Chapter III. Modern Rituals and African Dictators.

I

Soyinka has structured seven of his fourteen plays around rituals, of which only some are counterparts of myths. Hans H. Penner writes, "Although it cannot be denied that some rituals explicitly initiate or repeat a myth,..., it cannot be maintained that all rituals do so"1, allowing a basis for the independent existence of some rituals. In the previous chapter we have discussed the traditional myths and their corresponding rituals like the Ogun myth-ritual, the harvest ritual and the ritual of flogging as community cleansing. In this chapter we deal with rituals that exist independent of myths.

Traditional myths can be seen as knowledge and wisdom encoded in the form of narratives. They are a result of primitive man's interaction with cosmic forces. These myth-rituals seek to (i) to regenerate society through spiritual energy; (ii) affirm equality of man before god or divine forces; (iii) remind man of his responsibilities ie., to offer ritual sacrifices to the forces guarding the spiritual gulf and, (iv) guarantee continuation of life. In a nutshell, the traditional myths consolidate a belief system and situate man in the cosmic context. Soyinka works with myths and rituals because they provide him with an ideology which help him to determine what is good for his society and what is anti-social. Also, they ground his plays in his own cultural
context. All these aspects have been explored in the previous chapter.

Rituals that are not patterned on myths may be called social rituals. The origin of these rituals are as old as the community itself. Just as man has been sometimes described or defined as a rational, social or political animal, he "may be...viewed as a ritual being" as Hans H. Penner puts it. A community is based upon certain relationships; and these relationships can be sacralized by imbuing them with certain powers outside the material world and connecting them with the cosmic realm. By regulating "with whom one can eat or whom one can marry or kill" as Frederick J Streng puts it, rituals can give spiritual significance to social action. For example, a marriage, the erection of a monument, a war, a social gathering or a consecration of a king or emperor in traditional agricultural societies integrate the community through allegiance and order. A marriage for example establishes a sacred relationship between a man and a woman, a social gathering links man with his society in a non-utilitarian and abiding bond. The rituals have power of influencing living communities and are capable of affecting deeper sentiments of man.

Just as language is a system of symbols that is based upon some rules, ritual may also be viewed as a system of symbolic acts that is based upon some rules. Thus rituals as means of communication in man's everyday life become important for a playwright. Soyinka explores the social and
artistic potential of these rituals because they are in many ways crucial to a culture. The specific items used in a ritual such as garment, masks and objects form the non-verbal pattern of structure and meaning. Besides this, the rituals involve space and time as most rituals mark off a particular time of the day, month, year, stage in life or the beginning of a new event or vocation. Society recognises this space and time as "sacred". Soyinka finds this spatial and temporal elements of ritual very useful in terms of structural devices. He manipulates this space to bring into his plays a diversity of material and thereby enlarge the scope and dimension of dramatic action. In the hands of the playwright this space and time become symbolic rather than sacred.

The nature and function of the rituals have changed with the change in the political and social conditions of modern society. In several parts of the world the divinely ordained ruler has been replaced by the modern constitutional head of the state. Consequently a new class of people have come to power. Paradoxically the ordinary man has become more important than ever because god is no more a king maker but democratic process gives this privilege to the common man. Modern politicians, - and not only in Africa,- therefore attempt to capture the imagination of the common man through the medium of ritual using it as a means towards mobilisation of mass support. Festivals and rituals have been appropriated for political use. Examples of using religious symbols for
political gains or using 'Yatra' as a political ritual, or erection of a temple in order to gain mass support - such examples are fairly common in India. Soyinka uses cases from contemporary Nigeria for his dramatic purpose, eg. Kongi in Kongi's Harvest exploits the idea of the harvest ritual to boost his image in society. In multi-religious and multi-ethnic societies, these may also be ways of cementing a group identity. But more often the ritual language is used deliberately and consciously to project individuals as heroes and to create subliminal impressions on the communal psyche. An individual seeking popularity may use a marriage ritual for ulterior motives and make it a day of national importance: grant reprieves to criminals; offer awards and honours to people; give charities. Some one may even declare a war as a ritual act towards consolidating support. These rituals can turn an ordinary man into a hero in the eyes of common man. This way the rituals may be used for double purposes: for cementing groups and projecting individuals. The rituals, as Edward Norbec observes, can fetch "social status" and also reinforce "hierarchy" on the society. Thus, when the age old rituals are used with ulterior motives and artificial intents they become "modern rituals". 

Africa is a vast and heterogenous continent. With the end of the imperial chapter around the middle of the twentieth century most African countries have become independent. Today, these independent countries are facing a lot of social, economical and political problems including
those caused by the newly rich power brokers. Countries like Uganda, Central Africa, Equatorial Guinea have seen dictators like Idi Amin, Jean Badel Bokassa and Macias Nguema respectively. In the recent past these dictators have lead their countries to the verge of total destruction. Political experience in Nigeria has not been very much better. In their 32 years of independence Nigerians have seen six coups and a bitterly fought out civil war. A politician who exercises absolute power and assumes total control tends to become a dictator. In symbolic and dramatic terms, the greenery wilts where he walks and death dances where he reigns. A dictator's end is not very easy because he does not work within the limitations of a moral or a political or a constitutional framework; instead he may break these institutions to energize himself. A good example from Soyinka's plays is Kongi. We all know that sometimes the dictators in the developing countries are created by global powers to further their material gain. Religious fanaticism is yet another factor that has a history of producing dictators. A democratically elected person succumbing to the seductive allure of power may also turn out to be a dictator. Thus the emergence of a dictator is a complex process difficult to analyse exactly.

The ritual paradigm - i.e., a non-verbal structure of meaning can operate as a creative device, helping the playwright to create this complexity symbolically and achieve a satiric as well as a comic effect. A political head or a
dictator in the process of self gratification emerges a comic figure or an object of satire instead of appearing as a hero. Similarly, a political head is shown up as a blood thirsty tyrant when he is fighting his own people in a war or torturing an innocent person. When the ritual language fails to draw its traditional response from the society, instead of being a harmonising act it becomes a disjunctive performance. The "modern ritual" thus becomes a dramatic device for suggesting dehumanization and evoking suspicion. A war becomes an act of destruction rather than self-protective communal action, memorials and monuments leave deep scars on the communal psyche and not commemorate human glory. Hence "modern rituals" often evoke exactly the opposite effect of what the traditional rituals produced. Soyinka repeatedly uses the device of ritual in his plays to make his political comment on contemporary society. Instead of bringing benign spiritual influence on the people and affirming equality of man before god, the "modern rituals" perpetrate hierarchy. It is in this context that the four plays of Soyinka - A Dance of the Forests, Madmen and Specialists, Opera Wonyosi and A Play of Giants - will be read here. In these plays the dictators and politicians deploy rituals for ulterior motives. Soyinka does not make a political or sociological study of the dictators but he exposes their megalomania, short sightedness through the symbolic medium of rituals that no longer connect the past with the present.
A Dance of the Forests (1963)

A Dance of the Forests was written for the occasion of Nigerian independence day celebration (Oct 1, 1960) and it is a revised version of the earlier anti-apartheid piece A Dance of the African Forests. The play has none of the obvious topical references one might expect in a work written for so specific an event. It has a significance that transcends the occasion. The play is about power, corruption, creativity and regeneration that are relevant to any society. On the occasion of Nigerian independence Soyinka wants to tell his people that independence is not a time for complacent rejoicing and self-congratulation but for stock-taking and future planning. Accordingly he said, "The [independence] euphoria should be tempered by the reality of the external history of oppression". Soyinka employs the images of ancestors to interrogate the valorisation of the past in consolidating national identity. A Dance involves the past, the present and the future vision of an unnamed community of people, their gods and spirits. Soyinka has constructed his play around a modern ritual "The Gathering of the Tribes"- organised by the politicians for reaffirmation of their culture, but paradoxically it only exposes their insensitivity and greed for power.
The play is in two parts; in addition there is a small prologue providing a synoptic view of the play, the major characters and events. Some time before the play begins the "Human community," has decided to hold "the gathering of the tribes" and requested Forest Head, a god to send some illustrious guests from the world of the dead. Aroni, the alter ego of Forest Head has sent a warrior and his pregnant wife who lived in the court of a twelfth century king called Matakharibu. The warrior was gelded and sold as a slave for refusing to fight an ignoble war of the king and not reciprocating the amorous advances of the queen Madame Tortoise. The warrior's pregnant wife was drowned in a river. The organisers of the Gathering have refused to accept the dead pair as their guests and have driven them away using diesel smoke.

