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# Wole Soyinka's "Dawn" and the Cults of Ogun

YAW ADU-GYAMFI

WOLE SOYINKA'S "DAWN," the first poem in *Idanre and Other Poems* (1967), is perhaps the one poem by Soyinka that has received the most critical attention. However, criticism of the poem has been controversial. Two perspectives have occupied critics' attention, dividing them and generating an unsettled argument over Soyinka's poetry. One group of critics, giving prominence to Soyinka's complex use of language, dismisses him as incomprehensible, inaccessible, and obscure (Wilson 158; Goodwin 112; Booth 70). While admitting that Soyinka's poetry is difficult to understand, others nevertheless defend him against the charge of obscurity by arguing that his poetry fruitfully derives from, and coherently communicates in a contemporary mode, traditional Yoruba mythic aesthetics (Macebuh 207; Salt 170-71; Nwoga 178; Graham 217). James Booth's essay "Myth, Metaphor, and Syntax in Soyinka's Poetry," which he devotes to this controversy, aptly summarizes the orientation and central arguments of each critic in these two groups; nonetheless, he concludes by affirming the charge of obscurity. Indeed, Soyinka himself does not deny this central charge of what he calls "wilful obscurity" ("Neo-Tarzanism" 327), arguing that it reflects an authentic African cultural and "visionary" experience ("The Choice and Use of Language" 3).

For nearly three decades, "Dawn" has been extensively assessed in these syntactical and mythological dimensions without taking a fuller account of the way Soyinka draws on Ogun cult traditions to communicate not only the familiar creative-destructive ambiguity of Ogun but also ideas of the carnage of war and of how human beings are primarily perpetuating the

god's violent, destructive, and negative side. In fact, Soyinka's central concern in this poem is in the realm of the political, rather than in the areas on which critics have persistently focused their attention. Having gone on record in *A Dance of the Forests* (1960) to warn his country against the type of future an independent Nigeria faced given its sometime violent past, Soyinka uses "Dawn" to condemn what he sees as internecine ethnic wars in Nigeria, particularly the series of bloody *coups d'état* that plagued the country in 1966 and consequently led to the massacres of Nigerians of Eastern (Ibo) origin in October that same year, and to the Biafran war (the Nigerian civil strife) of 1967-70.

Though the primary referent of the poem's message is to the recurrence of war among his people, the Nigerian conflicts serve only as a typical example of a characteristic which extends to the rest of the world. As Soyinka points out, the Nigerian civil strife epitomizes "a general thing," the "reality of the eternal history of [warfare]" (*Spear* 18). He stresses this point again in "The Writer in a Modern African State," arguing that the tragic "situation in Africa today is the same as in the rest of the world" (17). Thus in the *Idanre* volume, the reader repeatedly encounters references to a history of wars fought in other parts of the world, especially to military expeditions in, or originating in Europe from the eleventh to the nineteenth century: "Easters in convulsions, urged by energies / Of light millenniums, crusades, empires and revolution / Damnations and savage salvations" (66-67). Soyinka denounces this global historical phenomenon of war and its associated evils, illustrating it in a cyclic manner to reflect what he calls the "doom of repetition" (88) or the endless recurrence of violence.

This political message may not, however, be immediately apparent because the poet has grounded his political message in a reconstructed version of Yoruba classical mythology and Ogun cult traditions. Uninitiated readers would not recognize such images as the sun, palm tree, palm fruits, kernels aflame, and blood-drops as first relating to Ogun cult practices, and then to Soyinka's critique of war. A broad knowledge of the Yoruba classical traditions that Soyinka weaves into the fabric of his poem to offer an unequivocal political critique of violence is

therefore necessary for a better understanding of the poem. And since both Soyinka's own account of Yoruba myths and other critical sources make evident that Ogun, as Afam Ebeogu rightly points out, "is of such immense dimension [and interest to Soyinka] that the god has come to represent a major symbol . . . in [Soyinka's] overall artistic conception" (84), much of my background information will concentrate on this god.

