Studies in African Literature

A New Reader's Guide to African Literature
Edited by HANS ZELL, CAROL BUNDY and VIRGINIA COULON

Homecoming: Essays
NGUGI

Writers in Politics
NGUGI

Morning Yet on Creation Day
CHINUA ACHEBE

African Literature in the Twentieth Century
O. R. DATHORNE

Protest and Conflict in African Literature
Edited by COSMO PIETERSE and DONALD MUNRO

An Introduction to the African Novel
EUSTACE PALMER

The Growth of the African Novel
EUSTACE PALMER

The Novel and Contemporary Experience in Africa
SHATTO ARTHUR GAKWANDI

The Literature and Thought of Modern Africa
CLAUDE WAUTHIER

New West African Literature
Edited by KOLAWOLE OGUNGBESAN

The African Experience in Literature and Ideology
ABIOLA IRELE

Perspectives on African Literature
Edited by CHRISTOPHER HEYWOOD

Aspects of South African Literature
Edited by CHRISTOPHER HEYWOOD

African Art and Literature: The Invisible Present
DENNIS DUERDEN

The Critical Evaluation of African Literature
Edited by EDGAR WRIGHT

Four Centuries of Swahili Verse
JAN KNAPPERT

African Writers Talking
Edited by DENNIS DUERDEN and COSMO PIETERSE

African Writers on African Writing
Edited by G. D. KILLAM

The Writings of Chinua Achebe
G. D. KILLAM

The Writing of Wole Soyinka
ELDRED JONES

The Poetry of L. S. Senghor
S. O. MEZU

The Poetry of Okot p'Bitek
G. A. HERON

Understanding African Poetry
KEN GOODWIN

An Introduction to the Writings of Ngugi
G. D. KILLAM

The Novels of Ayi Kwei Armah
ROBERT FRASER

The Writings of Camara Laye
ADELE KING

Stylistic Criticism and the African Novel
EMMANUEL NGARA

Ngugi wa Thiong'o: An Exploration of His Writings
Edited by DAVID COOK and MICHAEL OKENIMKPE

The Writings of East & Central Africa
Edited by G. D. KILLAM

CRITICAL PERSPECTIVES

Critical Perspectives on Chinua Achebe
Edited by C. L. INNES and BERNTH LINDFORS

Critical Perspectives on Amos Tutuola
Edited by BERNTH LINDFORS

Critical Perspectives on V. S. Naipaul
Edited by ROBERT HAMNER

Critical Perspectives on Nigerian Literatures
Edited by BERNTH LINDFORS

Critical Perspectives on Wole Soyinka
Edited by JAMES GIBBS

Critical Perspectives on Ngugi
Edited by G. D. KILLAM

The Writing of Wole Soyinka

REVISED EDITION

ELDRED DUROSIMI JONES

Professor of English
University of Sierra Leone

HEINEMANN
LONDON · IBADAN · NAIROBI

Heinemann Educational Books Ltd
22 Bedford Square, London WC1B 3HH
P.M.B. 5205, Ibadan · P.O. Box 45314, Nairobi
EDINBURGH MELBOURNE AUCKLAND
HONG KONG SINGAPORE KUALA LUMPUR
PORT OF SPAIN KINGSTON NEW DELHI
Heinemann Educational Books Inc
4 Front Street, Exeter, New Hampshire 03833, USA

ISBN 0 435 91645 9

First published 1973
Reprinted 1975, 1978
Revised edition 1983

Set in Plantin
Printed and bound in Great Britain by
Biddles Ltd, Guildford and King's Lynn

For W. S. *Our* W. S.

Contents

Acknowledgements

We are grateful to the following publishers for permission to quote extracts from the work of Wole Soyinka:
Autobiography:
The Man Died; Prison Notes of Wole Soyinka (Rex Collings Ltd, London, 1973).
Plays:
A Dance of the Forests, The Lion and the Jewel, The Swamp-Dwellers, The Trials of Brother Jero, and *The Strong Breed* (published under the title of *Five Plays*, Oxford University Press, London, 1964); *The Road* (Oxford University Press, London, 1965); *Kongi's Harvest* (Oxford University Press, London, 1967); *Madmen and Specialists* (Methuen, London, 1971); *Jero's Metamorphosis* (published in *The Jero Plays*, Eyre Methuen, London, 1973); *The Road* (Oxford University Press, London, 1965); *The Bacchae of Euripides* (Eyre Methuen, London, 1973); *Death and the King's Horseman* (Eyre Methuen, London, 1975).
Poetry:
'Of the Road', 'Lone Figure', 'Of Birth and Death', 'For Women', 'Grey Seasons', 'October '66', 'Idanre' (published under the title of *Idanre, and Other Poems* (Methuen, London, 1967); *Poems from Prison* (Rex Collings Ltd., London, 1969); 'Requiem' appeared in the first edition of Gerald Moore and Ulli Beier's *Modern Poetry from Africa* (Penguin, London, 1963) but was not included in their revised edition of 1968; *A Shuttle in the Crypt* (Rex Collings/Eyre Methuen, London, 1972); *Ogun Abibimang* (Rex Collings, London, 1976).
Fiction:
The Interpreters (Andre Deutsch, London, 1965; also Heinemann, London, *African Writers Series*, 76, 1970); *Season of Anomy* (Rex Collings, London, 1973).

moments the play seems to be suspended in a fusion of past and present. A similar scrambling of time is seen also in the technique of narration used in *The Interpreters*.

