IN SEARCH OF OUN: SOYINKA, NIETZCHE AND THE EDO CENTURY

By Odia Ofeimun

Mr Chairman, distinguished ladies and gentlemen, I was given the freedom to choose the topic for this lecture. As a matter of self-will, I have chosen to speak on my search for Ogun, god of iron and war, roads and creativity. I have made the choice as a way of memorializing a discovery that may surprise many people: that there is a relationship, better to call it a synchrony, between Ogun Ewuare, King of the Edo Kingdom in the fifteenth century (1440-1485) and Ogun, the god of iron who, in spite of Christianity and Islam, is still worshipped across much of Southern Nigeria, the West Coast of Africa, the African Diaspora - the West Indies and the Americas.

My discovery was made more than twenty years ago. It acquired a particularly poignant dimension in the anguish that I experienced when the Edo people in 1997 decided to commemorate the Benin Massacre which took place one hundred years before, in 1897. The Benin Massacre was a traumatic incident in the life of the Edo People. It was wreaked by nine war ships, and a tenth 'fitted for a hospital', which heaved the weight of the British Empire to the Bight of Benin to crush a people very deliberately provoked to excuse looting, arson and the mayhem of British overlordship. British soldiers overran and set Benin, the capital city, ablaze; looted centuries-old art treasures; sent the King, Ovonramwen, into exile at Calabar, and proceeded to mete out the justice of the strong over a city and people whose empire and reigning dynasty had existed for more than five hundred years. Not to forget: it was the second time in recorded history that the city was undergoing such a gory fare. The first time was in 1440, when Ogun Ewuare himself set his own city ablaze to punish the inhabitants for side-tracking him, their Crown Prince, and favouring his younger brother, much against the system of primogeniture which allowed only first sons to inherit the crowns of their fathers. Thereafter, Ogun Ewuare re-established the city on a footing of absolute sovereignty which no near or distant neighbour could bring to an end. Well, the British brought it to an ending that was still in force one hundred years later.

Its centenary commemoration was designed to achieve some self-apprehension. The Edo people made an attempt at national mourning, 'sackcloth and charcoal', as was due and appropriate. But the ceremony lacked truth-value. Because it went with a gush of fanfare. It was as if the Edo had found eventual British rule so much of an improvement on the past or maybe, time had dulled the wounds of defeat so much, or their incorporation into a larger nation called Nigeria had become so commodious an arrangement, that they were more eager to mark than to mourn what
happened a hundred years before. A marking or a mourning: it was like a celebration of the British defeat of the Edo people. In an editorial for the defunct Tempo magazine of which I was Editorial Board Chairman at the time, I wondered what the Edo had done with their defeat in one hundred years of trying. What have we acquired of the knowledge with which we were conquered and ruled by the British such that if the enemies returned today, there would be no routing of the kind that was perpetrated in 1897. I ask the same question, today, as a form of self-mockery, especially as I have chosen to describe the period, 1897-1997 as the Edo Century.

I have done this in the manner in which the history of the world is sometimes narrated in terms of the European, the American or Asian Century. I ask: in what sense have the Edo people claimed the period for themselves, if not during the 63 years of British rule, then the 37 years of post-colonialism that pre-dated the centenary of the Massacre? Or how have the Edo recovered from the humiliation of their empire, an empire with a pedigree that went back more than a thousand years, but was overawed in a matter of days by the thugs of foreign trading companies backed by British state power? Or since the Edo have been incorporated into a larger confabulation of nationalities called Nigeria, how has the nation of which the Edo are now a part, met the challenges and survived the vagaries, of the so-called Edo Century? Suppose some oil companies today backed by the power of the Group of Eight or ten decided to deploy their own police systems on-shore, as a means of ruling rather than merely protecting trade routes and oil pipes!

I dare say it makes no difference whether you are talking about the Edo People or the Nigerian People. The implications of the Edo century are the same on either side of the divide. The Edo are Nigerians or Nigerians are Edo, in terms of the logic of a defeated people who have not overcome their defeat. Irrespective of the pretensions to distinctiveness that have marked ethnic self-description in the Nigerian spoils system since the British overran our geographies, we have all failed, and woefully too, at putting up a sustainable, countervailing strategy for dealing with rampart imperialism, our own incapacities, and our need to map the future and to follow-through. Across Africa, whether we opted for a semblance of the old monarchical systems, scientific or African socialism, imported or home-grown capitalism, or just plain muddle as muddle, we have not managed to throw off the yoke of a defeated people. Which is why I have chosen the current topic. It is not to pump pride in our indigenous culture. The Edo people proved their pride stubbornly enough, after the Massacre, by refusing to change their monarch under the most prepossessing pressure from the British. Even after the exiled King Ovonramwen returned to his ancestors from behind the walls of a Prison in Calabar, the Edo were adamant at sticking by what they considered their unalterable heritage. Admirably, the people retained the old traditional order, especially around the institution of the Obaship; the people proved their self-respect. On closer inspection, however, it has become obvious that strategies of self-reflection and self-empowerment lurking deep in our history have not been recouped either to make the past use able or to achieve a basis for genuine participation in the century that has confronted us since the Massacre. Although we are awfully dedicated to our own cause, it is apparent that we have kept only the mere façade of the culture without plumbing to the deeper recesses, the creative core and force-field of self-mobilization and self-rejuvenation that had once given empowerment lurking deep in our history have not been recouped either to make the past use able or to achieve a basis for genuine participation in the century that has confronted us since the Massacre. Although we are awfully dedicated to our own cause, it is apparent that we have kept only the mere façade of the culture without plumbing to the deeper recesses, the creative core and force-field of self-mobilization and self-rejuvenation that had once given distinctiveness to Edo people. I cannot help asking myself what would happen when another century rolls by and we all decide to look back. What would we see?

I do not think that what there is today gives much room for grand expectations about what would be handed over to those who will look back after another hundred years. Of course, I am aware that, today, a brand of Edo nationalism exists which excuses the evident backwardness around us by blaming current disabilities on the centuries of devastation by slave-catching wars as well as colonialism and the eventual, forced-draft barracking of the Edo kingdom in a new contraption called Nigeria. Beyond excuses, the issue remains that there are obstacles to genuine development among the Edo as among all Nigerians which centre on the lack of will to confront “crying” problems. They are well-known problems: the disunity amongst the people, the poverty of our indigenous languages and cultures, the absence of a concerted defense of the livelihood of the whole populace, and the general ignorance that empowers brigands to overtake the civic competence of the whole population! Besides, although Edo state is one of the most developed and ethnically homogenous of Nigeria’s 36 states, and with a longer memory than most, it is just as rudderless, as any. The quality of the quarrels in the state is an embarrassment to good sense; as may be gleaned from the recent howler in the newspapers about Bini people rejecting an Anglican Bishop because he is not an indigene of Benin but an Ora, of a different Edo dialect. It has opened sesame for churches in Etsako to reject Esan clerics, and for Esan to reject Benin and so on and so forth. And to think that the same Anglican Church once enabled Yoruba, Igbo and Efik prelates, more distant cousins, to officiate with a certain imperturbable mien! It may be asked: if we cannot accept kinsfolk in the house of God, how would we treat strangers?
It tells the story of a people fighting, open-eyedly, for decline. The symptoms are in the misuse of religion, the abuse of knowledge, indifference to serious moral issues - the mark of a people neither going out for their own nor looking out for others. It puts to question the famed liberalism and gregariousness of the Edo people; indicating how we are contributing to the weakness of the country of which we are a part by the manner in which we take care of our own, including our internal differences. The short of it is that, as with other ethnic groups in the country, we have abandoned any sense of holistic planning for our people. Rather than put the whole population, not just a fragment of it, on a war-footing for a sustained confrontation with national problems, what we have is a form of negative segmentation which actively promotes cultural prejudice: one group against another. Education, once the biggest industry in this state, is flat on its face.

The more the colleges and Universities that are built, the more obvious it is that we are merely cannibalizing the right hand to make the left look good. At any rate, the majority of the educated are unemployed or unemployable and therefore give comfort to those who never answered the school bells. Hence, the most buoyant industry in the state is the promotion of mediocrity. This is evidenced by the ritualized maltreatment of teachers and farmers; the bruising of pensioners and the assault on civil servants who are obliged to rip off the rest of us in the maw of governments that are run on the principle that it is not the business of government to be programmatic. As such, it does not surprise anyone anymore that after so much money has been spent to educate a younger generation, they must expatriate to avoid wasting the rest of their lives in the immiserized conditions created by Federal myopia and native insipidty. Such that: when the prostitution menace in Edo State is tabled in terms of the dastardly roads that lead to Italy, you wonder why no one talks about what happens to hard-working and creative people who are blocked from making good. Look at Benin city. The scab of underdevelopment that you see is about governments that are not repositories of the self-knowledge of the people; and of a people who have forgotten that there was once a century in which their leaders cared about city-planning and constructed the great streets that today are clogged by the garbage of misbegotten modernization. If those visiting Portuguese adventurers who once compared Benin to Amsterdam were to return today, one wonders what they would make of the city that Ogun Ewuare built.

I must say, to put everybody’s mind at rest, that what interests me, in this lecture, is not history or politics but cultural philosophy: I am interested in what the Edo have lost or abandoned but Nigeria has not gained. Or better to say I am intrigued by what Nigeria could not have gained because no nation gains what any of its nationalities have lost. What I want to do is to interrogate the history, not for the sake of history, or what we might know about who did what, but to grasp the rationale, the logic of the history. I want to challenge the scholars of the Institute of Benin Studies, and beyond, to an interdisciplinary excursion into myth and history, not as a voyage into nostalgia - far from it – but to show how our self-knowledge and general development as a people have been compromised by the inadequate responses to the challenges of Western Civilization. My purpose is to show how certain blocked arteries in our understanding of our own history and culture have crippled our capacity to learn from our past and from the history of
Other people. I think Ogun, as a theme, is particularly fortuitous in this regard because it brings together core issues that have plagued African societies since the first European landed on our shores: issues concerning the displacement of native gnosis by alien epistemologies, the role of leaders, not just politicians but also writers and artists and other professionals, in re-mobilizing or failing to mobilize a defeated people; the shabbiness of mind and the impunity that haunts the construction of social projects and of course the necessity to turn thinking about the future, educating a younger generation from the defeat of yesterday and extracting strategies of self-management from it which belong to our traditional past and may well belong to our future. Mr Chairman, distinguished ladies and gentlemen, I crave more than your indulgence to move from territories that are familiar to others that may not be so familiar. Bear with me if, at the end of the day, I make ancestors and gods look like next door neighbours.

JACOB EGHAREVBA: A MAN OF CULTURE

Before we get to that point, let me acknowledge my debt to the disciplinary acumen of the man of culture, Pa Jacob Egharevba, to whom this lecture is the sixth tribute in so many years. Without his seminal performance as a historian, the theme of this lecture would not have materialized in the first place. Needless to say, Pa Egharevba pioneered the fundamental reclamation of Edo history and culture from the amnesia that tends to go with oral narratives. He raised what was knowable to scribal respectability; providing building blocks for the edifice that is Benin history through a fastidious concern for the everyday life of the mind of the average Edo person of old. His masterpiece of historiography A Short History of Benin, supplemented by 32 other little books, remains the foundational text, offering most of the leads and angles to the typical Benin Personage in history. True, more rigorous studies have been done which have opened up continents of understanding beyond what Egharevba proffered. But it is upon his shoulders that so many have had to sit in order to see what he could not.

His dating of events have been disputed and amended but not significantly. The reliability of his historiography has generally been affirmed beyond the nit-picking that is normal to academic disquisitions. I must emphasize it: that Pa Egharevba was a man of culture. He had the humility not to join in the rush for gold that overtook the new educated class which acted as side-kick to, and took over from the exiting colonizer. Relentlessly, he kept the need for the defence of our indigenous cultures above the indifference of those who, in government and outside it, have commanded the material wealth that belongs to the collectivity of our people but have refused to allow that wealth to have a relationship with the very culture that girds it.

In this connection, permit me to recall that as a young poet in this city, when I could not tell whether what I was writing was poetry enough to pass, I used to walk from New Benin to the CMS Bookshop near the Oba Market where I could find modern European poets to buy. Always, from the Bookshop, I moved to the Mbari Olokun Club, virtually next door, superintended over by the great man himself. The Mbari Olokun was like a grotto of ancient and modern arts which showed Egharevba's essential triumph as a man of imagination. In his everyday life, he was doing work that did not necessarily put food on the table but one that defended a people's memory with an implacable zeal. That zeal was inspirational. I dare not forget that it was at the Mbari Olokun Club that I first encountered the series of illustrated collections of poems by Christopher Okigbo, JP Clark, Reaberivelo, and Wole Soyinka, which were part of the Mbari Renaissance that dovetailed with Black Orpheus to produce the heady optimism sweeping through so much of Africa – with Nigeria as fountainhead.

Since Mbari-Olokun was not a lending library, I had to go there now and then to read and re-read the poets. Going there was a necessary ritual in my days of unemployment as well as later when I worked as a cub-reporter for the Midwest Echo, the last tabloid before the Nigerian Observer came on stream in Benin city. Sometimes, out of curiosity or just to feel close to the history that the old man represented, I would try to engage his attention as he sat in his easy chair, mild-manneredly over-seeing the entrances and exits from the grotto that was his ken. I never really managed to do it well. I had not then formulated the questions that were troubling me in modes that could be presented to an elder who could have answers. In retrospect, I realize that part of my disability lay in not having read enough of his many little books beyond A Short History. Even in those days, it was difficult to get the books to buy. All of them were virtually self-published. Which brings me to an issue that deserves to be properly raised at such a lecture: that even
today there is no place in this city where Egharevba’s books, as seminally central to the identity of the Edo people as they are, may be bought. Or maybe I should first of all note that in spite of the existence of one Federal University, two others, and so many other higher institutions in this state, there is no proper Bookshop anywhere in this city. Knowing this as the reality, it would be rude of me to ask: how many of us have Egharevba’s works in our family collections.

It is a rude question because we live in a country where the educated classes talk the world out about promoting and preserving culture but have no culture of buying books and so cannot support the publishing houses that should produce the books to defend our culture. It is a sad comment on how we are progressing as a people. Not just a comment on our collective incapacity to deploy the knowledge with which we were conquered, the knowledge with which we are being pulverized in the age of globalization; but on how much less we love ourselves as a people, and the general withdrawal of enthusiasm from the study of our own history and culture. This is what makes this lecture such a great challenge. It is about how much of our history and culture we do not know, how much of the challenge of the Institute of Benin Studies we have not taken up, from the standpoint of engaging the relationship between that culture and others in the Nigerian maelstrom and beyond.

MY SEARCH FOR OGUN

To begin from the beginning, the story of how I began my search for Ogun must be told. It is a factor of being born into a society in which there was hardly any written matter that could help a child growing up to answer serious questions about the indigenous culture. Before the colonial incursion into our history, before the Benin Massacre in 1897, the Edo child probably did not have to ask so many questions about the indigenous culture. The average child was a member of a family and, in the community, a member of an age grade which had clearly defined roles, into which every child grew and in which the knowledge needed for survival and interaction in the society was shared. But so much had happened and so much was happening that drew a sharp line between Western culture and traditional African culture.

Western culture was described as a civilization because it had a written culture and was technologically advanced and therefore presumably more high-minded than our own culture which was pictured as barbaric and primitive. One mark of its primitiveness was the distance between Christianity and the traditional religions or animistic worship. In my early life, and I reckon in the early life of many of us, the tension between the two was what defined life in general. In my maternal grandfather’s house where I grew up, traditional religion or animism of the rigorous vintage was discouraged. Christianity was the religion of the house. It meant that like all other children in the family, I could not partake in heathen dances, sing heathen songs unless they were appropriately sanitized by the displacement of heathen references. Nor could I therefore get into the popular culture unless as a spectator.

Even where no explicit bans existed, the atmosphere simply disavowed the animism of the herd. Although it is impossible to use the indigenous languages without being embroiled in their instinctive animistic turns, Christianity was set to undermine their pervasive hold. It was a particularly limiting kind of Christianity, although not even as fundamentalist as many current brands, which failed to acknowledge the inchoate science freighted by indigenous axioms and proverbs. Because of what its adherents thought of the fetishistic surrounds of the culture, they threw out the objective descriptions of nature, especially the behaviour of plants and animals embedded in indigenous proverbs. The knowledge contained in them was dismissed, and the culture that produced them demonized as fetishistic. Imagine (therefore) the notoriety I earned as a nine year old in primary school when I was reported, falsely, by a cousin, to have been left behind on the way from School while I was supposedly gawping at tortoise shells in the Ogun shrine. It was quite a scandal in the family. I could never hear the last of it. No opportunity was lost in drumming it into my head how my supposed fascination with the shrine and the tortoise shells constituted a betrayal of the faith into which I was being diligently schooled. Both the accusation and the hue and cry over the shrine were all so bemusing to me because the Ogun shrine in the neighborhood was not a hidden site.

It was in the front-yard of a well-known neighbour’s house on the way to and from school. It was like a blacksmith’s forge, or so I thought; but not as impressive. At any rate, I had seen too many blacksmithries not to be awed by this particular one. But after I was accused of being literally hypnotized by it, I grew self-conscious, unable for a long time
to look at it, except fleetingly. I had always to look away quickly in order not to be caught staring. It took time for me to be able to, very discretely, position my gaze. Not that there was much to see. The shrine was a scramble of tortoise shells in a welter of iron rods, some partly earthed, others hanging against the wall, and drums and gongbells, if I remember rightly, a-dangling from the eaves in front of the thatched-roofed house. Not much of a spectacle really. Not even when I was told that live tortoises and dogs were sacrificed to the god, with the blood of the sacrifice splashed on the iron forge, did it make any difference to me. But it was certainly unheard of for a well brought up child in a Christian home to be enticed by such heathen things. So, it took time for me to outgrow the shame of the Christian child eyeballing a fetish artifact.

