MYTH AND VALUE IN WOLE SOYINKA'S *IDANRE & OTHER POEMS*

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Abstract

This work examines some existential concerns and mythological structures that shape human experience in *Wole Soyinka's Idanre & Other Poems*. It explores how mythic deities and ritual consciousness operate as cultural responses to the persistent instability and the existential troubles within human condition. Through the lens of sociocriticism and mythology, the study unveils the poems engagement with socials symbols, collective beliefs and transcendental realities embedded in the African cosmology. Thus, this article argues that *Idanre & Other Poems* dramatizes the oscillation between chaos and order in human life. It also foregrounds the role of spiritual belief systems as mechanism of survival, meaning-making, and communal cohesion in African societies.

Keywords: sociocriticism, myth, deity, ritual, transcendence, social life.

Résumé

Ce travail examine certaines préoccupations existentielles et structures mythologiques qui façonnent l'expérience humaine dans le recueil *Idanre & Other Poems* de Wole Soyinka. Il explore la manière dont les divinités mythiques et la conscience rituelle opèrent en tant que réponses culturelles à l'instabilité persistante et aux troubles existentiels propres à la condition humaine. Å travers le prisme de la sociocritique et de la mythologie, cette étude dévoile l'engagement des poèmes envers les symboles sociaux, les croyances collectives et les réalités transcendantales ancrées dans la cosmologie africaine. Ainsi, cet article soutient que *Idanre & Other Poems* dramatise l'oscillation entre le chaos et l'ordre dans la vie humaine. Il met également en avant le rôle des systèmes de croyances spirituelles comme mécanismes de survie, de création de sens et de cohésion communautaire dans les sociétés africaines.

Mots-clés : sociocritique, mythe, divinité, rituel, transcendance, vie sociale.

INTRODUCTION

Wole Soyinka's writing span various genres, yet poetry remains his main literary production to expose the interactions between social realities and cosmology in the African context. *Idanre & other poems* is one of his collection of poems that stands out in this regard, as it deals with the Yoruba cosmology through the myth of Ogun. In this set of poems, the myth operates as an active interpretive framework that enables the understanding, negotiating of human experience and its symbolical resolving. Consequently, the poems become a source where social realities and transcendental beliefs combine to create cultural knowledge in African society. With regard to this assumption, this study examines how Soyinka's selected poems mobilize the Yoruba mythology to articulate social instability and existential anxiety within the human condition. Beyond the esthetical aspect of myth, how does it integrate the historical trauma, the social disorder, and human vulnerability? This work contends that the poetic deployment of myth, in the corpus, appears like a strategy of critic of society that takes roots in the cosmology.

The study is grounded in the theoretical argument that literary texts are inseparable from their social and historical conditions of production. As argued by I. Forson et al. (2022, p.1) "every work of art, be it prose, drama or poetry, is hinged and shaped by the artistes' social considerations as well as what they see around them." This relationship is clarified by Edmond Cros (1985, p.131) as he posits that, "the only mode of existence for the consciousness is that of the discourse, and no matter what the level of consciousness, the gap between the writer's field of social visibility and the text's field of social readability can only be detected through discursive trace". From this perspective, the poems under study emerge as a discursive trace where collective anxieties, historical memories and cultural beliefs systems are exposed and reconfigured through myth. In addition to Sociocriticism, mythology appears as crucial for this analysis. As Angus Nicholls observes, "myth was originally a cultural adaptation that constituted the human attempt to deal with anxieties concerning the threatening forces of nature by anthropomorphizing those forces into mythic images" (A. Nicholls, 2015, p.2). Thus, the presence of Ogun, a supernatural force, reflects this mythic logic in Soyinka's poems. The object is then to demonstrate that myth functions both as a narrative form and as ideological resource in the corpus. From this perspective, the work is organized into two main sections. The first examines the poet's engagement with social realities, including the collective trauma of the Biafra conflict. The second focusses on *Idanre*. Pointing out its mythological architecture and the centrality of Ogun within the Yoruba cosmology.