Because *The Lion and the Jewel* is a comedy, the follies of Lakunle result only in his own mild discomfiture. He is a false leader, but fortunately no one follows him. Indeed the play ends on a note of hope for Lakunle himself when he seems to be on the verge of giving his heart a chance as he is seen fascinated by the buttocks of the dancing girl. One feels that if he can only let himself really dance without being prompted, he might yet be saved. Other false prophets in Soyinka's works – the Kadiye in *The Strong Breed* for example – represent a more sinister threat to their society.

A Dance of the Forests

A Dance of the Forests presents a comprehensive view of man over a massive span of history; it even – in the highly symbolic chorusing of the future – looks into the future. For Soyinka, history is a nearly cyclical movement, any progress being represented by a kink after an evolution and at the start of a new cycle. 'Idanre' invokes the image of the snake swallowing its own tail and that of the 'mobius strip', a figure of interlocking rings – to represent this idea:

> multiform
> Evolution of the self-devouring snake to spatials
> New in symbol, banked loop of the 'Modius Strip'
> And interlock of re-creative rings, one surface
> Yet full comb of angles, uni-plane, yet sensuous with
> Complexities of mind and motion.
>
> (*Idanre and Other Poems*, p. 83.)

A Dance of the Forests is an attempt to represent the complexities of the human personality and its consequences within this cyclical pattern of history. The result is a very complex play with tremendous possibilities for staging as well as for interpretation; it is a warning against moral complacency and escapism.

The play is set at a crucial point in a particular evolutionary pattern – the completion of a cycle. Since it was written for Nigeria's Independence, the end of an era and the beginning of another, this is apt. The Crier who announces the ceremony of 'the welcome of the dead' invites only those of the dead who have completed a cycle:

> only such
> May resume their body corporeal as are summoned
> When the understreams that whirl them endlessly
> Complete a circle. Only such may regain
> Voice auditorial as are summoned when their link
> With the living has fully repeated its nature, has
> Re-impressed fully on the tapestry of Igbehinadun
> In approximate duplicate of actions, be they

Of good or of evil, of violence or carelessness;
In approximate duplicate of motives, be they
Illusory, tangible, commendable or damnable.
(*Five Plays*, p. 50.)

Another cycle has been completed, and characters who took part in the cycle represented by the Court of Mata Kharibu eight centuries earlier are now present at the beginning of another cycle, represented at the social level by the 'Gathering of the Tribes', which could be taken to represent independence and the ceremonies celebrating it. At another and more important level, this is also an opportunity for stocktaking, self-examination, self-confession, and possible self-regeneration. While all are involved in the social celebration, only a few humans – representatives of the race – take part in the process of introspection, and even these represent different levels of feeling and different capacities for understanding what they see – Demoke is obviously far more capable of feeling and understanding than Adenebi for example.

Although a particular geographical and social setting is selected for what amounts to a trial, it is important to remember that it is not just Nigerian man who is under examination but *homo sapiens* as a whole. The use of gods and spirits, the backward plunge into history, as well as the peering into the future with the aid of possessed humans, all combine to give the play an archetypal quality and an application broader than any confining parcel of space or time.

Numerous themes appear – some only momentarily – in this vast drama, but they are all contained under a broad enveloping theme of the contradictions of man's nature and the consequences of such contradictions (both as it involves the single man and as it varies from man to man) for the whole race of man and his environment. The environment involves not only other men and trees and rivers and minerals, etc., but also gods and the spirits of the dead who act as prodders and stimulators to the human conscience. Within this vast framework there is room for a great variety of sub-themes – the nature and functions of art, political corruption, the destruction of the natural environment, war, changes in values brought about by 'modernization', the consequences of free-will – there is a profusion of themes which arise naturally from Soyinka's treatment of the overall theme. No wonder then that as Margaret Laurence comments, 'There are some parts of *A Dance of the Forests* which seem overloaded. There are moments when the multiplicity of themes creates the feeling that there are a few too many plates spinning in the air – some of them speed by without being properly seen, and some crash down'.[1] Margaret

[1] *Long Drums and Cannons* (Macmillan, London, 1968), p. 45.

Laurence's own interpretation of the play is most sensitive and points a path through all these complexities, thus proving that the play is complex, but not confused. Indeed the problems arise mainly over the precise interpretation of the significance of the drama of the Half-Child at the end. Each succeeding reading produces insights which suggest a complete vision on the part of the author. It thus seems very likely that Margaret Laurence's expectations of the play will be fulfilled, namely that what is obscure to us 'may seem perfectly plain to the next generation of readers and play-goers'.

In addition to the multiplicity of themes, there is a multiplicity of symbols. One of the difficulties of interpretation may arise not merely from the multiplicity of symbols, but from the use of different symbols to reinforce the same idea. Man is the central figure in the play, and man is represented by living men and women – Demoke, Adenebi, Rola, Agboreko, The Old Man, etc. Some of these have a dual existence in that they also appear as historical characters in the court of Mata Kharibu. (This device conveniently establishes the essential continuity of human nature.) The Dead Man and Woman also represent man – man as victim of other men – and history as an indictment of man's past actions. The ants also represent man or rather men – the mass of men who are the victims of those in power – the manipulated masses. Man is also represented by the Half-Child, that ambiguous symbol of man's future. One has to be prepared for these changing symbols for different aspects of the same thing and respond to them. A perfectly coherent interpretation of the play is possible with a little care, though there will always be questions and disagreements over particular details.