I suppose the reason it was such a scandal was that my father, who had knowingly married into a Christian family, was not a Christian. Being a motor mechanic by trade, and a motor transport owner, he was, like all workers in iron in the traditional society, expected to be a devotee of Ogun. He was also a committed game hunter, and since Ogun is patron of hunters, road-builders, travellers and iron workers, the god had a multiple claim on him. His double-barreled gun, on this score, was a source of bonding between him and my maternal grandfather who was also not only a game hunter but a co-pioneer in motor transport business in my hometown. As hunters, with interests in motor transport business, father-in-law and son-in-law should automatically have been obliged, according to the wisdom of tradition, to elect for Ogun worship. But as a Christian, my maternal grandfather could not allow himself to get involved in Ogun rituals. While his motor mechanic son-in-law never missed the seasonal sacrifice of a dog to his patron deity, he went for his holy communion in the local Anglican Church, where the flesh and blood of Jesus Christ was consumed in symbolic form to ward off the need for blood rituals. Like father like daughter: my mother was too Christian to partake of my father’s Ogun rituals but she was traditional enough to appreciate the necessity for an iron worker to be a devotee of the god. Her understanding of my father’s indifference to the Church must have reminded my grandfather, too often, of the loss of his daughter to, as far as he was concerned, a ‘certified’ heathen. And to be a heathen implied ‘sacrilege’, a distance from ‘light’ and modernity, “living in the old way”, a failure to take advantage of Westernization.

it happened that, by some freak of circumstance, I came to share my grandfather’s view on the matter. Given that there were more educated people in my maternal than in my paternal family, I came to associate Christianity with Western education and Ogun worship with a less than judicious appreciation of educational pursuits. And since I loved school, and I knew, so to say, where my yam was roasted, I learnt to see the devotion to Ogun as being less than proper. If I was asked, I would never have been able to explain to my own satisfaction why it was less than proper. The point is that too many questions were raised by the Christian denigration of animistic worship which affected me at a very personal level. To have one side of my family making a commitment to a creed which damned to hell the other side of my family was not exactly a way of avoiding psychological turmoil. However, I was not torn, as they say, between the two polarities.

I was simply non-plussed; distanced from both in a way that made it possible for me to go through the motions without being taken over by either. I could see that those who were good on both sides of my family shared certain common traits in spite of the differences in their beliefs. Neither the devotion to Christianity nor the commitment to Ogun worship could explain the foibles of those who behaved badly on either side. Somehow, it was clear to me that the precepts of both animism and Christianity did not differ on issues of justice, and man’s inhumanity to man. In my eyes, Christian preachifying which was more insistent because it was a religion of the Book, was the one that took my goat. It was guilty of bearing false witness against neighbours, in the sense that it made a virulent attribution of unredeemed evil to traditional religions. This attribution blocked the possibility of any genuine conversation between the devotees on either side. The sin of my growing up therefore was that I could not make a holistic accommodation of the Christian denigration of Ogun worship without nurturing some scepticism. I could never accept that the demonized traditional religions were necessarily all evil. Rather misguided, yes, ignorant, possibly, but not thereby deserving of excommunication from civilized discourses. I tripped on the implacable hunch that something was there to be understood which the attributions of evil to Ogun worship and other forms of traditional practices, were blocking from view. I did not know what it was. But I needed to know it. I had to know what it was in order to appreciate the need to repudiate it.

COMING TO TERMS WITH OGUN

Because of the fairly aggressive Christian evangelism of my immediate environment, I could not come to grips with Ogun as a god until I encountered the writings of Wole Soyinka. Soyinka’s assertive animism, especially his
unabashed adoption of Ogun as a patron god, was what first fascinated me about his writings. This was where it all came together for me when I encountered those artful lines of his in Gerald Moore and Ulli Beier’s collection of Modern Poetry for Africa “And the mother prayed, Child, may you never walk, when the road waits, famished”

This poem had the flavour of a common animist prayer. Beyond its formal meaning, it provided self-representation for those, like me, who were just getting to hear their mothers’ voices within the ambit of literature in the English language. The translation was from the Yoruba; but it could well have been from the Edo language. Of course, Soyinka’s poetry, especially Idanre and Other Poems was part of a burgeoning complex that included the Abiku themes in his and J.P Clark’s poetry, Cyprian Ekwensi’s novels for adolescents, especially An African Night’s Entertainment, The Leopard’s Claw, and Burning Grass; Chinua Achebe’s Things Fall Apart and Arrow of God, which were godsend to every Nigerian child in search of self-representation in books. They offered a handle, emotional and philosophical, for an African world view that bolstered the joy of having one’s own within the normal excitements of the literary. So, admittedly, there was more to my reception of Soyinka’s art than love of literature.

The fact that this literature was ‘our own’, that the world-view expressed in the poems touched the extant animism of the popular imagination, had a lot to do with it. An immediate personal dimension, an added tension, to my excitement was that Soyinka met my need for engagement with the Ogun theme which had been such a mauling incident in my personal life. Thus it was not just that this was our own literature but that its metaphysics, its myth-making predisposition, spoke to my sense of the traditional culture as a common heritage. It turned my reaching for his work into a philosophical quest in the company of a creative writer in the manner in which, as I would come to agree, the encounter with the German coryphaeus, Friedrich Nietzsche, is an aesthetic quest in the company of a philosopher.

I would not be telling the whole truth if I do not admit that Soyinka’s avowed commitment to his patron god helped to wean me off the inhibitions that my Christian upbringing had made a part of my psychology. By reducing Ogun to the formalities of the gutemberg galaxy, that is, by setting things down, Soyinka removed from sheer dubiousness the particulars of even his own contentious re-descriptions of his patron deity in English. I was lucky, too, that about the time I encountered Soyinka’s poetry, his plays especially A Dance of the Forests, and novel, The Interpreters, I was discovering the works of Rousseau, Shelley, Thomas Paine, and Bernard Shaw. After reading Arthur Koestler’s Act of Creation and later Bronowski’s Ascent of Man, I needed to take a second look at the received Christian ecumenicals especially the Christian denigration of the traditional religions. Within the general necessity to search for meaning in society, I found Soyinka’s rooting for Ogun less problematic than the Christian insistence on denigrating whatever its adherents did not understand or were unable to fit within the message of the Bible. Take the simple matter of knowledge of herbs which fanatical adherents of Christianity find so fetishistic and reprehensible.

Once upon a time in the University of Ibadan, every plant used to carry a plaque bearing the botanical names, in latines, English and Nigerian indigenous languages. The practice bridged the distance between indigenous knowledge and Western science. That is, until the plaques decayed with the departments that once minded them. If, today, a botanist were to go round seeking to know the indigenous names for many of the plants, he or she may be able to do so only with the help of herbalists whom Christians would send to hell before the first questions are asked. To my mind, this has always suggested the necessity to separate religion (fetish?) from science, and culture from religion, as a basis for testing reality. And talking about culture, it was from Wole Soyinka that I learnt to test the stories I had heard about the god of iron against the realities of my own autobiography and the history of my society. The idea that Ogun, god of iron, went to war with three gourds, one for palmwine (celebration?) one for sperm (creativity?) and the other for gunpowder (war?) was for me a mythical howler.

It stood leg in shoe, however, with the myth that he had killed a leopard or tiger almost with bare hands or that after he defeated the enemies of his people, he turned upon them and decimated their ranks in blood-drunkenness. The stories, as Soyinka has authenticated and audited them, whether from the standpoint of a creation myth in which Ogun is the path-maker who cleared the way from the gods to humankind, or the entrepreneur who brought the fire of civilization to lift humanity from barbarism, or the war-monger who protects the weak but could also devour them in sheer gore-mongering, was fascinating because of what he added to it. For Soyinka, Ogun had become a twentieth Century deity, who superintended not only over iron foundries that gave rise to modern civilization but other scientific pursuits, beyond metallurgy, in electricity, electronics and related feats.
In his metaphysics, Ogun is represented as the modal archetype; not a god of either/or but a force capable of good and evil through whose feats civilizations may be explored, established or dissolved. While Ogun stood for the “overthrow of all conditions in which man is debased, enslaved, neglected” and made a contemptible being, he is presented as being also capable of mindless destructiveness of seismic proportions. To know this is to look out for that moment when even creativity and productivity can become pernicious to human life. But Soyinka’s narration, in this regard, was fairly cryptic. It left gaps that called for its core elements to be related to everyday experience within the bounds of verisimilitude. Otherwise, one could not be sure whether Soyinka’s commitment to his patron deity was mere metaphor or a matter of the highly ritualized sense in which my father, the motor mechanic, worshipped Ogun.

Whatever his disposition, the truth is that Soyinka had sufficiently untied or extended Ogun from myth to bring a recognizable historical edge to the narrations of the god. Suddenly, if I was asked What is Ogun to you? I would not immediately immerse myself in either my father’s devotion to the god or my grandfather’s distancing from the deity. I was obliged to imagine a third way that still cried for particularization not just as mythology required it, but as demanded by the scribal principle upon which my acquired education, in relation to Soyinka’s writings, was based. In particular, Soyinka’s reduction of the Ogun myth to a written, scribal, culture, made it possible for me to appreciate and subscribe to the historicity of Ogun, even in the very manner that I began to accept the grandness of the Jesus archetype of the New Testament Bible, whose teachings – especially doing unto others as you would have them do unto you and treating Jew and Gentile as being of one God - fascinated me beyond the hate-theories and ritualistic threats of hell-fire that most Christian preachers lived on. While I could not really identify with Soyinka’s rigorous commitment to Ogun, I found that learning about Ogun had removed the feeling I was beginning to have, that identifying with the local god was reprehensible or that I had to betray my own traditional culture in order to be a Christian.

Given Soyinka’s unapologetic and confident assertions, I began to put Ogun in the context of a legitimate struggle by my own people to deal with the vagaries of nature and the circumstances of history. I began to squelch the ghomids of my childhood. Soyinka’s re-visioning became quite a seductive handle with which to embark on a search for knowledge about the god. I was obliged to be a searcher, pouncing with gratitude, on his poems, plays, essays, and novels as a basis for investigating the links, vague and problematic as they appeared, that he drew between the traditional rituals and modern hermeneutic principles. No other personage, to my knowledge, had his kind of approach. Hence even before I ever met him Soyinka was close to my skin. He was too much part of the confrontation with the ghomids of my childhood to be taken and assessed without confronting myself. Or better to say that Soyinka’s literary, cultural and political production became part of my lived experience in a manner that goes beyond mere accession to arcane concepts and neologisms. I had to read him against the prescriptions of those who talked about his works in terms of a cult of difficulty. As I too began to write poetry, grooping in the throes of difficult questions that I could neither frame properly nor answer well, I found myself in a force-field, a territory that was literally crying to be conquered. In so far as Soyinka was mapping what there was, philosophically, to explore around the personage of Ogun, he was prince of that force-field of awareness. He was unraveling the byways and labyrinths that my mind encountered in the process of trying to crack the riddle of the god.

OGUN AND THE PRIMACY OF RITUAL

I must say that I persisted in my quest because I discovered I was in very good company. I have met too many people, old, young, African, non African, who were quite bemused by Soyinka’s identification with his patron deity. They preferred to view it as one of those zany things that artists and geniuses do to distinguish themselves from us poorer mortals. In a world in which Christianity and science have worked out a coalition against traditional religions, only artists, assumedly, can move in the opposite direction while still having groundings with the rest of us. Many scholars rightly situate Soyinka’s commitment to his patron god within its natural habitat in Yoruba metaphysics; but, beyond mere metaphor, they see it as backward, pre-scientific and even primitive. The Ghanaian philosopher, Akwasi Wiredu, argues in his Philosophy and an African culture (C.U.P, 1980, p.38) that “references to gods and all sorts of spirits in traditional African explanation of things” are far from the modern temper. While admitting that reliance on ‘the agency of spirits’, supposedly common to folk cultures, is still “deeply embedded in the philosophical thought of many contemporary Westerners – philosophers and even scientists”, he finds it distressing that even fellow Africans consider it a peculiarity of Africans. His sense of the modern is disturbed by “the spectacle of otherwise enlightened Africans pouring libations to the spirits of their ancestors under the impression that in so doing they are demonstrating their faith in African culture”. In his view, it is unscientific to assume that these ancestors – whether Ogun, Oduduwa,
Chaka, Ossei Tutu, Mari Jalak, Dingiswayo, and the rest of the avatars in African history - are truly still with us as it is assumed in variants of animistic worship.

Wiredu’s position has unlikely support from Obafemi Awolowo, the political leader of the Yoruba until his death, who, posits in Problems of Africa, (P.13), his Kwame Nkrumah Memorial lectures (University of Cape Coast, 1977) , that the deities were created by the dominant class in traditional Africa, in order to contain and assuage the hatred, resentment and occasional hostility of the exploited and enslaved as well as foster cohesion and a sense of patriotism among the people. To Awolowo, a failed agnostic who confessed Christianity to the very end, “the dominant class had more leisure. With leisure came reflection and with reflection came inner enlightenment. With their relatively superior intellect, they exploited the ignorance of the dominated class and created socio-religious and socio-political myths. In other words, they created a large number of gods and made them abide in the skies, well out of mortal view; they created spirits with which they filled the earth and its atmosphere. Since the gods and the spirits, were invisible, the dominant class facilitated the emergence of priests who were capable of holding dialogues with these gods and spirits, were qualified to act as spokesmen and interpreters for them through oracular pronouncements and the laying down of taboos and were versed in the rituals for appeasing them when angry. Above all they created the institution of divine Kingship. Whilst the priest was the spokesman, interpreter and appeaser of gods and spirits, the King was their divine representative on earth. For this reason he was clothed with the same halo as the gods and spirits, and his powers over his subjects were absolute and unquestionable”.

Awolowo’s view would appear on the surface to have enjoyed the acclaim of the dramatist, Femi Osofisan, an Ijebu-Yoruba like Soyinka and Awolowo. Osofisan had argued in his seventies essay Ritual and the Revolutionary Ethos “that this moment in history, the world view which made for animist metaphysics has all but disintegrated in the acceleration, caused by colonialism, of man’s economic separation from Nature”. In his opinion, “However one may regret it, myth and history are no longer complementary, and to insist otherwise is to voice a plea for reaction.” He added: “For it is obvious now that in order to adequately come to terms with the rapacious, dehumanized white men of Europe and America, the ancient modes of life must dissolve and yield place to an empiric mastery of life and of the means of production……”. He concluded: “……because the animist world accommodates and sublimes disaster within the matrix of ritual, the Red Indian world collapsed, and so did ours, perhaps with slower speed”. These views, when they were first expressed fitted well within and could be seen as variations on themes in Karl Marx’s Grundriss.

In Marx’s original formulation: “it is a well-known fact that Greek mythology was not only the arsenal of Greek art, but also the very ground from which it had sprung. Is the view of nature and of social relations which shaped Greek imagination and Greek art possible in the age of automatic machinery and railways and locomotives and electric telegraphs? Where does Vulcan come in as against Roberts& Co? Jupiter as against the lightning conductor? And Hermes against the Credit Mobiler” Marx’s answer was that “All mythology masters and dominates and shapes the forces of nature in and through the imagination; hence it disappears as soon as man gains mastery over the forces of
nature" (David McLellan, Paladin, 1973, pp 55-56). Unfortunately, or fortunately, depending on where you stand, Osofisan has not stood by this ‘Marxist’ critique of animism. Although his response to Soyinka’s Ogun was quite a factor in the radical cultural criticism of the seventies, he has since abandoned the position to embrace the imperative and primacy of a metaphysics by choosing for himself a patron deity in opposition to Soyinka’s Ogun. This has removed him from Awolowo’s rationalist bracket and, by the same token, distanced him from the position of Biodun Jeyifo, doyen of Nigeria’s radical literary critics, and one of the most insightful and consistent assessors of Soyinka’s metaphysics.

Even Jeyifo, as readers of the Guardian Literary series, Perspectives on Nigerian Literature: 1700 to the Present can attest, has had his soft moments: such as when he felt obliged to celebrate the sheer singularity of the award of the 1986 Nobel Prize for Literature to Wole Soyinka by defying his own over-credentialed materialist aesthetics. Jeyifo had asked the question: What is the will of Ogun? He could only properly pursue this question through a highly regressive submission to the logic of false consciousness. He had first of all to acknowledge the reality of Ogun, the god of iron, in order to search for his will. Even as a back-handed tribute to traditional metaphysics, his focus on the god posed a challenge to the modernist notion, largely Christian but decidedly Marxist, which disavowed the reality of gods and the space that is supposed to pertain to them in secular discourse. Presumably, if God was dead, as Nietzsche taught, or the gods do not exist, as Awolowo and the Marxists asserted, how could any search for the will of any particular god be considered worthwhile?

The truth however is that Jeyifo’s ‘regression’ to non-materialist categories was not gratuitous. It stemmed from acknowledging the rhetorical centrality of the myth of Ogun to Soyinka’s drama, poetry, novels and essays. It is not only that Ogun is a pervasive metaphor in Soyinka’s writings but that the acclaimed features of the god are perceived by ordinary folk in ancient and modern Yoruba society as being manifest in the reality of everyday life. As Jeyifo reports it: Ogun’s will was perceived as manifest “in the moment of his protégé’s supreme triumph” on August 19, 1986 when the joy, ecstasy and intoxication of winning the Nobel Prize for Literature coincided with the grief, horror and stupefaction of “grim and petrifying” events - the murder of the journalist Dele Giwa by parcel bomb and the death of Mozambican President Samora Machel in a plane crash. Confronted by such coincidence, even a materialist could not help but pay obeisance to that motif in popular culture which pictured Ogun as being “simultaneously, a creative, altruistic avatar and a vengeful destroyer”. Jeyifo was impressed enough by the ‘coincidence’ to draw a parallel between Ogun’s epiphany in the hour of Soyinka’s triumph and the emergence of Sango, the god of thunder and lightning, when the Yoruba dramatist, Duro Ladipo, the stage interpreter of the god, died earlier in 1978. Admirers of Duro Ladipo saw the coincidence of his death with the “tumult of rainstorm, thunder and lightning, totally out of season” as “a passage rite preternaturally appropriate to the transition of the contemporary incarnation of Sango.” Thus, although, not meaning to lend over-weaning credence to the animist intimations of the experience, Jeyifo in his essay, gave clear circumstantial accommodation to the personage of the god, as a ghost in the machine of Soyinka’s aesthetics.

