Soyinka is the greatest mythopoeist in contemporary African literature. He has made an extensive use of African mythology, culture and tradition in his writings. His works make a successful attempt to portray the African world in its full complexity—its traditional beliefs and structures, conventions and superstitions, contemporary progression as well as distortion. He has a deep scholarly interest in Yoruba culture, which naturally arises from his Yoruba traditional background from which his works flow. In his works he tries to define African ontology through an interpretation of Yoruba myths and rituals. Consequently as a literary artist, much of his significant writings display an unrelenting obsession with myth and its complete enactments through rituals. Thus, while his consciousness is ultimately historical, his imagination and idiom of creative expression stem from myth and religious sentiment. Stanley Macebuh says:

Soyinka is, first and foremost, a mythopoeist, his imagination is, in a quite fundamental sense, a mythic imagination.  

Biodun Jeyifo observes:

Soyinka has deep abiding penchant for mythology, metaphysics and mysticism.
Soyinka is greatly indebted to the traditional African forms and ideas. Very early in his career he underlined the primacy of traditional idioms in making theatre most effective. In an interview he explained the importance of the traditional African idiom in modern theatre:

As far as I am concerned, it is an inevitable step because it is - it is a kind of material with which one is confronted practically every day - well, it may not be so much in towns but, at least the atmosphere of it persists, even as it is carried over maybe in the songs in folk-lore. These are things which dramatists, an African dramatist, or, even more important a producer will find immensely useful. I will say producer in particular because, as I said, these are theatrical idioms. As for the producer, you know, these are priceless because they inject novelty- freshness into the interpretation. They might lead, in fact, to a theatrical revolution, the moment African writers and producers become very conscious of the potentialities of these idioms.³

Soyinka borrows from basic Yoruba beliefs to produce an atmosphere
in which at one and the same time we are in contact with the living and the dead, the unearthly and the earthly, with the present, the past and the future. Belief in the continuity of life from before birth to after death is common in Africa. It is a strongly held belief in Yoruba culture, which is Soyinka’s primary culture.

The scale of values and referents within which his works are conceived embrace the cosmic framework of man’s terrestrial existence. Soyinka’s mythopoeist has a personal idiosyncratic dimension as well as matrixed, cultural source. He has complicated this ambiguity in his reputation by striving in his earlier work at least, to proffer mythic explanations and resolutions for social problems, which ordinarily belong to the realm of historical reality and empirical human experience. An important evidence of this feature of his art is the tendency to create human characters whose actions are circumscribed by the cosmic attributes of specific Yoruba deities. A further aspect of this mythification of history is derivable from Soyinka’s mythic notion of tragedy and his cyclical conception of time, features that inhere in his idealist cast of mind. For him, the source of tragedy in the Yoruba world is to be located in the initial separation between man and the gods which Ogun, the god of Iron, thunder and creativity, was to restore through his cosmic will. This concept can be observed in his essay The Fourth Stage where Soyinka attempts to define the origin and meaning of the tragic myth and the context of the Yoruba worldview. It seeks to enquire into the origin of Yoruba tragedy, which originated from the God’s consciousness of their own incompleteness or what Soyinka calls ‘the anguish of severance’. ⁴
Soyinka’s writings are deeply rooted in the rich and complex culture of the Yoruba. He moves easily between cultures available in the knowledge, which he possesses. He uses the African heritage and African experience meaningfully in many of his plays and poems and effectively dramatizes Yoruba belief in the mutual dependence of the different areas of existence. For this he uses recurrent symbols of gods and spirits, myth and ritual songs, dance and mime as elements in his writings. Thus Soyinka’s Yoruban sensibility is to absorb every new experience, departmentalize it and carry on with life. As Biodun Jeyifo rightly says:

His deep immersion in mythology is a means of simultaneously giving imaginative depth to his writings and of anchoring his creative imagination in the collective tradition.  