The Gathering of the Tribes, the central social event, is celebrated in the town (sometimes called village), but its sounds and its effects penetrate into the forest which is the scene of the spiritual exercise of introspection. At the end of the play, just after Demoke's crucial restoration of the Half-Child to his mother, there is a silhouette of the rejoicings in the town which emphasizes the isolation of the social celebration from the deeper spiritual action which is taking place in the Forest:

A silhouette of Demoke's totem is seen. The village people dancing round it, also in silhouette, in silence. There is no contact between them and the Forest ones. (*Five Plays*, p. 82.)

This tableau underlines one of the themes of the play – the insensitivity of the generality of men to the deeper spiritual concerns, and their preoccupation with the mere externals of life. Here as in other works of Soyinka, it is given to a few – often a lonely individual – to seek and find the vision for the community as a whole. This is the opportunity which the play gives to

the three human protagonists Demoke, Rola, and Adenebi. These characters are clearly distinguished from each other, and their differences must be appreciated for a satisfactory interpretation of the play.

Adenebi is the least sensitive of the three. He is Council Orator in this life, and in an earlier existence had produced the play's most rhetorical speech in defence of Mata Kharibu's indefensible war. (Rhetoric of Adenebi's kind is frequently a mark of insincerity or hollowness in Soyinka's work.) Adenebi is given a thin surface respectability signalled by his rhetoric but also by his consciousness of his social position and his reluctance to be *seen* in the wrong company. When Rola's notorious identity as a prostitute becomes known, his one worry is that he would be contaminated by 'scandal': 'The whole horrible scandal. How did I ever get in your company?' (*Five Plays*, p. 22), and more explicitly:

> Oh yes, and I found that the woman who was with us was that notorious lady they call Madame Tortoise. That was really why I left. Think, if I, a councillor, was discovered with her! (p. 36.)

Underneath this respectable exterior is concealed an involvement with petty municipal corruption exemplified by the 'Incinerator' episode.

Adenebi's insensitivity is even more clearly demonstrated by his general lack of taste. In his enthusiasm for a new civilization, he is curiously without firm values. He has forsaken the humane, hospitable ways of the past, and cloaks his lack of generosity under his responsibilities to 'a proper family life', 'privacy', etc. But there is indecision even in his expression of his new creed, signalled here by 'I suppose', 'you know' and his hesitant delivery:

> It is rather difficult. I suppose one has to be firm. You start your own family, expect to look after your wife and children, lead – you know – a proper family life. Privacy . . . very important . . . some measure of privacy. (*Five Plays*, p. 5.)

He is incapable of appreciating art, his mind having been sealed off by a rule of thumb by which anything 'pagan' is bad:

> I really ought to tell you how disappointed I was with your son's handiwork. Don't you think it was rather pagan? I should have thought that something more in keeping with our progress would be more appropriate. (*Five Plays*, p. 33.)

His whole attitude is one of respectable philistinism. In this spirit he had

supported the Old Man's proposal for an invitation to the ancestors to join in the celebration, and had enveloped the whole scheme in his characteristic rhetoric. His picture of the ancestors is dangerously romantic: 'Purple robes. White horses dressed in gold. Processions through the town with communion and service around our symbol.' (p. 33.) This shallow, insensitive man is Council Orator, and in an earlier existence, Court Historian. In this earlier role he had silenced the common sense of the unwilling Warrior in the flood of rhetoric with which he supported the causeless war of Mata Kharibu and branded the Warrior as a traitor. (pp. 57–8.) In return for a bribe he had testified to the soundness of the slave dealer's boat which he had never seen. Adenebi in both existences represents the insensitive, corrupt, philistine trimmer who is always loud in support of power and of doctrines conducive to his own convenience. He is a clearly delineated person and is at the same time a manifestation of a type.

Rola is an odd mixture. In both existences she is a woman with a fatal attractiveness whose path is littered with dead lovers whom she has callously sent to their death. In her current existence, she too has repudiated the traditional ways, and finds family hospitality a burden: 'This whole family business sickens me. Let everybody lead their own lives.' (*Five Plays*, p. 6.) The implied selfishness and lack of human feeling is given a more sinister expression in her attitude to men whose lives have no value beyond their role as ministers to her own convenience. They are expendable pawns in her business. Her fierce defence of her position carries incidentally an ironic satirical comment on a society which is indifferent to human life in its pre-occupation with money-making:

> When your business men ruin the lesser ones, do you go crying to them? I also have no pity for the one who invested foolishly. Investors, that is all they ever were – to me. (*Five Plays*, p. 24.)

Rola's attitude in an earlier existence had exactly paralleled this one. A rejected lover who committed suicide has been selected, 'just as I select a new pin every day. He came back again and could not understand why the door was barred to him. He was such a fool.' (*Five Plays*, p. 64.) Rola represents in this side of her nature a destructive force. The Dead Woman excludes her from womanhood as a source of new life: 'I am certain she had no womb, but I think/*It* was a woman.' (The last pronoun, italics mine, is significant.)