1- WOLE SOYINKA'S LIFE APPRAISAL

In the section *of Birth and Death*, the poem "To My First White Hairs" is a lyric narrative of the poet colored in an imagery stance with a delicate use of some figurative languages. The poet expresses his astonishment in regard to the sudden changes in his hair format. He tangles in the following stanzas:

> Hirsute hall chinney-spouts, black thunderthroes
> confluence of coarse choudfleeces-my head sir! -scourbrush
> in bitumen, past fossil beyond fingers of light until…!
>
> Sudden sprung as corn stalk rain, watered milk weak;s
> as lighting shrunk to ant's antenna, shriveled
> of the febrile sight of crickets in the sun- (W. Soyinka, 1968, p.30)

The speaker's self-disgust and emotive feelings exhort him to open a conversation with an invisible addressee via "my head sir!" The hyperbole in the verse "Hirsute hell chimney – spouts, black thunderthroes" translates the excessive confusedness of the poet, due to the catastrophic situation of his head. The comparison items "Sudden sprung as corn stalk after rain", and "watered milk weak; as lighting shrunk to ant's antenna" reveal the figurative language of simile in the medium of "as" to denote the brutality of the change. The reason of all these lamentations is:

> THREE WHITE HAIRS! frail invaders of the undergrowth
> interpret time. I view them, wire wisps, vibrant coiled
> beneath a magnifying glass, milk-thread presages.
>
> Of the hoary Phase-Weave then, weave O quickly weave
> your sham veneration. Knit me Webs of writer sagehood,
> night cap, and the fungoid sequins of a crown. (Soyinka, 1968, p.30)

The phrase "THREE WHITE HAIRS" written in capital letters embodies the poet's inner turmoil as a result of new appearance. Through his mindset, W. Soyinka is aware of the fragility of the new tenant's arrival, the phrase "frail invaders of the undergrowth" is the illustration. But the poet is also convinced that this incoming status "interpret time" with "milk-thread presages". Both phrases indicate that it is the result of a deep analysis during a long period to posit future responsibilities. In this context the word "interpret" bears a dual figure of speech. A synecdoche because, here, "interpret" represents human in the poem. A personification in the sense that "interpret" is endowed with human qualities. The second stanza summarizes all the above interpretations. The "THREE WHITE HAIRS" just prepared him "of the hoary phase", sign of his social and personal maturity. He is therefore dubious to the sincere recognition of the people around him. In an anaphoric context, he murmurs, "weave them, wave O Quickly weave your sham generation". Beyond all ageist

consideration the poet enters “winter sagehood” and deserves “sequins of a crown” as a reward to his brilliant attendance to the society’s wisdom house.

Soyinka’s awareness and submission to social natural realities is not context free. His white hairs introduction remembers him that life is not eternal and the immediate consequence of life is death. The poem “Post Mortem” translates the poet inner melancholy in touch with his gloomy thoughts. He remarks that:

> There are more functions to a freezing plant
> than stocking beer; cold biers of mortuaries
> submit their dues, harnessed-glory be!
>
> is the cold hand of death…
> his mouth was cotton filled, his man-pike
> shrunk to such-soil grub. (W. soyinka’s, 1968, P.31)

For the poet, life after death is faded. In the medium of the figurative language simile visible in “a freezing plant/than stocking beer; cold biers of mortuaries”, a thrill landscape of death is descripted to focus the readers / readers minds on the issue. The verse “is the cold hand of death…” gathers many figure of speeches. A personification, the use of the word “hand” assimilates the death to a person. An irony, it is only humans who bear “hands”, and death is a passage, a life step. In the Surah Ali’ Imran chapter 3 verse 185 it is written that “every soul will taste death, and you will only be given your (full) compensation on The Day of Resurrection…” (M. khattab, 2016, P.74). This Surah gives strength to W. soyinka’s agreement that there is life after death and every single human will be rewarded at the length of his deeds on earth. The following stanzas are a keen illustration:

> His head was hollowed and his brain
> on scales-was this a trick to prove
> fore-knowledge after death?
>
> his flesh confesses what has stilled
> his tongue; masked fingers think from him
> to learn, how not to die. (W. soyinka’s, 1968, P.31)

As a result, “Post Mortem” is a poetic appeal to humans to consider life as a gift. The poet is convinced that life is not hazardous, and every human being has a mission to achieve.