Soyinka uses the traditional African forms and ideas- like the use of traditional African (mostly Yoruba) expressions and pseudo-traditional songs and chants, the festivals-like the New Year Festival, the Egungun Festival, the Oro Annual Festival, the Purification Festival, the religious ceremonies associated with various gods such as Sango, Ogun, Obatala and many other known Yoruba gods accompanied by drumming, dancing and folk songs. All the above forms form an integral part of Soyinka’s plays. These gods of mythology and traditional religious rituals and their attributes have yielded
central ideas of traditional African thought to Soyinka who has revitalized them for the contemporary society in his writings. In one of his interviews when asked to comment on the use of rites in drama, he answered:

"The use of rites? Well, rites, rituals, ceremonials, festivals are such a rich source of material for drama. They are intrinsically dramatic in themselves because they are formalized. Apart from being visually clarifying, their representation is so precise that even when the meaning is obscure you are left with a form, which is so clear that it reifies itself into a very concrete meaning for the viewer. So for me, rites rituals and festivals are inevitable metaphors for the drama of life, for many, many human situations."

Soyinka's debt to Yoruba tradition is obvious in his play *A Dance of the Forests* that he borrows from the basic Yoruba beliefs. His fascination with Ogun, his favourite god is very much in view as this is one play in which the god takes the form of a character and an important one in the unfolding drama. The play has been constructed on the pattern of the New Year Festival drawn on traditions of African dance and on African rites, rituals and gestures. He extends the idea of the belief in the continuity of life before birth
to after death, which is a strongly held belief in Yoruba culture and gives it physical reality.

In the beginning of the play the prevailing mood is that of the celebration or preparation of a great event, which produces tension and excitement in the whole populace. The play simply opens in a forest with a dead couple coming straight out of the earth without prologue or apology to walk among the living. With this opening the author ushers us into a fantastic folk-tale world in which the dead mingle with the living and the gods with men. Soyinka provides a preamble to the play, a testimony from Aroni the one legged one, which indicates the pattern that is followed when the 'dance' starts. This statement introduces the groups involved in the drama: the dead, the living, and the deities, both major and minor. The dead who arrive are remarkable, a man and a woman, have shown great courage and endured great suffering. They are not glamorous, gorgeously dressed, tyrannical rulers of a vanished African kingdom for whom Adenebi had hoped. The dead man had been castrated for his principles and the dead woman is pregnant with the Half-child, whom she has carried through many generations.

Adenebi, Rola and Demoke, whose murder of Oremole has, it seems closed the final link in a chain or, to use another image, completed a circle. The dance can proceed. The three human beings are brought together, and under the guidance of a major deity, and Forest Head, are conducted deep into the forest. The forest is a setting for many Yoruba adventure stories, for
initiation rites and for the meetings of secret cults. After revealing exchanges and the intervention of various gods, particularly the vindictive and aggrieved Eushoro and Ogun, who protects Demoke, the three human beings are taken back to previous existences in the Court of Mata Kharibu. In a flash back, 'The Welcome of the Dead', we see them commit crimes similar to those they have been responsible for as 'living characters'.

**A Dance of the Forests** continues with an extended rite, which incorporates ‘The Chorus of the Spirits, The Chorus of the Ants, The Masque of the Triplets and The Dance of the Half-child.’ Demoke bravely intervenes in the last dance and catches hold of the Half-Child, when he attempts to restore it to its mother, the dead woman. Eushoro blocks the way and appeals to Forest Head not to trouble him.