About all that can be said for Rola in either existence is that she shows some appreciation of art. She is not quite the philistine that Adenebi is in this regard. The expression with which she is to say these lines to Demoke

(according to the stage directions) suggests an awed appreciation of the carver's skill: '[*with unexpected solemnity.*] And you did not even cut it down. Climbing the king of trees and carving it as it stood – I think that was very brave.' (p. 7.) (It would perhaps be carping to observe that Rola's admiration is rather more for the carver's daring than for the resulting work of art.) This quality in Rola would not have been worth mentioning had not art and the appreciation of art as an index of moral sensitiveness been so important in Soyinka's work. The words of Obaneji (who is really Forest Head – the chief of the gods) in appreciation of Demoke's art are significant, particularly since his speech is a rejoinder to Rola's own remark last quoted: 'It is the kind of action that redeems mankind.'

Because of this sensitivity, the significance of the ceremony of the welcome of the dead is not entirely lost on Rola. She comes out of the experience looking (in the words of the stage directions) '*chastened*'. And Demoke (she herself is too overawed to speak) yokes her with him in the experience. She is no longer what she had been, the heartless 'Madame Tortoise': 'Not any more. It was the same lightning that seared us through the head.' (*Five Plays*, p. 85.) (It is significant that Adenebi just fades out of the play, being incapable of taking any significance from the vision he has just seen.) Rola/Madame Tortoise is rather more complex than appears on the surface. She is certainly capable of redemption and is thus nearer to the most sensitive of the three human protagonists, Demoke.

Demoke is the artist. (The redemptive role of art and the artist in Soyinka's work has been remarked on before.) In his earlier existence – as the Court Poet – he had also lived as an artist. Yet he too involves a contradiction. Being human, even this extraordinary artist is susceptible to jealousy and vertigo; he is capable of destruction as well as creation; of murder as well as the production of an extraordinary work of art – 'the kind of action that redeems mankind'. In the scenes showing his earlier existence, his work as a poet is not highlighted – except in the fulsome poetic phrases with which he praises Madame Tortoise – but his dual nature is even there suggested by the contrast between the deep contempt (revealed in asides) which he feels at Madame Tortoise's callousness, and the flattery which he lavishes on her in her hearing:

> Your hair is the feathers my lady, and the breast of the canary – your forehead my lady – is the inspiration of your servant. Madame, you must not say you have lost your canary – [*aside*] unless it be your virtue, slut! (*Five Plays*, p.52.)

He is bold enough to defy Madame Tortoise and forbid his novice to go on the hazardous errand to recover the canary – 'I forbid him to go' (p. 53) –

and his innuendoes almost bring down the wrath of his callous mistress on his head: 'And look out, my poet: sometimes, you grow wearisome.'[2] (p. 63.) But it is Demoke the carver (not the earlier Court Poet) who has the greater significance for the play.

Demoke combines the destructive and the creative capabilities of man. His very act of creation involves destruction. The majestic *araba* has to be destroyed in order to produce the totem. This is a necessary act, however, and a limited one. The further destruction of the forest by the townspeople, and the resulting vulgarization of his work, disgusts Demoke:

> When I finished it, the grove was cleared of all the other trees, the bush was razed and a motor road built right up to it. It looked different. It was no longer my work. I fled from it. (p. 8.)

Unlike the destruction of the *araba* tree, the murder of Oremole is not necessary; it is a crime, and the memory of it plagues Demoke's soul until he confesses it. At first he skirts round his crime. He mentions the death of his apprentice as though it had nothing to do with him: 'And one man fell to his death.' (p. 7.) The growing uneasiness of his conscience is dramatized by his compulsive urge to question the dead – he is the only one of the protagonists who takes any real interest in them. But what begins as an anxiety that his crime might be revealed by the voices of the dead, becomes – with the help of Forest Head's gentle prodding – an irresistible urge to make an open confession which leaves the way open for the regeneration which is Forest Head's purpose in ordering the welcome ceremony. Soyinka dramatizes the murder in a verbal flashback heightened by poetry. The narration highlights the mixture of jealousy and humiliation which motivated Demoke to murder his apprentice because he could climb higher than his master:

> I plucked him down
> Demoke's head is no woman's cloth, spread
> To receive wood shavings from a carpenter.
> Down, down I plucked him, screaming on Oro.
> (*Five Plays*, pp. 27–8.)

This act of murder is immediately succeeded by a frenzied act of creation no less vividly described:

[2] I differ here from Margaret Laurence who writes of the poet: 'The poet lets his novice fall to his death in rescuing the queen's canary from the roof-top' (*Long Drums and Cannons*, p. 57.)

Before he made hard obeisance to his earth,
My axe was executioner at Oro's neck. Alone,
Alone I cut the strands that mocked me, till head
And boastful slave lay side by side, and I
Demoke, sat on the shoulders of the tree,
My spirit set free and singing, my hands
My father's hands possessed by demons of blood
And I carved three days and nights till tools
Were blunted, and these hands, my father's hands
Swelled big as tree-trunks.

Both acts – of destruction and creation – are essentially Demoke's. (In spite of Ogun's attempts to take over the responsibilities of his protégé's crime: 'In all that he did, he followed my bidding. I will speak for him.' (p. 66.)

