demagogue who is obsessed with power. Mata Kharibu and Eshuoro are obvious examples of this type.

Then there are creatures like Ogun who are not really characters but more in the nature of forces or symbols, symbol of the artist as explorer, as visionary.

Language and non-verbal techniques are some of the things Soyinka employs in order to achieve his very individual dramatic effect. The language is full of wit and graphic insult; some of the stuffer characters speak stiltedly and boringly, using a number of clichéd proverbs. The language at the end of the play is dignified and poetically heightened, befitting the anguish of the Spirits of the different natural elements. As for non-verbal techniques, rites, like the invitation to the dead, rituals like the climbing of the totem pole, music and dance form an intrinsic part of the dramatic effect of this play. This play gains much of its power from being staged, such is its spectacle, rather than from being read.

4.13 GLOSSARY

Expiation:	Making amends for (a sin)
Nativism:	To prefer metaphysics over history. In other words, to be more interested in seeing certain essential traits being enacted age after age, in civilisation after civilisation, rather than to show how contingent the forces of history are. To prefer philosophical generality over historical specificity.

4.14 QUESTIONS

- Q.1. What are the ways in which Soyinka's play departs from western dramatic tradition and convention?
- Q.2. What are the elements that Soyinka adopts from Yoruba ritual and drama into his play and how successful is the amalgamation of western and Yoruba elements?
- Q.3. Who is a nativist? Do you agree that Soyinka is a nativist? Use material from *A Dance of the Forests* to support your answer.
- Q. 4. Write a note on Soyinka's structure and characterisation in *A Dance of the Forests*.
- Q.5. What sort of political statement is Soyinka making in *A Dance of the Forests* which, as you know, was performed on the occasion of Nigeria's independence?
- Q.6. Is *A Dance of the Forests* an example of postcolonial theatre? Answer with close reference to the text. You may also refer to Soyinka's other writings and to the writings of Frantz Fanon and Ngugi wa Thiong'o if you so choose.

4.15 SUGGESTED READINGS

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UNIT 5 WOLE SOYINKA'S MAJOR DRAMATIC WORKS, EXCLUDING *A DANCE OF THE FORESTS*

Structure

- 5.0 Objectives
- 5.1 *The Swamp Dwellers* and *The Lion and the Jewel*
- 5.2 *The Strong Breed*, *The Road* and *Kongi's Harvest*
- 5.3 *Madmen and Specialists*
- 5.4 *Death and the King's Horseman*
- 5.5 Let Us Sum Up
- 5.6 Glossary
- 5.7 Questions
- 5.8 Suggested Readings

5.0 OBJECTIVES

I shall now give a brief introduction to some of Soyinka's important plays, excluding the one in our syllabus which has already been closely analysed, in order to give you, a taste of the different kinds of plays Soyinka wrote and a general sense of his oeuvre.

Femi Osofisan lists as some of Soyinka's favourite themes in his plays the following: the "wanton and cynical abuse" of political power in Africa, the malaise of widespread corruption, the curbing of individual freedom, the elusive meaning of history and the "exploration of the mythology of death" (Maja-Pearce 53). I wish to add to this the role of the artist in society and the ritual of expiation that must be undergone by a character often at the cost of his/her life in order to cleanse the community of its ills.

5.1 *THE SWAMP DWELLERS AND THE LION AND THE JEWEL*

His two earliest plays, *The Swamp Dwellers* and *The Lion and the Jewel*, although composed in the same period, 1957-58, are very different from each other. The first deals with the effect of sudden wealth on a community and on the relationships of people within that community (oil had just been discovered in marketable amounts in the Niger Delta.) The play is set in a hut raised on stilts--it is immediately clear that this is a play about people in a subsistence economy. The story is about Makuri and Alu and their twin sons, Awuchike and Igwezu. Awuchike had set off ten years before to seek his fortune in the city. He had found it but was dead to all feelings for his family. Igwezu had fulfilled his promises to his family, but he had not prospered. His crops had failed and the family priest had not kept his word about protecting him. However, Igwezu gets a bit of his own back when the shameless family priest asks him for a shave and is treated to a terrifying inquisition with the edge of a razor at his throat. The play is written in a naturalistic style and the characters are set off against one another--the responsible brother and the heartless

one, the faithful woman and the adulterous one etc. The form is flawed, expectedly, since Soyinka is learning his craft (there are far too many entrances and exits for one thing), but the play has an emotional impact.