1.1- Life Occurrences

Drenched in Yoruba tradition, some of Wole Soyinka’s poems remind the audience, the cultural aspect of his thoughts. “Abiku”, the poem under analysis “tells about a child who died at a very young age and was born again by the same old people when they have overcome grief last event” (A. T. Suryani, 2013, p.7). That interpretation was confirmed by W. Soyinka (1968, p.28) himself when he admits that “Abiku” is a “wanderer child. It is the same child who dies and returns again and

again to plague the Mother-Yoruba belief". To narrate this fact which sick's at heart a family, the poet uses many figure of speeches to settle the dramatical lens of the situation. In the verses, "I am Abiku, calling for the first / and the repeated time (W. Soyinka, 1968, p.28), "Abiku" is hence introduced in a metaphoric way. The phrases "first" unveils birth and "repeated time" suggests death homestead. Above all, both items translate mother who suffers and die following delivery. The following stanzas illustrate this picture of the pregnant woman:

> The ground is wet with mourning
> White dew suckles flesh-birds
> Evening be friends the spider, trapping
> Flies in wine-froth;
>
> The ripest fruit was saddest;
> Where I crept, the warmth was cloying.
> In silence of webs, Abiku moans, shaping
> Mounds from the yolk. (W. Soyinka, 1968, pp.29-30)

The first verse of the first stanza, "the ground is wet with mourning" is a hyperbole to translate the deepest of the pain. The poet evokes a witchcraft ability in the core of the circumstances that engender the loss of a dear person in, "white dew suckles flesh-birds". Through this personification figurative language, "white dew" refers a witch while "flesh-birds" represent human flesh. W. Soyinka in his attempt to be clear enough in his explanation uses a paradox via "the ripest fruit was saddest". It is an image with a deep sense. "The ripest fruit" embodies life, the pleasure of a family to see the arrival of a new born baby, "saddest" underscores death, the loss of the newcomer. In a nutshell, beyond the words, it is an illustration of the happiness that ensues the birth of a child as well as the immensity of the sorrow that follow the death, of the latter.

"Night" is a poem of the section "grey seasons". A.T. Suryani explains that "Night tells about the changes that the Earth goes through when it changes from night to day" (2013, p.7). The poet attempt to depict night mysteries has given floor to many figurative languages scattered in the verses. He goes as follow:

> Your hand is heavy, Night, upon my brow
> I bear no heart mercuric like the clouds, to dare
> Exacerbation from your subtle plough.
>
> Woman as a clan, on the far crescent
> I saw your jealous quench the sea's
> Fluorescence, dance on the pulse incessant. (W. Soyinka, 1968, P.46)

The first verse of the first stanza displays a metaphor with the use of "hand is heavy" and "upon my brow". It underscores the irresistible action of sleep on the human body. Whatever your strength

nobody is ripped enough to fight sleep. The second verse is endowed with a simile through the word "like" to testify the poet inability to challenge night. The second stanza is more romantic. The verses enter the intimate life of a given couple during night fall.

In the medium of a simile, the speaker praises "woman as a clam" to highlight her tenderness. But on the other side, the poet demonstrates that woman is a two edge mood persona incorporated in "I saw your jealous eyes quench the sea's". This hyperbole posits the excessive jealousy of a woman to possess, protect and defend her love in case of the presence on an intruder. A paradox is also unveiled in "jealous eye" and "quench the sea's" all together in the same target to sacralize woman's tender and bitter composure. As the poet skillfully demonstrates "Abiku" and "Night" societal impact in Yoruba tradition, he gives his impression and analysis on Nigeria's Biafran war as an eye-witness.

1-2. The Biafran Civil War

W. Soyinka is a committed poet. His actions in favor of social changes are variously interpreted. This is why, as "a prominent political activist, Soyinka was imprisoned for nearly two years during the Nigerian Civil War and was later exiled. He continues to fight against government corruption and oppression world wide" (www.britannica.com / biography/Wole –Soyinka). In his poetical landscape he dedicates a whole section to that Biafran war. The collection is entitled "October' 66" with six poems such as "Harvest of Hate", "Civilian and Soldier", "Malediction", "Ikeya, Friday, four o'clock", all elaborated to translate a specific fact at a given period.