Demoke's open confession of his crime (as well as a triumphant assertion of his act of creation) is in contrast to the reactions of both Adenebi and Rola to the proddings of Forest Head. Adenebi, for ever shoring up the façade of respectability which covers his real nature, never admits anything. We can only deduce his complicity in municipal corruption. He staves off the questions of Obaneji (Forest Head) with a show of sensitive anger. (p. 17.) He is equally furious at the same questioner's attempt to get him to say what sort of death he would like to die (the answers of both Rola and Demoke are self-revelatory). Adenebi misses the opportunity of self-examination and confession offered by Forest Head, and hence disqualifies himself from benefiting from the significance of the welcome of the dead.

Rola's reaction is different again. Once pushed to the corner she fiercely turns against her accusers. (It is significant that Adenebi baits her mercilessly: 'What! No shame. No shame at all,' (p. 22), while Demoke is almost protective.) Indeed she seems at one point to lay the blame for her conduct on her nature: 'I owe all that happened to my nature.' But she also admits her own responsibility in a defiant, satisfied way: 'I only know I am master of my fate. I have turned my training to good account. I am wealthy, and I know where my wealth comes from.' (p. 24.) There is some honesty here which is totally absent from Adenebi's hypocritical reactions. Rola could thus take some meaning from the vision at the end. These then are the three living human protagonists who witness the welcome of the dead.

The dead, variously called by uneasy humans 'accusers', 'executioners' and other derogatory names have been invited by Aroni to trouble the conscience of the living. Their appearance does have this effect. Demoke's father is the most concerned to drive them back. He wants to keep the part of the past which these dead represent, hidden. To him in particular they

bring memories of his son's crime which he would not have revealed. But he really speaks for men in general when he says that these particular dead 'have come to undermine our strength. To preach to us how ignoble we are.' The Old Man is here resisting the truth about himself and the rest of mankind; he is denying his true history and his true nature. It was he and Adenebi who had put the proposal to the Council to invite representatives of the ancestors as guests at the Gathering, but they only wanted guests who would flatter their ideas of themselves. They only wanted the noble, not the ignoble side of their history and their nature represented. 'We were sent the wrong people. We asked for statesmen and were sent executioners.' (p. 30.) and 'If we can drive them away from here, it will be sufficient.' (p. 29.)

This refusal to face the fact that man is capable of both creation and destruction, of both nobility and meanness, and the consequent failure to take this into good account in national thinking, constitute a dangerous romanticism. It makes men totally unprepared when the results of this other side – the evil side – of their natures suddenly overtake them. For Soyinka even outside this play, Africans (particularly writers) who indulge in this kind of myth-making are lulling their people into a dangerously false sense of virtue out of which a sudden discovery of their own viciousness rudely wakes them and finds them unprepared:

> We, whose humanity the poets celebrated before the proof, whose lyric innocence was daily questioned by the pages of the newspapers, are now being forced by disaster, not foresight, to a reconsideration of our relationship with the outer world. It seems that the time has now come when the African writer must have the courage to determine what alone can be salvaged from the recurrent cycle of human stupidity.
>
> The myth of irrational nobility, of a racial essence that must come to the rescue of the white depravity, has run its full course. It never in fact existed, for this was not the problem but the camouflage.[3]

The Old Man in trying to hunt the Dead Man and Woman away from earth, to smoke them out with petrol fumes, is involved in a game of 'camouflage'; of smothering the truth under a pall of smoke. Fortunately the Old Man's son – Demoke – acknowledges the presence of the dead, and through this, acknowledges the duality of man's nature so that (as apparently happened to him when he murdered his apprentice) man's viciousness will not take him by surprise. Unfortunately for most men it is the camouflage, the racial myth, that is important. Conscience and the unpleasant parts of

[3] Soyinka, 'The Writer in a Modern African State', in Per Wastberg (ed.), *The Writer in Modern Africa* (Uppsala, 1968) p. 20.

the truth, represented by the dead, must be suppressed. Eventually the truth comes out; the ancestors cannot be so easily got rid of and the Old Man's efforts prove futile. As the Elder Agboreko asks: 'Will you never believe that you cannot get rid of ancestors with the little toys of children . . .' (p. 41.)

The historical section of the play, the Court of Mata Kharibu, is an evocation of the truth of the past. Such a court had been in the minds of the Old Man and Adenebi when they made their proposal for the invitation – 'Mali, Songhai. Perhaps a descendant of the great Lisabi. Zimbabwe. Maybe the legendary Prester John himself . . . I was thinking of heroes like they.' (*Five Plays*, p. 33.) The court shown in the play has the external trappings of what Adenebi wanted. Mata Kharibu is powerful and keeps a glittering court but he is also vicious. He is surrounded by learned men, but they do not have the courage to speak the truth. The one man in the court who has the courage to speak the truth is emasculated and sold as a eunuch. The Court Scene is beautifully balanced. The brutal tyranny of Mata Kharibu on one side of the stage is complemented by the coquettish cruelty of Madame Tortoise on the other. The results are the same – the condemnation of human beings to death in fulfilment of a whim. Both violate the sanctity of human life for trivial purposes. The Court contained not only prostituted academics and distinguished bribe-takers, but also that sinister figure (usually pictured as an alien but here pictured as one of the nation) the slave dealer – a man who thrives on the miseries of others. All the characters are recognizable in our own times. Soyinka underlines this by giving the Historian, the Poet and Madame Tortoise a contemporary existence, as well as by bringing the dead man and woman from this court into the contemporary world to witness against the living.