The idea of *The Lion and the Jewel* was apparently suggested by the fifty-plus Charlie Chaplin's marriage to the teenage daughter of the American dramatist, Eugene O' Neill, Oona. This led Soyinka to think about how a number of Yoruba chiefs had married girls young enough to be their granddaughters. The energy, wicked cunning and ability to satisfy their own lust in these chiefs is celebrated in the figure of Baroka who despite his years has no trouble in outwitting the pompous and superficially Europeanised schoolmaster Lakunle and stealing the pretty young woman Lakunle has set his heart on marrying right from under his nose. Apart from the interest in the stratagems used by Baroka, the play shines in its spirited exchange of insults and ham-handed compliments between Sidi, the young woman courted by both men, and her two admirers. Soyinka includes the stylistic innovation of including a dance drama which functions much like a play-within-a-play but in a much more spectacular fashion. This play was initially misinterpreted as presenting Yoruba society in a reactionary light. However, there is nothing static about Baroka's values and the nimbleness with which he meets every fresh challenge. Rather, it is Lakunle who appears to be a dolt, slavishly aping the west and blindly believing that all good can only come from there. Lakunle is a victim of what Ngugi Wa Thiong'o in *Decolonising the Mind: the Politics of Language in African Literature* (which I referred to earlier) calls the "cultural bomb" of imperialism. The effect of this bomb is to "annihilate a people's belief in their names, in their languages, in their environment, in their heritage of struggle, in their unity, in their capacities and ultimately in themselves. It makes them see their past as one wasteland of non-achievement....It makes them want to identify with that which is furthest removed from themselves..." (3).

5.2 THE STRONG BREED, THE ROAD AND KONGI'S HARVEST

After *A Dance of the Forests* which was written around the time of Nigeria's independence (1960--Soyinka was twenty-five years old at the time) came the three major plays of the sixties, *The Strong Breed*, *The Road* and *Kongi's Harvest*. *The Strong Breed* tells the tragic story of Eman who is born into a family charged with carrying the evil from the community to the sea is a highly symbolic annual ritual. Eman is killed when he takes the place of a mentally disabled boy he has befriended in a village's annual purification ritual. As Eman grows from a coward who flees from dangerous situations to a hero and saviour who has the courage of his convictions, the spiritual growth of a community is also illustrated.

The Road baffled many a critic when it was first performed and is still regarded as a rather obscure play. It is about two people, Professor and Kotonu, and how their lives intersect. Professor is a corrupt swindler, Kotonu is a bewildered bus driver who took refuge after injuring the half-child Murano. In this play Soyinka combines naturalism with symbolism, popular comedy with ritual, and Shakespearean elements with elements of the absurd drama.

Soyinka said *Kongi's Harvest* was apparently inspired by a single sentence which he had once heard from the lips of an African leader, and that sentence, replete with realpolitik, threat and utter indifference to the worth of human life was--"I want him back alive, if possible." The play grows out of Soyinka's concern for political

activism, his observation of Nigerian politics, and of his concern to incorporate African festival rituals and theatre into drama written in English. *Kongi's Harvest* centres around a New Yam Festival held in the imaginary land of Isma. Kongi is the tyrant of Isma, and his repressive ways are aided by a band of sycophants and an Organizing Secretary. Kongi's rule is challenged by the supporters of the jailed Oba Danlola and by Kongi's ex-mistress. Rather than the details of the plot, which include attempts by Kongi to take over Danlola's position in the New Yam Festival and attempts to assassinate both Danlola and Kongi, it is the spectacularly staged Yam Festival, complete with music and dance, that makes an impact. In one of the performances, Soyinka himself played the part of Kongi.

5.3 *MADMEN AND SPECIALISTS*

Madmen and Specialists, Soyinka's next important play, was the only one he wrote during the Nigerian Civil War years--at this time most of his writing was in non-dramatic form. This acerbic play, with certain touches of ghoulish black comedy, is about Dr. Bero, who has been transformed by the wars: earlier he was a doctor, now he is an intelligence officer. He is aided in his sinister designs by the senior officers of the party. His father, like the figures of Greek myth and tragedy, tries to thwart their designs by serving them a feast of human flesh, (hoping thereby to fill their minds with revulsion.) The father's plan backfires: Bero and his allies develop a taste for human flesh. (In a 1993 interview Soyinka remarks that he observes a "philosophy of cannibalism in Nigeria at the moment, a ruthlessness towards each other....Corruption has become even an *exhibitionist* fact" [Maja-Pearce 157]). At the end of the play all the father's attempts at rehabilitation come to naught: he is shot by his son. The Earth Mothers who possess a great store of wisdom and wish to pass on this knowledge to safe hands burn their collection of herbs. This is an ambiguous action--thereby the herbs' power for good is destroyed, but the Earth Mothers also prevent them from falling into the wrong hands--Bero's. So some critics see this bitter and depressing play as being one not entirely bereft of hope.