Before dealing with the poems, what were the main causes of that Nigerian Civil War?

> The Nigerian Civil War, also known as the Biafran war, was primarily caused by ethnic conflict, economic inequality, and educational disparities. Following Nigeria's independence, regional tensions escalated due to ethnic competitiveness and economic imbalances. The country was divided into regions dominated by major ethnic groups: The Yoruba in the west, the Igbo in the east, and the Haussa-fulani in the north. Political instability, including a series of coups and ethnic massacres, further exacerbated tensions (www.britannica.com / topic/ Nigerian-Civil-War).

Moreover,

> Hausa and Yoruba army officers from the northern and western regions feared a government dominated by the Igbo, and in July 1966 Northern officers staged a successful countercoup in which Lieut.col. (later Gen.) Yakubu Gowon was installed as the new head of state. Under Gowon's rule, Ojukwu retained his command of the Eastern region. Meanwhile, the rising tide feeling against the Igbo in the Northern region led to a large-scale massacres of Igbos by northerners in May-September 1966 (www. britannica.com / biography/ Odumegwu-Ojukwu).

In a nutshell, it is this fratricide enmity which boosts the poet creativity to decry that social canker. Certainly, "Art has the power to touch. Art affects. And anything that affects, changes people, changes communities" (N. Osundare, 2005, p.55). The poet believes that his writings vehicle messages with

the objective to change people's mentality. The poem "Massacre, October' 66" gives the tones of his pain. W. soyinka's (1968, p.51) notes:

Swept from pointed craft
A mockery of waves remarked this idyll sham
I trod on acorns; each shell's detonation
Aped the skull's uniqueness

In this stanza, the poet exposes his inability and fragility to change things in a society where brotherhood is reduced to "idyll sham". The intensity of the war between Hausa and Yoruba in one side and the Igbos on the other side has caused monstrous human damages which the writer in a hyperbolic and personification figurative languages assimilates to "shell's detonation". It also implies the strong implication of militaries in the conflict with conventional weapons. The harm is deep. In the verse "Aped the skull's uniqueness", the word "skull" is a synecdoche, a figure of speech to emphasize on the size of victims. Concretely, "some 10,000 to 30,000 Igbo people were massacred in the Northern Region, and perhaps 1,000,000 fled as refuges to the Igbo dominated east" (www.britannica.com/topic/Ibgo). This is why the poet estimates that it is a malediction "In brotherhood of ill, pride of race around me" (W. Soyinka, 1968, p.52) with "A kind confusion to arithmetics of death" (W. Soyinka, 1968, p.51). The poem "Malediction" keenly illustrates that opinion. It goes as follows:

Those lips
crossed in curse corrugations
Thin slit in spittle silting
and bile-blown tongue
pain plagued, a mock man plug
Wedged in waste womb-ways
a slime slug slewed in sewage
Orogbo egan, gege l'eke arugbo… (W. Soyinka, 1968, p .55)

To emphasize the curse fact, W. Soyinka uses several alliterations to decipher his mindset. This accumulation of consonant tones, "crossed in curse corrugations/ wedged in waste womb-ways/ a slime slug slewed in sewage" covers the poet personal disgust to an ongoing plight. As a native Yoruba, W. Soyinka expresses his inner voice in his mother tongue, "Orogbo egan gege l'eke arugbo", to translate his support with his brothers and sisters' Igbo and Hausa as well as his disagreement with that harmful policy. Beyond his awareness of Biafran Civil War, the poet makes an over critics on Idanre to enlighten the audience/reader on that social fact.