Demoke is told that the Half-Child is a 'doomed thing' but, after a moment's hesitation, he entrusts the child to its mother, the dead woman—who seems to want it despite the curse which it carries. Aroni leads the mother and the child away. Forest Head withdraws, and Eushoro with a loud yell of triumph, rushes off accompanied by his supporter. These somewhat bewildering events are followed by 'The Dance of the Unwilling Sacrifice' in which Demoke is compelled by Eushoro and his jester to bear a sacrificial basket to the top of the carved totem. There is a bitter crisis between the Gods- Eushoro and Ogun. Demoke, Ogun’s servant is an artist and carver who worships the god of Iron. Furthermore, Demoke has murdered Oremole,
Eushoro's worshipper in the process of carving the totem. Thus, Eushoro is in pursuit of Demoke and is determined to attend Forest Head's Welcoming of the Dead in order to gain his own ends. Ogun is, however, equally determined to protect Demoke.

In the play three-parallel worlds of the living, the ancestors and the unborn can be seen. Since all the three worlds cannot be presented on a linear scale, one has to imagine them as spatial worlds and the movement between them in this crucial realm of transition, which Soyinka calls the 'fourth stage' in his *Myth, Literature and the African World*.

In this stage of transition, all are present. Aroni calls forth the past, and the twelfth century court of Mata Kharibu where all the living beings are forced to act out their former lives. After awakening the past, the three town-dwellers are masked and are not incorporated into the dance as forest spirits (the Chorus of the Spirits). Then the ants too join the masquerade (the Chorus of the Ants) where the ant leader curses the future. Then the Forest Head orders the unmasking of the three town dwellers so that they may see the final enactment of the future. The rite now embraces the collective mask of the three Triplets who join the dance one after another (The Masque of the Triplets). The first triplet is the manifestation of that 'good to come' for which numberless, nameless human beings have died and which has no 'good' end at all. It is followed in by the second triplet. The first and the second triplets are linked to the world of the living. There is a third triplet- the half child
'fanged and bloody', 'I am posterity. Can no one see on what milk I have been nourished?' (Dance of the Half-child) and finally, the sacrifice of Demoke, as in a rite of passage, which will carry the burden of his people across the void (Dance of the Unwilling Sacrifice). Soyinka’s treatment of the half-child is quite representative of the African 'Abiku' concept of the Yoruba.

The dead man is dressed in a rusty outfit and the dead woman is already eight centuries pregnant. She gives birth towards the end of the play to a symbolic half-child ‘abiku’. The three town dwellers- Demoke, Rola, and Adenebi, and a fourth ‘town dweller’ (who is in fact, forest head himself in disguise and who has secretly arranged the welcoming of the dead) pass by the ancestors one by one, uncomprehending who they are. The dead pair questions the town dwellers and ask them to take their case, but the living ignore them and the dead couple wander off into another part of the forest.

The town dwellers walk deep into the forest and Obaneji (the disguised forest head) compels the three town dwellers to reveal not only their true motives for their escape into the forest but to admit their guilt (the lives of the living were viciously intertwined with lives and deaths of the dead pair some eight centuries ago). Forest Head’s secret design is to arrange a welcoming of the dead, in which representatives of living will be forced, as part of the process of moral exposure, to witness their roles in sufferings of the warrior and his pregnant wife in the court of Mata Kharibu. The dead couple has
travelled the underground streams from the ancestor world to be the unwelcome guest at the gathering of the tribes. As Demoke says:

But the reveler doesn’t buy a cap before he is invited.  

The half child is the representative of man, the ambiguous symbol of man’s future. The child who at the beginning of the play, lies in the dead woman’s womb, is forced out at the end. The dead woman and the half child witness the welcome of the dead. The Half-child begins a game of ‘Sesan’ in which the figure in Red (Eushoru disguised) joins. Unhappy, the half-child moves away from the game, and then returns and says:

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.  

Thus we understand that this child is born only to die, the half child tries to reach its mother, and says:

Still I fear the fated bearing...
Still I circle yawning wombs.  

Ogun transfers the half child to Demoke. The decision of the half child's future thus lies with Demoke, a living human being who has freedom of chance. Demoke is under pressure as Aroni tells Demoke:

Demoke, you hold a doomed thing in your hand. It is no light matter to reverse the deed that was begun many lives ago. The forest will not let you pass.  