There are human protagonists also escaping into the forest - Demoke, Rola and Adenebi. They were linked to the warrior and his wife in the past and have also committed crimes in the present. Demoke, the carver of trees has murdered his apprentice out of jealousy for his climbing ability. In the past, as a court poet to Matakharibu he had pushed his novice from the roof of the palace where they had been sent to rescue the queen's pet canary. Rola, the present day courtesan, has driven one of her lovers to murder the other and then committed suicide. In her previous incarnation as Matakharibu's queen she had ordered the castration of the warrior and the murder of his wife. Finally Adenebi who in
the past after having accepted bribe from a slave trader had prevailed upon the king to sell his soldiers as slaves, and in the present permits a lorry to be overloaded (again because he has been bribed) and becomes responsible for the death of sixty five persons. Forest Head disguised as Obaneji has lured the three guilty humans into the forest to reveal their past to them and to make them learn from their mistakes.

Aroni has taken the dead pair into his fold now assuring them a welcome. At the welcome of the dead the pregnant woman unburdens herself giving birth to an 'abiku', a child born only to die which is returned to its mother. The dead pair's case is heard as well as the case of the various spirits representing the natural resources. The ceremonies of the living and the dead converge at the end of the play. The rituals- the Welcoming and the Gathering expose and satirise the politicians and the men of power in the past and present who use rituals for their own selfish ends. The play gets more complex at the end as Soyinka knits various symbolic episodes and images together. When the play ends two of the human protagonists emerge 'chastened' as they learn from their past, understand the present and has a vision of the future.

"That human beings simply are cannibals all over the world so that their main preoccupation seems to be eating up one another" is a view consistently held by Soyinka. It is
pessimistic and often constitutes the core of his political plays. Professor in The Road, the dictators in Kongi's Harvest and The Bacchae of Euripides are all embodiments of this philosophy. Cruelty is deeply ingrained in man and consequently his past and present have been violent and the future is not going to be any different. Soyinka insists through his plays that a humane world will emerge only when man makes a discovery of the ugly force within him and can make a visionary transformation of it. A Dance exemplifies this view through the paradigm of a "modern ritual". The mask dance and the revelation of the past through magic.

Soyinka opens the play with the arrival of the Dead Man and Dead Woman. In a spectacular scene the two characters rise from an empty clearing indicating the co-existence of the dead and the living worlds. They don't seem to see each other establishing their separate spheres in space and time. The Dead Woman is pregnant and the Dead Man "is fat and bloated, wears a dated warrior's outfit now mouldy". Aroni has chosen this couple as guests for "The Gathering of the Tribes" of the human community. Rather than being greeted and welcomed by the living the dead pair must literally chase the living in order to communicate with them. Adenebi, Demoke and Rola have run away from the scene. The dead pair want the living to hear their case:

Dead Woman: It is hard to carry this child for a hundred generations...when I was asked I thought...here was a chance to return the living to the living that I may sleep lighter. (p. 8).
Ritual is the site where the past meets with the present in order to create a better future. The Dead Woman has thought the community gathering is the right place to render unto the living what belongs to them. By not recognising the dead pair the living have refused to come to terms with their past and to think about their future. Though Rola, Demoke and Adenebi are not the organisers of the Gathering their rejection of the dead pair exposes their limited and debilitated hold on life.

The two important figures among the organisers - Old Man, the council head and Adenebi, the council orator - are representatives of power today. They thrive on empty rhetoric and grand gestures without substance. The Gathering is an event created by them for self aggrandisement, but the dead pair who have arrived as their guests do not seem suitable as "illustrious ancestors". Old Man says, "we were sent the wrong people. We asked for statesmen and we were sent executioners". (p. 29) Soyinka heightens the misplaced values of the power holders through Adenebi who had made a case for the Gathering:

Adenebi: ...we must bring home the the descendants of our great forebears. Find them. Find the scattered sons of proud ancestors. The builders of empires. The descendants of our great nobility. Find them. Bring them here. If they are half way across the world, trace them. If they are in hell, ransom them. Let them symbolise all that is noble in our nation. Let them be our historical link for the season for rejoicing. Warriors, Sages. Conquerors. Builders. Philosophers. Mystics.
Let us assemble them round the totem of the nation and we will drink from their resurrected glory. (p. 31).

There is something universal in the desire of the men of power to rewrite history and construct the past selectively. Old Man and his council have cleared a vast area of the forest and laid motor roads. In this area stands the totem, the council has carved. The totem - is a symbol of their culture, traditional gods and heroic ancestors. But the sanctity of the totem is lost because the forest has been cleared, and the process of fumigation resorted to for diving away the dead pair has made all the forest creatures and spirits leave the place. Thus the ritual is merely a political gimmick now, bereft of all cultural and spiritual resonance.

The Gathering ceremony of the living community fails to bring any good to the society. Reluctant to give such a ritual a centre stage treatment Soyinka pushes this ceremony to the background, providing the centre stage to Forest Head, a divine character who would lead the three human protagonists to their redemption. These three are representatives of the human community. Through them Soyinka dramatizes social action and human behaviour that would redeem mankind and regenerate humanity. And therefore he has selected only those who are guilty: Demoke, Rola and Adenebi are guilty of murder.
The three of them were escaping into the forest when Forest Head found them. He led them deep into the forest to reveal their past to them and to make them witness their roles in the suffering of the warrior and his pregnant wife in the court of Matakharibu. The most talented carver of the land Demoke suffers from one weakness: vertigo, which leads to his jealous killing of his apprentice. Rola is responsible for the death of her lovers. Adenebi's dishonesty has lead to the overturning of a lorry, killing sixty five passengers. Forest Head uses various devices to make the three confess their guilts: first he asks them provocative questions. In the second stage, he makes them witness their past.

Adenebi is known to us as a council orator. He is the most contemptible of the three human protagonists not only because he is responsible for the deaths of sixty five passengers but because of his hypocrisy and pompous self-righteousness. Adenebi feels morally outraged when he learns that Rola is a prostitute: "Two lovers in the graveyard...How did I ever get in your company". (p. 23) Forgetting his own earlier flirtations with Rola, he now assumes a dismissive attitude towards her. Similarly Adenebi can easily write off his earlier appreciation of Demoke's art when he learns that Rola is the subject of his work. In his interrogation Forest Head cannot get any simple or true answer from Adenebi:

Obaneji (Forest Head): You see, I want to close my files on this particular lorry - the incinerator. And my records won't be complete unless I have the name of the man who did it - you know, the one who
took the bribe. Do you think you can help me there.

Adenebi: Since you are so clever and so knowledgeable, why don't you find that out yourself? (p. 17).

Hiding his own culpability Adenebi projects himself as a guardian of cultural heritage. Essentially a duplicitous man, his isolation is inevitable because he cannot face either god or man. “I have always lived in moral fear of being lost” he confesses in a rare moment of truth.

The forest and its darkness is the "seething cauldron of transitional abyss" where the cosmic winds tear man into pieces. Ogun had plunged into that and emerged regenerated, but Adenebi fails to recreate himself. Hence, we only see him getting into the forest. he does not belong to either of the worlds - the gods or the human beings. The forest swallows his corrupted self completely and we do not hear of him at the end of the play.

Old Man and Adenebi may not appear to be dictatorial but they are definitely self-seeking politicians. Old Man, though not referred to as the Head of the council anywhere in the play, is in total control of the Gathering ceremony. His audacity and arrogance are revealed in the fumigation of the forest spirits and the dead pair. He has his following too: two councillors always parade themselves behind him. Old Man and Adenebi are not presented against the background of privileges and luxuries which usually accompany the dictators
in the world of Soyinka. However, they both possess diabolic manoeuvring power.

Like Old Man and Adenebi, the king Matakharibu belongs to the world of power. His wishes and aspirations are capable of changing the society and affecting its morality, culture and tradition. Matakharibu, a twelfth century king is an ancestral link between the living community and the dead. Rola was his abducted queen, Madame Tortoise; Demoke was his court poet, Adenebi was his court historian and the dead pair were his subjects, demonstrating through this replication the continuity of history. At the present moment the council has used the Gathering as ritual device to glorify themselves. Similarly, in the past, Matakharibu had used war as a ritual means to project himself as a great hero in the eyes of history. Just as modern ritual wreaks devastation, Matakharibu’s war had dispersed the community leading to slave trade. Thus, Matakharibu is the first to use a ritual for self gratification. Soyinka traces the present ritual mania to its past and demonstrates the exploitative use of ritual by the men of power. For this purpose the magical play - within a play is deployed as an illustrative device.