In his notes on "Idanre," the title poem of the volume, Soyinka summarizes what the god stands for in Yoruba mythology: "God of Iron and Metallurgy, Explorer, Artisan, Hunter, God of War, Guardian of the Road, the Creative Essence. His season is harvest and the rains" (*Idanre* 86). Though Soyinka's version of the mythical background to this summary in *Myth, Literature, and the African World* is quite different from other anthropological accounts by scholars such as S. A. Babalola and Sandra Barnes, it nevertheless offers some useful information about Ogun among the living in the Yoruba worldview. Most importantly however, Soyinka's version will best provide the context within which he reconstructs the Ogun myth as he deploys it poetically.

According to Yoruba mythology, the gods once lived in union here on earth with human beings, and their relationship with mortals was marked by camaraderie and mutual regard for one another. However, either through rebellion or disobedience on the part of mortals, the gods withdrew into the heavens. A long isolation from the world of mortals brought about an "immense chaotic growth which had sealed off reunion [between mortals and the gods]" (Soyinka, *Myth* 144). The gods tried unsuccessfully to demolish this impassable barrier, until Ogun, "armed with the first technical instrument which he had forged from the ore of mountain-wombs" (28-29), triumphantly hacked a passage through the chaotic growth to reunite the gods with humans. He thus earned the appellation "the first creative energy, the first challenger and conqueror of transition" (145). The abyss of transition, as Soyinka explains it, is a conceptual aspect of existence, defining the area between and around the worlds of the gods, the ancestors, the living, and the unborn in Yoruba traditional worldview. The pathway Ogun hacked to re-open the road between the gods and mortals, thus establishing

his primacy as the god of the road, is the link allowing the contemporaneous experience of, and continuity between, one area of existence and another in Yoruba worldview.

In appreciation of Ogun's conquest, the gods offered him sovereignty over them but he refused. Mortals, represented by the people of Ire, also invited him to be their king and warlord, which he again declined, preferring instead to live in "solitude, hunting and farming. [But] again and again he was importuned by the elders of Ire until he finally consented" (29). Because in "Dawn" Soyinka draws on Ogun's "descent" as king over mortals, it is pertinent to recount here two important faces or manifestations Ogun presented to the people of Ire when he decided to be their king. Ogun first presented a face of himself which he hoped would put an end to their persistence and cause them to rescind their decision to make him king over them. "He came down in his leather war-kit, smeared in blood from head to foot" (29). The people took to their heels and the god returned to his solitary abode satisfied. But again, the elders came to him and begged him to descend as their king in a less terrifying attire. Ogun agreed and came down clothed in palm fronds.

As King of Ire, Ogun led his men to victory, war after war. But then, as Soyinka explains, "finally, came the day when, during a lull in the battle, . . . Esu the trickster god left a gourd of palm wine for the thirsty deity. Ogun found it exceptionally delicious and drained the gourd to the dregs" (29). In that battle, Ogun drunkenly turned his fury against his own people as well as the enemy, slaughtering friends and foes alike. This account illuminates the opening lines of the popular Yoruba song, "Ogun, God of War": "Ogun kills on the right and destroys on the right. / Ogun kills on the left and destroys on the left" (Beier 33). Further, it explains why Ogun is generally referred to as the "incautious, power-drunk, god of war" (Ebeogu 85), whose uncontrolled power lacks the ability to distinguish between friend and foe, subject and enemy, threatening all parties with equal destructiveness.

As represented by the myth, Ogun exhibits two significant aspects of his personality: a positive side, represented by his innovation, benevolence, and creativity; and a negative side of

unpredictable, violent passion, which is indiscriminate in its effects. This two-sidedness is phenomenally, symbolically, and metaphorically embodied in the positive and negative uses of iron, of which Ogun is both god and introducer into the realm of the living.