5.4 *DEATH AND THE KING'S HORSEMAN*

The last play of Soyinka's that I will discuss was written in the period of his second exile from Nigeria--1971 to 1975. It is *Death and the King's Horseman*. The play is built around the attempted ritual suicide of the King's Horseman at Oyo in 1945. When in 1944 the Alafin of Oyo died, Jinadu, his Master of the Horse or Horseman, danced a ritual dance through the streets of Oyo as a prelude to killing himself. However, the British intervened and arrested him. Once the news of the Horseman's arrest and jailing reached his home his youngest son killed himself in place of his Jinadu. In his play, Soyinka changes the time to that of the Second World War and introduces a visit by the Prince of Wales to Nigeria. Soyinka transforms the bare bones of the historical narrative in his typical iconoclastic way--Elesin Oba, the King's Horseman, en route to committing suicide, decides he may as well leave something of himself behind for future generations. He decides to impregnate a young woman on her way to be married, despite the young woman's prospective mother-in-law, Iyaloja's, warnings. Along with the story of the Horseman is juxtaposed the tale of the British District officer and his wife, dancing a tango in egungun masquerade dress and completely unaware of the contempt they are showing to the country in which they live, more excited by the prospect of a visit by the Prince of Wales than anything going on in the African community. The two

rituals, that of the suicide and that of the welcome to the Prince of Wales, go on simultaneously, Elesin Oba's son, returned from medical school in England, rejects his father in public. Elesin is jailed, has a long conversation with the British District officer in which the latter's shallowness and Elesin's wisdom are revealed. Elesin blames the polluting "alien hand" in his land for his condition, an explanation that is immediately rejected by Iyaloja. She puts the blame squarely on Elesin's shoulders. Finally Elesin strangles himself. In this play Soyinka is successful not only in presenting the narrow-minded selfishness and ignorance of the British colonial administration but also the limitations of the Yoruba world view. Perhaps through Iyaloja's word of admonishment to Elesin, Soyinka is also hinting that some of the blame for the length and duration of colonial rule goes to the indigenous inhabitants who are not alert and responsible enough to get rid of the alien interlopers. As Soyinka said about the Gowon years in a 1993 interview, "we, the populace, wasted chances by failing to choose the right leadership when we had the chance" (Maja-Pearce 151). In the 'author's note' to the play's printed text, Soyinka says, "The colonial factor is an incident, a catalytic incident merely. The confrontation in the play is largely metaphysical, contained in the human vehicle which is Elesin and the universe of the Yoruba mind...." So, rather than colonialism per se, it is the effect of colonialism on the indigenous inhabitants of the colonised country and how these peoples' relations with each other are undermined is Soyinka's interest. He also wants to comment on how the caretakers and authority figures within the indigenous culture are threatened and psychologically enfeebled. In this play, from the point of view of dramaturgy, many of Soyinka's earlier lapses in technique, like too many entrances and exits, a confusion about the actual story, a tendency to get carried away by dialogue, are eschewed. The structure is tight; the emotional impact considerable.

5.5 LET US SUM UP

This unit analyses seven other plays by Soyinka written both before and after *A Dance of the Forests*. It shows how political corruption and the frailty of human nature, its susceptibility to greed, and the chance of ordinary, fallible human beings of doing something heroic is always a possibility. Soyinka does not give up on human nature, even though his critique of human failings is searing and pitiless. In a number of the plays a member of the community undergoes an expiation ritual which may or may not cost him his life in order to cleanse the community of certain ills.

The image gradually darkens--while the early play, *The Lion and the Jewel*, laughs at as well as criticises the chieftain and the vanities of foolish and westernised Lakunle, the last play discussed here, *Death and the King's Horseman*, is a sombre look at the price humans must pay for rampant corruption, greed and violence. The plays also carry an ongoing critique of colonisation without using it as an excuse for all Nigeria's ills.

5.6 GLOSSARY

Wanton:	unrestrained, irresponsible
Inquisition:	search, investigation

5.7 QUESTIONS

- Q.1. Are there any common themes or motifs in these seven plays by Soyinka?
- Q.2. Does Soyinka's vision change over the period of eighteen years that these works encompass? How so?
- Q.3. Do you see any lines between *A Dance of the Forests* and the plays described here?

5.8 SUGGESTED READINGS

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