Matakharibu has stolen his brother chieftain’s wife, Madame Tortoise and made her his queen. Now, he wants his abducted queen’s “trousseau” to be recovered. Matakharibu insists on fighting a war over this issue inspite of the fact that the chieftain does not consider Madame Tortoise worth a
battle. The war is Matakharibu's excuse for self aggrandizement. Like the eponymous dictator in *Kongi's Harvest* he wants to set a precedent for the future generation as the only king who carried away the dowry along the stolen wife: "Matakharibu asks what is rightly his. The dowry of a woman he takes to his wife" (p. 49) because he considers it "an affair of honour".

The warrior, who was in fact Matakharibu's army captain of genuine integrity refused to command his men to fight a frivolous war to recover the clothes of Madame Tortoise.

Warrior: It is an unjust war. I cannot command my men into battle merely to recover the trousseau of any woman. (p. 48).

Matakharibu might have, at the most, imprisoned the warrior for his insubordination, but the court historian inflamed his passion further by advocating the heroic and patriotic function of a war.

Historian: ... war is the only consistency that the past ages afford us. It is only the legacy which new nations seek to perpetuate. Patriots are grateful for wars. Soldiers have never questioned bloodshed. The cause is always the accident your majesty, and war is the Destiny. This man is traitor. He must be in the enemy's pay. (p. 57)

It may be recalled that the court historian of the past is Adenebi of the present, whose unctuous words led to the enactment of the Gathering ritual.

Thus the court historian/Adenebi is the other face of power: the intellectual who provides the justification for
the selfish acts of politicians. Against the advice of the physician he instigates Matakharibu to sell his disloyal soldiers to the slave trader and make a profit. Soyinka thus indicts all of them - Matakharibu, Old Man and Adenebi - of cruelty to countless human lives.

Before the warrior is moved to the slave ship, Madame Tortoise approached him with a suggestion: "Matakharibu is a fool. You are a man and a leader, soldier. Have you no wish to sit where Matakharibu sits?" (p. 56). Also, she asked him to take her as his queen, but the warrior resisted both the temptations. The warrior's wife begged for mercy, but Madame Tortoise ordered the castration of the warrior before he was sold. Separated from her husband the warrior's wife committed suicide by jumping into a river.

Demoke is neither a politician nor a man of power. He has not victimized anybody and he is not a victim of the power game. His killing of Oremole is not a political act. As a manifestation of the spirit of Ogun, he is different from the corrupt Adenebi, Old Man, and the historian of the past. The theme of the regeneration of the creative will through the rediscovery of the self is conveyed through Demoke. He demonstrates the process of Ogun's "battle of will in the transitional abyss". He is one of the three guilty human protagonists who were escaping into the forest and finally landed up in the company of Forest Head. Demoke is sand-witched between the men of power and politicians - Old Man,
Demoke's apprentice Oremole climbed to the top and mocked Demoke for his inability, an infuriated Demoke pulled Oremole down and he was killed by the fall. Then possessed by a creative urge Demoke cut off the top of the tree and carved the totem. Demoke is thus like Ogun, destructive as well as creative. Yet another quality of Demoke is his admission of and repentance for the violence caused by him. This makes him more human than the other unrepentant criminals in the play. Unlike Adenebi who conceals his crimes Demoke voluntarily admits it:

Demoke: Thrice I said I would behead it. Whence my feet would go no farther. Thrice Oremole, slave, ............
Demoke's head is no woman's cloth, spread To receive wood shavings from a carpenter. Down Down I plucked him screaming on Oro. And I carved three days and nights till tools were blunted, and these hands, my father's hands, Swelled big as the tree trunk. Down I came (p. 27-8).

To admit and repent for ones own crime is a way of purging the guilty self. By his confession Demoke proves himself to be humane and dynamic. Rola, a prostitute too does this. As a result, forest Head selects only Demoke and Rola for a vision of their past and future, because they can learn from their mistakes "to pierce the mirror of original nakedness of soul deadening habit, and bare the mirror of original nakedness" (p. 62).
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Forest Head leads Demoke and Rola to "the welcoming of the Dead" to give them a vision of the future. He commands that the Dead woman be relieved of the child in her womb: "let the tongue of the unborn, still for generations be loosened" (p.63) The Dead woman brings an abiku child which according to the Yoruba is born only to die. It is a symbol of both the spirit of the future and the memory of the past and do not convey a happy future. The child and mother together from a complex symbol. Through the centuries of pregnancy, the child is not dead even though its mother was dead.

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'II be born dead  
I'II be born dead. ( p. 64).

Soyinka uses a number of stage devices like the symbolic spirits of nature, human perversions in the form of grotesques and the tableaus of ants to drive home a message that the half-child is not born into a safe world. The three human protagonists are masked and made to speak as spirits of palm, precious stones, darkness, rivers etc... The spirits tell the story of man's eternal greed, destruction of environment, of animal and planet life and treachery towards his own kind. The ants complain of the waste of human resources. Added to this, Eshuoro, an evil god, attempts to attract the child. The triplets named - 'The End', 'The Means' and 'Posterity' dance around the half-child. Demoke
senses danger to the future of the half-child and returns it to its mother. The child is symbolic of the future of the living community.

The stories of Demoke and Rola emphasize the distinction between true ritual that connects the human spirit with the spirit of nature and cosmic forces and false ritual that is constructed for temporary and selfish gains. Demoke the artist and Rola the whore, both cured and chastened at the end of the play emerge wiser than before. When the Old Man asks him about his experience of the night, Demoke's answer testifies to this: "Expiation. We...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." (p. 73) He has been through a life resuscitating process provided by Forest Head. Forest Head is in a way performing the same function that Soyinka is doing in the play: holding a mirror to the "original nakedness" knowing full well that the animality in man will not change:

Forest Head:(more to himself): 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 fully well, it is all a futility. Yet I must do this alone and no more. (p. 71)

The structural aspects of A Dance have obvious parallels with Brecht's A Caucasian Chalk Circle although
Jonathan A. Peters has seen a more "obvious patterning after *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. Episodic structure, play-within-a-play, the journey motif are exactly the devices Brecht uses in his play which ends with a Chinese story in which two parties contend for a child. Both *A Dance* and *A Caucasian Chalk Circle* begin with a violent incident in the past that dispersed the people: the flight of the governor's wife leaves Grusha the housemaid with the child where as in *A Dance* the incidents in Matakharibu's court have left the warrior's wife with the child in her womb. The child in both the plays is communally significant and the women's saga to give the child freedom for its growth occupies the central place. Grusha and the warrior's wife become the victims of their society and finally find a space where they can breathe: Grusha in the northern mountains and the warrior's wife under the protection of Forest Head. The plays end with a fight for the possession of the child and the conflict in each case is resolved in a court. Forest Head restores the child to the warrior's wife and Azdak returns her child to Grusha. Both playwrights are interested in exploring the interconnectedness of the past, present and future of their societies.

Agboreko in *A Dance* who always speaks in riddles and proverbs bearing the richness of the colloquial and folk heritage also seems to be a character inspired by Brecht. Statements by different characters in Brecht, eg, "When the horse was shod, the horsefly stretched out leg as the saying
gears" (Simon), "Better a treasure in the sewer than a stone
in the mountain stream" (Azdak), "A fine day, let's go
fishing said the angler to the worm" (Simon), becomes fused
in one composite character in Soyinka's play who always
speaks in riddles, eg, "If the flea had a house of his own,
he wouldn't be out on dog's back. Proverb to bones and
silence" (p. 32) and "Because it rained the day the egg was
hatched the foolish chicken swore he was a fish. Proverb to
bones and silence" (p. 33). Soyinka more often than not
works with the western dramatic forms, in the process he
explores the richness of his own culture.