To understand Soyinka's reconstruction of the Ogun myth and how it is used metaphorically in "Dawn," readers should know something of the various traditions which developed around Ogun as the god of iron, and which led the Yoruba people to perceive several different kinds of Ogun, their typologies based on the various occupations which involve the use of iron. These "many kinds of Ogun" are summarized by a Yoruba *ijàlá* or hunter's song, the unique poetic chant of the god:

Iré is divided into seven—  
 And Ogun has seven arms.  
 Ogun of the house does not gather palm-nuts,  
 Ogun of the farm eats palm-oil.  
 Ogun of the farm does not see blood.  
 He of the hunters [warriors] tastes much blood.  
 Ogun of Iré Sànbébé is yet another.  
 One builds a smithy, one does not.  
 One builds a palm-leaf hut, one does not.  
 The torrent passes before the house of one.  
 (Qtd. in Williams 299-300)

The differences between these various Ogun cults, according to Morton-Williams's research into cult organizations among the Yoruba, are determined by distinctive patterns of beliefs, symbols, dances, the context in which ritual occurs, and the characteristics of members of each cult group (246). A discussion of three identifiable groups—the farmer, warrior, and blacksmith traditions—seems useful here because of Soyinka's representation of Ogun in "Dawn."

The farmer tradition, as Williams correctly explains in his research into the birth and growth of sacred iron rituals among the Yoruba of Nigeria, is oriented to the creative-fecund aspect of Ogun in his relationship to the earth (88). Perhaps the most notable characteristic of this tradition is that it finds expression through the direct equation of the positive resources of the earth and iron implements. Material objects called *edan*, cast in male-

female pairs with exaggerated genitalia, sometimes given hermaphroditic dimensions, act as the central objects symbolizing the fertility and reproductive potential of Ogun in his intimate association with the earth. Babalola refers to one form of *edan* as "a rare, big lump of iron obtained from the 'roasting' fire to which the iron ore with all its impurities has been subjected [and which] is usually placed on a specially carved stone plinth in the Ogun shrine" (167). Also, Barnes refers to the soft wood of the oil palm tree (*ôpe*) as another form of *edan* (26). She explains that the *ôpe* itself embodies the principle of fertility: "both male and female spadices grow on the same plant" (26). Consequently, the palm tree itself stands for Ogun's procreativity in the rituals of the group who regard Ogun as primarily the god of harvest.

Discussing "Dawn," Booth mockingly cites the palm tree's monoecious quality in derision of what he sees as Soyinka's "messy" metaphors (63). However, Soyinka evidently intended the reference to demonstrate the complexity of Yoruba traditional thought, which included ideas of the hermaphroditism of both plants and human beings. The latter is revealed in the ritual of *Sakungbengbe* which occurs during the annual *Odun Ogun* and *Odun Oro* festivals in Nigeria, which honour Ogun's prominence. As Pemberton explains, during this ritual, the *Orangun* ("Divine King" affiliated with Ogun) "dressed in the garments of a woman . . . to pay honor at the shrine of Amotagesi, the second *Orangun*" (136) who, according to oral tradition, "possessed powerful herbal 'medicines' (*o ôgun*) and once transformed himself into a beautiful woman in order to marry . . . another 'strong man in medicines'" (136). The ritual enactment of this transformation may be interpreted as a textual statement of the hermaphroditic images, motifs, and structural patterns underlying ideas attributed to Ogun, ideas common during festivals and in the farmer tradition.

The warrior tradition of Ogun is symbolized by the sword, being the primary instance of the use of iron implements for purposes of violence and destruction. As Carroll's studies into representational art in Nigeria reveal, the members of the warrior tradition identify with Ogun's military exploits, portray-

ing him symbolically in their rituals as the god of war (8). Yoruba military discourse is revealing regarding the relationship between the warrior and Ogun. Any dictionary of the Yoruba language would indicate that the word "Ogun" is both the linguistic sign for war and the god, though the two words are distinguished by tone differences. "Ogun" is again prefixed or suffixed to several terms dealing with warfare: "ounogun" (weapons), "ologun" (brave warrior), "olori ogun" (general of the army), "egbe omo ogun" (army), "ohun elo ogun" (arms), "opa ogun" (war staff), "ija ogun" (fight or battle), and "balogun" (war chief).

Members of the warrior group, like those of the hunter group, taste much blood. But unlike members of the latter, who taste the blood of animals, those of the former relish only the taste of human blood, as in this *oriki* (oral praise poem) describing Ogun's ferocity in war:

Where does one meet him?  
 One meets him in the place of battle;  
 One meets him in the place of wrangling;  
 One meets him in the place where torrents of blood  
 Fill with longing, as a cup of water does the thirsty.  
(Idowu 89)

The detailing of the military activities of Ogun's warrior tradition gives a sense of a group that valorizes the regular and repeated carnage of war.