Even if he did not mean to identify with the devotees of Ogun, he could not afford to be indifferent to the god in any attempt to touch the heart of Soyinka’s art. To do so, he knew, would amount to playing Hamlet without the Prince, The Road without Professor or impliedly, trying to take Jesus Christ out of the New Testament. So inexorable and hegemonic is the personage of Ogun at the heart of Soyinka’s art that the search for the will of Ogun could indeed be viewed as the most logical means of hermeneutic access to his literary, philosophical and social vision. As he puts it: to “choose the deep portents of …events in mythical terms – gods and epiphanies …..is only too appropriate to Soyinka’s accustomed literary and philosophical temper” (p.170) All the same, given his own ideological bent, he was supposed to discountenance the formalities of the myth in order to avoid Soyinka’s presumed tendency to mythicize history rather than, as he and the materialists would wish it, historicizing myth. “This indeed is the crux of the matter”. Although not totally dismissive of ancestor worship, and the mytho-religious thinking that goes with it, Biodun Jeyifo presents Soyinka’s mythopoiesis as anchoring out contradictions in society. His concern is that for historical advance and progress, more than a conflictless coexistence of …. different forms and styles of thought is often required, often infact a violent antagonism between them leading to a rupture in thought and consciousness ….. an epistemological revolution as distinct from, but co-extensive with a social or political revolution”. His expectation is that a “contemporary writer” would write of myths and “essences”, not to valorize them, but to “explain” them, to relativize them historically, showing how they are transformed by historical forces”. In essence, he does not see it as being
enough for Soyinka to hitch the myths that he deploys to the process of liberation, the struggle for justice against
tyranny in society. On the contrary, the will of Ogun could be hitched to the modern temper only by doing violence to a
secular notation in the philosophy of culture.

Unfortunately, or fortunately, as we may soon discover, “the unrelenting mythopoeist in Soyinka refuses to oblige”.
Soyinka insists that the “animist , essentialist consciousness of change, far from being static, is endlessly flexible and
accommodative of change, even revolutionary change”. Almost as an “epistmological axiom” he gives credence to
“the coexistence and fruitful mutual interaction between disparate forms of consciousness and styles of thought and
cognition produced by different social formations and modes of production”. In his view, the “superstitious”, ritualist
view of the universe and reality can and does often co-exist with a progressive, innovative consciousness”. Hence “the
important phenomenon of a preponderance of some of the world’s greatest geniuses of all times among the adherents
of one of the most “unliberalised” religions of the world, Judaism”. Of course, this view is not just Soyinka’s. It follows
centuries-old wisdom not too dissimilar to the position of Thomas Aquinas who freed Europeans from the guilt of
believing that being scientists made them unfit to be Christians. Or that being Christians required them not to be
scientists. It is a viewpoint affirmed in a different sense by the French philosopher, Regis Debray, who in his book
Critique of Political Reason (Verso, 1981) sees all human transitions from “unorganized” to “organized” as having
implications for the religious and mythical planes of existence.

He notes that “if you claim to be replacing an ‘outdated mythology’ which is ‘obviously bankrupt’ with a new set of
correct ideas, it is as well to be aware that your ideas cannot spread ‘to the mases’ without being transformed into
their opposite (into myths)”.(p.45) Hence, “on the ill-defined and perpetually threatened frontier that divide chaos from
order, contemporary revolutions explore the collective past and reenact the birth of the collective”. The short of it in
Debrays hermeneutics is that myths are inexorable in human affairs. He structures his standpoint upon the Greek
myth of Prometheus as told more than 2,500 years ago by Protagoras. It happened that at the point of creation or
man’s emergence from the earth into daylight, Prometheus realized that unlike other animals “man was ‘naked,
unshod, unbedded, and unarmed”.

He thought of what to steal from the gods to make up for man’s deficiencies. “He at first intended to make off with the
secret of ‘the art of politics, of which the art of war is a part’, but he had to abandon that plan as the secret was too
well guarded in the citadel of the gods, with terrible sentries at the door. He therefore made his way to the workshop of
Athena and Hephaestus and penetrated it by stealth”. In the end, he stole fire, a principle of the utilitarian arts. Men
were then “technically in a position to survive, but they had to live in scattered groups and were profoundly
unhappy……… ‘They sought therefore to save themselves by coming together and founding fortified cities, but when
they gathered in communities, they injured one another for want of political skill, and so scattered again and continued
to be devoured’. Seeing this, Zeus took pity on them and sent down Hermes, a jack of all trades, to teach men a
respect for others and a sense of justice to make up for an incurable lack. The human race was saved from biological
extinction, but Zeus kept for himself politics, the art of living together without injuring one another”(p.38-39) The
outcome is that although relations between men take certain things as their object and the relations between men and
things are always mediated by other men, the latter can yield technical and scientific progress but in the former, you
have the ‘stammering of history’ which yields mythologies. Quintessentially, therefore, myths are about the lives that
we live not some otherworldly circumstance in which only the gods are at home.

Whatever else they may be, they are enactments of events that the world has seen before but in terms of the many
forms in which they may come back again and again to haunt us until we can get a handle on them. This is why
A.M.Horcart argues in his book, The life-giving myth and other essays (Tavistock & Methuen, 1973) that all human
societies and organizations are myth-suffused and every myth is necessarily backed by rituals in the sense in which
for instance the idea of workers solidarity prefigures the rituals of May Day as a commemoration of that original
incident when workers on strike were shot in Chicago in 1841. All myths, so to say, have their source in historical
reality. Or else, as Hocart puts it, “The myth detached from reality can continue to exist only in a society which is itself
divorced from reality, one which has such reserves of wealth that it can afford to maintain an intelligentsia exempt
from the pursuit of bare life and free to devote all energies to intellectual play, to poetry and to romance.” When a myth
has reached that stage, he avers, it is doomed, it is lifeless, and can only be relished as literature (or orature), as mere
metaphor.
If Debray’s and Hocart’s thoughts on the matter are accepted, it follows that the pervasiveness of myth (and therefore ritual) in human affairs is not, as such, what is at issue but a proper understanding of their implications for social stability and change. Assumedly, where myths thrive, and gods subsist who are viewed as archetypal beings, as archetypes of behaviour and as patterns and habits of mind that human beings project in their everyday lives, a sensitive grasp of their forms could help in apprehending, if not altering, what Soyinka has called the vicious circle of human stupidities. The essential motivation is the need to learn about the gods, not so much to valorize them as objects of worship, but to appreciate how human activities conform to or might move away from the modes of their archetypal rituals. This is one way of escaping or surmounting the virtual treason of the marketplace against our individual and collective goals. So to say, it is not so much an issue of whether you are or are not a devotee of this or that god but whether the patterns in nature that myths re-present can be tested in everyday life as some kind of hypothesis to help people grapple with social life. To say this, in essence, is to raise myth above mere aesthetic and intellectual play and to concede that there is a life outside art, part of the rituals of everyday life in society, that it relates to, and to which more attention is due than the one due to mere metaphors.

This is the point however that Isidore Okpewho in his book Myth in Africa (CUP, 1983) is unwilling to concede because it over-privileges the aesthetic and intellectual play of a precedent age or imagination while leaving the artist of the moment as a mere cipher. In his view, Soyinka draws exceeding attention to the life that his patron deity Ogun has had outside art; a life which art may mirror and prefigure. But this life outside art which is the original act or hubris that is the basis of ritual, is a feature of pre-memory that no one can ascertain as to fact and which therefore allows the artist some room for the exercise of imagination in the sense in which Soyinka has himself revised the myth of Ogun to meet contemporary situations. The danger however is that once the life outside art is no longer invoked, in the manner Okpewho suggests, myth may indeed become mere metaphor.

It is significant to note that what Okpewho wishes to downplay is precisely what Biodun Jeyifo wants Soyinka to re-cast or re-examine when he talks about the need to historicize myth. Jeyifo’s demand is a fundamentalist one from the standpoint of a sceptic, or an unbeliever. It is, also, in my view, a necessary and inexorable challenge in the face of the artist’s freedom to intervene in arenas that require commitment to some form of belief. The need is to have a sense of what they may or may not be deviating from as well as why that reality, the history of which the myths is a part, needs to be taken seriously. To historicize Ogun, therefore, situating the god in history, is one maneuver I consider imperative, both from the standpoint of devotees who may not be satisfied with the bliss of ignorance or others who do not want to become victims of mere artistic projecteering. Let’s simply say that it is not about how, like a devotee, to immerse oneself in the voluptuaries of the god but how to bring a deified personage, already promoted to the sacral and other-worldly level, back to a secular context. This, unfortunately is the hard issue that, neither Biodun Jeyifo nor the other radical critics of Soyinka’s metaphysics have outlined. How to go about it, in relation to this particular god who, for centuries has been held in so much awe! This, for me, is the challenge.

THE AFROCENTRIC CHALLENGE

In order to get a handle on it, I find it necessary to look with some closeness at Wole Soyinka's disposition as a writer especially the ways in which he has embroiled himself in the discourses of his patron deity. Squarely, this requires grappling with the larger picture of the crisis of Western intervention in African history and the unequal argument that has existed between the scribal culture of Europe and the basic orality of African traditions. There is no way of seriously engaging Soyinka’s disposition as a writer without considering, for instance, that he was one of the pioneers in the bid to correct the hegemony of narrations with which Europe had overawed our nations and peoples. Simply, one has to begin from the sheer notation that Soyinka’s Ogun is African. At the same time, it has to be acknowledged that although the writer grew up in a country of more than four hundred African languages, he has had to deploy English, once a language of conquerors but now Nigeria’s official language, as the means for re-describing his patron deity. The consequent hybridity of his style, its inter-mesh of the native and the alien, (What Henry Louis Gates, Jr partly implies when he says “And, Soyinka’s language always is his own”) was bound to present a crisis of genealogies, “one half in Europe and one half in Nigeria” as one early assessor viewed it. Soyinka has, on his own, roughened up the issues by re-imaging his patron deity with the aid of parallels drawn from Western culture. We have his word to go by on the matter.
In his foundational essay, The fourth Stage in Myth Literature and the African World (CUP, 1976) he situates himself in that cultural industry, entrenched by Friedrich Nietzsche’s Birth of Tragedy, which traces Western literary traditions to the mythopoesis of ancient Greece. By making his recourse to African gods a parallel of Nietzsche’s return to the Greeks and their gods, Soyinka has drawn together two traditions in whose confrontations and dialogue we are obliged to have to fish in search of what is authentically African as distinct from what is borrowed or re-symbolized. The challenge is to differentiate the extrusion of traditional Yoruba, largely orally, culture in Soyinka’s work from the intervention made by the other, a hegemonically scribal Western culture. Whichever way it is pressed, it is axiomatic that no writer performing in Africa today can have any space to himself or herself that is authentically African. It happens to be also true, despite hegemonic propaganda, that there has been no authentically European space since Europe began to steal, pilage and borrow the garments of other cultures to boost what its publicists choose to call Western civilization. This is really also a way of acknowledging the fact that just as cultures intervene in the work of writers, writers also make interventions in the cultures that produce them. The relationship between cultural traditions and the artist cannot be taken however in as linear a fashion as the European case described by TS Eliot in Tradition and the Individual Talent. Biyadun Jeyifo was right: after the “hostile, paternalistic, and condescending external forces that African tradition has had to contend with” the artist appears almost a schizoid personality influenced by a multiplex of rather incongruous factors which ensure that the reception and influence of a work is by a highly segmented environment.

In essence, we are confronted by a history that begins with the denigration of Africa and Africans as a norm of scholarship. It is followed by a reactivist approach by Africans which embosses revenge as a form of epistemology. Then there is a post-modernist revision which inflicts a plague on both houses without having an archimedean standpoint from which to test a civilizational imperative that can rise above undue relativism in pursuit of a common morality and a Normal Science of its own. Hence, two kinds of genealogies emerge: a genealogy of murals in which we seek the authenticity of the claims that are made on behalf of one culture or the other - and a genealogy of morals - setting the writer within the context of his individual creative urge. Specific to Soyinka’s performance: the first requires us to confront those who, in pursuit of a nativist ethic, have accused Soyinka of virtually selling out to the West. Then there are those who think that he has overdone his much-touted retrieval of the African world view. There is a third position emphasized by Anthony Appiah which I find irresistible. It looks at “the Soyinka whose account of Yoruba cosmology is precisely not the Yoruba account; the Soyinka who has taken sometimes Yoruba mythology, but sometimes the world of a long-dead Greek, and demythologized them to his own purposes, making of them something new, more “metaphysical” and, above all, more private and individual”. Radically exaggerated: but against the background of such disquisitions rises the essential need to consider kinks in Soyinka’s biography as a means of unraveling his progress as a metaphysician especially his embroilment in the advanced metaphysics of the German philosopher, Friedrich Nietzsche, who cleared the grounds that he has moved into and reconditioned for a very personal ideolgical programme or what Nietzsche would have called his Will to power.

To get to Nietzsche, it is important to engage and settle some issues with African critics who have tended to over-privilege the writer’s birth place or indigenous culture as a basis for arriving at a code for literary appreciation. The notorious case in relation to Soyinka’s art is the stumble-and-fall performance of the troika, Chinweizu, Madubuike and Jemie in their TOWARDS THE DECOLONIZATION OF AFRICAN LITERATURE (Fourth Dimension Publishers, Enugu, 1980) a polemic in which they make too much of a meal of the Euro-modernist influences in the poetry of Wole Soyinka, Christopher Okigbo, J’P. Clark and Michael Echeruo. With characteristic afflatus, the troika hunts for European ghosts whose modernist propensities, they claim, account for the cult of difficulty and ‘obscurity’ in Wole Soyinka’s as in the poetry of the other Afro-modernists. Hopkins’ disease, they call it, arguing quite plausibly that these works are full of linguistic quirks which are not to be found in the ‘oral’ languages of Africa.

They indict the poets for deserting their African traditions. They put them, these ‘ineffectual imitators’ of the euro-modernists, squarely on the carpet: “Prominent among the characteristics of Nigerian euro-modernist poetry are Hopkinsian syntactic jugglery, Poundian allusiveness and sprinkling of foreign phrases, and Eliotesque suppression of narrative and other logical linkages of the sort that creates obscurity in “The Waste Land”. As a sop to lovers of Hopkins they note that while imitating the faults, the Nigerian poets “have uniformly shunned the strengths” of the Europeans. “For instance in the best of Hopkins there is an energy and felicity that survives the syntactic jugglery and word-play”. Uncharitably, they deny any form of energy and felicity that survives the syntactic jugglery and wordplay’ in the Afro-modernists. The implication of this criticism, from the position of a trenchant cultural nationalism, is to give the impression that Soyinka and the other poets are not African enough. Or not African at all. In effect, we are supposed
to take it that the European and Non-African associations, which the named African writers invite, involves a blanching out of that mysterious factor which should give their works the touch of nativity. The pity is that ‘what is African’ to the troika is not exactly clear from the nebula of representations that they project as a basis for their assault on the Euro-modernists. Nor do they address the problem of how one should view those elements that are to be found in both the European traditions and the pre-colonial traditions of many African societies. Impliedly, they give these elements away as factors of European influence, thus leaving to Africa’s heritage a more constricted room for self-defence against the widening gyre of Western hegemony.

Yet, if only they were not too hasty! They could have benefited from a study made few years earlier of the poetry of Soyinka’s native Yoruba language. The studies indicate that traditional Yoruba poetry accommodated all those disjunctions and stylistic quirks which were supposed to constitute Hopkins’ disease. In Ulli Beier’s Introduction to African literature, Gerald Moore, benefitting from these studies, thought they approximated what M. Senghor saw as a possible Bantu quality in the poetry of Tchikaya U Tam’si. Moore writes: “In Yoruba poetry we find often a cryptic juxtaposition of images; a refusal to explain and to build easy bridges for the reader from one part of the poem to another; coupled with an extreme power and conciseness in the images themselves” (Ulli Beier p.107). One does not have to be a Yoruba speaker, to intuit the rapid world-play, and, sometimes the deliberate infelicities and thus the ‘Hopkinsian’ dimensions that the Ewi poet on Nigerian radio carts along with the most sing-song performance.

As for the use of foreign phrases in modern African poetry of English expression, there is the example of the Ifa corpus in Yoruba to go by. The historian, Ade Obayemi, in Studies in Yoruba history and culture – edited by G.O. Olusanya (upl, Ibadan,1983) notes that the Ifa corpus may be better understood by one who is conversant with the Nupe language from which some of the concepts were derived. The pattern is not dissimilar to that of the many African languages including Hausa, and the Madinka languages which have taken over many Arabic words and forms. Evidently, the poetry in African languages is not free of the very elements that the troika trace only to the influence of the Euro-modernists. Unfortunately, it is a well-cultivated virtue of their ‘de-colonization’ to make no allowance for the influence of these ‘oral’ traditions on the Afro-modernist poets; and since, we cannot accuse poets in the Yoruba language, a tradition that predates all hoopla about modernism, of learning from Hopkins, we obviously must assume, without intending to impugn their credentials as cultural nationalists, that members of the troika do not know enough about the Africa that they are seeking to defend. What they seem unable to concede is that there are so many different ways of being African, and of being Nigerian or being Yoruba for that matter.