Thus Demoke has either the choice of restoring the half child to its mother or suffer the malevolence of the forest under Eushoru. Demoke, consequently makes the human choice of restoring the half child to its mother, thereby atoning for the death of Oremole and bringing the doom of the forest upon himself. Thus, Demoke foresees that the power of will is not yet strong enough for a reversal of the cycle of destruction, which has plagued mankind. Neither does Demoke have the transcendental force of will that is required to challenge established powers. In recognition of his own unreadiness he becomes the unwilling sacrifice.

Demoke and he seem to be on the same side of the struggle for the half child at the end. He (Ogun) is thus identified with the man in the struggle against the merely bestial, which Eushoro represents. Ogun is prominent in
the play as the God of creativity and of art. He is Demoke's patron and champion. He defends everything Demoke does and accepts responsibility for the crime. As Ogun in the play says:

I Ogun, swear that his hands were mine in every action of his life.

Soyinka believes that the artist can perform his redeeming function only if he asserts his direct and vitalizing connection with the long tradition of which he is the inheritor.

Soyinka employs the African idea of ritual purification in his play The Strong Breed. The traditional model is that of a purification festival. He employs the idea of ritual cleansing through a victim in order to produce a vision of the kind of sacrifice through which the society is saved. The play uses the traditional custom of having a carrier for the sins of the village. The inequities of the whole community are atoned for with the carrier's sufferings. The focus of the play thus is the redemption or cleansing of a community through a sacrifice ritual. Sacrifice is thus, the vital point in the play and we can recall the dance of the unwilling sacrifice that Eushoro performs in The Dance of the Forests. However in this play we see that the author employs the theme of sacrifice in both forms- sacrifice of the willing carrier and sacrifice of the unwilling victim.
Traditionally in African villages, each village has a family of 'strong breeds' usually strangers who are used as carriers. This carrier goes round the village collecting insults, abuses and curses, after which he is finally driven into a bush and never comes back. In this way the whole village is cleansed and purified of its sins.

In The Strong Breed, Ifada, an idiot, is forced to be the carrier. But Eman, the protagonist in the play, protests against Ifada being made a carrier. Ifada seeks refuge in Eman's house when the villagers chase him. The villagers try to dissuade Eman from giving shelter to Ifada. As Jaguna, another important character in the play says:

.... A carrier should end up in the bush, not in a house. Anyone who doesn't guard his door when the carrier goes by has himself to blame. A contaminated house should be burnt down.

Eman: But why pick on a helpless boy, obviously he is not willing. In my home, we believe that a man should be willing. 12

A little later when the villagers become furious, Eman continues to say:
...A village which cannot produce its own carrier contains no men.\textsuperscript{13}

The village has no carrier of its own and thus they use a stranger as a carrier. Oroge, another character in the play says:

\ldots \text{You ought to know that no carrier may return to the village. If he does, the people will stone him to death. It has happened before. Surely it is too much to ask a man to give up his own soil.}\textsuperscript{14}

When Eman explains that preparing an unwilling carrier could not fool the New Year, Oroge says:

He shall be willing. Not only willing but actually joyous. This one escaped before I began to prepare him for the event. But you will later see tonight, the most joyous creature in the festival, and perhaps then you will understand.\textsuperscript{15}

It is later decided by the villagers to chase Eman, as he too is a stranger to the village. Eman willingly accepts the role of a carrier in the
beginning, but later on he runs away and hides himself in the passage. Jaguna and Oroge fail to find Eman. Jaguna says:

It is a poor beginning for a year when our own curses remain hovering over our homes because the carrier refused to take them.\(^{16}\)

Crouching beside some shrubs, torn and bleeding, Eman recalls that he too belongs to the tribe of strong breeds and that he had left his village on this account only. On his return to his village after twelve years, he tells his father:

I am unfit for your work father. I wish to say no more. But I am totally unfitted for your call. \(^{17}\)

The Old man tells his son:

...Ours is a strong breed that takes this boat to the river year after year and wax stronger on it.... No woman survives the bearing of strong ones.... your own blood will betray you son, because you cannot hold it back. If you make it do less than this, it will rush to your head and burst it open. Other men would rot and die doing this task year after year. It
is a strong medicine we only take. Our blood is strong like no other. Anything you do in life must be less than this.... I am very sad. You only go to give to others what rightly belongs to us. 