Madmen and Specialists (1971)

In his play written on the occasion of Nigerian
independence Soyinka's vision of future was bleak. Speaking
through the warrior he had almost predicted what would happen
in the coming years:

Warrior: Unborn generations will be cannibals most
worshipful physician. unborn generations
will, as we have done, eat up one another (p.
49. A Dance)

Not even six years had passed before these ominous
words began to seem prophetic. An ethnic conflict in the
North led to the massacres of the Ibos, the republican
government fell followed by two successive coups. These
incidents created a national crisis and a civil war. All was
not well in Nigeria. Soyinka was arrested and imprisoned for
twenty seven months for his strongly worded article in a newspaper arguing for a truce with the Biafra secessionists. Shuttle in the Crypt, a collection of poems, The Man Died an autobiography and Madmen and Specialists, a play are all results of his personal involvement with the civil war.

Some characters in Madmen and Specialists are inspired by Soyinka's interaction with the 'E Branch' officers mentioned in The Man Died. The exodus of the Ibo officers in the ranks of military and civil administration during the 1965 riots had resulted in the sudden promotion of the low ranking officers and some of them ruthless in their new found positions had turned arrogant. Dr. Bero in Madmen and Specialists is a combination of two characters in The Man Died "Mallam D' who always said, "Anyway, you are safe with us" and another young man "Cocky, self-assured, I put him down at first glance as one of those untried replacements for the exodus from professional positions... His manner towards the commissioner, his superior by several ranks was deliberately arrogant". And the suffering individual in the play "Old Man" seems to be the author himself as he appears in The Man Died who was cut off from his society for more than two years and was mentally tortured.

Madmen and Specialists presents the aftermath of the war, its dehumanizing effect and the impoverishment of the Nigerian society. In A Dance Soyinka has chosen a whole society linked by murders and crimes and studied it through the enactment of a modern ritual but in Madmen and
Specialists he takes a family bound by blood and emotions in a closely knit neighbourhood. The Beros are a family practicing herbal medicine: 'Old Man' has a son Dr. Bero and a daughter, SiBero. Both the father and son go to war - Old Man to work in a rehabilitation camp for the disabled in the war. Instead of teaching how "to amuse themselves, make something of themselves" Old Man has taught them to "think, think, THINK" and put "a working mind in a mangled body". And he had preached what is "As", (a multivalent word in this play, denoting man's destructive urge). Besides this, Old Man had tricked the army officers into eating human flesh to make them realise how gruesome the crime of man-slaughter is. But, the plan backfired completely and "power - hungry" commanders, Dr. Bero among them, delighted in what they were fed on realised that "(i)t was the first step to power". Due to the sudden death of the head of the intelligence, Dr. Bero changed his profession from fighting to intelligence and imprisoned his own father to stop him from teaching people to think, and eventually tortured him to death.

In the absence of her father and brother, SiBero, back at home collects herbs and learns about herbal medicine from the two earth mothers living in the premises of SiBero's house. SiBero, earth mother Iya Agba and Iya Mate and the Christian priest constitute a group who are not physically or mentally affected by the war. Thus, a three member family come made to render a paradigmatic view of the larger society: - Dr. Bero is a fanatic power hungry man; SiBero is
an innocent woman outside the power game and Old Man, the
direct victim of the military regime. There is yet another

group of characters who show the physical deformities caused
by the war - the four mendicants - Goyi is a 'rubber ball'
"because if it were not for the iron rod holding up his spine
he would collapse like a toad"; he does not have either his
legs or hands. Aafaa is a patient of St. Vitus spasms, and
there are Blindman and Cripple. They not only beg on the
roadside but do spying jobs for those in power. While the
mendicants represent the physical scars of the war, Dr. Bero
and Old Man show the effects of war on the mental level.

In Madmen and Specialists Soyinka shows a considerable
improvement in the use of dramatic strategies. In A Dance he
used flash back and change of role to take the readers to the
past of some characters where as in Madmen and Specialists he
employs parody and play-with-in-a-play to talk about
incidents that have happened before the play began. The
deformed mendicants add ambiguity, double meaning and an
extra dimension, by suggesting the ills of the society.

When the play opens we have before us 'Bero's home',
the surgery down in a cellar and a semi hut on a higher
structure to one side where the earth mothers live. The four
mendicants - Cripple, Goyi, Blindman and Aafaa are sitting
and begging on the roadside. They are passing time by
throwing dice from the gourd rattle. The roadside here is
symbolically pertinent: "The characters are not on the road
that leads from one place to another, that imposes a rare sense of purposeful direction and progress, but by the roadside. The meaningful pursuance of existence becomes a mirage as the roadside is out of reach. The idea of ‘sideness’ is suggestive of superfluity and *de drop*¹² as Benedict M. Ibitokum has put it.

The mendicants represent a common humanity that have come under the ravages of war. They remain on the stage all through the play, a reminder of the cruelty of ‘As’. Also they perform the role of chorus as in a Greek play.

Soyinka’s use of the Absurd Theatre techniques in the play is obvious: for example, the words of mendicants referring to events and situations outside the immediate context and the circumlocutory one liners. Just as Godot in Becket’s *Waiting for Godot* remains a mystery the ‘As’ in the play does not appear at all. Nevertheless the word ‘As’ has innumerable ramifications. The mendicants also suggest to us what the play is all about, as for example in these wishes for SiBero and her brother:

Goyi: More grease to his elbow.
Aafaa: Not forgetting armpits.
Blindman: More power to his swagger stick!
Cripple: May light ever shine...
Aafaa: From his brands and buttons.
Goyi: May he come home safely...
Aafaa: To your loving arms.
Cripple: Not to mention to his Daddy’s.
Goyi: God help her, that is some brother she has.
You may say he is ... dutiful.
Cripple: How a dutiful son? you are crazy.
Blindman: I know what he means. (He points an imaginary gun.) Bang! All in the line of duty!
Goyi clutches his chest, slumps over (p. 226-7)
The one-liners are directed towards Bero and his father whom we are yet to see. While the words 'grease to his elbow' and 'armpits' give a satirised introduction to Dr. Bero the 'swaggerstick', 'the braids and buttons' hint at a military life. Swagger - stick indicates power and with it Dr. Bero 'cuts across Aafaa's face' and hits his father. 'Loving arms' of Siero prefigure her nature uncorrupted by war but 'God help her', 'some brother she has' convey sinister forebodings. The dutiful nature of Dr. Bero demonstrated by Blindman with 'an imaginary gun' followed by the loud "Bang" clearly suggests the death of Old Man in the hands of his son. The tone of the play is obviously satirical and the mood is one of despair and despondency.

The play is in two parts: the first part establishes the major characters and their inter-relationships with the individuals and the war; the second part presents the ritual killing of Old Man. Egomania, the deranged mind, bestiality in Dr. Bero which are largely the result of his dehumanization in the war are dramatized in the confrontation between the father and son. In the parody and the plays-within-play we see military dictators and powerful men of politics who have employed the ritual of war to make themselves heroes and inscribe their names in the communal memory. Soyinka has pushed these 'murderous buffoons' to the background obviously because he wants to give centre stage treatment to the war - affected community.
In a major speech by Blindman, Soyinka satirises the rulers who vainly seek to legitimize their violence by framing it in religious rhetoric. Just as the Historian in A Dance justifies the self-seeking war of Matakaribun as an historical necessity, the rulers in Madmen and Specialists have also termed their war a 'historical beauty'. They have capitalized on issues like ethnic and cultural purity which would provoke blind and fierce passions. In the note for the producer of the play Soyinka suggests that "the speech should be varied with topicality and locale of the time".

Blindman: It was our duty and historical necessity and historical beauty. What through the wind of change is blowing over the entire continent, our principles and traditions - yes must be maintained. For we are threatened, yes, we are indeed threatened... As for oil, I can't tell which is the margarine. If we don't stop them now, but it may be our turn next movement... would you want your daughter married to one of them?... It may happen believe me,... Excuse me, but we are entitled to match you history for history to the nearest half-million souls. Look at the hordes, I implore you. They stink. They eat garlic... (pp. 285-7)

The speech echoes the anti-Ibo sentiments which led to the civil war. Going by the crude logic this speaker might be a military dictator. It is the land of the Ibos which has oil. The Ibos are largely Christians today, and the northerns are Muslims. It is in the north the killings first began, hence the reference, "The nearest half-million souls" could be to the civil war killings or to the 1965 massacres. Soyinka exposes the leaders of Nigeria who in pursuit of personal profit have resorted to violence.
The dictators not satisfied with the carnage of half-a-million innocent souls want the social ceremonies to follow which convert their acts of barbarism into noble causes in the eyes of common man. This way, they create a following of their own who will regard them as heroes of the future. The mendicants' self-explanatory one-liners expose this diabolic fraudulence. The rulers with their power over nation's money create various benefit schemes for their stooges, and hold public ceremonies.