2- THE DUAL CONNOTATIONS OF IDANRE

"Idanre" has a double meaning and sense according to the poet's explanation. In the "Preface to Idanre", W. Soyinka (1968, p.57) admits that "Idanre was born of two separate halves of the same experience. The first was a visit to the rock hills of that name, a god-suffused grazing of primal giants and mastodons, petrified through some strange history, suckled by mists and clouds". View on this angle, it is a natural mountainous creation appeared among the people, and acts as a pilgrimage sanctuary, a sacred place for worshipers. Furthermore, "in details, in the human context of my society, Idanre has made abundant sense. The town of Idanre itself was the first to cut its bridge, its only link with the rest of the region during the uprising of October' 65" (W. Soyinka, 1968, p.58). Through this second determination, Idanre is a human-made habitat with a specific history. Concretely, "Idanre is a myth concerning traditional Africa tampered with by modern culture" (J. A. Lambo, 2002, p.75). As myth represents a key clue in Idanre, the people's veneration toward the deity Ogun deserves to be treated with circumspection.

2-1. Praises to Ogun

Ogun is a Yoruba deity/god. Idanre rockhills are his natural shrine where whorshipers come from all over Nigeria's regions to ask for his assistance and protection. In Yoruba's traditional mythology, Ogun is an omniscient and omnipotent deity with an unlimited power. The "Notes an Idanre" have given a succinct summary on that conception. Believers are convicted that Ogun is a "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 (W. soyinka's, 1968, P.86). Grounding on those skills of Ogun the seventeenth stanza of the poem "…and after" confirms his status of "Guardian of the road" as follows:

Ogun, godfather of all souls who by roads
Made the voyage home, made his being welcome
Suffused in new powers of night, my skin
Grew light with eyes; I watched them drift away
To join the gathering presences (W. Soyinka, 1968, P.65)

The line "Ogun, godfather of all souls who by roads" admits a figurative language of synecdoche. The word "souls" involves all human beings implicated in the trip to his shrine. In the same mood of recognition of Ogun's powerfulness, the seventh stanza of the poem reveals:

Harvest night, and time to walk with fruit
Between your lips, on psalming feet. We walked
Silently across a haze of corn, and Ogun
Teased his ears with tassels, his footprints
Future furrows for the giant for the giant root (W. Soyinka, 1968, P.63)

The harvest time is an evidence that Ogun's season is "Harvest and rains", the people enjoy that benevolence. There is also the use of the figure of speech hyperbole in the phrase "Teased his ears with tassels, his foot prints". It is an exaggeration of the fact to underscore Ogun's good will. Before harvesting, "the biological life creates on earth is signaled by the down pour of rain" (J.A. Lambo, 2002, P.75), and that is a quality inherent to Ogun's competence to settle people's wellness. The poet arguing in the same trace, details:

> And no one speaks of secrets in this land
> Only, that the skin be bared to welcome rain
> And earth prepare, that seeds may swell
> And roots take flesh within her, and men
> Wake naked into harvest tide (W. Soyinka, 1968, P.62)

This sequence denotes a double figurative language with the use of the word "earth". Firstly, it suggests a synecdoche because "earth" in this context represents all the believers in Ogun's transcendental activities. Secondly, "earth" usage here is a hyperbole in the sense that all human beings around the world are note involved in this situation. Comparatively it is noticeable that:

> Have honeycombed beneath his hills, worked read earth
> Of energies, quarrying rare and urgent ores and paid
> With wrecks of last year's suppers, paved his roads
> Ogun is a demanding god (W. Soyinka, 1968, p.64)

Through this stanza, the poet highlights people's convenience to Ogun's actions with its batch of interrogations. J.A. Lambo (2002, p.75) is more explicit in his following argumentation while devotailing that, "The people salute this event by cultivating the earth and extracting clay and rare minerals from the land. The people however pay for these benefits by losing their lives in road accidents and by offering sacrifices to appease Ogun". In a nutshell, what are the reasons of Ogun's changing mentality?