While Eman is thus entranced, the villagers close in on him. Jaguna says:

...It is a poor beginning for a year when our own curses remain hovering over our homes because the carrier refused to take them... 

...There is too much harm done already. The year will demand more from this carrier than we thought. 

Eman recalls:

Twelve years I was pilgrim, seeking the vain shrine of secret strength. 

This is preparation for the role of the carrier, which he is destined to play in a strange land unexpectedly. After Eman's death, the villagers begin to return subdued and guilty. Jaguna tries to justify himself by saying:
We did it for them. It was all for their common good. 22

Thus Soyinka makes use of a fairly common scapegoat ritual in his play. What he implies is that the tradition of the willing carrier is one worthy of respect, in that it dignifies both the suffering of the hero and witness of the spectators. Soyinka, in an interview in Zimbabwe, said:

In The Strong Breed, for instance, I talk about the ritual of purification at the end of the year, which again is tied up with the whole business of sacrifice, of self-sacrifice, the acceptance of the role of the carrier in the society on whatever level. Whether one speaks of this community wise or individually, the fact is that there are beings in society who accept the role of sacrifice. .... It seems one of the pivots of social regeneration all through history. And of course, I come from a society where these rites proliferate and where even Christian rituals are part and parcel of the same formalism of rites. 23
Soyinka's play *Kongi's Harvest* employs the ritual of the New Year festival. There is a lot of ritual attached to this festival and is celebrated after the harvesting of crops, in order to thank the god of agriculture and ask for new blessings for the coming year. The play grew out of his perception of political developments on the continent of Africa and out of his anxiety to root his theatre in the idioms of African festival performances. The play is rooted in African tradition, especially in the elaboration of concepts concerning the feast of the New Year, in the extensive employment of proverbs and in the ritual of the King's dance.

The traditional belief of the African people is that the prosperity of the people and the fertility of the land are closely associated or linked with the life and virility of the king who is not a mere man but a divine incarnation of the spirit of vegetation. Oyin Ogumba makes the following comment on the structure of the play:

In *Kongi's Harvest*, the king is that of a king's festival, especially a Yoruba king's festival. The king in Africa is still God's deputy on earth and so he continues both spiritual and political functions. Hence his festival is not a private celebration, but one that has meaning for the whole community and in which everyone is expected to participate with interest. The King, the first citizen is the ideal figure around whom the whole tradition is woven.
The King's dance is the dance of the community by its divine leader, a re-enactment of the whole living tradition of the people. It is life-giving ritual, which has to be done in epic style to demonstrate the higher aspirations of the community. 

In the opening of the play, the prevailing mood is that of the preparation for a celebration of a great event, which produces much excitement or tension in the whole populace. The main action of the play is concerned and set against the background of the New Year festival, which in turn is associated with fruitfulness and happiness in the midst of plenty. In the beginning of the play itself one can witness the dance of the king (Oba Danlola) with the singing of the anthem accompanied with a roll of drums and the traditional characters. However, instead of the usual praise in magnificent poetry to the founder and past executors of the royal tradition, they express despair in their invocatory chant. The dance that Oba Danlola and his retinue perform in the introductory 'Hemlock' section of the play seems to have this royal quality. These words from the praise-song sung by Oba Sarumi, pay tribute to the might and majesty of the king:

Oba ni f'epo inu ebo ra'ri
Orisa l'oba
Oba ni I f'epo inu ebo r'awuje
Orisa l'oba
None but the king

Takes the oil from the crossroads

And rubs it in his awuje

The king is god. 25

These lines stress the spiritual authority of the Oba when he anoints the head’s pulse center with the oil of sacrifice, as well as his power as a god. But the Oba now has only the trappings of royalty, since he is in detention after being stripped of his political power by Kongi. The regal dance is therefore make-believe, as we discover when the superintendent stops the dance by grabbing the wrist of the lead drummer. Danlola exhibits his resignation to his loss of power when he says:

My friend, you merely stopped
My drums, but they were
On the day when Kongi cast aside
My props of wisdom, the day he
Drove the old Aweri from their seats. 26

The Oba laments the tyranny and aggressive incursions of Kongi, a repressive, ambitious autocrat into the strongholds of his traditional authority. Kongi has detained the traditional king Oba Danlola forcefully and wants to receive the New Yam from the Oba’s hands. The King’s men begin a dirge
signifying the end of traditional kingship, sentiments that predict the impending blighting of tradition. The Oba predicts only disaster as he dances his slow dignified dance. Thus they chant to the beating of the drums:

... This is the last
Our feet shall touch together
We thought the tune
Obeyed us to the soul
But the drums have newly shaped
And stiff-arms strain
On stubborn crooks, so
Delve with the left foot
For ill luck, with the left
Again for ill-luck; once more
With the left alone, for disaster
Is the only certainty we know.  

Partaking of the New Yam is the prerogative of the rightful king. The Yam, as symbol of harvest, embodies the fertility of the tribes and guarantees its continued procreation through harmonious interaction with nature. In addition, as an occasion of cleansing, the harvest festival symbolizes the purgation of the clan's sins and restoration of its commonwealth through the medium of its spiritual head. The New Yam festival is consequently no light matter. It lies at the heart and soul of the community and imposes an onerous
burden of responsibility on its divine ruler. Whoever presides over such a feast therefore has the life of the community in his hands.

Kongi already has the power but wants the spirituality, which is inherent in the Obaship of eating the New Yam. He wants to eat the New Yam and present himself to the people as their protector and spiritual leader. Oba Danlola is unwilling to cooperate in this exercise, as it would abdicate him of his religious function. Oba's authority is spiritual. His authority crosses the borders of life. Even in prison, the Oba is still powerful. As is seen in these lines:

Ogun is still a god
Even without his navel. 28

He gives life not only to the already born but also to the unborn whereas Kongi is just the opposite. As Oba Sarumi aptly points out:

Soon the head swelled
Too big for the pillow
And it swelled too big for mother's back
And soon the mother's head
Was nowhere to be seen.
And the child's slight belly
Was strangely distended. 29

Thus Kongi is the smotherer, the destroyer of his country. He stands
condemned because his is a regime that is self-centered, not people
centered. It is a regime based on death, not on life. Instead of giving life to the
people, he is a dealer out of death.

Kongi's secretary tries to convince Oba Danlola and his retinue:

Gentlemen, please, all we want is some way of
persuading King Danlola to bring the New Yam to
Kongi with his own hands.... Kongi desires that the
king perform all the customary spiritual functions,
only this time, that he performs them to him, our
leader. Kongi must preside as the spirit, in
pursuance of the five year Development plan. 30

Oba Danlola has two strong supporters in the form of Segi, Kongi's ex-
mistress and Daodu, his nephew. They want the king to pretend to cooperate
in order to draw Kongi to the public celebration of the New Year Festival so
that they can assassinate Kongi, when he is about to commit outrageous
blasphemy. The assassination attempt misfires and Segi's father is killed.
Segi presents her father's head to Kongi in a covered platter in the guise of the New Yam.