Along with the farmer and warrior traditions is the blacksmith cult made up of iron-workers. These have the primary duty of fashioning iron into implements meant for either a negative or a positive use. This characteristic duty is expressed in a special appellation the group shares with Ogun: "He who smashes up an iron implement and / Forges it afresh into new form" (Soyinka, *Poems* 55-56). The praise song reveals the ambivalent nature of the work of blacksmiths: besides the prerogative of fashioning iron implements, they may decide to forge afresh an iron implement previously used to serve a positive purpose (like farming) into a negative, deadly weapon (for war), and vice versa. This cult identifies with Ogun's ambivalent nature and reflects the human capacity to invent and wield the technology that can either at its



best enhance the livelihood of individuals or at its worst bring about their destruction.

In Soyinka's poetic reconstruction of the Ogun myth, the coalescence of the "many kinds of Ogun" appears to be a principal dynamic. The many ideas, symbols, and practices of the various Ogun cults consolidate into one complex whole, which is nevertheless expressed as a two-sided phenomenon to reflect in both singular and plural dimensions the creative and the destructive propensities embodied in Ogun. Soyinka succinctly alludes to this nature of the god in his essay "And After the Narcissist?":

Ogun is the antithesis of cowardice and Philistinism, yet within him is contained also the complement of the creative essence, a blood-thirsty destructiveness. Mixed up with the gestative inhibition of his nature [is] the destructive explosion of an incalculable energy. Contradictory as they are, it is necessary to experience these aspects of the god as a single comprehended essence. (14)

The ambivalent nature of Ogun is emphasized here, but Soyinka does not mince words in making the reader aware that his interest does not lie in representing the god as a conjunction of opposites or of the many but, as he puts it, as "a single comprehended essence."

Soyinka describes the god's duality as "the paradoxical truth of destructiveness and creativeness in acting man" (*Myth* 150). In relation to this equation, Soyinka has argued that it is only the person "whose spirit has been tested and whose psychic resources laid under stress by the forces most inimical to individual assertion . . . [who] can understand and be the force of fusion between the two contradictions" (150) in the acting man. "The resulting sensibility," he goes on to say, "is also the sensibility of the artist, and [one] is a profound artist only to the degree to which he [or she] comprehends and expresses" (150) this paradoxical truth of the good/evil duality in the acting man.

Using this statement as their point of reference, the "Troika" of Chinweizu, Madubuike, and Jemie, best known for their book *Towards the Decolonisation of African Literature*, are right in the superficial sense that Soyinka reconstructs and treats myth in a "privatist mode and from the universalist-individualist outlook"

(235). Soyinka's statement is however rendered more meaningful by Craig McLuckie, whose explanation of it turns the rather pejorative tone of the Chinweizu critics into an affirmative one. He explains:

[I]n the first sentence of the quotation, Soyinka lays down a simple equation: Ogun is acting man; acting man is both destructive and creative. . . . Such actions offer insights into the nature of existence (its truth), and the archetypal (historical or originating) example of such actions is Ogun's plunge into the chasm to reunite man with god, the physical with the metaphysical [which is a creative act, as contrasted to his rampage in battle]. . . . Only some men may gain access to [some of these] truths of existence. Soyinka asserts that the artist is privileged in this respect, but again there is a distinction: artists and profound artists. The latter is one who experiences and communicates (expresses) the experience of the truth as well as the truth itself to others. (97)

The ambivalent nature of Ogun thus becomes an analogue of human character, symbolizing the reality of both good and evil powers inherent in human beings.

In "Dawn," Soyinka initially exploits various images of Ogun, to whom he personally refers as "my god" (*Idanre* 72). The idea of dawn itself connotes the unveiling of Ogun, especially as the challenger and conqueror of the abyss of transition to re-establish union between being and non-being. The conquest is symbolically depicted as the sun breaking through darkness to give the world light. The way Soyinka describes the Ogun dance—a dawn chorus—in his book on myth and the African worldview aptly parallels this dawning process of Ogun in the poem: "[E]xplosion of the sun's kernel, an eruption of fire which is the wombfruit of pristine mountains, for no less, no different were the energies within Ogun whose ordering and control by the will brought him safely through the tragic gulf" (*Myth* 133-34). In the context of the general mythological background, this revelation of Ogun marks the restoration of reunion, contemporaneous life, and cultural forms.