This bears restating because what they regard as factors of Western influence are and were, provably, among the many ways of being African even before the European incursion that led to colonialism and ruptured the tendency to take African traditions for granted. It is important to stress this because many features of the indigenous culture which are coincident with elements in Western culture are too often given away to a Western tradition. This occurs largely because the language in which discourse is carried on in the modern setting happens to be Western. It is not only in literature and literary criticism that this has occurred. Students of history (see E.A. Ayandele’s Nigerian Historical Studies, (Frank Cass, 1979) and political science have long been aware that Soyinka’s Ijebu homeland had a political system which functioned in accordance with the theory of separation of powers almost as John Locke and Montesqueieu theorized it. John Locke (even with the example of Plato to contest it) would have been the first to acknowledge that the separation of powers was not ab initio a congenital part of the European mind. It grew from trials and errors until philosophers codified its principles. Besides, it was not something that had to be learnt full-blown from the Greeks. ‘God,’ Locke said, ‘has not been so sparing to men to make them barely two-legged creatures, and left it to Aristotle to make them rational’ (quoted in Myth in Africa, p.223).Indeed, God has not been so sparing of Africans as to make them barely two-legged creatures, and left it to Europeans to make them political animals. Otherwise, before John Locke was born, the Ijebu people had a separation of powers more rigorous than what the Americans were to evo

In the system that obtained, the King reigned, the Oshugbo ( or the ogboni) deliberated, the Iwarefa executed, and the Oluwo ministered, the Parakoyi traded across borders, and the age-grades functioned at a mass participatory level that was both a source of legislative and executive authority. In the face of these, the claims made by social scientists who point to the fusion of structures as proof of the underdeveloped-ness of traditional African systems amounts to libel. The Lockean ideal did not have to be imported into the formal structures of religio-political thinking in such a
system. The ideal was the life. As the case of Obafemi Awolowo, a modernist political theorist and an Ijebu Yoruba like Soyinka proves, even the use of a concept, like Federalism, which is decidedly Western ought not to make us forget traditional practices from which the confidence of current usages is derived. The removal, or roughing up, of such confidence must be deemed one of the negative achievements of the colonial impact which made normal translation between different cultures hostage to a culture-clash theoretic. It yielded improper education that has turned the meeting of the African and Western into a permanent struggle of Difference and the Other.

I would argue that the assumption of a proper education should incline us to credit Soyinka’s experience of the Western as being in large measure intra-cultural rather than inter-cultural. This should save us from the diffusionist imps of the ethnologists and allow us to see many of the elements in their proper perspective. Although such elements may have a home only in the specificity of a given culture, they emerge as interventions by social actors in the argument or dialogue within a culture or between cultures. It seems to me that this is the sense in which Soyinka’s appropriation of several elements that are apparently European, may be viewed. It is the angle, I think, from which we may most fruitfully view the critiques of his works which focus either upon the Yoruba-ness or the Western-ness of his creativity. Even where Soyinka himself insists that he is having a grounding in the indigenous culture one ought to be suspicious. The reason is that there are elements common to all cultures which the mere linguistic/conceptual address turns into a fundamental difference. Someone familiar with both sides can draw from either without self-consciousness. Where the distinctions that are made between the Western and the African World are already functions of a culture-clash, it requires more than pat assertions to determine where one strand or the other is coming from.

The Afrocentric rule prescribed by the troika assumes that faced with a problem, one does not have to think of the right solution but what tradition, no matter how indeterminate, says. Where tradition is inadequate any new knowledge that is applied is seen as an importation from outside the culture. Wittingly or unwittingly, creativity is turned into a Westerner. On the other hand, we have to confront and sieve through Soyinka’s self-distancing from what he sees as inauthentic ways of being African such as we find in his notorious critique of Negritude and his arms-length treatment of New world orishas in Myth Literature and the African World. To be sure, his grounds for disagreement with the Negritude prophets was not that they were not pro-Africa but that the image of Africa emerging from their endeavours was not based on life as it is lived in Africa. More of an aesthetic response to a denial of humanity foisted on Africans by Europe. The Negritude prophets, as such, had become too enamoured of life as metaphor rather than ritual. Their Cartesian inversion which moves from the European “I think, therefore I am” to the supposedly African “I feel, therefore, I am” was actually a very European idea which coalesced in the Romantic movement in several European countries. It drew strength from the works of Rousseau, Herder, Goethe, and Nietzsche. To have made it the definient of what it means to be African was simply an unwitting assertion of one half of the European argument as the basis for African self-identity.

To make this contrived self the object of a mounting narcissicism, “in the supposed grandeur of the cultural dilemma”, implied a degrading of an action-oriented metaphysics. Its self-absorbed disposition suggested straightaway its suitability to the needs only of a liesure class; a leisure class whose bourgeois propensities led to the pressing of racial pique into the naïve Sartrean hope of a unity of all humankind pictured as the working class. Soyinka did not allow that there was necessarily an end to the racial conception of self through a dialectical transformation of racial pique into working class consciousness. If working class consciousness had to come to racially abused peoples there had to be some other route and for him it lay in refashioning the actual rituals deriving from actual labour and the mytho-history still extant in the languages of African peoples. In the face of Africa’s near-dissolution as a result of colonial and other pressures, Soyinka saw the Negritude recourse to flighty aestheticism and narcissism as being itself the problem. He did not give up the idea, which Negritude pursued, of an African world view, that could stand against European mis-representation of Africa. Against that mis-representation, essentially denigratory, he set out in pursuit of self-retrieval that did not need to deny the quotidian perversity encountered in the everyday life of the African. He took this African world for granted irrespective of what had been said about it; irrespective of the European fictions that masquerade as a description of African reality.

Understandably, this taking for granted of the African world never quite solves the problem. Anthony Appiah argues. In the hands of the less imaginative, it not only allows features common to both the western and the African world to
be treated as if they were either exclusively African or exclusively European, it tends to ossify perspectives. In its crudest forms, orality and myth are depicted as African. Scribal culture and history are dubbed as European. The two worlds are so distanced that the possibility of a conversation, and of shared commonalities, between them is subjected to the antics only of a culture-clash. This is the issue very admirably addressed by Appiah in his book IN MY FATHER’S HOUSE while, in my view, granting undue privileges to culture-clashes as the core-theme in Soyinka’s DEATH AND THE KING’S HORSEMAN. Appiah certainly has his point. In the programme notes to the play, as he points out, Soyinka insists that “the colonial (read: Western) factor is an incident, a catalytic incident merely...”. But Appiah does not agree. He thinks that Soyinka is merely trying to hide what is owed to the Western world.

He wonders why this is the case: “Is it perhaps because he had not resolved the tension between the desire which arises from his roots in European tradition of authorship to see his literary work as, so to speak, authentic, ‘metaphysical’, and the desire which he must feel as an African in a once colonised and merely notionally de-colonized culture to face up to and reflect the problem at the level of ideology? Is it, to put it briskly, because Soyinka is torn between the demands of a private authenticity and a public commitment? Between individual self-discovery and what he elsewhere calls the ‘social vision?’ I believe that these are the right questions that follow from Soyinka’s own practice. But Appiah overplays the analytical hand when he resolves his problematic by insisting that Soyinka’s approach, which consists in taking Africa for granted, as if Africa had not suffered the fictions of Europe, is possible only by an effort of mind that Soyinka does not grant. His claim is that what Soyinka “needs to do is not to take an African world for granted, but to take for granted his own culture - to speak freely not as an African but as a Yoruba and a Nigerian”. But can Soyinka even take his Yoruba and Nigerian culture for granted? I doubt it.

For Soyinka to do this is actually to impose a different problematic upon the existing one. Instead of setting the African World view, legitimately or illegitimately, against the Western one, he would have to reduce it to a lower level of discourse. It becomes a case of one particular African culture against all the others. Not such an illegitimate point from which to view the problem. Except that viewing Soyinka’s position as the right answer to the ‘wrong question’, instigates the easy insurrection: that Appiah talks about a Western Other against Soyinka’s African World while insisting that the only appropriate response to the Western is a Yoruba world-view. What needs to be met by Appiah’s transposition of the problem is an explanation of how the differences within the European maelstrom allows for the assertion of a common Western world view, implying the mashing of the genus of race and metaphysics, while he occludes the similarities, commonalities and complements that characterize different African cultures. Evidently, he grants undue privileges to differences between Africans while commonalities between Europeans are embossed over all else. Different forms of ancestor worship, labouring under the same metaphysical projects are distanced from one another while the original issue remains that distinctions have been made between (African) societies in which ancestor worship is based on rituals and another (a Western) society where it has simply become so much a matter of mere metaphor.

To assume within such a context that a Yoruba Form is so different from, as to warrant a hard and fast drawline between it and, the Zulu, the Ashanti and or Madinka Forms, is to over-constrain and parochialize the civilizational implications of certain commonly-held ideas. And to do this is to be unable to appreciate the grand performance that Soyinka has made in Ogun Abibiman where he has attempted to fuse the ethic of Ogun with that of Chaka and the liberation movements in Southern Africa. It is arguable that the capacity to fuse totems, in this manner, across cultures, ethnic boundaries and races, is the true soul of the civilizational enterprise. It is also the aspiration of all great art. Thus, if it makes sense to use a common word such as Romanticism to describe the German, the French and the British forms in spite of their differences, the distance between various African cultures ought not to be viewed as a drawback to a unanimist conception of African culture. Partly, of course, I think the problem is that being anti-unanimist in his approach to African culture and believing that the accommodation of race as a defnient of the African amounts to accepting racism as a possibility if not a necessity in human affairs, Appiah tries to reduce the matter to a manageable issue of nationalities and language groups. Unfortunately, this does not appear to touch the heart of the matter.

It touches enough however to make Appiah worry about “a kind of Yoruba imperialism of the (African) thought-world” (Appiah:258). At best, it sensitizes us to the dialectic of ethnicity and nationality which Soyinka’s proto-unanimist metaphysics does not address. Yet, when we come to think of it, the habit in Soyinka’s metaphysics of seeing the ethnic as a representation of the nationality (or the continental ethic), does enjoy more credence once it is conceded that the larger whole does not necessarily command a different set of values. In spite of the complexity that the use of
different concepts may import into it, a common meaning may be more active across African cultural boundaries than Appiah allows. Where this is the case, each ethnic positioning may well be seen as the anticipation of a conversation between, that could liberalize, the ethnic bastions.

The expectation ought to be that, with time, different ancestral lore could be brought to a common ground in a collective image that can stand up to the counter-image of Africa constructed by the Eurocentric ethnographers and other modern-day propagandists. This is to say that it makes no strategic sense to cut up or fractionize the African image in the face of a unitary conception of the Western world. Contra-Appiah, I do not see why the myth of Ossei Tutu and Ogun cannot be brought to an interface as a way of understanding the past. The purpose is not to name every ancestor in the African pantheon or continental village but to make it possible for Africans from one part of Africa to accord a place of integrity and shared empathy to ancestors from other parts. The fact that conquerors from one part of Europe once conquered and laid waste the other parts have not prevented them from laying claim to a common heritage. It should not be different among Africans. Or why should the habits of empathy in the face of one set of ancestors not be made, or seen as, a basis for equating conditions between and across cultures, towards creating nations from ethnic groups and building up to a truly continental and global village? Surely, an African world view ought to begin with the presumption of such empathy. By the same token, in response to Chinweizu’s Afrocentrism and Appiah’s perhaps unintended ethnic imperative, it may be argued that Soyinka’s proto-unanimist metaphysics is partly authorized by the decisive African influence on ancient Greek culture which was marked by the consecration of Greek gods in Ethiopia, as Homer acknowledged.

This suggests that the recourse to Helen paganism as a means of self-retrieval is not as outlandish a tack as it looks for the African writer. It is more like picking a garden tool from a neighbour for the purpose of clearing hedges overgrown with weeds. Or this is the sense in which it ought to be seen but for critics who, over-stressing the role of a given culture in the works of a writer, have failed to acknowledge the choices that a writer makes within a culture or between cultures.

Given my interest in genealogies, I have tried to avoid playing the chauvinistic game of art critics who interpret Pablo Picasso’s originality without even an allusive reference to his debt to the anonymous fashioners of African masks; or
Henry Moore without his beholdingness to pre-Colombian American sculptures. Whether the focus is on Soyinka’s progress as a mythopoeist who happens to be an African writer, or an Africa writer who happens to be a mythopoeist, I believe there are kinks in his biography which indicate his debt to occidental predecessors which ought to be factored into an appreciation of his works. True, mere precedence in time does not warrant the treatment of earlier writers as necessary ancestors to those who come after. But it helps to identify background noises that older art forms insinuate. In Soyinka’s case, the background noises of earlier performances in the literature of Europe cannot be escaped in his works. Writers who are ticked as influences, sometimes on the basis of an insignificant echo, run the gamut: Shakespeare, Chekov, Synge, Sean O’Casey, O’Neil, the Euripides, Aristophanes, Pirandello, Brecht, Arnold Wesker, John Osborne, the lot. One early encounter deserving of special notice is his virtual stand-off with that secondary birth-pad of much Nigerian writing, Joyce Cary’s MISTER JOHNSON which can also be observed brooding or sulking besides Chinua Achebe’s NO LONGER AT EASE. The first scene in THE LION AND THE JEWEL could not have been better designed to locate the following scene from Joyce Cary’s novel: “He comes again to the yam field and asks her to marry him. He tells her that he is a government clerk, rich and powerful. He will make her a great lady. She shall be loaded with bangles; wear white women’s dress, sit in a chair at table with and eat off a plate ‘Oh, Bamu, you are only a savage here - you do not know how happy I will make you. I will teach you to be a civilized lady and you shall do no work at all’……………… ‘Oh, Bamu, you are a foolish girl. You don’t know how a Christian man lives. 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The Soyinkaesque intensity of THE LION AND THE JEWEL may be seen as outmatching this jejune encounter between Mr. Johnson and the most beautiful girl in Fada but the paralleling is unmistakable. By the same token, we may ponder the mark of Henrik Ibsen’s Gabriel Borkman (THE MASTER BUILDER) upon Demoke in A DANCE OF THE FORESTS. Nor is there something overly pedantic in outing the closeness, even if it is only a hint, between Thomas Mann’s DEATH IN VENICE and Soyinka’s THE INTERPRETERS. Aschenbach’s world - may not be exactly coincident with that of Soyinka’s Egbo and Kola, nor would Mann’s Tadzio occupy the same plane as Soyinka’s Albino. In both works however a common modernist strain can be discerned with a distinct stretching that covers Sagoe’s Voidancy essays. Someday the essays will make appearance in Chinua Achebe’s ANTHILLS OF THE SAVANAH with the weight of the plot shifted more to the essays than in the earlier novel. But we would be hunting where the aparos are if we take note of them. At the risk of making a fetish of the German associations, one may move from Thomas Mann and its Goethean forms to Bertold Brecht, one of the avatars of the modern stage to whom some of Soyinka’s works are a virtual libation. The Brecht in Soyinka may be hidden by the ritual ambiance of THE STRONG BREED and THE ROAD, but it is inescapable and the dramatist draws attention to it in OPERA WONYONSI, the adaptation of the THREE PENNY OPERA sieved through John Gay’s BEGGAR’S OPERA. No matter how distinctively African and Nigerian the play WONYOSI may be, its Bretchtian air is unmissable. Of course Brecht is so much common property that it does not need to be belaboured. But that indeed is the point: in a world in which cultural genetics is so much a source of dispute, what is or is not common property needs to be determined as part of the search for meaning. That search is very ritualistically advertised in Soyinka's adaptation of the BACHAE OF EURIPIDES which is like trying to put a lived experience to his deployment of Friedrich Nietzsche's categories in The Birth of Tragedy. It would be right to call it a case of self-apprehension through engagement with other cultures. Soyinka’s biography testifies to it.

His self-portraiture in AKE and IBADAN and his many interviews and essays, no matter how part-fictional some of them, offer a fairly helpful picture of his progress in this regard. They reveal a precocious upbringing within a literate, Westernized but traditional-enough conundrum which enabled him, better still, predisposed him, to immerse himself in the literatures of Europe without neglecting the myths and histories of his native Yorubaland. He grew up under the heady proselytization of early christianized Yoruba nationalists who, as JD Peel has reported, matched Christian saints to equivalent personages in the Yoruba pantheon in order to convert traditional religionists. The Yoruba, as it happened, were engaged in a self re-invention, or modernization which later took on the character of a communal enterprise under the aegis of the Egbe Omo Oduduwa, the union of the descendants of Oduduwa, the Yoruba family Union. Among other purposes, the Union sought to assimilate Western civilization while digging down to indigenous roots.

The ultimate ambition was to take over neologisms in Western Science, domesticate them within the Yoruba language, and create the basis for standing up to the West and competing with other ethnic groups in the Nigerian firmament. Although attacks from other ethnic groups later forced the Egbe to retreat from this project, there was no
denying the imprint it left on one of its most sensitive offspring. Incidentally, Soyinka’s first discernible master, the Yoruba writer, D.O. Fagunwa, one of whose tales he has re-presented in English as A FOREST OF THOUSAND DAEMONS was one of the stalwarts of this movement. After encountering Fagunwa, Soyinka was on the road to his niche as a mythopoeist. What Abiola Irele writes of Fagunwa begins to apply: “Our very notion of fantasy as opposed to reality undergoes a drastic revision...” such that “we cannot then demand from him a narrow realism.....

Reinforcements for Soyinka’s mythopoesis came from the nascent University College in Ibadan where he began his life as a Classics undergraduate. In terms of impact, Ibadan merged with the University of Leeds where Wilson Knight and Arnold Kettle superintended at the centre of a seething rennaisance in the last gasps of European Romanticism. It was in Leeds that his immersion in the European maelstrom deepened; for Wilson Knight was not just the Shakespeare scholar who took his students through the modernist divertissement of T.S. Eliot, W.B. Yeats, Ezra Pound and Gerard Manley Hopkins: he was quite some patriarch in the absolutely primitive sense of grandmaster, steeped in the search for the deep image of Jung’s psychology, and fusing the pagan phosphoresce of Socratic dialectic with musings about Rousseau’s noble savage. It is interesting that, after Leeds, Soyinka’s major theoretical output on the question of myth and African literature was written for Wilson Knight.