Thus, Kongi is qualified to preside only over the harvest of death. Kongi is given a harvest dish more symbolic of his denial of life. The possibility of regeneration seems to lie only with Daodu, the heir apparent of the traditional ruler. He represents the spirit of fertility and spirit of harvest while Segi symbolizes love and fertility. Thus Kongi's Harvest abounds with traditional expressions, masquerades, rituals, dirge, praise singing, dance, mask tradition, the Yoruban Yam festival and the New Year Festival.

The play The Road makes use of the egungun masquerade and ancestral masquerade, which continue the line between the living and the dead. Soyinka explains:

It is one of the devices for reconciling society and the individuals to the trauma of death. The masquerade comes out each year in symbolic habiliments of the dead man. The masquerade speaks in a guttural voice, with certain tricks of speech, which they remember as belonging to the dead person. The world of the dead is brought closer to that of the living and that is the social and
psychological purpose of egungun. The Egungun, being from the other world, is not supposed to eat or drink, but the food that is left for the ancestors rapidly disappears when he moves from house to house.  

In the prefatory note to the producer in *The Road* Soyinka writes:  

Since the mask idiom employed in "The Road" will be strange to many, the preface poem 'Alagemo' should be of help. 'Alagemo' is simply a religious cult of flesh dissolution. The dance is the movement of transition; it is used in the play as a visual suspension of death— in much the same way as Murano, the mute, is a dramatic embodiment of this suspension. He functions as an arrest of time, or death, since it was in his 'agemo' phase that the lorry knocked him down. Agemo, the mere phase, includes the passage of transition from the human to the divine essence (as in the festival of Ogun in this play), as much as the part psychic, part intellectual grope of Professor towards the essence of death.  

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The play is, in fact, prefaced by a poem 'Alagemo' which alludes to the dissolution of flesh that occurs when a person passes from physical to spiritual essence. The poem prefigures the Professor’s sacrilegious attempt to recreate out of turn the dance of ‘Agemo’, which has been suspended when Murano, the mask-wearer was struck down by Kotunu’s lorry in a road accident.

The Road presents a tragic and mystical vision of mankind in a universe in which the physical and the spiritual interpenetrate. The Professor in the play seeks full knowledge of death. His mysterious palm wine tapper, Murano, is a dramatic embodiment of an indefinite suspension between life and death. It was in his ‘Agemo’ phase that the lorry knocked him down and made him limp. This phase is the passage of transition from the human to the divine essence. Murani is a believer. Thus the professor captures Murano, in his ‘Agemo’ state. Murano is used as an object by the Professor who uses Murano as an instrument in his consistent search for what he calls the ‘Word’. The Professor is engaged in a single-minded pursuit, which reflects his egoism. As he rightly points out:

When a man has one leg in each world, his legs are never the same. The big toe of Murano’s foot-the left one of course-rests on the slumbering chrysalis of the Word. When that crust cracks my
friends-you and I, that is the moment we await.
That is the moment of our rehabilitation.\textsuperscript{33}

The broad background in this play is the world of the users of the road (a recurring myth in Soyinka's works) - the drivers, their touts, their passengers and other users of the road. They are under constant threat and its hunger can be appeased only if a dog is sacrificed. As Samson in the play says:

\begin{quote}
Kill us a dog Kotunu, kill us a dog. Kill us a dog before the hungry god lies in wait and makes a substitute of me...Ogun likes it that's all that matters. It's his special meat. Just run over the damned dog and leave it there.... Serve Ogun his tit-bit so the road won't look at us one day and say Ho ho you two boys you look juicy to me. But what's the use? The one who won't give Ogun willingly will yield heavier meat by Ogun's designing.\textsuperscript{34}
\end{quote}

The road is a pervasive symbol and Ogun, the god of iron and patron saint of drivers, preyed on his devotees, the champion drivers who all perished on the road. Zorro, Cimaron kid, Sergeant Burma, Indian Charlie etc., were all heroes of the road but ultimately its victims. These heroes had
sacrificed many dogs to Ogun, their patron and finally they themselves became 'heavier meat'. Life on the road was a constant war. The road is an agent of death as on this path the dead passengers are carried to their Church funeral. The Professor, the main character in the play, is in quest of the 'word' and is associated with death. As he says:

My bed is among the dead ... There are dangers in the Quest I know, but the Word may be found companion not to life, but death.... I found this word growing where their blood had spread and sunk along plough scouring of the wheel. Now tell me you who sit above it all, do you think my sleep was broken over nothing, over a meaningless event?  