Besides this allusion to Ogun through the explosion of the sun, Soyinka makes a further reference to the god through the tall palm tree, a form of *edan*, symbolizing the god's unique presence: "Breaking earth / . . . lone / A palm beyond head-

grains / . . . piercing / High hairs of the wind” (9). Explicitly representing the reproductive potential of the god by means of exaggerated sexual aggressiveness, this object alone pervades the poem, endowed with a conscious position of pride.

Soyinka chooses the palm tree as his emblem of Ogun instead of the more common big lump of iron for significant sacred, metaphoric, and thematic reasons. The individual parts of the palm tree highlighted in the poem give insights into these reasons. The young palm fronds, called *màrìwò*, and described in the poem as “spring-haired . . . / A palm beyond head-grains, spikes / A guard of prim fronds . . . / As one who bore the pollen highest,” symbolize “the clothes” and the presence of Ogun. According to Barnes’s research into the sacred functions of the palm tree in Ogun worship, the palm fronds are also used traditionally as shrine furniture, worn as cult emblems by worshippers, and used on pathways to indicate the presence of Ogun (24). As a symbol of both the presence and clothes of Ogun, it alludes particularly to the second and more acceptable second descent of Ogun among mortals (the people of Ire), when the god descended decked in palm fronds.

The red, oil-rich fruit of the palm tree, referred to in the poem just after the allusion to the young fronds as “blood drops in the air,” evokes the sacred importance of palm nuts (*òpẹfá*) in Ogun symbolism. These are used for divination in Ogun ritual. The shells are also used as fuel for the smelting of iron; iron is of course sacred to Ogun. Like palm wine, the oil from the palm nut is considered Ogun’s sacred food. All of these, as will be shortly explained, have special thematic importance in the poem. The palm nuts particularly allude to the principle of fertility embodied in Ogun, which is marked in the poem by the sudden and decisive transition from maiden-flower to fruit-mother—“As one who bore the pollen highest / Blood-drops in the air” (9).

Despite the violent, aggressive, and ill-mannered aspects of Ogun’s personality, this transition is not the result of a rape, as Jones’s Eurocentric reading suggests: “A rape indeed . . . is implied . . . (Tarquin’s rape of Lucrece is strongly suggested here). . . . Not only do the words ‘celebration’ and ‘rites’ suggest this, but the blood-red kernels of the palm become an apt sacrifi-

cial offering to a god who is himself 'afame'" (103-04). Jones's reference to Tarquin's rape of Lucrece is especially doubtful. Nothing in the poem alludes to this Roman legend; therefore, it is not surprising that he offers no explanation for his suggestion.

Goodwin and Ojaide, who share with Jones this reading of the poem's images as representing a rape, are more explicit about who does the raping, although they differ in their interpretation. Goodwin sees the rape "in terms of a theophany in which the sun rapes a lone palm tree, 'tearing wide the chaste hide of the sky' that has previously enfolded it like a 'night-spread' (that is, the bed-spread of the night)" (111). Ojaide, on the other hand, argues that "[t]he poet personifies dawn as a vigorous tall [male]" intruder who violates a "virgin bride" (25). Neither critic realizes that both the sun, (which symbolizes Ogun's ordering and controlling of the abyss of transition), and the palm tree, (a form of *edan*), refer to Ogun. In effect, they seem to be suggesting that Ogun rapes himself. Soyinka is in fact recapitulating the bisexual imagery embodied in Ogun's fertility principle, depicting the god as both male aggressor and virginal rape-victim, an experience that reflects the paradoxical bloodthirsty destructiveness and creative essence of Ogun.

In the lines immediately following the reference to the palm fruit—"above / The even belt of tassels, above / Coarse leaf teasing on the waist"—Soyinka alludes to feminine aspects of the hermaphroditic images in Ogun cult traditions and festivals. As Jones explains, the lines "suggest a human figure gaily, even coquettishly, attired" (103). Here, the skirt-like woven garment of the young palm fronds, the dress of Ogun, worn as cult emblem by Ogun worshippers, is evoked. The lines describe literally how the fronds curve downwards to reveal the palm fruits; metaphorically, they reveal an image of Ogun (or his devotees) in his favorite dress, displaying his fecundity while eliciting ideas of hermaphroditism in Ogun festivals and cult traditions.