It has been argued by James Gibbs that while departing from much that is associated with the Wilson Knight crowd in Leeds, Soyinka’s output clearly showed affinity with it - a ‘brave new world’ of modernism and righteous anti-capitalism based on distaste for the nihilism that had overtaken Europe in the wake of two World Wars. It was a ‘modernism’ intent on bridging the yaw in the European maelstrom deepened; for Wilson Knight was not just the Shakespeare scholar who took his students through the modernist divertissement of T.S. Eliot, W.B. Yeats, Ezra Pound and Gerard Manley Hopkins: he was quite some patriarch in the absolutely primitive sense of grandmaster, steeped in the search for the deep image of Jung’s psychology, and fusing the pagan phosphoresce of Socratic dialectic with musings about Rousseau’s noble savage. It is interesting that, after Leeds, Soyinka’s major theoretical output on the question of myth and African literature was written for Wilson Knight.

Nietzsche, a German philosopher confronted by a world seemingly careering into chaos and nihilism, sought an ethic, or a deviation from it, that could help re-orientate people away from moral distress. In a world in which problems are in a fluid state, due to the presumed death of God, all humankind is exposed in all nakedness to the elements. The world becomes all of Socratic men whose imagination is stunted by a “historical sense, trained to look everywhere for strict psychological causation” or deploying intellectual constructs which yield “abstract education, abstract mores, abstract law, abstract government; the random vagaries of the artistic imagination unchanneled by any native myth; a culture without any fixed and consecrated place of origin, condemned to exhaust all possibilities and feed miserably and parasitically on every culture under the sun”. Nietzsche sought a cure which was not readily available to him in the mores of extant Christianity. He found what he wanted among the ancient Greeks who saw all meaning as a factor of metaphysics. It was not, he realized, a matter of escaping from metaphysics but recognizing what your metaphysics are. In the three periods, into which his career as a philosopher tends to be divided – covering the ‘aestheticist’ Nietzsche of the Birth of Tragedy; the ‘rationalist’ Nietzsche of Human All too Human and the Gay Science; and the Nietzsche of the Will to Power in Twilight of the gods and Thus Spake Zarathustra - he was committed to the value of pagan classicism as represented by the gods of Ancient Greece.

Even at his most rationalist, in the middling Nietzsche which went in pursuit of a theory of science, he found a hermeneutic refuge in the image of the gods on Mount Olympus where Zeus, King of the Greek gods superintended over the others. As he saw it, the Greeks in their pagan modes of thinking in mythic terms, created the gods as a means of escape from the horror of mortality. The gods represented a modality that served as counterweight and will to the rationalist tendency in Socrates and his stepchildren down the ages. Not unlike Plato, he made a distinction between the age of poetry and the age of philosophy in the manner in which Wolfgang Goethe distinguished between the ages of poetry, philosophy and prose. Following Goethe, Nietzsche did not see the point in compartmentalizing the mind that thinks from the heart that feels.
Unlike Goethe however who thought the age of poetry would necessarily be superseded, Nietzsche’s age of poetry was not to be superseded but was one to be assiduously cultivated in eternal returns. In this he was at one with Plato who banned poets from his Republic because they were irredeemable children of divine frenzy. Except that Nietzsche considered the permanent age of poetry a saving grace where Plato saw it as a distraction from true knowledge. Moving from the sin of the ethnologist, that is, from believing that the mind of myth inhered in primitivity, in the childhood of the world, Nietzsche acceded to a view which transformed myth and poetry to a universal plane that was un-reconstructed-ly against boundaries of geography and time. He asserted that “The images of myth must be the daemonic guardians, ubiquitous and unnoticed, presiding over the growth of the child’s mind and interpreting to the mature man his life and struggles. Nor does the commonwealth know any more potent unwritten law than that mythic foundation which guarantees its union with religion and its basis in mythic conceptions”.

Thus Nietzsche was not against religion as such but one that had become coincident with the rationalist tendency. The core of his musing on myth centred on what he called the chthonic realm, an in-between world of the dead the living and the unborn which approximates a precedent “original Oneness” and a future becoming. In that realm, he stressed the role of two archetypal deities. His choice of patron fell on Dionysus, Greek god of wine and song. The alternate deity, Apollo, god of order and rules, he considered too formalistic, too disciplined to allow for that spark of creativity or Plato’s divine frenzy which distinguished the poets from the philosophers. Nietzsche’s achievement was to expand the role of Dionysus till it overcame Apollo and overtook all the other gods, virtually acquiring even the features of Athena, the goddess of war.

Like Nietzsche before him, who wanted a return to that pagan order to offset the never-realized but very European idea of the death of God, Soyinka sought return to the African gods as a means of healing the severance that had taken place between humankind and the original Oneness. He was unable to grant unqualified credence to Christianity which was busily contesting, and annihilating, all traces of Yoruba traditional worship. He wanted to retrieve the old forms of knowledge, the old gnosis that the gods represented. After Fagunwa, he did not have far to go in search of them. Nor did he have to create them afresh. West Africans seeking African parallels to occidental forms generally followed the assiduity with which the early Christian missionaries matched African mythical personages to Christian ones. Soyinka, as a child of that match-making, was not a stranger to the common stress in the traditional culture which allowed individuals or ancestors associated with some feat to be deified. ( The practice, although under siege, has not quite abated; as there is a decade-old threat by the reigning Oni of Ife, before his recent conversion to Pentecostal Christianity, to add Obafemi Awolowo to the list of existing 403 gods).

Surely, the very idea of sacralizing individuals or deifying them was a commonplace in the world in which Soyinka grew up. Not really too different from the world of Christian rites, in which the order of saints supervened. In the indigenous rites, not only human beings but trees, hills and rivers may be deified. If a particular forest was considered supremely important to the survival of a people it was deified to foreclose despoliation and desecration. However, the matter of interest is that rather than match Yoruba gods to the Christian saints, Soyinka chose to grant no privileges to Christian avatars in his mythical order. He preferred to match African gods, still very much alive and steeped in ritual, to their Greek counterparts, who were dead gods that served merely as metaphors to the European mind.

As Soyinka saw it, the modern African, under the pulverizing pressure of Western forces, had to recognize, as Nietzsche did, that the historical imagination was killing off the mythical vision without which there could be no hope of surviving the age of nihilism that had dawned. Just as Nietzsche felt free to bend Greek gods to his will, Soyinka felt free to bend the Yoruba Gods to his will as a way of engaging spheres of experience in which neither science nor Christianity had any explanatory force. In recognizing such spheres, his purpose was to defend the indigenous knowledge inherent in the myths. Although he was only too aware of Christian charges of fetishism against animistic worship, Soyinka did not advert much attention to it. He was less perturbed by the science/fetishism debate locked in the clash between the cultures. He took the matter of preserving the old knowledge as a function of the myths without discounting or needing to over-rationalize the practices, including the sacrifices, animal and human, which formed part of the rituals.

It was in standing by the rituals that he would not agree to make concessions to the New world orishas whose worshipers tended to import many Christian notions into the authentic Yoruba pantheon. As the Italian semiotician and novelist, Umberto Eco has reported in his Travels in Hyper-reality, (A Harvesstr/HBJ Book,1973) the New World orishas are indeed very much a mish-mash of the ancient, the modern and the futuristic. Soyinka appears to agree.
Except that a careful survey of his own progress reveals that he, too, has done no less than those who have bent the
pantheon to the vagaries of the middle passage and the racial inter-mesh of the new world. What he has achieved is
the deployment of Yoruba gods to meet modern hermeneutic projects which the original devotees never had in mind.
He may be more faithful to the original historical ambiance of the mythical personages, but he is also, as Okpewho
has argued, revising the traditions. His revisions indicate ideological imperatives which are not often acknowledged.
But they are there.

The ‘ideological imperatives’ are projected in the effort he makes to distinguish the Yoruba orishas from the Greek
gods while taking the pains to distinguish his patron deity from the other Yoruba gods. The Greek gods are viewed
within the ambit of illusion and metaphor but Yoruba gods are ritual-oriented, terrestrialized, reality-prone. Human
agencies, or other natural phenomena in pre-memory, pre-history, or reconditioned history, they are necessarily
implicated in unusual or outstanding feats that put them, not outside, as in the Greek case, but within the pale of
everyday morality. Soyinka obviously prefers to locate them in pre-memory. Except that the need to distance them
from European(Greek) archetypes requires their being located within a specific cultural geography, that of his own
Yoruba nationality. In effect, his revision ceases to be innocent enough to make one forget the living history that gave
rise to the myths in the first place. The logical catch is that the deification of a human agent does not necessarily
obliterate from memory whatever was known of the personage in historical time.

The task of deifiers, as in the making of Roman Catholic saints, may require devotees to forget all other biographical
details except the one that assert ‘holiness’ about the sanctified being. Where the details do not match the ones that
justified deification or sanctification, the myths would compete with what history allows. A basis emerges for multiple
and even contradictory interpretations. This is not necessarily what happens in the case of Ogun, but it is instructive to
look at how the god has fared within a more objective, non-devotee ambiance, outside animistic essentialism. Or
maybe the use of the word objective is wrong. Non-devotee bias would be more like it. Which ever it is, one can see
that the status of Soyinka’s mythmaking derives from not allowing too much of the background noise from historical
events to filter into the discourses of the gods.

In Myth Literature and the African World, he expatiates on the ritual archetypes by stripping the gods to their bare
mythopoeic identity. He singles out three deities from the Yoruba pantheon for especial attention in the manner that
Nietzsche focused attention on Apollo and Dionysus. The three gods Ogun, Obatala and Sango are “represented in
drama by the passage-rites of hero-gods, a projection of man’s conflict with forces which challenge his efforts to
harmonize with his environment, physical, social and psychic”. Although they are terrestrial deities, hence personages
in Yoruba myth as well as history – Soyinka downplays the history or better to say that he devalues the history to
ensure that it does not interfere with the purposes of the myth. A deliberate a-historicism is embossed which makes
tell-tale references to place names and identifiable historical personages and events virtually as irritating give-aways
of what was meant to be a hidden history. Easily taken care of, in this regard, is the case of the god, Sango, whom
Soyinka grants the least credence in the drama of the gods.

THE CASE OF SANGO AND RITUAL

Historically, a 15th century King of Oyo, Sango was deified as god of thunder and lightning after he did not hang
himself in shame or regret arising from the destruction wreaked on his own house and family by his own experiments
in lightning conduction. He apparently wished to punish his adversaries by invoking the elements hence he is also now
viewed as a god of retributive justice. His contemporary identification with electricity which is marked by Ben
Enwonwu’s sculpture in front of the electricity corporation of Nigeria in Lagos, is actually a very formal obeisance to
Western science and the intelligence of the American statesman and scientist, Benjamin Franklin who, as Jacob
Bronowski notes in his Ascent of Man (Macdona Futura Publishers, 1973. p.170) “ ….proposed that lightning is
electricity and in 1752 he proved it – how could a man like Franklin prove it? – by hanging a key from a kite in a
thunderstorm”.

Well, like Benjamin Franklin, Sango is linked with electricity in the sense that his fate was similar to that of
experimenters in lightning conduction in the history of Western science who ritually (consistently) destroyed their
houses, laboratories and surrounds with their experiments while copying Benjamin Franklin’s simple experiment
before he invented the lightning conductor. Bronowski notes that Franklin turned his experiments into a practical invention …..and made it to illuminate the theory of electricity ..by arguing that all electricity is one kind and not, as was then thought, two different fluids”. Of course, those who link Sango to Benjamin Franklin’s science are aware that one science was of the inter-subjective variety while the other, Sango’s, was sheer mysticism. Or better to say the world is still wondering how much of it was science and how much mysticism. Well, it is as mysticism that Soyinka views “…Sango’s case, …. the agency of lightning, lightning in turn being the cosmic instrument of a swift, retributive justice”. From the perspective of his own aesthetics, what Sango’s story yields “would hardly be ritual, however”.

As he sees it: “The narration of a moment in the history of the Oyo, even a tragic conflict involving their first king, might result from it, but not the drama of the gods as a medium of communal recollection and cohesion, not the consolation which comes from participating in the process of bringing to birth a new medium in the cosmic extension of man’s physical existence”. Clearly, Soyinka’s scheme of ranking the gods consigns Sango to a terrain of history that hardly allows the god a mythical station in the matching of Yoruba gods to Greek ones. Hence it is Obatala and Ogun, not Sango, that are matched or juxtaposed with Apollo-Dionysus. It is a fascinating matter, at least as Soyinka presents it.

The special case of Ogun, Soyinka’s patron deity, although discussed also within the ambit of Yoruba history and culture creates a different kind of problem from Sango’s because the historicity of the god as well as that of Obatala, the god of creation, is less advertised. Part of the problem is that unlike Sango who travels clearly as a Yoruba god with Oyo history weighing him down, Obatala was hardly ever viewed as history. The personage was consigned in all secular discussions to pre-history and the other-worldly. The tendency has been to treat this ‘other-worldly’ as a Yoruba site or zone. This was so implacably asserted by missionary scholarship that, given the nature of early colonial award of identity according to ethnographic imprimaturs, there was hardly a chance of manifestations of the god being properly acknowledged outside the sites of the original discoveries. Such that although Ogun is shared with so many other ethnic groups and nationalities in ways that contest its exclusive Yoruba-ness, the discourses of the god have been haggled almost to the complete exclusion of other nationalities which share the same myths as a vibrant part of their ethos. Largely this has been due to two factors. The first is the tendency noted by Isidore Okpewho for every myth’s deviation from the norm of historicity to attempt to survive by doing two things: it must lay claim to a past that can no longer be investigated as to ‘fact’ and in order to be successful as hermeneutic device in the culture, it must seek to accomplish the contradictory self-positioning as the authentic definitive of the core of history.

The success of the Ogun myth in this regard is that it is often de-terrestialized and consigned to a region of the Yoruba imagination whose relationship to terra firma is a matter of poetic licence. Still, the necessity for the rituals, as rituals do, to reach back to the past that it has to recast calls attention to a terrain that cannot be divorced from history. The result is that, in spite of aporias and motiveless or teleological roughing-up of the myths, it is possible to trace linkages, no matter how vaguely, to precedent events in historical time. It happens to be a historical time whose integrity relies on oral traditions. The introduction of scribal culture adding a new twist creates the second factor.

It is the common tendency noted by The historian, Ade Obayemi, to make Nigerian ethnic groups “appear as if they are culturally and historically distinct from one another”. Linguistic differences (which must have prevented cross-boundary forays by researchers) may have been partly responsible for it but more aggravating has been “the work of the anthropologists in their (traditional?) propensity for ‘tribal’ monographs. Nadel’s Nupe, Bradbury’s Edo, Bostons’ Igala, Meek’s Jukun, or his Igbo, Forde’s Yako, Harris’ Mbenbe, Lloyd’s Yoruba,. etc)…” By drawing hard lines around the language groups, they’ve had the effect of rupturing pre-colonial commonalities between neighbours; with the result that they “…..all appear to have so little in common that they have helped to perpetuate the mentality of tribal compartments”.(quoted in Elizabeth Isichei A History of Nigeria Longman London,1983, p 4).

In Nigeria’s environment of ethnic competition, in which there is so much projecteering to make every tribe look like a nationality and every nationality a race, compartmentalization has tended to lead to insupportable allocation of values for purposes of identity-making and political gerrymandering. The impact on the narratives of the gods in secular space can be imagined within the constraints. It has called for a special effort of mind to distinguish the mythology from the nationalist histories which, conjointly, constitute official credos against the emergence of genuine scholarship, as I hope to show presently.
Following the myths to their source in history is a labyrinthine pursuit. It takes more than education and hardwork - it takes some element of luck - to pluck the gem out of mushy mythology. It is such luck that I think is not pressed home in the book AFRICA’S OGUN: Old World And New edited by Sandra T. Barnes (Indiana University Press, 1989). In a chapter ‘Ogun, the Empire Builder’, Sandra T. Barnes and Paula Girshik Ben-Amos, traverse the mytho-historical landscape of the Edo, Fon, and Yoruba in order to locate the god and to solve the riddle of the deity in terms of “beliefs surrounding iron, … found throughout the Guinea Coast”. But they hit a blank. They did not find Ogun or rather they found Ogun everywhere. This authorized them to reach the conclusion that “The meanings attached to Ogun were abstractions that were not tied to a single place or a single cultural context”… They conclude that “all evidence for the emergence of Ogun is circumstantial”. In the introduction, Sandra Barnes had foreclosed the issue: “The way to think about the beginnings of a deity such as Ogun, then, is to view his origins, by necessity, as indeterminate. At any historical point, the ideas reflected by Ogun, or the ideas out of which he is created, are a cultural assemblage….. through which people reflected on the historical milestones of their development - from first clearing the land to living in a glorious Age of Empire”.

