

Cambridge University Press

0521398347 - Myth, Literature and the African World

Wole Soyinka

Excerpt

[More information](#)

1

Morality and aesthetics in the ritual archetype

I shall begin by commemorating the gods for their self-sacrifice on the altar of literature, and in so doing press them into further service on behalf of human society, and its quest for the explication of being. I have selected three paradigms. The number is purely fortuitous; there is no intent to create a literary trinity, holy or unholy – their choice is governed by the nature of their attributes which, in addition to their manipulable histories, have made them the favourites of poets and dramatists, modern and traditional. In addition (and this of course is true for many of their companion deities), they appear to travel well. The African world of the Americas testifies to this both in its socio-religious reality and in the secular arts and literature. Symbols of Yemaja (Yemoja), Oxosi (Osofi), Exu (Eso) and Xango (Sango) not only lead a promiscuous existence with Roman Catholic saints but are fused with the twentieth-century technological and revolutionary expressionism of the mural arts of Cuba, Brazil and much of the Caribbean.

The three deities that concern us here are Ogun, Obatala and Sango. They are represented in drama by the passage-rites of hero-gods, a projection of man's conflict with forces which challenge his efforts to harmonise with his environment, physical, social and psychic. The drama of the hero-god is a convenient expression; gods they are unquestionably, but their symbolic roles are identified by man as the role of an intermediary quester, an explorer into territories of 'essence-ideal' around whose edges man fearfully skirts. Finally, as a prefiguration of conscious being which is

Cambridge University Press

0521398347 - Myth, Literature and the African World

Wole Soyinka

Excerpt

[More information](#)*The ritual archetype*

nevertheless a product of the conscious creativity of man, they enhance man's existence within the cyclic consciousness of time. These emerge as the principal features of the drama of the gods; it is within their framework that traditional society poses its social questions or formulates its moralities. They control the aesthetic considerations of ritual enactment and give to every performance a multi-level experience of the mystical and the mundane.

The setting of *Ritual*, of the drama of the gods, is the cosmic entirety, and our approach to this drama might usefully be made through the comparable example of the Epic which represents also, on a different level, another access to the Rites of Passage. The epic celebrates the victory of the human spirit over forces inimical to self-extension. It concretises in the form of action the arduous birth of the individual or communal entity, creates a new being through utilising and stressing the language of self-glorification to which human nature is healthily prone. The dramatic or tragic rites of the gods are, however, engaged with the more profound, more elusive phenomenon of being and non-being. Man can shelve and even overwhelm metaphysical uncertainties by epic feats, and prolong such a state of social euphoria by their constant recital, but this exercise in itself proves a mere surrogate to the bewildering phenomenon of the cosmic location of his being. The fundamental visceral questioning intrudes, prompted by the patient, immovable and eternal immensity that surrounds him. We may speculate that it is the reality of this undented vastness which created the need to challenge, confront and at least initiate a rapport with the realm of infinity. It was – there being no other conceivable place – the natural home of the unseen deities, a resting-place for the departed, and a staging-house for the unborn. Intuitions, sudden psychic emanations could come, logically, only from such an incomparable immensity. A chthonic realm, a storehouse for creative and destructive essences,

Cambridge University Press

0521398347 - Myth, Literature and the African World

Wole Soyinka

Excerpt

[More information](#)

The ritual archetype

it required a challenger, a human representative to breach it periodically on behalf of the well-being of the community. The stage, the ritual arena of confrontation, came to represent the symbolic chthonic space and the presence of the challenger within it is the earliest physical expression of man's fearful awareness of the cosmic context of his existence. Its magic microcosm is created by the communal presence, and in this charged space the chthonic inhabitants are challenged.