The last stanza—"O celebration of the rites of dawn / . . . and a god / Received, aflame with kernels"—with its obvious homoerotic sexual connotations, has the added significance of alluding to

the traditional use of kernels as fuel for the smelting of iron in traditional Africa. Ogun, the god of iron, is portrayed as red-hot from the heat provided by burning kernels ("afame with kernels"). "Received" in this state, the god may be fashioned into any powerful tool of unpredictably beneficial or destructive technology. This, it could be argued, is the central message of the poem, echoing paradoxical ideas of Ogun's duality.

In subsequent poems in *Idanre*, Soyinka exemplifies the beneficial and/or destructive potential of the god when fashioned into various objects: for example, motor vehicles in "Death in the Dawn" (10-11), airplanes in "Around us Dawning" (12), and weapons in "Idanre" (57-85). Though these poems immediately introduce the creative/destructive dichotomies embodied in the Ogun concept, they emphasize an anomalous vision of disaster occurring rather paradoxically at a time of promise. The poems, depicting Ogun as the god of all users of metal-related technology, capture the ironic vision of human progress by emphasizing that motor vehicles, airplanes, and weapons, all inventions by human beings and a symbol of their "Progression," have "wrathful wings" ("Death in the Dawn" 11) that claim the life of their inventor prematurely. Dawn in this context metaphorically represents a time of hope, of technological advancement, which nevertheless is also ironically the moment of disaster and death.

Though the allusion to the fashioning of iron implements in "Dawn" is there to emphasize the duality of Ogun's character, the dominant symbols and rituals of Ogun that Soyinka evokes suggest the manifestation of the god's destructive or negative potential. This is evidenced in the poem by the pervasiveness of the colour red, implied by images such as red-hot kernels and "blood-drops." The latter literally evokes the spilling of blood, although it at the same time represents the palm fruit and all of its sacred uses in Ogun ritual. These images symbolize the activation of the negative side of the god according to the ideas that have become fairly standardized among Ogun devotees. Barnes, writing about an annual Ogun ceremony, explains:

The color red, sacrificial blood, and the "foods of Ogun" represented the active (destructive, cruel, or violent) principle inherent in the Ogun concept. The color white, *màriwo*, . . . and the "drinks of Ogun"

[clear and white fluids like gin and palm-wine] represented the pacific (creative, pure, and calm) principle. These symbols and themes have become so standardized that Ogun worshippers of one community are able to recognize and become a part of a cult group [in another] . . . despite the many localized cult variations. (40)

One realizes that Soyinka refers to the color red just to mirror the recurrence and carnage of war. To the reader who is not familiar with the Yoruba language and the extent to which it reflects the politics and customs of the people, this representation will seem puzzling or incomplete. But as Beier explains in the introduction to his book, *Yoruba Poetry*, Yoruba poetic language is full of allusions and incomplete phrases which the reader is left to complete in his or her mind. The assumption behind such linguistic or poetic practice is that the reader, upon encountering the colour red (as a metaphor for Ogun's destructive side), will recall the history of violence perpetuated by the commonly known warrior tradition of Ogun.

Put within this linguistic context, the dominance of the colour red becomes a kind of supra-reality epitomizing the lived reality of the repetition of war in Nigeria and other parts of the world. It ominously gives the indication that human beings are one-sidedly activating and perpetuating the god's negative, evil, bloodthirsty side, an anomalous human behaviour Soyinka equates in particular with "the tail-devouring snake which [Ogun] sometimes hangs around his neck to symbolize the doom of repetition" (*Idanre* 88). Ojaide's point that violence is "positive in 'Dawn'" (25) is therefore simply wrong; violence is rather negative.