The whole play moves towards the 'welcome of the dead' which Aroni has organized on behalf of Forest Head. This is the real climax. The earlier sections prepare the minds of the mortal characters for the experience and inexorably draw all the participants to the scene of welcome.

The human characters have been looked at, but a glance at some of the Forest dwellers – the gods – is necessary. Forest Head is the supreme deity; the creator who has endowed man with free will, and now has to endure the pain of watching his creation perversely choosing the wrong path over and over again.

Interfering would be to deny man his free will and Forest Head will not do this. All he can do is every so often – at the completion of a cycle – to give man an opportunity of looking into his real self 'pierce the encrustations of soul-deadening habit, and bare the mirror of original nakedness – knowing full well, it is all futility'. (*Five Plays*, p. 82.) It is to this end the welcome ceremony is staged.

Aroni, who acts on behalf of Forest Head and who like an Elizabethan 'Presenter' gives a prologue to the play, is an embodiment of wisdom and justice. His role then is to bring men to justice and make public what is hidden. In the words of Agboreko:

> Aroni is Widom itself. When he means to expose the weaknesses of human lives, there is nothing can stop him. And he knows how to choose his time. (*Five Plays*, pp. 34–5.)

Agboreko's reference to 'the scales of Aroni' (p. 35) emphasizes his judicial role. He does not however pass judgement. He only 'exposes' the evidence in the hope that the right self-verdict will be given by man himself. 'Let the future judge them by reversal of its path or by stubborn continuation.' (p. 67.)

Ogun and Eshuoro, although Forest Dwellers (gods), are curiously linked to men, not only by the fact that they are respectively patrons of Demoke and Oremole, but also by their human-like conduct. Forest Head who has to come between them as they spring at each other's throats, comments: 'Soon, I will not tell you from the humans, so closely have their habits grown on you.' (*Five Plays*, p. 67.) They are contrasted one with the other, but they are also shown (as are the humans) as embodying contradictions within themselves. (It is probably wise to take these two beings as they are defined within the play rather than to bring too much from external knowledge of the Yoruba Pantheon. In any case Eshuoro is a special creation for the play of a combination of two deities Eshu and Oro.) The two deities are introduced by Aroni in his opening 'testimony':

> Eshuoro is the wayward flesh of ORO – Oro whose agency serves much of the bestial human, whom they invoke for terror. OGUN, they deify, for his playground is the battlefield, but he loves the anvil and protects all carvers, smiths, and all workers in metal.
> (*Five Plays*, p. 2.)

Eshuoro (also described in the list of characters as a wayward cult-spirit) comes out in the play as an enemy of man, particularly of the noble part of man's nature. His attitude to Demoke's totem seems to bear this out. He is unable to see the work of art; he is so obsessed with the desecration of his tree and the insult to his dignity that this implies:

> The totem, my final insult. The final taunt from the human pigs. The tree that is marked down for Oro, the tree from which my follower fell to his death . . . But my body was stripped by the impious hands

of Demoke, Ogun's favoured slave of the forge. My head was hacked off by his axe. Trampled on, bled on, my body's shame pointed at the sky by the edge of Demoke, will I let this day pass without vengeance claimed blood for sap? (*Five Plays*, pp. 47–8.)

This is the voice of pique. Eshuoro's anger seems to spread over all men – 'the human pigs' – and transcends the single act of Demoke. It is as a general enemy of man that he functions in the final pageant of the play. His inability to see the work of art reminds us of the philistinism of Adenebi. Murete is infuriated by Eshuoro's attitude to the totem and his speech points to the place of art in Forest Head's scheme of things:

that is
an offering which would have gladdened the heart of Forest Father himself. He would have called it adulation. Did he not himself teach them the arts, and must they be confined to little rooted chips which fall off when Eshuoro peels like a snake of the previous year . . .?

This restores the balance. For Eshuoro appears as something of the protector of the forest. He quite rightly resents the indiscriminate deforestation and pollution which has taken place: 'Have you seen how much of the forest has been torn down for their petty decorations?' (p. 45), and 'The whole forest stinks. Stinks of human obscenities.' (p. 46.) (Indiscriminate deforestation is often a signal of human vandalism – in *The Lion and the Jewel*, for example.) In extending his wrath to the totem and condemning it, however, Eshuoro shows a lack of discrimination and taste. He acts out of mere pique and ruins his case. In any event his pique leads him to work his rage out on Murete's tree thus neutralizing somewhat his role as protector of the Forest. (pp. 44–5.) Eshuoro also seems to be incapable of seeing the heroism of the Warrior's conduct: 'The soldier was a fool. A woman. He was a woman.' (p. 65.) He obviously preferred the bloodthirsty self-destructive path of man. His general malevolence to man is seen even more clearly in the final dance.

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 his crime. 'I, Ogun, swear that his hands were mine in every action of his life.' (p. 67.) This is of course an excessive claim as Forest Head's rejoinder implies. But it at least establishes his complicity in, and condonation of, the crime. He too, like his protégé, combines both the elements of creativity and destruction – 'His playground is the battle-field' as well as the studio. He and Demoke seem to be on the same side of the struggle for the Half-Child at the end. He is thus identified

with man in the struggle against the merely bestial which Eshuoro represents.