Cripple. Imperial commendations.

Aafaa unfurls the scrolls, slaps his tongue up and down
Goyi. Commemoration occasion...
Aafaa. Certificates of merit
Goyi. Long service medals... (p. 285)

The mendicants are parodying the process of bestowing honour on the heroes through medals and awards. "[Cripple] pins the medal on Goyi's left shoulder, who then pins medal on CRIPPLE's chest" and both kiss each other showing admiration for each other's dubious services.

In this play 'As' symbolises the destructive force in man that does not change. It is the first word of the Christian liturgy - 'As was beginning... world without ending" with which Soyinka gives religious colour to his understanding of man. 'As' suggests cannibalism since they are 'vultures' in Aafaa's words: "We clean up the mess made by others" (p. 227) and "where the cycle is complete there will 'As' be found" (p. 225). 'As' also symbolise death
because it is with that the cycle of man comes to an end. This idea is further reinforced by Old Man. According to him 'As' - "abominates Humanity - the fleshy part, that is" and "Favourite food of As - is human flesh" (p. 227). As violence is the nature of uncivilized and primitive man and continues in the blood of the 'As' in the present - "As does not change". (p. 278) Politically the 'As' make "The pious pronouncements. Manifestos. Charades. At the bottom of it all humanity choking in silence". (p. 280) Dr. Bero is an embodiment of 'As' and is linked to them, just as the three human protagonists in A Dance were linked by blood to the dead pair.

Dr. Bero, first, is a victim of the system of As and subsequently its instrument and finally its embodiment. When he left for war he was a humanitarian, a doctor dedicated to the preservation of human life; when he returns he is an intelligence officer, a "specialist", a seeker after power to whom human life means nothing. By his actions he reflects sadism, greed for absolute control over others which are the qualities of As. He can't stand opposition and the voice of others: when Aafaa tries to argue with him he "cuts across the face with his swagger stick" (p. 242). The other symptoms of the loss of humaneness in Dr. Bero are his disregard for neighbours (he considers them 'corpses') and his refusal to meet the earth mothers. He invites the Priest for a dinner made out of the human body: "But why, Pastor, it's quite delicious you know ...Of course, not all parts of the body. I
prefer the balls myself" (p. 250-1). He shamelessly utters this in the presence of his sister flouting all the cultural taboos. "It was the first step to power you understand. Power in its purest sense. The end of inhibitions. The conquest of the weakness of your too human flesh will all its sentiments" (p. 252) he tells his sister.

Dr. Bero is the essence of the anti-life, self-deifying qualities of the 'As'. He imprisons his father under the provisions of "Official secrets"- the invocation of which makes him a messiah and his father an anti-national in the eyes of the society. The official secrets act is like NSA or TADA in the Indian situation, its application will naturally take away the fundamental rights of a person and on the contrary, would empower the state to deal with the person. Taking the fullest advantage of the law Dr. Bero has "forfeited" the property of Old Man and now, "Legally, he does not exist" (p. 269). Dr. Bero has certified him insane: "You are certified insane. Your fate creates no anxiety in anyone" (p. 279). Through the confrontation between Dr. Bero and Old Man we see a micro version of the war itself - the destruction of personal relationships and human values. Torturing and killing his father gives Dr. Bero a palpable sensation of power. "Power comes from bending nature to your will" (p. 247) he tells his sister.

Dr. Bero is steeped in the kind of evil which is completely outside SiBero's humane and positive world. When she sees Dr. Bero she runs towards him and "embraces him,
then tears herself off". She offers him a ritual welcome "with a gourd of palm wine, pours it on the ground in front of doorstep" (p. 243). While his neighbours are 'corpses' for Dr. Bero, they are still a part of SiBero's life. Dr. Bero only mocks her, "out of your world, little sister, out of your little world. Stay in it and do only what I tell you...Go and make tea with the senile pastor or gossip with your old women. Don't come out from where you're safe. [Quietly.] or sane". (p. 252). In her world she can be safe and sane in contrast to the war environment where men are always unsafe, since their conditions verge on insanity.

Bero's humanity cannot be restored by any character in the play. The earth mothers do try to offer him positive sustenance: "We move as the Earth moves" and "we age as Earth ages" (p. 273) says Iya Agba, describing her cult. Bero's arrogance forms a wall between himself and the Old women. it is as if he has sold his soul to the devil and is past redemption: "Your mind has run further from the truth. I see it searching, going round and round in darkness. Truth always too simple for desperate mind". Bero cannot understand their cult and he passes judgement on them: "you are proscribed, whatever you are, you are banned," Iya Agba points out the hollowness of his threat: "you will proscribe Earth itself? How does one do that?" (p. 273-274).

The presence of the earth mothers in the world of 'As' and Bero is a measure of the healing power of nature if only
man would open himself to this balm. Just as Forest Head in A Dance could not force the individuals to admit their guilts and redeem themselves, the earth mothers too fail in their effort to regenerate Bero.

Old Man, Bero's father, employs abominable ways of teaching human values because direct preaching does not work. For example he feeds the army officers with human flesh to make them aware of the horrible nature of their acts. "All intelligent animal kill only for food, you know, and you are intelligent animals" he says to those who have just tasted human flesh. "Eat, -eat-eat-eat...Eat" (p. 267). It is humanity itself, as Aafaa puts it, that is "the ultimate sacrifice to 'As', the eternal oblation on the alter of As" (p. 168). Forest Head in A Dance succeeds in redeeming two of the three human protagonists by making them aware of their past, present and future. He succeeds because he worked with people who wanted to learn. In this play Old Man fails, inspite of his hard hitting way, because he works among 'As' who "does not change".

Soyinka deliberately links the Old Man with Socrates. Dr. Bero offering the poison berries to his father says: "If you ever tired and you feel you need a night cap like a certain ancient Greek you were so fond of quoting, just soak a handful of them in water" (p. 277). Socrates is a reminder that the world has always expressed its intolerance towards those who reason. Soyinka's reference to Socrates brings out the universal and everlasting conflict between the rational
and the fanatical forces in this world. Old Man as a healer is also a surgeon who has to use violent means to bring back health. His attempt to feed the human flesh to the officers is one such example of using cruelty to bring back sense. Sometimes his voice rises to a frenzy as for example:

... you cyst, you splint in the arrow arrogance, the dog in dogma, tick of heretic, the tic in politics...the boo in Buddhism, the ham in Mohammed, the dash in the criss cross of Christ, a dot on the i of ego, an ass in the mass, the ash in ashram, a boot in kibbutz, the pee of priesthood...(p. 292).

The vehemence of language is like the surgeon's knife. His anger reminds one of another mad old man-Lear except that his tragic utterance had a greater coherence.

In the last scene Old Man wants to operate on the cripple who is metaphor for the maimed society. Old Man "snatches the surgeon's coat from where it is hanging, puts it on, dons cap, pulls on the gloves and picks up a scalpel" (p. 293) and getting cripple on the table, he starts operating him. Old Man's wish is known to the cripple also:

"(...shows confusion). I...dream he tells me to get on that table. He says, I could not attend to you before but there are other things...one thing at a time, certain things are more important than others. So he operates on my back" (p. 260).

Old Man's intention is to make him walk properly. For this he must first feel his deformity. The earth mothers have already expressed a similar sentiment "You don't learn good things unless you learn evil" (p. 233) says Iya Mate. At this
point Bero shoots Old Man under the impression that he is killing the Cripple. Suspicion is a chronic instinct for the dictators. They deify themselves through ritualistic carnages. And it is only mad old man like Bero's father who can resist them through self sacrifice and frenzied words of condemnation:

...Oh how dare you raise your hind quarters you dog of dogma and cast the scent of your existence on the lamp-post of Destiny, you HOLE ON THE ZERO OF NOTHING. (p. 292).

Opera Wonyosi (1981)

*Opera Wonyosi* 13 belongs to a tradition of subversive, agit-prop satiric revue sketches performed hot on the heels of the event, which Soyinka wrote for urgent political communication in the post-civil war period. Soyinka presumed that wrongs can be corrected if they can be identified. He attacked the individual villain rather than villainy itself and took little trouble to camouflage his identity. *Opera Wonyosi* a ballad opera (first performed in 1977 but not published until 1981) is the most substantial and sustained of these satires. In this process Soyinka not only drew indirect inspiration from Brecht, he modelled the play directly on his *The Three Penny Opera* (1972) which was an adaptation of John Gay's *The Beggar's Opera* (1728). Soyinka has added to the performance, "English ballads, kurt weil songs, jazz and blues, and the tunes of the 1950s Ibo folk singer Israel Izemaye" 15 thereby radically transforming his
sources and giving *Opéra Wonyosi* a distinctly operatic flavour.