The destructive nature of violence is very well illustrated by the depiction of the starkest violence in "Idanre" and the "October '66" poems (*Idanre* 49-56). The former etches a graph of warfare in the universal context:

Festival of firevales, crush of starlode  
And exploding planets  
Whorls of intemperate steel, triangles of cabal  
In rabid spheres, iron bellows at volcanic tunnels  
Easters in convulsions, urged by energies  
Of light millenniums. (66-67)

The latter concerns a specific instance of violence: the senseless October 1966 massacre of Ibos in Northern Nigeria that resulted in the Nigerian civil war (1967-70). This section of six poems records grave political problems like ethnic conflicts and we/they (us/them) divisions ("Harvest of Hate" 50; "Malediction" 55; and "Massacre October '66" 51-52), unexamined brutalities ("Civilian and Soldier" 53), the waste in national resources or the preoccupation with mass weapons of destruction instead of with food ("Ikeja, Friday, Four O'Clock" 49), and the violation of human lives through *coups d'état* and wars ("For Fajuyi" 54; "Massacre October '66" 51-52). According to the *Time* magazine report of 14 October 1966 (42-45), the Nigerian pogrom rivaled in its inhumanity that with which the Armenian Christians in the Ottoman Empire or the Jews in Nazi Germany were treated. The title poem and major piece in the section, "Massacre, October '66," suggests something similar to the *Time* magazine's report by the titular subscription "Written in Tegel." Tegel, a residential suburb of Berlin, used to be one of the centres of the *Herrenvolk* myth, which the Nazis under Hitler used to legitimize the slaughter of thousands of people. Thus the poem stands as a paradigm of what Moore describes as "the repetitive pattern of events . . . in a world where most of mankind is blindly intent upon repeating the follies and crimes of the past" (281). Indeed, the massacre of Ibos was a repetition on a more horrendous scale of earlier ones in Northern Nigeria in 1945 at Jos, and 1953 at Kano (*Pogrom* 2).

Though the reference is to a history of bloodshed, the phenomenon should not be understood as belonging to the past, since the concept of time in the volume does not operate within the Western linear concept of time but in an African metaphysical system, in which time, instead of moving forward into the future, moves backward into the past, only to recur as part of a cyclical rhythm. Soyinka suggests this context in his Preface to "Idanre" when he describes "the bloody origin of Ogun's pilgrimage [as recurring] . . . in true cyclic manner" (58). Lodged in this metaphysical temporal context, the political message of "Dawn" can be said to be prophetic, pessimistically warning against endless bloodshed unless the living take it upon them-

selves to break away from the warrior cult and make a revolutionary choice for Ogun's agricultural tradition.

As Jones observes, "it is this . . . [political] aspect of Soyinka's work that is most obviously relevant to the whole of the modern world . . . [in its application] (only more so) to those who are armed with nuclear weapons as to those who have only swords" (12). The choice that remains then seems quite obvious and unarguable: humans can choose to remain in the destructive orbit of Ogun and continue to reap the destructive harvest, or transfer from there to the god's creative orbit to reap the creative harvest. This challenge suggests an attempt on Soyinka's part to arouse the governors and the governed in his society and the world to political action for a better today and tomorrow. In this regard, Soyinka manifests himself in the poem, albeit somewhat obscurely, as a political activist who attempts to effect positive political changes in society.

In conveying this sociopolitical commentary on what life is, in contrast to what it should be, Soyinka has reworked Ogun cult traditions from his traditional background to create a work of art that is both enriched by and enriches the communal heritage. This textual strategy of using cultic language to reflect the politics, problems, fears, and hopes of a people suggests that Soyinka imitates the style of *Odu Ifa* poetry (the poetry of the Yoruba Oracle). This kind of poetry is usually shrouded in a cultic language. It also has, as Beier says, this characteristic:

The oracle's advice is always based on precedent: so and so was [given this advice]: he refused. Then such and such happened. In the end, he [obeyed the advice] and was saved from his troubles. Therefore you, too, should act as he did, if you are to avoid similar troubles.

(24)

Though Soyinka has never been described as a priest-poet, the oracular style in which he conveys "Dawn's" political message evidently makes his work functionally analogous to the role of the *Ifa* priest, the *babalawo* (father of secrets). The poem's language therefore can be said to be a complex yet unified coalition of Ogun cult traditions. As such, the poem remains difficult but successful and accessible.



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