The Professor's quest is not merely intellectual but also emotional. His quest is for some kind of a mystery of existence after death. From the beginning to the end of the play the Professor is in search for the meaning of the Word. He observes thus:

I am so confused, but I have sight and vision only for the Word and it may chance, sometimes, that I miss my way among worldly humans.  

As Ulli Beier observes:
The Yorubas believe strongly in the power of the word or rather in a mysterious force called 'ashe' which could be best described as that quality in man's personality which makes his words once uttered come true. The ultimate power of 'ashe' is held by arisha' and it is through his spiritual union with that of the worshipper will ultimately become an 'alashe', which means once who has and uses 'ashe'-curse, blessings, protective spells, magic become effective through 'ashe'.

At the end of the play, the Professor's Quest for the Word leads him to alienate himself first from the church and then the devotees of Ogun. Say Tokyo Kid respects Ogun and fears his powers. During the performance of the egungun masquerade it is considered dangerous to see the face of the man under the mask or part of his body. Anyone who dared to see the same suffered the penalty of death at the hands of the cult members. Say Tokyo Kid, being a strong devotee of Ogun, considers the Professor's use of the 'egungun' as sacrilege and thus stabs him fatally. Since the Professor is unsuccessful in his quest, he says:

Be even like the road itself. Flatten your bellies with the hunger of an unpropitious day, power your hands with the knowledge of death. ..... Dip in the
same basin as the man that makes his last journey
and stir with one finger, wobbling reflections of two
hands, two hands, but one face only. Breathe like
the road. Be the road...Spread a broad sheet for
death with the length and the time of the sun
between you until the one face multiplies and the
one shadow is cast by all the doomed. Breathe like
the road, be even like the road itself... 38

Soyinka employs the egungun masquerade very effectively in this play.
Besides, yoruban rituals, dances and the traditional songs along with the
other gods form an integral part of the play. The play can be described as
'African' for its employment of yoruban attitudes and conventions.

Thus we can see that Soyinka was intrigued by the theatrical
conventions, idioms, meanings and themes of such deities and festivals. As
seen in the preceding study of his mythology we observe that he effectively
dramatizes Yoruba belief in the mutual dependence of the differing areas of
existence. For this he uses recurrent symbols of gods and spirits; myth and
ritual; song, dance and mime as elements in a feast. He uses Yoruba
language for the songs; the tonal rhythms of Yoruba are in tune with the
drums and the dancing, and all three-language, music and action - are
inseparable from the performance of ritual. He thus owes a great debt to
traditional wisdom and culture, which he fashions into a literary credo. This
debt to tradition can also be found in his women characters that have been discussed in the next chapter.
NOTES


6. Ibid., p.143.


8. Ibid., p.64.

9. Ibid., p.70.
10 Ibid., p.76.

11 Ibid., p.59.


13 Ibid., p.129.

14 Ibid., p.129.

15 Ibid., p.129.

16 Ibid., p.132.

17 Ibid., p.134.

18 Ibid., p.133.

19 Ibid, p.132.


21 Ibid, p.143.

22 Ibid, p.146.


26 Ibid., p.63.

27 Ibid., p.68.

28 Ibid., p.68.

29 Ibid., p.69.

30 Ibid., p.77.


33 Ibid., p.187.

34 Ibid., p.198.


36 Ibid., p.158.