Soyinka, following Brecht and Gay's plays which also involved a state ceremony, knits his play around His Imperial Diminutive emperor Bokassa's coronation which took place in the same week as Soyinka's Ife production in 1977. The play is therefore situated in Bangui, the capital of the former Central African Republic. However the motley collection of rogues and thugs in the play: the racketeer Chief Anikura; the venal police chief and security expert "Tiger" Brown; the psychopathic Colonel Moses, and the thieves, arsonists, drug peddlers, and murderers gathered around the highway robber Macheath - "the genius[es] of the race portrayed in this opera," Soyinka wrote in his programme note, "[are] entirely, indisputably and vibrantly Nigerian".14

The central preoccupation of the play is a modern ritual: the coronation of Bokassa, and the dramatic narrative develops towards that. The play of course pauses occasionally providing space and time for various episodes thematically linked to this "modern ritual". Performed in the traditional ritualistic way, coronation symbolises the process whereby the people and the king make an agreement to live together as one, to collectively protect each other from internal and external forces, to establish a system of social political and economical justice. Also, the king swears an
oath to abjure selfish motives and narrow considerations in favour of the common good and universal justice. Marking the beginning of a significant day, people drink, eat, revel and indulge in extravagances. The coronation of Bokassa has thus provided Soyinka with the thematic and structural frame.

The play opens in the opera style with music and orchestra. MC DJ, - Master of ceremonies Disc-Jockey, the conductor of the orchestra, resembles a sutradhara of the Indian traditional drama and the chorus of a Greek play; he offers sympathetic and critical comments and introduces characters and incidents. Like Samson in The Road and the mendicants in Madmen and Specialists Dee-Jay also represents an ordinary mortal who performs operatic functions but is fated to remain mute in the real world.

Bokassa, the dictator, a real life character here in Opera Wonyosi rules over an unfortunate African country - Central Africa which is one of the poorest countries of the region. Out of sheer arrogance and desire for publicity, the Emperor 'Boky' celebrates his royal coronation with "a two-tonne throne of gilt bronze, a 124 carat diamond crown, an ermine-frizzed robe and 2000 foreign guests". While the coronation reveals one aspect of Bokassa's moral, social and political bankruptcy, his other weaknesses include womanising, sadism and francophilea: "you know...my mother- (lifts hat as he does each time he mentions France or mother country). France. Liberte'. Egalite'. Fraternite'.". (p. 330) Like similar characters in the other plays - 'As' or Kongi -
he is incoherent, neither a good orator nor a politician. Perhaps, the little that was taught to him at school is all that he remembers about the French contribution to democracy and Europe is still the source of civilization and culture for him. Soyinka presents him as a “windbag”, ‘ape’ and a cannibal.

Rhythm Section! Ready...Two go!...One-two-three-dig! In!...heels In! I said Stomp! Stomp! See their eyes-Dig In! Skulls! Imperial Stomp! Stomp! Stomp! Studs In! Toe-caps! Grind! Grind! Crotch movement! Crotch! Dig In!...Spinal column! Aim for the pelvis junction! Pelvic junction! Grind! Grind! You bastards I said grind! (p. 334).

This passage refers to a real life incident: Boky’s killing of the school children who refused to wear the uniform. The words ‘stomp’, ‘skulls’ and ‘Grind’, ‘pelvic junction’ are aimed at reproducing the staccato horror of the incident, although the actuality of the event must have been far too blood chilling to be rendered dramatically in an adequate measure.

Bokassa’s reign of terror breeds corruption, greed and deforms the society. All of it could be seen in the unfolding drama of the professional and gang rivalry between the Anikuras and Macheath, a highway robber-turned-business man, who have all holed up in an imaginary place called Ikoyi in the capital city of Bangui, Central Africa. They represent the under belly of Nigerian society of the 1970s. In a programme note to the 1977 production Soyinka wrote:
The post civil-war period after an initial period of uncertainty - two or three years at the banquet of highway robberies, public executions, public floggings and other institutionalised sadisms, arsons, hoarding, epidemic, road-abuse and reckless slaughter, exhibitionism-private and institutional-cavalous and contemptuous ostentation, casual cruelties, wanton destruction, slummification, Naira mania, and its attendant atavism... an orgy of physical filth, champagne, usury, gadgetry, blood... the near total collapse of human communication...

Each one of these observations comes alive on stage as the play progresses. Chief Anikura is the proprietor of the "Home from the Home for the Homeless" and "the king of Beggars" (in the words of Dee Jay). In metaphorical terms, Anikura trades in pure 'POWER' and related equipments - eg., clothes: "khakhi and brass", "white coat and black gown" which are symbolic allusions to government positions. Whosoever wants the positions, promotions and preferments can seek it through Anikura. Hence, the ragged band of beggars around him are lawyers, professors, doctors and clergymen. Disguised in beggar's rags they litter around in the "Home" and when Anikura: "(k)icks awake the bundles of rags and cloth which have been strewn all over the floor, human forms emerge, slick off, taking their rags with them" (p. 305). These human forms are none other than his student: Professor Bamgbapo the chairman of the Mining corporation and also holds a Professor's post at a University; Alatako a lawyer who wants to be Attorney General in less than three years. Outraged at the deteriorated social values at the highest places in public life Soyinka indicts "the whole nation" as "
a Beggars Opera". He uses begging as a metaphor for sychophancy.

In the moral world reflected in Opera Wonyosi avarice, greed and lust seem to have replaced all the human values. De Madam, Anikura's wife is a more sophisticated version of her husband with all the evil, villainy and treachery concealed under a polished veneer. De Madam is not averse to amassing wealth at the cost of making her own and only daughter a widow. While cajoling a maid servant in a brothel to help her nab Macheath who has secretly married her only daughter, De Madam says, "with Mack gone, his properties revert to his widow, which means that as her legal guardians we control...And...one quarter of that is for whoever helps us..." (p. 363-4). This sums up the cool machinations of De Madam.

Macheath, the underworld don of Ikoyi and his notorious gang parallels the sophisticated criminals, black marketeers, anti-social elements in "uniform" like Inspector Brown, Colonel Moses, Professor Bangbapo, Alatako, the AG in the making. The song "Mack the Knife" describes his dare devil killings and murders:

Now the shark has teeth like razors.
And he shows them in fight
All Mackie has is a flick knife
And he keeps it out of sight.
    Where the night blows dark and silent
    There you will men lying dead
Was it plague that really killed him
Or a fee to Mackie paid? (p. 304).
Polly and Mack are the Anikuras of the future generation as with their marriage they bring together the world of legitimized crooks - the Anikuras and the criminals at the lowest levels of the society - Macheath and his gang. Polly supplies 'sophistication' to Macheath and his gang, a quality she has imbibed from her parents, and thereby transforms the underground operators into multinational businessmen. By changing their dresses, she changes their looks from that of crooks to gentlemen.

The alliance of the criminal world and state power is reiterated in the play through several hilarious incidents. There is a spiralling of bribe culture from the common guard of jail to the Chief Justice, all geared towards the legitimization of the crime, the activity through which money is generated:

Polly... although there are only one thousand shares written down, we actually paid for four thousand shares. Five hundred went to commissioner Brown. Five hundred went to Mistress Emperor Boky, another five hundred went to the Director of Prisons and the final thousand were personally handed to the Deputy Chief Justice of the Empire for redistribution if and as how he thinks fit. (p. 350).

Hence Mack is a money yielding tree who nobody will touch. His life is essential as he is an inverted messiah of the underworld who would bleed or blade or knife the innocent to materially strengthen the unctuous and mendacious rulers of his society. When Mack is about to be executed in public, Boky's reprieve comes just in time:
The coronation - the modern ritual that breeds dehumanization - is thus the metaphorical carpet that sweeps under it the anti-social and criminal world eliminating the thin line separating the good from bad when the official power collaborates with the underworld. The ultimate loser and sufferer is humanity because the abiding and positive human values get stifled and marginalised by this hegemonic culture.