These qualities of the gods are important in an interpretation of the complex dance which is the climax of *A Dance of the Forests*. From the very opening of the play attention is directed to a trial at the end. The dead man and woman come out of the ground looking for human advocates to take their 'case'. It soon becomes clear that a trial is to be organized by Forest Head: 'Forest Father, masquerading as a human,/Bringing them to judgement.' (p. 29.) The nature of this judgement is further revealed as a process of self-judgement and self-condemnation to be undertaken by the humans themselves. It is Aroni's purpose 'To let the living condemn themselves'. (p. 37.) Later Forest Head himself gives out that he has summoned the welcoming 'for ends of my own' (p. 67), which in the words of Aroni are to give man an opportunity for regeneration. 'It is enough that they discover their own regeneration.' The particular cases of the Dead Man and Woman become involved with a more general case involving all mankind. It is ironical that at first the Dead Man and Woman look at Demoke to take their case until they discover that he too is on trial: 'What is this? The one who was to take my case – has he sent another down? Into the pit?' (p. 26.)

The hearing of the particular cases of the Dead Man and Woman becomes mixed up in the general trial at the end. In the more general case of man which soon emerges, the Dead Woman speaks not just for herself. Her question is 'For all the rest':

Say someone comes
For all the rest. Say someone asks –
Was it for this, for this,
Children plagued their mothers? (p. 69.)

The question suggests a consciousness of the ultimate futility of human life. Was it worth it all? In her particular case – she is accused of depriving her unborn child of life by herself committing suicide – she pleads weakness. She did not see the point of continuing either her own or the child's life. She had in fact tried to save the child the futility of life. But this is wrong. The suffering cannot be escaped, as Forest Head points out: 'Child, there is no choice but one of suffering.' This point having been established, interest shifts from the Woman to the Dead Man. His appearance establishes that all his three existences (the other two are not indicated) have entailed unjustified suffering, and like the Dead Woman he wants rest: 'I have come to sleep.' (p. 70.) The Questioner (Eshuoro in disguise) accuses him of having learnt nothing. He had let power (in the Court of

Mata Kharibu) slip through his fingers. He is to be condemned to wander a hundred years more. Eshuoro is merely repeating his earlier opinion which encourages man's degeneracy. At this inconclusive stage of his particular case the Dead Man is ushered off and never appears again. The two particular cases seem to be dropped but the Dead Woman features prominently in the drama of the Half-Child later.

A new drama is introduced when the three human protagonists are masked and become possessed so that they speak, not in their own voices, but for the various spirits who now appear. Into this drama is woven the drama of the Half-Child, the details of which have caused readers of this play most trouble.[4] The chorus of the spirits by comparison is fairly straightforward. The spirits together symbolize the total environment of Africa – all its resources and all its potentialities. To what purpose will they all be used? The suggestions are that they will be used unwisely, even destructively. The spirit of the palm whose sap is ordinarily life giving – it 'suckles' – will turn to blood, because of the evil in man's nature – 'blackened hearts'.

> White skeins wove me, I, Spirit of the Palm
> Now course I red.
> I who suckle blackened hearts, know
> Heads will fall down
> Crimson in their bed!

The imagery indicates a violation of the processes of life; a contamination of the sources of nourishment for life. (Soyinka frequently portrays this idea through images of an aborted harvest.) Each spirit speaks in a similar vein, showing man doomed through a perverse exploitation of his resources. The pollution of the sources of life so that they become the sources of death is clearly imaged in the chorus of the waters:

> Let no man then lave his feet
> In any stream, in any lake
> In rapids or in cataracts
> Let no woman think to bake
> Her cornmeal wrapped in leaves
> With water gathered of the rain
> He'll think his eye deceives
> Who treads the ripples where I run
> In shallows. (pp. 75–6.)

[4] For a summary of the different readings of Ulli Beier and Una Maclean, and Margaret Laurence's own interpretation see the latter's *Long Drums and Cannons*, especially p. 43.

The Half-Child too joins in the chorus of a doomed future: 'I'll be born dead/I'll be born dead.'

The Ants, representing the masses who are exploited by their leaders (they had been mischievously persuaded to come to the trial by Eshuoro) picture their enslaved and exploited state: 'We are the ever legion of the world,/Smitten, for – "the good to come".' (p. 78.) The facile political morality of leaders is given dramatic form in the distorted triplets. They are physical manifestations of the rhetorical distortions which are used to justify political crimes: 'I am the Greater Cause, standing ever ready excusing the crimes of today for tomorrow's mirage.' The satire on human perversity is obvious in passages like these; the significance of these symbols is not obscure.

The Half-Child, it has been suggested earlier, is a symbol for man's future. That this future is doomed is clear in the Half-Child's chorus 'I'll be born dead'. But Soyinka involves him in a further tableau whose significance is less clear. He engages (against his will) in a game of *sesan* with Figure in Red (who turns out to be Eshuoro), and loses. His life is thus forfeited to the bestial Eshuoro. But Eshuoro is not allowed to carry off his prize. Ogun intervenes. We recall here the contrast between the natures of Ogun and Eshuoro and read into his act some sort of salvation for the child. The fate of the Half-Child is for some time in the balance, with Eshuoro and his jester trying to win him to one side, while his mother, Demoke and Ogun all seem to fight on the other side to save the child. These forces are the natural mother (though this is complicated in that this one is dead), the artist representing the noble side of man's nature, and the god of creativity. The peril of the Half-Child is vividly dramatized in the dance in which it is tossed between Eshuoro, the third triplet (posterity) and Eshuoro's jester, while Demoke tries to rescue the child from the obvious peril represented by the knives.[5] It is Ogun, however, who intervenes, rescues the child, and passes him to Demoke. Here the symbolism is so thick that one can only make suggestions for an interpretation.