2.2. Ogun's Volte-face Attitude

Ogun's wrack toward his worshipers originates from their defiance and disobedience to his supernatural achievements. As a deposit of people's well-being, Ogun is hence contravened and acts as equal. Clearly, when "Ogun returns to Idanre, his heavenly abode, only to discover, to his dismay, that during his absence, the shrines were desecrated by men. Ogun grieves that is increasingly losing faith in god "(J.A. Lambo, 2002, P.75). It is a rebellion orientation conduct by "A traitor's heart rejoiced, the gods' own slave / dirt-covered from the deed" (W. Soyinka, 1968, P.68). The rebel/traitor involves in that rebellion is "Atooda (also called Atunda), slave to first deity. Either from pique or revolutionary ideas he rolled a rock down into his unsuspecting master, sashing him to bits and

creating the multiple godhead" (W. Soyinka, 1968, P.87). In the shape of a leader, Atunda uses words that encourage:

> Man's passage, pre-ordained, self-ordered winds
> In reconstruction. (piece meal was their deft
> Re-birth, a cupped shell of tortoise, staggered
> Title tegument;) And monolith of man searches still
> A blind hunger in the road's hidden belly (W. Soyinka, 1968, P.69)

This offense proportionally meets the wrath of Ogun since "the rock in revolution – and the Boulders cannot / Up the hill in time's unwind" (W. Soyinka,1968, P.82). Ogun could not stand aloof of this kind of outrage. His action is cruel and indelible, the poet in the poem "the battle" makes a large exposition of that memorable massacre amidst worshipers. W. Soyinka (1968, P.75) narrates:

> His sword an outer crescent of the sun
> No eye can follow it, no breath draws
> In wake of burning vapour. Still they cry
> Your men Ogun! Your men!
> This blade he forged, its progress
> Never falters, rivulets on it so swift
> The blood forgets to clot
> There are falling ears corn
> And ripe melons tumble from the heads
> Of noisy women, crying
> Lust-blind god, gore-drunk Hunter
> Monster deity, you destroy your men!

The sequence illustrates the devastating effects of Ogun's Warcraft. There is no mercy on that "Lord of all witches, divine hunter" (W. Soyinka 1968, P.74) extinction project. His retaliation endeavor is so high that he becomes insensible and emotionless to the heart cry of his followers. Even the interpellation in the verse "Your men Ogun! Your men!" has failed to stop his fury. The metaphor is the lines "His sword an outer crescent of the sun / no eye can follow it; no breath draws" recaps the sharpness and the brutality of the deity's actions. Human beings imply in that genocide are so numerous that the figurative language of hyperbole inspired the poet in the verse, "The blood forgets to clot" to stigmatized on the pitiful aspect of that insane war. Above this dramatic occurrence, the people paradoxically keep on having faith in Ogun's supernatural performances in remembrance to his former accomplishments. J.A Lambo (2002, P.76) in a comment remarks that "with the good or productive side of Ogun who in spite of the carnage is still worshipped and sacrificed to by the people". An illustration of that resilience concept is colorfully lay out by the poet in the eighth stanza of the poem "harvest". It is written as such:

> The first fruits rose from subterranean boards
> First in our vision, corn sheaves rose over hill
> Long before the bearers, domes of eggs and flesh

Of palm fruit, red, oil black, froth flew in sun bubbles
Burst over throngs of golden gourds (W. Soyinka, 1968, P.85)

Roughly speaking, after the hurricane of fury of Ogun motivated by "the fact that man is becoming increasingly uncontrollable as demonstrated by his re-enactment of the slave's rebellion against the father-god" (J.A. Lambo, 2002, P.75), worshipers still giving praise to him as a recognition of his power.

CONCLUSION

At the end of this study, W. Soyinka drives the reader / hearers through his Yoruba traditional universe. *Idanre & Other Poems* is the fruit of his poetic maturity inspired by his cultural repertoire. The poems under analysis have revealed that life is a myth where odd events appear to challenge human beings understandings. To give more strength to his rhetoric, the poet finds the necessity to underscore his own experiences while pointing out the regrettable and controversial Biafran Civil War. Beyond all these life vicissitudes, the poems question mankind attitude toward existential issues. At this point, the hills of Idanre and the deity Ogun, in the poet opinion become a repository to heal the people's worries. Relying on a supernatural being befits a socerdocy to bring hope and comfort to the worshipers. As a matter of fact, *Idanre & Other poems* by Wole Soyinka embody the collection of poems that assemble brightly this concept.

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