This context however is the cosmic *totality*, in speaking of which it must be constantly recalled that we do not excise that portion of it which, because so readily and physically apprehended, tends to occupy a separate (mundane) category in modern European imagination. This was not always so. This gradual erosion of Earth in European metaphysic scope is probably due to the growth and influence of the Platonic-Christian tradition. After all, the pagan Greek did not neglect this all-important dimension. Persephone, Dionysos and Demeter were terrestrial deities. Pluto not merely ruled but inhabited the netherworld. Neptune was a very watery god who conducted his travels on water-spouts. Those archetypal protagonists of the chthonic realm, Orpheus, Gilgamesh, Ulysses, did penetrate this netherworld in concrete and elemental terms. And before that oriental twin-brother of Christianity – Buddhism – attenuated and circumscribed Asiatic thought, Lord Shiva drove his passionate course through earth, uniting all the elements with his powerful erection which burst through to the earth's surface, split in three and spurted sperm in upper cosmos. In Asian and European antiquity, therefore, man did, like the African, exist within a cosmic totality, did possess a consciousness in which his own earth being, his gravity-bound apprehension of self, was inseparable from the entire cosmic phenomenon. (For let it always be recalled that myths arise from man's attempt to externalise and communicate his inner intuitions.) A

Cambridge University Press

0521398347 - Myth, Literature and the African World

Wole Soyinka

Excerpt

[More information](#)

The ritual archetype

profound transformation has therefore taken place within the human psyche if, to hypothesise, the same homo sapiens mythologises at one period that an adventurous deity has penetrated earth, rocks and underground streams with his phallus, going right through into the outer atmosphere, and, at another period, that a new god walks on water without getting his feet wet. The latter hints already at cosmic Manichaeism, evidence of which we shall encounter in the aesthetic structure of the drama of African deities in their new syncretic abode across the Atlantic. The seed of anti-terrestrialism sowed by Buddhism and Judeo-Christianity had to end with such excesses as the transference of the underworld to a new locale up in the sky, a purgatorial suburb under the direct supervision of the sky deities. The multiple epiphanous deities have become for the European a thing of distant memory, and heroes who once dared the divine monopoly of the chthonic realm fade into dubious legend. The ultimate consequence of this – in terms of man's cosmic condition – is that the cosmos recedes further and further until, while retaining something of the grandeur of the infinite, it loses the essence of the tangible, the immediate, the appeasable. It moves from that which can be tangibly metaphorphosed into realms of the fantasied; commencing *somewhere else*, where formerly it began, co-existed with, and was completed within the reality of man's physical being and environment. Thus, where formerly the rites of the exploration of the chthonic realm, of birth and re-birth, the rites of regress and entry, were possible from any one of the various realms of existence into any other, for and on behalf of any being – ancestor, living, or unborn – living man now restricted his vision of existence to the hierarchic circuits immediately above earth. Ritual drama, that is drama as a cleansing, binding, communal, re-creative force, disappears or is vitiated during such periods or within such cultures which survive only by

Cambridge University Press

0521398347 - Myth, Literature and the African World

Wole Soyinka

Excerpt

[More information](#)

The ritual archetype

the narrowing of the cosmic whole. It is instructive to observe the commencement of this process in the drama of the gods in contemporary Christian-influenced societies of the African world.

To speak of space, music, poetry or material paraphernalia in the drama of the gods is to move directly from the apparent to deeper effects within the community whose drama (that is history, morality, affirmation, supplication, thanksgiving or simple calendricification) it also is. This is not to suggest that such drama *always* operates on this level. Casual secular entertainment may also involve the gods – the gods are quite amenable to fustian, nowhere more so than in their most sacred *oriki* (praise-chants) – but such pieces do not concern themselves with creating the emotional and spiritual overtones that would pervade, as a matter of course, the consecrated spot where the divine presence must be invoked and borne within the actor-surrogate.

This brings us briefly to the question of art. The difficulty of today's agent of a would-be ritual communication (call him the producer) is that, where the drama of the gods is involved, his sensibility is more often than not that of an enthusiastic promoter, very rarely that of a truly communicant medium in what is essentially a 'rite of passage'. To move from its natural habitat in the shrine of the deity, or a historic spot in the drama of a people's origin, or a symbolic patch of earth amidst grain stalks on the eve of harvest; to move from such charged spaces to a fenced arena at a Festival of Arts, or even to an authentic shelter of the god only lately adapted for tourists and anthropologists alike; this constitutes an unfair strain on the most even-tempered deity, and also on the artistic temperament he shares with humanity. This is not simply a question of truncation, such as the removal of the more sacred events from profane eyes. The essential problem is that the emotive progression

Cambridge University Press

0521398347 - Myth, Literature and the African World

Wole Soyinka

Excerpt

[More information](#)

The ritual archetype

which leads to a communal ecstasy or catharsis has been destroyed in the process of re-staging. So this leads us intentionally to the perennial question of whether ritual can be called drama, at what moment a religious or mythic celebration can be considered transformed into drama, and whether the ultimate test of these questions does not lie in their capacity to transfer from habitual to alien environments.