In the Introduction to AFRICA’S OGUN, Sandra T. Barnes claims that “No date can be assigned to the birth of Ogun, nor can a place be assigned to his origins”. In an earlier study, Ogun: an Old God for a New Age (1980), she had “proposed that many of the themes surrounding Ogun are rooted in a set of pan-African ideas that probably accompanied the spread of iron -making technology throughout sub-Saharan Africa as far back as 2000 years” (Barnes, 1989). This idea of the ‘sacred iron complex’ shared by Barnes is questioned by Robert G. Armstrong who makes use of linguistic evidence to show that the concept of Ogun was also equally associated with metaphysical ideas to do with hunting, killing, the resultant disorder that killing brings and the need for purification before the reintegration into society of people who have killed. Armstrong however does not resolve the question of when the concept of Ogun as factor of the divine iron complex was transformed into a divine being. The transformation in West African societies, as Barnes argues, obviously predated the 1700s when its emergence was first noted among slave populations in Haiti and the new world. Dennis Williams in his ICON AND IMAGE: A Study of Sacred and Secular Forms of African Classical Art (London, Allen Lane, 1974) gives the sixteenth century as a likely date of Ogun’s emergence as a divine being because that was when among the eastern Yoruba, ritual objects made of iron, which can be dated because of the use of imported metal by Ogun devotees, began to proliferate …..”. Williams thinks that it is only with imported metal that dating becomes possible or that the tentative nature of a dating which relies only on carbon dating was worth the while.

But he pressed another hypothesis: “pictorially reinforced by a brass plaque depicting a Benin warrior wearing miniature iron tools - the almost universal symbols of Ogun - that dates to the fifteenth or sixteenth century”. Barnes and Ben Amos suggest an even earlier date for the emergence of Ogun based on an annual ceremony in the Kingdom of Benin which dates to “the thirteenth or fourteenth century and which featured ritual battles and sacrifices of the type that today are appropriate only to Ogun”. On the strength of this, they pin the geographic area of Ogun’s emergence to eastern Yorubaland and to the Kingdom of Benin, “where ritual reenactments of battle between kings and town leaders have long figured in large civic pageants dedicated to Ogun”. Somehow, beyond identifying a broad geographical spread, they fail to pursue the matter any further.

The problem with their attempt at locating Ogun lies in their ignoring folk history. They do not consult the mythologies in the identified cultural geographies in order to confront the possibilities they open up as “hypothesis”. A little accommodation of folk history would have intimated the existence of an Ire in Ekiti in Eastern Yorubaland which mythology identifies as the point of Ogun’s arrival after breaching the primeval gulf. Obviously following the line of earlier anthropologists who gave some primacy to Owo and Benin as great centers of art, they considered any other site as being too out-of-the-way to yield much by way of fresh evidence. Their quest, at the very point of discovering what they sought halted. Apparently standing by the most advertised of the stories which are basically Yoruba-derived, they fail to follow the Yoruba masquerade, so to say, to its hole in Ekiti-land. The result is that they merely enable us to identify some of the nationalities within the Ogun complex but without following the leads to be found in Johnson’s History of the Yorubas (CSS Bookshops, 1989) Fadipe’s Sociology of the Yoruba(1976) and Idowu’s Olodumare:God in Yoruba Belief (Longman, 1962) which summarize the myths and folk histories. I personally prefer the summaries provided by Soyinka because of the more aesthetic context in which they are rendered.
In his foundational essay, On the Fourth Stage Soyinka writes: “Yoruba myth syncretizes Obatala, god of purity, god also of creation, (but not of creativity) with the first deity, Orisan-la”. The reign of this god had to end for the other gods to emerge. That is to say, unlike the Greek god Zeus, King of Olympus, Orisanla never had to supervise or supervene over the other gods. (p.27): “Once, there was only the solitary being, the primogenitor of god and man, attended only by his slave Atunda. We do not know where Atunda came from – myth is always careless about detail – perhaps the original one moulded him from earth to assist him with domestic chores. However, the slave rebelled. For reasons best known to himself he rolled a huge boulder on to the god as he tended his garden on a hillside, sent him hurtling into the abyss in a thousand and one fragments. Again the figure varies” What has not varied is the mythical certitude – if such be known – that the stone rolled by a jealous slave “down the back of the first and only deity….. shattered him” and “From this first act of revolution was born the Yoruba pantheon” (p.152).

The shards also created mankind. Of some interest is that the slave Atunda (Atowoda) whose boulder did the deed is not one of the gods today (because he was a slave?) but it is to him that we owe the existence of the gods, and mankind, as well as the “transference of social functions, the division of labour and professions among the deities whose departments they were thereafter to become”. Soyinka shows his partiality for his patron god by asserting that although none of the gods, “not even Ogun, was complete in himself”….. the shard of original Oneness which contained the creative flint appears to have passed into the being of Ogun, who manifests a temperament for artistic creativity matched by technological proficiency. His world is the world of craft, song and poetry”. Whether partial or not, these are the grounds upon which he has matched the god to Prometheus, Apollo, and Dionysus. Like these mythical personages, Ogun reached into the womb of the earth for properties that enabled him to forge ‘the first technical instruments’ with which he saved the other gods from being stranded on the other side of the metaphysical divide. He broke the ‘impassable barrier which they tried but failed to demolish’ in their bid to link up with mankind, to inspect or drink at, the fount of mortality’. “Ogun cleared the primordial jungle, plunged through the abyss and called on the others to follow”. For this he was offered a crown by the other gods. He rejected the crown. At Ire, after much hedging, he allowed himself to be importuned by the elders to accept to be their king. It was here that he was beguiled by Esu the trickster god to gorge himself in palmwine. Drunkenness empowered the god. He routed the enemies in battle ‘even faster than usual’. However under the influence of alcohol “friend and foe had become confused; he turned on his men and slaughtered them”.

If anything, this blind slaughter proved the god’s incompleteness; which he obviously sought to hide by initially refusing to get involved in the ways of mortal beings. But consciousness of incompleteness never prevented Ogun from being the “embodiment of challenge, the Promethean instinct in man, constantly at the service of society for its full self-realization”. In fact, the reality of incompleteness, and the coexistence of contradictory attributes which bring Ogun closest to the conception of the original Oneness of Orisanla, becomes the constant motivation to bridge the gulf between gods and men. Through “sacrifices, rituals, ceremonies of appeasement to the cosmic powers which lie guardian to the gulf,” mankind seeks to bridge the gulf or at least make it less threatening. Soyinka does not explain the nature and the efficacy of these sacrifices and rituals. Part of the brief of being a devotee is to render praise to the god. As the modal praise singer, he toasts the “practitioners of Ijala, the supreme lyrical form of Yoruba poetic art, …followers of Ogun, who celebrate “not only the deity but animal and plant life” while seeking “to capture the essence and relationships of growing things and the insights of man into secrets of the universe”.

Soyinka joins in celebrating of Ogun’s many manifestations which is quite an industry, as Barnes and Ben-Amos affirm in their listing of the praise names of the god. As they observe, among the Fon: “Gu himself was, in some manifestations, percieved as sword; he was a “force” with no head, only a great tool jutting out of a trunk of stone. From the day of creation onward the sword was given this praise: ailt-su-gbo-gu-kle, “ /the road is closed and Gu opens it”. Among the Yoruba: Ogun is “ Master of the World”, the innovative deity who “showed the way” for others; the deity who brought fire; the first hunter; the opener of roads; the clearer of the first fields; the first warrior; the introducer of iron; the founder of dynasties, towns, kingdoms”. As they note, “each of these acts was in some way revolutionary. Each was in some way a “first” in the sense in which fire was a first principle that transformed ore into iron, just as it tranformed raw food into cooked, and thus, as Levi-strauss would put it, nature into culture. Thereafter Ogun brought a new political order through civil war or conquest, a new economy through clearing the fields, a new technology through the introduction of iron and a new way of life through the founding of towns and cities”(Barnes, 1989:57). Among the Edo, specifically in shrines in Benin city, Ogun, according to them, was “depicted in a war costume, wearing or holding the tools and weapons of his varied occupations. Often, his costume and significantly, his eyes were painted red”….indicating his violent temper and capacity for causing harm”(Ben-Amos quoted in Barnes(1989)).
In his book, THE ENTREPRENEUR AS CULTURE HERO: Preadaptations in Nigerian Economic Development, published by Praeger Publishers, N.Y.(1980) Bernard I. Belasco takes on the story from the Benin end of the Ogun phenomenon. Following Jacob Egharevba's A Short History, he points out that Ogun, like Olokun “great God of the sea...good luck, riches and goodness” is not originally Yoruba but an Edo god. In the case of Olokun, he writes: “Benin appreciation of the mystic and pragmatic qualities of the lagoon and ocean eventuated in the founding of the Olokun cult by Oba Ohen probably in the fifteenth century at a time before the Portuguese landed”(p.79).. The priest of the cult was a state appointee whose primary task, wrapped up in the accoutrements of religious worship, was to safeguard trade-lines, the new wealth that was coming from the sea. “Olokun, and the cult of the god of the sea, became the instrument of the state monopoly of the trade goods. At the same time, through the cult the state regulated the political and ideological effects of the introduction of overseas wealth”. Olokun, Belasco posits, was later adopted within the Yoruba pantheon after re-symbolization, nativization,, which turned the god into a goddess, daughter of Yemaja.

The worship of Ogun also faced domestication among the Yoruba, but with a difference. Belasco does not provide any specific evidence beyond the mere assertion. He points out however that Ogun worship followed the patterns of the influence of Benin. Agreeing with Thomas Hodgkin’s proposition that “firearms made possible Benin expansion westward on the lagoon to Lagos”, Belasco contends that the “ritualization of iron and the ascription to Ogun, god of war, of the added dimension, god of iron, appears to be associated with the period of large scale iron imports from overseas”(p.64). The implication is that the notion of the sacred iron complex which dates the Iron Age to between 500 -900 AD did not produce a divine personage around the “iron hunger” of the fifteenth century.

If Belasco’s hypothesis is accepted, it would need to be explained how Ogun could have risen among the Edo and how his influence spread as wide as it has done. I argue that the evidence here may be accessed, fruitfully, by bouncing the mythology that Soyinka presents against the history of the Edo people across the border from Eastern Yoruba land. To begin with the history: for the Edo people, as for most sub-saharan peoples, the fifteenth century happened to be one of the most innovative, most glorious. It was a period of renaissance in Africa at a time when there was also a renaissance in Europe. This was the century of the great African city states and empires and their culture heroes - Mari Jalak in Songhai, Rumfa in Kano, Sango in Oyo, Ossei Tutu among the Ashanti etc. In Benin, this renaissance centred around the personage of a highly innovative King, Ogun, whose royal title was Ewuare. He reigned for about 45 years (1440-1485) according to dating provided by the historian of Benin, Jacob Egharevba and generally accepted with slight variations by Bradbury, Ryder, Webster and Sargent.

What makes him interesting from the standpoint of the search for Ogun’s origins is not just his name but that the characterological sketches, ritual performances and other biographical intimations vouchedafed by folklore and mythology are coincident with his progress. Egharevba portrays him as a pure renaissance character in a manner that justifies what has been described as Soyinka’s semiotic overcoding of the personage of his patron deity. Ogun Ewuare is presented as the founder of an Edo nationality: Before him, the people of the capital were known by the name left behind by Oramiyan, the life founder of the extant dynasty among the Igodomigodo. Ogun was a descendant of the Oramiyan line. An exiled Crown Prince making secret intermittent visits to his future capital, he “travelled over every part of Nigeria, Dahomey, Ghana, Guinea, and the Congo”, a fact which must explain the many innovations that he brought to Benin when he finally became King. But to become King, he stalked, trapped and worsted his Younger brother who had usurped the throne. As reprisal for his earlier banishment and to make the people rue for accommodating a usurper, he burnt the city down; causing “a great conflagration in the city which lasted two days and nights as a revenge for his banishment”.

However he rebuilt the city, constructing those well-paved streets which were greatly admired by Ruy de Sequeira, the portuguese adventurer who visited Benin in 1472. According to Egharevba: “It was he who had the innermost and greatest of the walls and ditches made round the city and he made powerful charms and had them buried at each of the nine gateways to the city, to nullify any evil charms which might be brought by people of other countries to injure his subjects”. Infact “the town rose to importance and gained the name City during his reign”. He re-named the City - Edo - a city of love as against the old name of ile-ibinu, ( a city of quarrels).
The new name Edo belonged to the slave who gave him a ladder to escape from a dried up well where he had been hidden by the Ifa Priest who went to tell the city chiefs "so that they might arrest and punish him". The night after his escape he ran into other dangers; he killed a leopard and a snake and planted an evergreen tree on the spot to commemorate it. This is celebrated in mythology except that the tradition of killing a leopard every year, although continued by his successors, has been displaced by the sacrifice of dogs, more readily available, the so-called meat of Ogun. He created a centralized Authority for the Kingdom: attenuated the lineage system and the age-grade system which had controlled the Kingdom in a pattern of segementary forms and made them answerable to the King. Every adult male became a king's man; every married woman became, notionally, a king's wife. He originated a "bachelor's camp" (ekohae), a standing army for the king, in which "each new king stays for seven days before his coronation". One of the first tasks of his rule was to bring from all the outlying districts the magicians, the famed artisans and the men of worldly and other-wordly affairs. He barricled them all in the City.

He re-structured the guild system, dividing the realm into occupational zones for iron-workers, woodworkers, brass and bronze workers, cotton and cloth-guilds etc. Ivory and wood-carving became a state industry during his reign. He was partial to iron-workers. They were to be captured but never to be killed in war. His influence was sufficiently widespread for this code to be observed by neighbours outside his Kingdom. He was himself an inventor. A musician, he invented a fife-like wind-instrument, eziken, and created ema-Edo, the royal band. He introduced the royal beads and the scarlet cloths (ododo) - which the stole from the Portuguese ship through the agency of the Olokun priest. This, with time, would be celebrated as a feat in the mythology of Ogun. True, he went down in history as a supreme arsonist and a destroyer of towns but also a builder of towns and cities, a town-planner. Egharevba writes that "He fought against and captured 201 towns and villages in Ekiti. Ikare, Kukuruku,, Eka, and the Ibo country" on the western side of the river Niger.

It was during his reign that the infiltration of Onitsha as an outpost of Edo culture began. The influence of the Edo Empire across the southern belt of the Guinea coast into what is today known as Ghana generally credited to as a consequence of his authoritarian rule. The Ga of what is now Ghana, the Urhobo, the Esans and the Etsakos were 'migrants' from his tyrannical rule which, at its most preposterous, included a decree banning sexual intercourse in the city for three years as part of the mourning for the death of two Princes, one of whom was the Crown Prince. This does account for the sobriquet among the Esans and Urhobo that he was Ewuare the Wicked. But it was certainly the origin of the apocryphal notion that he went to war with kegs full of sperm, blood and wine. It is celebrated by worshipers in Ire-amongst whom Ewuare sojourned before he became King. After he became King, he was invited by the people to help ward off their enemies. At first, he refused to be involved in their bickerings. Under pressure, he intervened. After the defeat of the enemies, he repeated the revolutionary feats he had occassioned in Benin. He turned upon the leadership of Ire and decimated their ranks, installing his own appointees as chiefs.

This is the source of the quip that he turned upon his own people. Understandably, Ogun entered the Ekiti pantheon as a god of war as distinct from his centrality to the order of ‘the divine iron complex’ which was favoured at Ife. Generally, Ogun worship in what was to become known as Yorubaland owed much more to the Ekitis whose version of the Ogun myth is more influential among the Ijebu and Egba. This may be easy to understand because the myth of origin of the Ijebu-Remo peoplepointedly indicates that the Ifa advised them, who were leaving Ife with Olofin Ogbolu, to migrate with certain Ekiti peoples. According to one authority on the history, (J.Olu Soriyan’s The Handbook of Ikenne History,1991) that wave of migration "shaped their course via Benin" to their present locations in 1450. Ogun Ewuare was on the throne. If he features so much in the myths of origin of the people, it is to be understood in my view as a syncretism of all these migration themes. And it ought not to be such a surprise. For Ogun Ewuare was the overlord along the southern belt of what is now southwestern Nigeria during the period. The ajele from Oyo (Sango’s dormain) who were soon to be displaced by Ijebu armed traders, the parakoyis, were beholding to Ogun’s Olokun cult-members. As Belasco notes, Ogun themes which show him as an aggressor in most of the Yoruba myths are to be taken as Oyo versions of a domineering cousin with whom they had to be on good terms.

Modern historians have not been as shy as the literary critics in confronting the secular elements in the history which separate fact from mythical hunch. In his book KINGDOMS OF THE YORUBA, first published in 1969, Robert S. Smith, provides a narrative which could move the questions towards some resolution. On page 64, he writes: “During the first three or four centuries of Ado history two themes predominated. The first was the gradual expansion of the Ewi’s rule over the surrounding district, so that today, in addition to Ado, the Ewi rules over seventeen subordinate towns, of which Igede is the largest. The second theme consisted in a series of defensive wars which Ado fought with
Benin. It was the expansion of Ado which apparently brought about the intervention in the area of Benin, since Ikere, a town some ten miles to the south of Ado which had formerly been subject to the Elesin, invited the Oba of Benin to send his troops there. According to Oguntuyi, this occurred during the reigns at Ado of Ata, the first Oba after Awamaro whose name is recalled, and at Benin of Ewuare, and if this association with Ewuare is correct it can be ascribed to the middle or second half of the fifteenth century. During the ensuing war Ekiti was overrun by the Bini, while the ruler of Ikere, the Olukere, was himself replaced by a Bini whose title was the Ogoga.