Considering the amount of space given to the portrayal of the criminal world in the play, one may wonder whether Soyinka has not glorified the lives of the most corrupt and the hard core criminals who despite their heinous crimes seem to go scot free. There are two answers to this. First, Soyinka assumes his audience to constitute the silent and suffering people who know how invincible the criminal are and who still have Bokassa as their king. Second, there are two songs which depict the pains and agonies of the ordinary people. While the song "Big Man chop cement; cement chop small man" portrays the pathetic condition of workers in a cement factory who end up there as "a slab of cement" the
"who killed Neo-Niga?" objectifies the sorrows of the common African. Neo-Niga is killed by the Bigshot; the police and military have turned a deaf ear to the news of his death. Traders have sold Neo-Niga and the helpless public has mutedly witnessed all the humiliations, insults and inhuman treatment meted to Neo-Niga.

Opera Wonyosi is a satire that hits hard but its subtlety the sting in it diminishes because of the topical allusions and episodic dramatic narrative pattern. However, Soyinka is evidently more concerned here with theatre as a social instrument than drama as an art form. Soyinka writes in the Foreword that he wants "art [to] expose, reflect, indeed magnify the decadent, rotted underbelly of society that has lost its direction, jettisoned all sense of values and is careering down a precipice as fast as the latest artificial boom can take it". This objective is certainly achieved here.
A Play of Giants (1981)

From Opera Wonyosi to A play of Giants we find Soyinka moving from a destructive, mindless dictator entrenched in power to several equally dangerous dictators, and all of them neurotics. The ritual of social gathering, the coronation, the war - having used them all in the earlier plays - Soyinka this time uses a statue as the central metaphor. And he employs more physical and concrete communicative devices against the subtle suggestive techniques which he had so lovingly employed in his major plays like The Road, A Dance and other plays.

Patterning his play on the theme of the - erection of statues and manipulating the time and space offered to him by it, Soyinka manages to assemble at one place all the infamous dictators of Africa which was a challenge for him: "... (N)o single play should even attempt to contain a gallery of supermen. I therefore shift the blame for this act of hubris to Jean Genet (The Balcony) who suggested the idea" (p.v). The Secretary General of the United Nations, and two delegates each from Russia and America are the other big personalities who imbue the play with an international flavour. The occasion for such a huge gathering though not expressed in the text, could be a UN meeting. As the play unfolds we see the role of the superpowers in sustaining the dictators in power and the true nature of these African
dictators - their confusions, sexual perversions, their ill-conceived notions of power and its attendant complexities.

When the play opens, Kamini, Kasco, Gunema are sitting on throne-like chairs looking like three abnormal human grotesques: Kamini is a huge fellow; Kasco is dwarfish and Gunema is a thin and tall person. A reader familiar with Soyinka's plays may well wonder whether the human perversions inherent in the triplets in *A Dance* projecting the future of Nigeria have now come true. Toboum (Mobuto) dressed in stripped animal skin joins them later, symbolically reinforcing the animality in them. Soyinka introduces them to his audience just as he would do in case of circus animals: "Ladies and Gentlemen, we present ... a parade of miracle men ... (Cracks whip)... Giants, Dwarfs, Zombies, the incredible anthropopopagai, the Original Genus Survivanticus, (alive and well in defiance of all scientific explanations) ... ladies and gentlemen ...". (p. X) This obviously takes away the honour and dignity the throne like chairs had come to be linked with, and presents the dictators in a satiric mode.

In Soyinka's world the dictators deploy the social rituals in order to deify themselves and in the process mutilate and distort the original meaning of these rituals. We have seen in the other plays that they kill their own people; drive away gods, spirits and their own ancestors, and celebrate their own marriages as national events. In *A Play of Giants*, while the egotism of the
dictators remains the same, playwright's manner of exposing them changes. Kamini who is at the centre of the play wants to present a statue of himself to the United Nations in response to the organisation's request for a "work of art representative of their culture".

The dictator evidently has little or no knowledge of economy or art of state craft. The World Bank refuses to grant a loan to Kamini for not paying back the earlier loan or its interest. On learning this Kamini orders his Bank chairman to, "get back to Bugara and right away start printing more Bugaran Bank notes" (p.5) when the value of Bugaran currency is "not worth its size in toilet paper". He thinks that Bugara is his personal property and swears to sell it off to anybody who loans him just "two hundred million dollars". By such tyrannical reign Kamini has impoverished the nation, for example:- the ambassador and Kamini's cabinet ministers have escaped; fax and telephone facilities at the Bugaran Embassy have been delinked for not paying the bills; several administrative posts at the Embassy remain vacant for lack of funds.

Although the dictators in A play of Giants are not the kind of tragic characters that we see in Shakespeare's political plays, they are nevertheless human beings who call fell fear and guilt. They suffer from guilt because they have usurped power through coups and constantly fear that they will also be overthrown. Soyinka shows how each one of these "supermen" is a savage cannibal in his struggle for
survival. Human virtues do not find any place in their scheme of things. During the “brotherly” exchanges they reveal the accounts of the killings of innocent people. Barra Toboum recounts an event in which he has mowed down his own people:

Toboum: My striped leopards of Gwanza. The rebels were desperate too. The Tribe of Shabira...They took hostages, workers at the mine of Shabira, their families, priests, men, children, foreigners and citizens alike. Our French paratroopers arrived. They were sated from plunder and rape...fierce and savage. The hostages? What does a violated nun hope for?...we moved from street ...and my consorts responded: "Boom, Boom, Toboum, Qui Va là? "again and again. ...Till at last covered in masonry and blood, they began the surrender... we didn’t even give them a burial and left them hanging. (p. 19-20).

There is a limit to what theatre can do visually and to extend the dramatic effect Soyinka resorts to sound effects. “Boom, Boom, Toboum” echoes not only the cannons but also foregrounds the animality of Barra Toboum. That is a way of relishing power among the dictators. Similarly, for Gunema “power is an elixir” and killing is a palpable sensation of gratification:

Gunema. ...power is an elixir...how I taste this elixir, how?...I watch the execution of these merquino who think they want to take my power. Firing squad, hanging, the garrot ...I do my execution...I watch when zombies torture lesser Zombies. I have their cries of pain...strongman cry like woman...but still I don’t taste this elixir. I sentence one man to death who I suspect of plotting against me...his wife come to plead for him. She is waiting all day in the house and when I am going to dinner she rush through my guards and fling herself at my legs, I am sorry for her ...That night, after my dinner I take her to bed. Perhaps she think by that I will reprieve her husband ...when I make love to.
her I taste it last. It is a strong taste on my tongue, my lips, my face everywhere. It rush through my spine, soak through my skin and I recognise it for that elusive overwhelming taste. (p. 57-8).

Arrest an innocent person on dubious charges and sentence him to death and when his wife comes to beg for her husband's life exploit her helpless situation for the satisfaction of your lust. Kill the husband first and later, the woman too because you think she may take revenge for killing her husband. Soyinka presents this real life episode just as he read it in the newspaper. The story has tragic elements in it and the seed capable of growing into a full text for a complete play. Soyinka could bring in various episodes totally unconnected to the central theme because the episodic structure of the ritual plot gave him space and time.

Soyinka often ritualises killing or torturing in his plays to make vivid of the cannibalistic tendencies of his dictators (eg. in Madmen and Specialists). In A Play of Giants the sculptor is beaten up off the stage, and we only hear his screams. But the fate of the Bank Chairman is worse; his head is forced into the lavatory bowl before and after it is used by Kamini. The audience is reminded of the stomach turning incident throughout the play as a task force special flushes the cistern over the honest man's head. The whole lingering, distasteful episode epitomises the many degrading ways in which innocent people were punished and killed in Idi Amin's Uganda. Kamini in the play is modelled on Dr. Idi
Amin of Uganda as Soyinka in his Foreword to the play informs us: "No serious effort is made to hide the identities of the real life actors who have served the models for A Play of Giants". (p. iii) Robert Serumuga, a friend of Soyinka told him this about Amin's persecution mania:

At the start...you more or less know what to do and what to speak, when to shut up and what to say or not say. Now there are no longer any rules. What saved you yesterday turns out to be your death warrant today. I have no friends, no colleagues left. They are all dead or escaped. But mostly dead. (p. x)

"I'd rather kill him, but I acknowledge my impotence" Soyinka said of his grotesque figures of power in an interview at the time of the play's New York production. "All I can do is make fun of them". Soyinka holds the politicians and journalists of Nigeria in particular and generally of the whole world responsible for this: "A good half of our national leaders are little more or less than tools of the super-powers" and deplored the lack of "investigative journalism" on Uganda. Amin, Kasco. or Nguema or Mobutu remaining invincible, Soyinka understands, was not possible but for the support of the global superpowers.