These questions are as frequently posed as they are largely artificial. The anguish over what is ritual and what drama has indeed been rendered even more abstract by the recent reversion of European and American progressive theatre to ritualism in its 'purest' attainable form. This is especially true of the black theatre in America but is also true of the current white avant-garde in Europe and America. How, except as a groping towards the ritual experience (alas, only too often comically misguided) could we describe the theatrical manifestations of the so-called 'Liquid Theatre' or the more consciously anthropological 'Environmental Theatre' in America? Or the intense explorations of Grotowski into the human psyche? What more concise expression could capture the spirit of the spectacle mounted by the French director Mnouchkine in her *1789* other than a 'ritual of revolution'? Peter Brook's experiments which took his company to Persepolis for a production of *Orghast*, a play in a wholly invented non-language, are propelled by this same need to re-discover the origin, the root experience of what Western European man later reduced to specialist terminologies through his chronic habit of compartmentalisation. (It is by the way a very catching habit; we have all caught it to some extent.) Their modern forerunner (European that is) was of course Jean Genêt, but his drama only revealed a potential for the eventual distillation of a heavily literary theatre into pure ritualistic essence. It is no surprise that towards the close of the sixties, the company which created a New York version

Cambridge University Press

0521398347 - Myth, Literature and the African World

Wole Soyinka

Excerpt

[More information](#)

The ritual archetype

of Euripides' *Bacchae* should draw, among other sources, upon an Asmat New Guinea ritual in its search for the tragic soul of twentieth-century white bourgeois-hippie American culture. The question therefore of the supposed dividing line between ritual and theatre should not concern us much in Africa, the line being one that was largely drawn by the European analyst. Groups such as the Ori-Olokun Theatre in Ife, and Duro Ladipo's company, also of Nigeria, have demonstrated the capability of the drama (or ritual) of the gods to travel as aesthetically and passionately as the gods themselves have, across the Atlantic. So indeed have groups in black America, such as Barbara Ann Teer's Harlem Theatre. If civil servants (beginning with the colonial administrators) and even university entrepreneurs who are most often responsible for bringing our Cultural Heritage out of its wraps to regale foreign delegations, Institute of African Studies conferences etc., retain the basic attitude that traditional drama is some kind of village craft which can be plonked down on any stall just like artifacts in any international airport boutique, it should not surprise us that the spectator sums up his experience as having been entertained or bored by some 'quaint ritual'. Such presentations have been largely responsible for the multitude of false concepts surrounding the drama of the gods; that, and their subjection to anthropological punditry where they are reduced, *in extremis*, to behavioural manifestations in primitive society. The burden on a producer is one of knowledge, understanding, and of sympathetic imagination. Whatever deity is involved demands an intelligent communication of what is, indeed, pure essence.

Now let us speak of the gods and of their fates – both in myth and at the hands of their creative exploiters.

Sango, of whom more will be said in chapter 2, interests us here only in respect of his essentiality, which enables us to relate him to a cosmic functionalist framework, in

Cambridge University Press

0521398347 - Myth, Literature and the African World

Wole Soyinka

Excerpt

[More information](#)*The ritual archetype*

company with several deities. This description 'functionalist' does not imply that other deities such as Ogun and Obatala with whom he is later contrasted do not also fulfil functionalist roles in the Yoruba man-cosmos organisation. The distinction is largely one of degree, or emphasis: in what primary sense a deity is thought upon in a community of his worshippers, the affective ends towards which he is most readily invoked. In Sango's case, it is as the agency of lightning, lightning in turn being the cosmic instrument of a swift, retributive justice.