The Ewi survived but the Bini seem to have acquired a form of suzerainty over Ado, probably expressed by the payment of tribute. Thenceforth, Ikere under its Benin dynasty was to be a rival and a threat to Ado.” Smith continues: “A second war between Ado and Benin took place during the reign of Ewi Obakunrin. It was again occasioned by an appeal for help to Benin by the Ikere, who were protesting against the Ado’s attempts to enlarge the area under their control. The Ado say that in this Oluponkosuponno (‘let everyone die in front of his own house’) war, the Bini for the first time had firearms, but they merely discharged them into the air to cause terror – perhaps the most effective use of the primitive muskets which these must have been. Once again Ado submitted to Benin and affirmed its loyalty”. On page 67, Robert S. Smith adds the decisive strand of the narrative from the standpoint of the Ogun theme: “One of the smallest of the independent towns in Ekiti is Ire, some fourteen miles to the north-east of Ado. It is of interest as the centre of the worship of Ogun, god of both war and iron in the Yoruba pantheon. According to the ruler, the Onire, the town was founded by Ogundahunsi, son of Ogun, who himself was a son of Oduduwa, or so they say at Ire, though not at Ife. On return from a long campaign, Ogun lost his temper with his son and killed him. Overwhelmed by remorse, he sank into the earth at the place in Ire where his shrine now stands. The Onire claims descent from Ogun and recites a list of rulers, ending with himself as twenty-ninth”

Undoubtedly, there is so much that one can never know about the history. There is so much too that the artistic bricoleur has overlaid with imaginative leaps which we cannot contest successfully. The gaps between history and mythology however are not as wide as may well have been thought. Certain questions are asked which provide clues. How for instance could an Edo god become so totally absorbed within the Yoruba firmament? It is a question that religious proselytes may not ask knowing that the source of a religion may have no shrine for the god while devotees from afar take over the worship and build monumental shrines as in the case of the Roman Catholic Church and the Anglican Church – how far they are from Jerusalem! There is the case of Dionysus whose status as a Greek remained in intermittent contestation. The scandal in the case of Ogun is that to affirm his Edo provenance demands a recasting of the current knowledge of about nationalities in the Nigerian firmament.

It is not only as Obayemi claims, that modern anthropologists have tended to separate the ethnic groups into compartments but that we may have to relocate the notion of core and periphery as they pertain to Ogun worship. Ekitiland, far from being a supine periphery of the Ife world was actually quite a producer of the spine of the collective racial self-conception as witnessed by the fact that it was the source of Ogun worship which is at the heart of the definition, not just Soyinka’s definition, of the Yoruba pantheon. Added intelligence to the effect that Ifa Divination was introduced to and nationalized in Ile-Ife by the Ekiti sage, Agbonmiregun, indicates the pervasiveness of the Eastern Yoruba influence.

It is the insertion of the Ekiti element in the god’s epiphany that makes it quite legitimate to call Ogun a Yoruba god in spite of his Edo provenance, and apart from the fact that Ogun was indeed a great grandchild of an Ife lord whom the Edo however claim to have fathered. The more substantive reason I would say is that the Yoruba have done more to entrench the worship of the god than the Edo – as it might be said that the Greeks did more for Dionysus and Rome has done more for Christianity than Jerusalem. If hunch be allowed, the deification of Ogun in Ire may be seen as an extension of the normal divinity of Kings in the Edo world which Ogun Ewuare’s long reign and his polysemic performances must have entrenched wherever he had influence. That area of influence, as it is generally agreed, included a wide swipe of the West Coast of Africa into what is now Ghana.

It was certainly not an influence based not only on the force of arms which was source of much of his suzerainty. The influence went, not only with a profession of arms, what Alan Ryder in Benin and the Europeans 1485-1897, (Longman, London, 1977) describes as “his skill in organizing his subjects and harnessing hri energies to a war machind which became an inegal and permanent part of the state” but also to the “efficacy of the magical powers with which he protected his subjects and destroyed his enemies”. This means that ideas about his godhood were widely acknowledged apart from his extra-ordinary acumen for protecting people of ideas – artists, artisans and medicinemen
and warriors wherever he could find them. The distance between the myth and the history may not be fully bridged by such assessment of influence. But then there is still the need to deal with the logic of the myths themselves in terms of their implications for historical narratives.

How for instance do we account for the distance between the Jacob Egharevba’s Short History which locates Ogun Ewuare in the 15th Century and the mythical one that puts Ogun at the very origin of the world where he wrests ore from earth-wombs to make the instruments with which he cleared the path to mortality? The answer may be partially provided by the notion of the divine iron complex as a pre-existing format to the rise of the god among the Yoruba and other nationalities on the West Coast. The question is how the divine iron complex suddenly acquired an Ogun Ewuare personage at its core in the 15th century. Surely, this strains the non-mythic sensibility which tries to make sense of the pantheon. Incidentally, the same question has been raised in relation to Sango, a fifteenth century King of Oyo, deified as god of thunder and lightning and now retributive justice who is allowed within the region of that original hubris that created the Yoruba pantheon. Shouldn’t one really wonder that the Edo people who, for centuries, must have had rituals connected with thunder and lightning suddenly in the fifteenth century began to worship Sango, a failed King of Oyo, as a god of thunder and lightning.

To compound matters, there are versions of the same myth which may or may not be considered inauthentic, in which Obatala who is syncretized as the first deity journeys to Sango-country, where, tricked by Esu, the trickster god, he is imprisoned for stealing Sango’s horse. Whatever the level of our acceptance of the logic of mythic fabulation, this stretches the logic of chronology a bit too far. A little naturalism tells us that: Sango and Obatala could not have been contemporaries nor could the Oyo King have bounced out when Orisanla’s head was split by the revolutionary slave. Soyinka, the mythopoeist explains however (p.9) that “Sango is anthropomorphic in origin, but it is necessary in attempting to enter fully into the matrix of a society’s conceptions of becoming, to distinguish between primary and secondary paradigms of origin – the primal becoming of man and his racial or social origination”. He concedes that “Whatever semantic evasions we employ – the godness, the beingness of god, the otherness of , or assimilate oneness with god - they remain abstractions man-emanating concepts or experiences which presuppose the human medium”. There is surely a logic and rationality to this myth which rationality itself must pay some attention. Given a cyclical conception of time, which accommodates reincarnation as a norm of the natural world, and thus allows a grandfather to call his grandchild Baba, we can suppose that a god who emerges five hundred years or a millennia after the initial splitting of the godhead may be addressed as being there in the origin of the world. The logic of it is that once accepted as a god, the mortal personage becomes ageless and in some circumstances place-less. Possibilities, I dare say, are then opened for secular interventions in the narratives and drama of the gods.

A secular intervention is mandated in the case of Orisan-la by the narrations of historians who have moved away from the sectarian and ultra-nationalist and myth-seduced scholarship of Johnson’s History of the Yoruba. The new historians broaden their sights beyond one nationality to highlight cross-ethnic themes bordering on a common metaphysical heritage, a common divination system and a sub-structure of earth-mother worship, that links the worlds of the Nupe, Ekiti, Ile, Igodo-Edo, Igala, Nri-Igbo within the same Kwa-language complex. Obatala is properly located within this complex as the last of the sixteen Kings of Ife before the arrival of Oduduwa, the mythical founder of the Yoruba race. He it was who drove Obatala from the Kingdom thus causing the shattering dispersal of the autochthons that the Orisanla suffered. In historical terms, Obatala and his party belonged to a system of lineage heads, autochthons who had a sub-regional impact along the forest belt of the West Coast of Africa.

They ran their affairs by a system of age-grades which would proliferate as (an Otu system in Igodo-Benin, the Ogboni among Western Yoruba, the Oshugbo among the Ijobu) providing the umbrella for the exercise of civic competence. They were the custodians of the Ifa Oracle which was the communal wisdom of the children of Efa, the earth-mother. Of course, Ifa is the acknowledged product of several nationalities – the Nupe, Edo, Ekiti, Igbo and others in the forest belt of the Niger/Benue complex. It was introduced to Ile-Ife by the Ekiti sage Agbonmiregun. Its nationalization at Ife gave the status of a centre of civilization to the place, to which all the surrounding nationalities had to come for prophecy and wisdom.

The idea of going to Ife for divination became in itself a means of authenticating identities. The city attracted people from far and wide. The minders of the Oracle, Obatala’s party, belonged to an ethic of purity and communion-building whose sense of shared empathy gave nerve to earth-mother worship. It was into this conceivably ideal framework of values that Oduduwa is said to have come from Orun, an indeterminate location which no self-respecting historian
now bothers to accept as either the Middle East or Heaven but places within the Niger-Benue complex. Even within
that complex only Edo mythmakers or historians (take your pick) locate the antecedents of the progenitor in a manner
that is at least in agreement with Ifa's assertion that the progenitor was a “stranger” in Ife. Certain nationalist
historiographical exigencies may posit otherwise, but I think that Soyinka’s equation of Orisanla with Obatala (and by
extension, Orunmila) throws our quest in the laps of the historians, Ade Obayemi and Isola Olomola, in their
contributions to I.A, Akinjobin's IFE, the cradle of a race and Adiele Afigbo (especially in The Igbo Experience: A
Prolegomenon and Igbo enwe eze: beyond Onwumechili and Onwuejeogwu.

In different ways, they have roundly speculated upon the historical status of Obatala as the pre-existing King of Ife
before Odudua. In their historiography, the assertive arrival of Odudua in Ife (through what we might call a coup)
led to the displacement of Obatala and his party of autochthons, the Igbo who will thereafter be known to popular
imagination through the Moremi myth. Olomola in fact posits that the pre-existing name for Ife was Igbamokun while
Afigbo designates “The entire group of the first migrants which stretched from Yorubaland to the present Igboland
…….. as Mega-Igbo”, to distinguish them from the micro-Igbo. The scattering of the autochthons explains the famine
which befalls the land. Who needs to ask what becomes of harvest time if farmers never had a planting season?
Surely, as in Obotunde Ijimere’s play The imprisonment of Obatala, “Creation comes to a standstill/When he who
turns blood into children/ is lingering in jail”. Or in exile.

The displacement of the autochthons who were the farmers, artisans and the keepers of the shrine led to calamities.
Tradition has it that Odudua made efforts to bring back Obatala’s party. But the reconciliation did not work.
Intermittent battles, a virtual civil war, erupted and petered out until it became the case that Obatala’s party were to be
encountered thereafter in scattered remnants which today are recalled only in terms of the names of towns that bear
Igbo as suffix or prefix to their names. This is as much history as myth.

The unaltered tale in all traditions centers on the survival of the Oracle; it meant that, as insider or outsider, there was
always an institutional cover for the ethic that Obatala represented. What Soyinka credits Obatala with is more like a
programme of a masonic order personified by a leader. Obatala is “ all clear tone and winnowed lyric, of order and
harmony, stately and saintly. Significantly, the motif is white for transparency of heart and mind: there is a rejection of
mystery; tones of vesture and music combine to banish mystery and terror; the poetry of the song is litanic, the
dramatic idiom is the processional or ceremonial”. This is affirmation of the archetypal “cool” god, who does not accept
blood sacrifices, “whose task is to create the lifeless form of man” into which life is breathed by Olodumare, the
Supreme deity himself…. A peep at the historical narratives suggests how Obatala, as leader of the autochthons
emerges as the back of which Orunmila, the master of divination and prophecy, the keeper of the old gnosis, is the
front. Even before deification, Obatala, the autochthon, is quite a world from Ogun and Sango, the ‘hot’ gods of the
pantheon.

The latter create dynasties, build states, live by performing outstanding feats, engaging in proto-scientific experiments
such as lightning conduction in the case of Sango or in Ogun’s case, making a living by breaking frontiers, bathing in
blood, if need be, and daring to push nature to its limits. Whereas Obatala’s followers are preservers of customs,
institutions and traditions, the hot gods are patrons of darers and inventors, state builders. Obatala is the philosopher
who interpretes the world where the Ogun-Sango complex is determined to change it. The hot gods create the lived
experiences that provide the knowledge which Obatala-Orunmila (Agbonmiregun?) turn into the wisdom of the
divination tray. It is not surprising for instance that Ogun is present in myths of origin of most towns because the god
of iron was patron deity of the warriors or clearers of paths towards new habitations. At Ire-Ekiti, as the history shows,
there was especial reason to picture Ogun as a foundational deity even if he was not there at the beginning.

Obatala may be god of creation and epitome of purity and may have been syncretized from the original oneness of
Orisanla but like all the gods of incompleteness “is always marked by some act of excess, hubris or other human
weakness.” As Soyinka remarks “The uncancelled error of Obatala, god of soul purity, was his weakness for
drink…..One day, …Obatala allowed himself to take a little too much of that potent draught, palmwine. His craftman’s
fingers slipped bady and he molded cripples, albinos and the blind. As a result of this error, Obatala rigidly forbids
palm wine to his followers. That is the language of myth. The language of history is that much of what is known about
Obatala is the product of the victors so that the politics of representation may have had a lot to do with this
characterization. Such that when Soyinka tells us that “part of the compensating principle of the Yoruba world view is
revealed in the fact that by contrast, Ogun, who was yet another victim of draught, makes palm wine a mandatory
ingredient of his worship”, we ought to consider other explanations. If there was a special need to distinguish the ‘cool’ god Obatala from Ogun the archetypal “hot” god, this palmwine ethic does it. One god strives to resist temptation, hard as it may be to succeed, the other accedes to it. But there is indeed more to it than just a palm-wine.

A naturalistic explanation inheres in the timeless truth that warriors and hunters and where do you find an army that is not involved with wine and women – are wine-swilling tribes. It may tell us a lot about the pragmatic nature of the Yoruba but it tells us more about the general nature of the warrior ethic which Ogun personified. Which is really another way of saying that Soyinka’s mythopoesis emphasizes its Yoruba-centredness but it is divested of the high nationality markers, as the critic Ato Quayson notes in Biodun Jeyifo’s Wole Soyinka: Freedom and Complexity (p.207). When Soyinka uses the word Yoruba the not-so-parochial reader is supposed to read it as “African” – meaning “traditional”.

That this is the proper implication of Soyinka’s usages is discernible from his refusal or unwillingness to buy one inauthentic version of the Ogun myth which puts him as arriving in Ile-Ife after he breached the primeval gulf and cleared the jungle to mankind. His choice of the authentic source of the Ogun myth in Ire actually displaces a politics of nationality that it would have had in the normal frescos of nationality that are being painted by ultra-nationalist historians in search of a Yoruba nation that was always there, even if it had to wait for the nineteenth and twentieth century to be discovered by adventuring nation-builders.

Although anyone wishing to discover its Yorubaness may be able to find and bow down to it, “it is more important for Soyinka to expand the myths to embrace fresh realities than to use them for their usual role of validating one town or another or the affirming of a particular social hierarchy”. It is so generally oriented towards an ever-widening cultural geography that it made more caused more than humourous vibes during the Nobel Prize ceremony in Stockholm when Soyinka included Nordic gods among the younger siblings of Ogun. The maneuver is sometimes so successful that one wonders that appear fails to press home the grain of truth in Anthony Appiah’s suggestion of “a kind of Yoruba imperialism of the African thought-world” in his book, IN MY FATHER’S HOUSE. Appiah concedes that if Soyinka is an imperialist he is not necessarily for the Yoruba cause but for his own artistic revision of the Yoruba pantheon. His revisionism is simply the artist’s Will To Power, reducing all history to myth which we are obliged to share only as the artistic bricoleur has fashioned it. The quite ingenious removal of Ogun from the local politics of nationality allows the god to travel outside the realms of ancestor worship to which it would have been unnecessarily hitched if Soyinka had located him too closely with Ile, a central precinct of Yoruba cultural geography. The consequent displacement has enabled Soyinka not only to create a metaphysical universe in which Ogun ranges over enormous swathes of terrestial space but to stride beyond the Yoruba Universe towards pan-African ambitions and projects.

The consequent universalist twist to Ogun’s will, I would say, is a civilizing agency. From Ire, Ogun’s agency clears the paths. A cutlass, hoe, spear, or axe in the communal foraging for living space under the direction of the Ifa Oracle brings one migrant party after another to its pre-determined home. Ogun becomes a prime agency in the founding and defence of domiciles, performing an essentially civilizing role in bringing clans and moieties and tribes to the platform of a common nationality and beyond that to the racial commune. Every ethnic group or fraction that wishes can swear by its own Ogun. Soyinka aids this process by so successfully divesting his patron deity of all historical accouterments thus enabling the god to travel across borders into neighboring cultures as just an African god.

Indeed, it is as an African God that Ogun has been travelling for centuries mainly through the agency of the Yoruba, a more-travelled people than the Edo. In the resilience of the god in the New World is hidden an ambition that is advertised by Soyinka’s universalism. It ought not to be surprising therefore that as Ogun travels from one place to another, there are accretions of new characteristics around a core-personage who definitively over-appropriates the qualities of the other gods in the pantheon. The god takes on an onomatopoeic cast in the sense that in the modern context of an industrial civilization the iron complex is at the heart of almost every endeavour. To talk of electricity and electronic science, Sango’s fort, is to accost Ogun. Although the plastic arts, Obatala’s realm, is not of Ogun, how can it be denied in the modern world.? The transposition of the god from pre-industrial to an industrial deity is one of those poetic leaps of the religious imagination which makes the conception of eternity and timelessness so easy to accomodate within the constraints of finite concepts.

The imperialistic sway of the god has however been contested by another Nigerian dramatist, Femi Osofisan. A Yoruba like Soyinka, he once argued that Soyinka’s recourse to the gods was retrogressive,(retrogressive from
what?), but he has since chosen Orunmila, another deity, master of divination, as the god most likely to be of service in our times. Apparently, he is so enamoured of the metaphoric significance of his chosen deity that he does not see the necessity to elaborate the god’s ritual properties. He avers: “In response to Soyinka’s Ogun model, … I have substituted the Opon Ifa paradigm, in which you have a dialectical fusion of the Esu-Orunmila principles”…This fusion yields, in his view, “anarchic conservatism” such as was recommended by Professor Billy Dudley who saw the necessity for political skepticism on the part of the citizenry and therefore some measure of disorder as inevitable in society “if order is to be achieved”. Away from rigorous anarchism, which is a rejection of all authority, Osofisan’s Esu, a deity “much maligned by Christians and mistaken for Satan” represents “the principle of free choice and of revolution – the god who, with his prominent phallus, promiscuously incarnates the place of doubt and disjunction, but also justice and accommodation in our metaphysical

Orunmila is presented as the “winnowing spirit which distills wisdom from chaos, prophecy from uncertainty, harmony from disjunction”. Although the ethic of the god functions within basic animism which Osofisan once considered unprogressive by nature, he takes refuge in it, setting up Soyinka’s Ogun in diametrical opposition to Orunmila. On ogun’s side you have “cultic separation from the banality of the quotidian”, “the language of the shrine” the psychic and cerebral which leave “terror untouched”, while on the other side you have deliverance, a solidary voice of consolation, the language of the public square, and therapeutic possibilities.