These global powers used dictators in Africa as puppets to serve their political or economic interests and to fight their proxy ideological wars in Africa. While the British had sustained Kamini in power, the Russians supplied lethal war weapons and trained his security force and the
Americans had rendered monetary support to him. This manipulative strategies of the global powers get exposed when the Russians and the Americans express no objection to the idea of installing the statue of Amin in the UN buildings provided the statues of their respective national heroes like George Washington and Lenin are also accommodated in the same building. In a highly dramatised situation Soyinka makes a Russian confess his nation's guilt.

2nd Russian: Yes, A common butcher. we knew him. We had close studies of him sent regularly by our own men, not just western reports. But any case, we did not create him-the British did. They sustained him in power, backed by the Americans. The pupil had more than mastered the game of his masters. So we stepped in to fill the vacuum. We are pragmatist. Our policy in that part of the continent required his retention in power. (p. 55)

Professor Batey a black American is the only character in the play who sympathises with Kamini and his cronies because he understands that Kamini is merely "a product of economic and historical conditions of our people on the continent. There is no such as monster". (p. 85) This has earned Professor Batey a bad reputation of being a die hard bureaucrat who is blinded by his proximity to power. Professor Batey, suggests that the African dictators are largely "scape goats" of the west and holds the post-colonial policies of the Global powers towards Africa responsible for all the miseries of the African people.

Batey (Sudden out burst). You slave. You sacrifice. You devote your existence, day after day, hour after hour, with no rest, no let up, no
distraction. From hundred tribes, tongues, cultures, religions, animosities and suspicions, you weld a single united people. Deprived, reviled, sabotaged and subverted by outside forces, from whose exploiting hands you have wrested your people, put an end to their centuries of domination, sometimes through force of arms, but always with your share of heroic encounters, imprisonments, tortures and deportations...you discover that the greed is still in their eye and they bring new, camouflaged weaponry to bear is wresting from your hands the fruits of your peoples labour. (p. 52-3)

That the self-deifying ambitions of dictators in Soyinka end up in situations that threaten their very existence, may be seen as an element of poetic justice in the political satires. In Kongi’s Harvest the eponymous dictator fails to become the spirit of harvest, Pentheus in The Bacchae of Euripides gets torn into pieces and Dr. Bero’s quest for the meaning of ‘As’ never comes true in Madmen and Specialists. Likewise, Kamini gets neither the bank loan, nor the space for his statue and an opportunity to address the UN assembly. Kamini cannot live peacefully also, because violence is a self-perpetuating process. Kamini has come to power, and remained in power shedding blood and his ousting also demands blood shed. Testifying to this is the coup in Bugara during the course of the play which overthrows Kamini. The Bugaran embassy which served as a studio in the beginning and a prison later has finally become a fortress and a battle field symbolising the plight of Bugaran people under Kamini. Death and devastation are the consequences of such “modern rituals” in Soyinka. The final message of the play seems to be that those who sow the seeds of poison
cannot hope for fruits of life. The global powers who encourage dictators like Kamini may eventually make short term gains but will someday pay heavily for their diabolic powergame. The last scene is suggestive of this. Kamini at the news of his overthrow is reacting violently, ordering his task force special to bombard the UN buildings. The large amount of weapons accumulated in the embassy are smuggled in the diplomatic baggage. The windows are booby trapped; the entire building has been wired, rocket launchers and machine guns are placed in strategic positions. "The whine of rockets mingles with the boom of exploding grenades... Kamini swings back in to the room, his gun aimed directly at the hostages" (p. 69). The hostages include the two Russians, the two Americans and the UN General secretary. A small time dictator like Kamini surely cannot bombard the UN building situated in the heart of New York city. The scene merely dramatises the anger of the playwright at the farcical institution which dances to the tune of the superpowers.

A play of Giants is thus a satirical portrayal of the monstrous dictators of Africa and their instigators abroad. The slow but dramatic unfolding of the play catalogues the excesses committed by them. At places the play becomes flat provide only information at the cost of dramatic interest, a charge that has been often attributed to the street theatre also. The play has to be seen as an example of political praxis rather that as a well formed play. Soyinka is

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employing theatre in a radical way to reflect upon the everyday drama in African political life.

The play ends with Kamini still alive but out of power; thus the end of Kamini is not the end to Kongism or Aminianism in Africa. The sculptor who is working "in slow motion" while the lights are fading on the stage is the artist who daring the threats and dangers to his life protests against the oppression, and records everyday history for the present as well as for the future.

III

The four plays, A Dance, Madmen and Specialists, Opera Wonyosi and A play of Giants discussed in this chapter vary qualitatively on the surface level as any casual reader may notice. The first two plays are complexly structured, and are deeply rooted in traditional, religious and human values, and go beyond the immediate axes of place and time. But the last two plays are overtly political, loosely structured and topical. There is a difference also in terms of time taken for the creation of the dramatic narratives: A Dance is a revised play and Madmen and Specialists belongs to a period of the playwright's intense suffering in isolation in Kaduna Maximum Security Prison. The playwright's distance from his immediate audience has given him more time and space to perfect his expression. An earlier version of A Dance was written in England where as Madmen and Specialists was conceived during 27 months imprisonment. As a contrast, the
political revues are born out of the urgency of the contemporary situation. In conclusion, it can be said that the playwright-philosopher and the playwright-politician are two faces of Soyinka which have created distinctly different plays. The first two are concerned with humanity as a whole and the revues address themselves to the current political crisis.

I have studied these four plays together because of their common concern with power and its depravity and also because a similar structural device is used in each of the plays for organising dramatic action: a public ritual. A social gathering in *A Dance*, a war in *Madmen and Specialists*, the coronation in *Opera Wonyosi* and the commemoration of a statue in *A Play of Giants*. These are meant to be social rituals initially positive in nature but now turned destructive because they are abused by a few for ulterior motives.

The last two plays in this chapter use a lot of topical material and living characters and personalities obliterating the line that divides fact and fiction - reality and art. The non-African reader who does not have first hand experience of the day to day political reality may not always be able to extricate parody from mimesis. In folk tradition it is always the real life stories that are remembered, retold, recited for the human qualities in them and thus become permanent in the communal psyche as "orature". By this logic, Soyinka is
performing the traditional bardic role here. By academic or theoretical criteria these plays may not be sophisticated, but they have an energy and immediacy that invest them with a special importance both as theatre and as social satire.

Soyinka in *Opera Wonyosi* and *A Play of Giants* has experimented with the well established theatrical devices of the agitation and propaganda theatre: terror and torture on the stage, the names and characters of the real personalities the political victims and the oppressors. While he uses terrorism and torture as theatrical devices, Soyinka’s aim seems to be to tell the audience that they are the real victims of the state terrorism and not just the characters on stage.

Unlike the entertainment theatre in a hall the political theatre goes in search of people because it wants to convey its message as widely as possible. The major concern here is communication with the people, to be direct, clear, close. The concern is not with literary values but with a forceful impact. Images speak more strongly than words: mime and songs carry the burden of the performance. The use of real names and personalities becomes essential in the political theatre because, if one may add from his own street theatre experience, the politicians, once they attain popularity through public stunts and gimmicks and create a public image for themselves they live in that protected world. The common man comes to look upon them as demi-gods and very often refuses to get his belief system
destabilised. Only a demythification process - stripping them naked in public by exposing their true nature - can open the eyes of the common man. Thus conceived *Opera Wonyosi* and *A Play of Giants* while employing modern techniques also contribute to folk culture.
Notes


2 Ibid., p. 824.


5 Wole Soyinka, A Dance of the Forests, Collected Plays Vol. 1, London, OUP, 1973, All references to this text.


9 Wole Soyinka, Six Plays, London, Metheun Ltd, 1984. All references to this text.


11 Ibid., p. 29.


13 Six Plays, All references to this text.


15 James Gibbs, p. 132.

16 James Gibbs, p. 130.
Ibid., p. 131.


"Soyinka's Smoking shotgun", p. 33.

Quoted in "Tear the Painted Mask", p. 25.

James Gibbs, p. 156.