Sango is anthropomorphic in origin, but it is necessary, in attempting to enter fully into the matrix of a society's conceptions of becoming, to distinguish between the primary and secondary paradigms of origin – the primal becoming of man, and his racial or social origination. Sango is cast in the latter frame, and his tragic rites are consequently a deadly conflict on the human and historic plane, charged nonetheless with the passion and terror of superhuman, uncontrollable forces. Duro Ladipo's play *Oba Koso* will be discussed more fully in another context, but some apposite lines from the Brazilian Zora Zeljan's play on Oxala (Orisa-nla) in which Sango features prominently will convey some of the awesome passion of the man. After dearth, famine and plagues, caused by a crime of injustice against a disguised deity, committed within his kingdom but without his knowledge, Sango at last discovers the identity of the long-suffering god. In rage, he challenges Olodumare, the Supreme Deity:

Blow, winds, and efface the memory of this crime!
 Swell seas, and wash my kingdom clean of this guilt!
 And you, lord of destiny, how can I respect you
 from now on? You wrote my life in the eternal
 books. You are to blame for it! Thunders that I
 control, explode with all your might! Attack the

Cambridge University Press

0521398347 - Myth, Literature and the African World

Wole Soyinka

Excerpt

[More information](#)*The ritual archetype*

heavens! I want to fight with Olodumare. I
 challenge that power which made me cover myself
 with so much shame! More! More! More! Set fire to
 the skies!¹

He is brought under control only by Oxala, the victim of the original injustice, who rebukes Sango's blasphemy. Yet Sango's rage is wholly understandable and reinforces a clever philosophical issue deployed by Zora Zeljan to reinforce the essence of Sango as the principle of justice. Since the crime against the disguised deity was committed in his own land, Sango has to bear responsibility for it; yet he is innocent of the crime. Zora Zeljan's dramatic shrewdness lay in basing the motivation for Sango's passion, not on the unfairness of the long curse on his land, but on the egotistical realisation that he, Sango, principle of justice itself, had been unwittingly made to commit an unjust act. His reaction, terrible and blasphemous as it is, raises him to truly superhuman, super-daemonic levels. It is doubtful if any philosopher would want to raise, confronted with this spectacle of passion, the finer points of the principles of culpability. Sango embodies in his person, in that culminating moment, the awesome essence of justice; nor is it disputable that the achievement of this is in large measure due to the ritualist mould of the play, where all action and all personae reach deeply through reserves of the collective memory of human rites of passage – ordeal, survival, social and individual purification – into an end result which is the moral code of society.

Sometimes, in the historic pattern of Sango's rites, there appears to be a temporal dislocation. I have stressed that Sango's history is not the history of primal becoming but of racial origin, which is historically dated. Yet he leaps straight after his suicide (or non-suicide, to be liturgically correct) into an identification (by

¹ Zora Zeljan, *Oxala*, *Transition* no. 47 (1974), p. 31.

Cambridge University Press

0521398347 - Myth, Literature and the African World

Wole Soyinka

Excerpt

[More information](#)*The ritual archetype*

implication) with the source of lightning. This seeming cosmic anachronism is in fact a very handy clue to temporal concepts in the Yoruba world-view. Traditional thought operates, not a linear conception of time but a cyclic reality. One does not suggest for a moment that this is peculiar to the Yoruba or to the African world-view. Kerenyi elicits parallel verities from Greek mythology in his essay 'The primordial child in primordial times'.² But the degree of integrated acceptance of this temporal sense in the life-rhythm, mores and social organisation of Yoruba society is certainly worth emphasising, being a reflection of that same reality which denies periodicity to the existences of the dead, the living and the unborn. The expression 'the child is father of the man' becomes, within the context of this time-structure, not merely a metaphor of development, one that is rooted in a system of representative individuation, but a proverb of human continuity which is not uni-directional. Neither 'child' nor 'father' is a closed or chronological concept. The world of the unborn, in the Yoruba world-view, is as evidently older than the world of the living as the world of the living is older than the ancestor-world. And, of course, the other way around: we can insist that the world of the unborn is older than the world of the ancestor in the same breath as we declare that the deities preceded humanity into the universe. But there again we come up against the Yoruba proverb: *Bi o s'enia, imale o si* (if humanity were not, the gods would not be). Hardly a companionable idea to the Judeo-Christian theology of 'In the beginning, God was', and of course its implications go beyond the mere question of sequential time. Whatever semantic evasion we employ – the godness, the beingness of god, the otherness of, or assimilate oneness with god – they remain abstractions of man-

² In C. G. Jung and C. Kerenyi, *Introduction to a Science of Mythology*, translated by R. F. C. Hull, Routledge & Kegan Paul, London, 1970.