Demoke having rescued the child stands confused. Although the mother had originally wanted to be relieved of her burden and leave the living child with the living ('I said the living would save me' [p. 26], and 'I thought . . . here was a chance to return the living to the living that I may sleep lighter' [p. 5]), at this point she seems to have changed her mind and wants the child back – she mutely appeals to Demoke (for the child).

[5] This perilous dance, for which Soyinka had to substitute a different tableau in the alternative ending of the play, is done by professional dancers in many parts of West Africa. Geoffrey Gorer describes such a dance in *Africa Dances* (Faber, London, 1935), p. 317.

(p. 82). Demoke apparently cannot in any case be allowed to keep the child because his keeping it would in some way 'reverse the deed that was begun many lives ago'. Therefore 'the Forest will not let you'. (p. 82.) Demoke's act would somehow have broken the cycle. Now this would have been clear had the dilemma been Ogun's – if, for example, he had hesitated between keeping the child under his own protection and hence interfering, or giving the child to Demoke as a representative of the living thus leaving man with his free will. He does not hesitate, however, and hands the child to Demoke. What then is the significance of Demoke's dilemma and his handing the child to the Dead Woman who presumably returns with it to the world of the dead (for ever? Can he be born again?)? At this point even the suggestion that the Half-Child is a symbol for man's future begins to look weak.[6]

Leaving aside intransigent details, the general point seems to be that Forest Head will not intervene; man is returned to his own kind and the exercise of his free will with the risk that he will continue to frustrate his own happiness. The cycle continues as before.

This whole pageant has been laid on for the benefit of the human protagonists. They pass through fire, and the effect on Demoke is traumatic. Although three humans witness the welcome, only two appear afterwards. Adenebi fades out – not surprisingly perhaps because of his insensitive nature. But only the most insensitive can come through the vision unchanged. Demoke suggests that they will never be the same again: 'We three who lived many lives in this one night, have we not done enough? Have we not felt enough for the memory of our remaining lives?' (p. 85.) Certainly Madame Tortoise is not the same. That she survives alive surprises Agboreko: 'I did not think to find her still alive.' She seems regenerated – 'chastened' – having been seared by the same 'lightning' as Demoke.

While there are people capable of undergoing the spiritual experience of total introspection, of piercing 'the encrustations of soul-deadening habit' which is represented by the participation in the welcome ceremony, there is presumably some hope for man's regeneration. Even so, this is not certain. (It is significant that the humans are compelled by Forest Head to face the truth about themselves in this way.) The general picture which emerges from the play is that of man ruthlessly exploiting his natural environment and other men for his own limited, selfish ends; of man so

[6] For a valuable contribution on the significance of Demoke's act, see Nick Wilkinson's 'Demoke's choice in Soyinka's *A Dance of the Forests: Journal of Commonwealth Literature*, 10, 3 (1976), pp. 22–7; reprinted in James Gibbs (ed.), *Critical Perspectives on Wole Soyinka* (Washington, DC: Three Continents Press, 1980).

preoccupied with his material concerns that he neglects matters of the spirit, and grows progressively insensitive. The play suggests the need for an occasional pause for thought – in the case of Nigeria what better time than the occasion of independence and the start of a new cycle? On such occasions instead of a total absorption in the externals of celebration, instead of whitewashing our history and true nature in pageants of splendour, men should face the truth, the whole truth about themselves, and with a mixture of hope and trepidation move into the uncertain future.

A Dance of the Forests has all the ingredients for a spectacular play, but only in the most capable hands. A bad production would be an unmitigated disaster. The set has to suggest the timeless element of the play, particularly in the welcome scene when the stage directions require a setting suggestive of a meeting point of existences. The dark wet atmosphere suggests the 'dark backward and abysm' of time – the scene of the beginnings of amoebal life – while the 'rotting wood' and 'mounds' suggest an apocalyptic scene of death and the end of life. This recreation would require all the ingenuity of the technician:

> *Back-scene lights up gradually to reveal a dark, wet, atmosphere dripping moisture, and soft, moist soil. A palm tree sways at a low angle, broken but still alive. Seemingly lightning-reduced stumps. Rotting wood all over the ground. A mound or two here and there.*

This unearthly scene is necessary to convey the out-of-time atmosphere of the last section of the play. The Mata Kharibu section has to be differently lit again from the here-and-now scenes in the forest.

The costuming too gives opportunity for spectacular designs which should at the same time clearly distinguish the characters one from another and remind the audience of their identities when they appear either in disguise or in different historical periods. It would probably be helpful during Aroni's 'testimony' which introduces the main lines of the play, if the characters appear on the stage in a tableau as they are named. The ironies implicit in Forest Head's exchanges with the human characters would be immediately appreciated by the audience if he has already been introduced and seen as Forest Head disguised as Obaneji during Aroni's 'testimony'. The final tableau with spirits of things (whose distinctive natures would have to be suggested by their costumes), masked humans, a Half-Child, the grotesque triplets, ants, gods, all describing their own movement patterns, would make either a spectacular scene or total confusion. The hazards of staging aptly reflect the hazards of interpreting this grandly complex play.