Soyinka’s Ogun is presented as a harbinger of “power-mongering and bloodlust” whose messianism however positive, carries the “potential danger of the annihilation of an entire nation through the tyrant’s hubris”. Osofisan asks: “in an age where soldiers are the authors of our anomie, responsible for spreading the poison of violence and corruption in the ventricles of public life, is the Ogun image not precisely the kind we need to discourage and e-emphasize in our polity?”. Evidently, what Osofisan upholds is a continuation of the partisan confrontation which has helped to create in Yoruba history parties that read their histories not from the past to the present but from the present to the past, such that those who identify with a particular personage in a current situation re-interpret the past in terms of that personage.

It is a characteristics that Bernard Belasco describes as a feature of “Yoruba consciousness ..saturated in a series of lived antinomies which may be synopsized as the Obatalan-Ogun opposition – peace-war, lineage-palace, communal-individual, autochthon-stranger, kin mutuality-market exchange, mother-witches”. Belasco, benefitting from the writings of Bolaji Idowu explains it as an evocation of the “historic conflict between a warrior stratum led by Odudua and indigenous horticulturalists whose tutelary divinity was Obatala” (p.108). Osofisan’s self-advertized functioning within the ambit of these antinomies may not be skin deep, only an artistic maneuver. But it provides enough grist for wonder about how the effort he has made to distance himself from “the tainted aura of militarism” fits into rituals that are within the precedent logic of the chosen deity. Face to face with an era of war, do we appeal to peace-niks, the flower-children or the minder of the arsenal? Surely, not having threshed out, in ritual terms, his chosen deity’s relation to an age of militarism, it is as a metaphor in the present tense that his Orunmila intervenes in current battles. As a pacifist in war-torn zone, it is important never to forget that Orunmila functions within Ogun’s sphere of existence.

In reality, clearly, the antinomies, become self-defeatist. First, because the pride of the animism, something that Soyinka has consistently emphasized is that it is eclectic and liberal, admitting into its frameless frame, any new knowledge produced by the ‘hot’ gods. Once new knowledge is incorporated and domesticated within the Ifa system: it becomes part of the Knowledge Industry. It is pooled knowledge which makes no distinction between the two supposed polarities, Ogun on one side and Orunmila on the other. The differences break down as each god answers to a different set of problems, a different principle, but benefits from the pooling of knowledge within the Ifa system. This is not necessarily a virtue. What it says about the pantheon however is that there isnt one god for all occasions. No god is complete enough to answer all questions. Setting two gods at loggerheads whom you would need to reconcile to get things properly done is like wasting a life in order to complain about it.

The truth of the matter is that although Soyinka’s Ogun appears to range over the whole pantheon, there are realms foreclosed to the god because there are areas in which the god lacks salience or shall we say competence. In those areas, increasingly constricted under Ogunnian pressure, the superiority of the animistic and pagan system to other contending religious brackets lies in upholding a multiple principle in nature within a oneness that is both ontology and goal. It may well be speculated that seeking to achieve that Oneness was Awolowo’s achiement in secular politics. It never quite held, for Yoruba or for Nigerian politics for reasons which are outside the scope of this lecture. The
interesting part however is that what subsists shares the Judeo-christian ideal which recognizes saints, and affirms the plural principle. True not in the same manner than the animist system grants autochtony to the deities but it sets grounds, across the board for illegitimizing the oppositional logic that places one god against another in the supposed search for harmony or therapy. Beyond the zeal of proselytizing religions, therefore, the point is to recognize planes of existence in which only some principles but not others are, or can be active in a world of shared or shareable empathy.

Unfortunately, Osofisan's response to Soyinka's Ogun is from an oppositional site in a binary altercation that places Orunmila, with or without the help of Esu, on a collision course with the god of iron and war. Wittingly or unwittingly, Obatala-Orunmila, deity of prophecy and preserver of accepted knowledge, is given a new role from the one authorized by the rituals of the god. The truth is that what devotees want do not necessarily determine what the gods can do. What the gods do is already part of their nature as prescribed by their location in the pantheon. Osofisan's Orunmila may well be presented as a god of justice and protector of the masses but this is only from the standpoint of metaphor not ritual. In history, in mytho-historical time, that is, Obatala was indeed god of the popular masses, leader of the Igbo, the natives in Ife, until Oduduwa's coup against him led to his exile and his armed attempts to re-possess the kingdom. Given Obatala’s famed revulsion for violence and bloodshed, it is understandable that his war of return or re-possession consisted in entering the town in gory-faced masks which frightened people off while they raided and looted and abducted women. That is, until Moremi, a princess of the town, took what must be regarded as the authentic mix of Ogunnian and Obatalan step of letting herself be carried, married off to one of her abductors, learning the secrets of the masked attackers and reporting back to her own people.

In spite of Moremi’s feats, in modern festivals, the masquerades still come out from the bush or the holes and women are prevented from going out. It suggests genealogies beyond the common run for today’s rituals. Clearly, we have here in a nutshell the context that produced the Moremi myth which Femi Osofisan has dramatized in a highly idiosyncratic manner in Morountodun, sashally reworking history and myth as a powerful metaphor. His resort to metaphor, un-supported by lived experiences but straining for the wisdom of the divination tray, allows him, in Soyinka’s words, to offer “heroic myths up as sacrifice on a would-be universalist altar by a deliberate and gratuitous distortion”.

One quick point here is that when Soyinka talks of a gratuitous distortion he is making a distinction between his own kind of revision, on the one hand, the inauthentic versions that have imported Christianity into the pantheon, on the other and the wilder ideological presumptions of Osofisan’s dramaturgy. Whether it is a “will to ideological respectability” or some other imperative that yields such a distortion, what matters is that there are, putatively, consequences from the standpoint of a hermeneutics of social organization. For anyone living in a time of crisis and seeking to understand and provide solutions to crying problems, the question is whether a particular distortion can meet the Nietzschean scheme in The Birth of Tragedy for a “mythic foundation which guarantees its union with religion and its basis in mythic conceptions” that serve as the potent unwritten law of the commonwealth. Such a foundation is the ambition of Soyinka's mythopoesis. But it is an ambition that, in my view, cannot be realized without a recasting of the mythic sensibility in a more secular direction than it has pursued so far. Whether the search is for social harmony, a revolution or plain social change there is a peculiarity to the knowledge that the gods provide which can be of service in contemporary society whichever way we view it: Afrocentric, Western, modernist or post-modernist.

OGUN AND MANAGEMENT SCIENCE

It seems rather abrupt to move from myths and myth makers to modern theories of management and organization. But there is a warrant for it. While monotheists, and ideologically correct defenders of secular culture may be hard put to allow a discussion of the gods within their paradigms, theories are emerging from the most unlikely sectors which suggest that a knowledge of the gods may be more of service today than is usually supposed. The knowledge is steeped in religiosity, but as part of a way of engaging problems of organization in modern secular society – in schools, hospitals, barracks, factories, farms, government or private sector - there is hardly a more germane repository of axioms for the purpose of achieving organizational effectiveness. In particular, Management theorist, Charles Handy, one of the gurus of Prime Minister Tony Blair’s futurist platform, has brought to form a way of reasoning about the gods which may befuddle the uninitiated but invites a way of deploying the Greek pantheon to remove organizational failure. In his books Understanding Organizations and Gods of Management (Arrow Books, 1995), Handy provides a creative retrieval of an old hermeneutics based on Greek and pre-Christian paganism.
which indicates how the conclave of the gods makes sense beyond the religious context within which they are usually discussed.

He situates them firmly within the realm of management science. Based on the principle of equifinality which posits that there isn’t only one way to organize - that we can arrive at the same goals from different directions – he looks at four archetypal gods of management, Zeus, Apollo, Athena., and Dionysus. Zeus, almost like but not quite an Orisanla figure, is a patriarchal personage who brings order in situations of fluidity; a deity positioned to take quick decisions, but generally bored by routine and prone to a person-culture in organization. Charles Handy pictures the format around this god as The Club Culture exemplified by a spider web.

The second archetypal god of management is Apollo, the god of rules and order, a true god of the bureaucracy, a god of, more or less, settled times when what happened yesterday may well happen tomorrow, a follower of precedents with skills for counting and numbering, but not very helpful in turbulent times. Apollo’s is a role culture, which defines the job to be done rather than the personality that would do the job or perform the role. “Its picture is a Greek temple, for Greek temples draw their strength and their beauty from the pillars”. The third god of organization is Athena, a young woman, the warrior goddess, patroness of Odysseus, “that arch problem-solver, and of craftsmen and pioneering captains”. The format is: “First define the problem, then allocate to its solution the appropriate resources, give the resulting group of men, machines and money the go-ahead, and wait for the solution.

Judge performance in terms of results, solved problems”. The picture of the Athena culture “is a net, because it draws resources from various parts of the organizational system in order to focus them on a particular knot or problem. Power lies in the interstices of the net, not at the top, as in the Apollo culture, or at the centre, as in the Zeus organization. The organization is a network of loosely-linked commando units each being largely self-contained but with a specific responsibility within an overall strategy…….The culture recognizes only expertise as the base of power or influence. Age does not impress, nor length of service, nor closeness of kin to the owner. To contribute to your group, talent is what is needed, and creativity, a fresh approach and new intuitions”.(p.28). Athena’s is a task culture, dealing with research, development departments, consultancies, even advertising. “Variety, not predictability, is the yeast of this kind of management.

The fourth god of management, according to Charles Handy, is Dionysius, god of wine and Song. He represents the existential ideology among the gods. Existentialism starts from the assumption that the world is not some part of a higher purpose; we are not simply instruments of some god. Instead, although the fact that we exist at all is an accident, if anyone is responsible for us and our world, it is ourselves. We are in charge of our own destinies. This is not a reason for self-indulgent selfishness, for Kant’s categorical imperative applies, that whatever we ordain or wish for ourselves must be equally applicable to the rest of mankind. Wine and orgies wont work unless someone makes the wine, and that someone must potentially include us”. Handy states the organizational implications: “In all the other three cultures, the individual is subordinate to the organization: the style of the relationship may vary, but the individual is there to help the organization achieve its purpose and is paid in one way or another by the organization for doing that. In this fourth existential culture, the organization exists to help the individual achieve his purpose”(p.32). The Dionysian culture belongs to professionals; it exists for its participants, a commune culture of mutually independent
stars who recognize no "boss".

The impression we get, after Handy’s introduction of the four gods is that we have always known them. The difference is that, from the standpoint of management science, the commitment that people make to the different gods is outside the ponderous, religious overhang of the ‘old’ pantheon. Charles Handy deepens the secular edge and utility of his proposition by drawing attention to their everyday involvements in management problems. Organizations, he argues, always tend to “put the common good before individual need and so they tend to try to translate Dionysians into Athenians, the existential into the task culture”. In the end, as he also reasons in Understanding Organizations, it becomes obvious that no god is able to live without the other gods. In essence, organizations are generally obliged to have to mix the cultures in order to achieve goals. It does not follow that any mix will do. Some mixes, it turns out, are more relevant and effective than others. Nor is it about being married to or committed to a patron deity. The aim is to ensure a fit between the nature of the problem to be solved and the god who is appealed to, for solutions. Difficulties arise, and organizational failure results, when the wrong gods are invited to the work-table.

A remarkable feature of Handy’s scheme is that it does not need to be much revised or panel-beaten to agree with the animist praxis that Soyinka’s Ogun upholds. The Dionysian, we might propose, is an Ogun figure with enough frenzy to meet and correct the ossification of social reflexes. But there are days for Apollo, the Obatala figure, the role-player, lord of the formal, bureaucratic ethos; there are forms of organization which conform to the will of Narcissus, self-luxuriating god; or the more ecstatic forms which tie up with Athena’s task culture. The Esu figure would be coincident with the Greek god, Hermes, a god of pure technie, task oriented, or as Debray has called him, a jack of all trades, who is generally viewed in the Yoruba pantheon as beyond good and evil. All the gods, in essence, embody concerns buried within the pantheistic, animistic or what is incorrectly described as pagan traditions. In Charles Handy’s creative retrieval of the old gnosia, the purpose is not to graft extraneous matter on the behaviour of the gods but to follow the rituals of the gods, their ‘characterological’ attributes. For effect, the gods, depicted in terms of the understanding they represent in the management of organizations, are not so much summoned, as recognized, appeased and given their due.

Ogun, for instance, may be a personal god chosen as a matter of temperament, or ideological orientation. But, as the Italian semiotician, Umberto Eco discovered in Brazil, and as he reports in the essay Whose side are the Orixa on?, (Travels in Hyper Reality), you do not so much chose but are chosen. He, for instance, was told by different pai de santos, patriarchs of umbanda shrines, that he was a child of Ozala (Obatala). In effect, it is not so much a choice that one’s culture makes - although a culture may be predominantly of one god than the other at a particular time. It is a choice that one represents within a culture. The choice of Ogun, for that matter, may amount to the choice of a strategy, a typology of action, which could meet some situations but not necessarily others in the face of a culture attuned in other directions. Handy posits, for the benefit of modern management science, that as not only individuals but also organizations can be of one god-type or culture, individuals who are Athenians can find themselves in Dionysian organizations just as Zeus figures may function within Apollonian organizations.

The consequent mix may lead to success or failure depending on the problem at hand. In the circumstance, the task of management is not just to learn to recognize its own god, but to consider which personage fits the task at hand. Problems of routine are generally ceded to the Apollonian-Obatalan figure. Those which call for initiative, the breaking of logjams in difficult situations, in particular, problems involving a confabulation of equal citizens in a political organization or trade union or echelon of professionals - not only iron workers and soldiers now but also others - are necessarily in the region of Ogun-Dionysius.

All the gods, quintessentially, function within what Nietzsche describes as the chthonic realm: Soyinka’s fourth stage, a zone in mythic space, distinct from but encompassing the world of the living, the dead and the unborn, an-in-between world, in which all the agonies of gods and humankind are experienced, transformed and re-incrbed for the fortification of human will. Although both Nietzsche and Soyinka resolve the chthonic realm into a religious force-field in which the distance between men and gods may be reduced and the differences between the gods are made known, resolved, terrestrialized or superseded, we may also view it in a secular light as a zone of hard decisions in which uncertainties are breached which thereafter affect the present and reshape how we relate to the past and the future. The chthonic realm in essence is a zone of contingency, indeterminacy and risk, where critical decision-making takes place; where the arts and the sciences may serve as limbs deployed to determine or pre-determine outcomes! That is, depending on how the gods mix or are mixed.
Even within this secular understanding, it retains its primeval attributes: the critical decisions that it engages fall within a typology, already prefigured by a past event, repeated in age after age, offering the basis for fore-knowledge of the way things are or could be. Mostly, we are dealing with human Will, stripped to a prong for the mastery of eventualities - the processes of change and of becoming, the cycle of the seasons, the eternal returns of mornings noons and evenings in the life of people and projects; the fact that people are born, grow old and die. Of course, immersion in the chthonic realm is supposed to change a lineal perception of time in the pursuit of goals: visualizing situations in terms of life circles, yet, accommodating respect for chronologies in order to map the grounds for effective individual and collective action. The implication is that there is an everyday chthonic realm or fourth stage in the affairs of the world outside the big decisive happenings in history.

In politics, it may be mapped by institutions created for the purpose of absorbing changes or simply swimming with the tide. In any circumstance, those intent on breaking the normal rhythm of things need to be aware of the score in terms of the gods that must be appeased. Knowing that eventual decay or ossification is the fate of all phenomena, what god must be appeased to obviate the imminence of, shall we say, violent change when what were once solutions become crying problems? This is a question that many polities have found answers to in periodic elections - liberal democracy as a means of social renewal. Chairman Mao in China thought otherwise and sought to avoid ossification and social decay through Cultural Revolutions. But the trauma of seasonal upheavals, answerable to no known procedures but the whims of the secular Promethians, could not produce the requisite Apollonian/Obatalan modus for handling recurrent ventures.

It may be recalled that Mao’s positioning on the question of the Cultural Revolution was an advance on the theory of Permanent Revolution, a theory that assumed the linearity of commitment to proletarian consciousness irrespective of the cultural pressures, ideas, events, and changes in the structure of the population. The unconscionable commitment to this linearity partly explains the demise of the Soviet Union. On the other hand, the repudiation of a permanent revolution - and suggesting some kind of cultural determinism - explains why Obafemi Awolowo in his The People’s Republic accepted almost every plank in the Marxist notion of society but affirmed periodic elections, and rejected the idea of a stateless society. The state as a means for expressing human will, he reasoned, would not wither away, whether at the level of the village, the tribe, the nationality, the continent or the supra-supra of a World Government. The exercise of human will was thus affirmed as a constant requirement for the defence of decent life on earth. How to bring will to the fore? This – let it be argued – is, eternally, the political question, and the central problem at the heart of social and political organization.

We encounter variants of the problem in Soyinka’s works. In The Interpreters, Egbo has to decide, as the Odemo of Isara in Soyinka’s hometown had to, whether to serve his country in the civil service, in the urban maelstrom or move to his hometown, essentially to the backwoods, to become a traditional ruler. Lazarus in the same novel, the most political of the characters although cast in a religious light, gathers the down and outs of society together, but what is he to do with them? Fuse them into a movement or simply let the synergy of their being together lead where it will? The answer would appear to have come in the follow-up novel, SEASON OF ANOMY. Pa Ahime, the Mao-Orisanla figure, in the novel represents a life-affirming ethic whose missioners are intent on moving the country away from a violence-prone cabal towards humane directions. Failure dogs the missioners he sends out to proselytize the hostile, unequally yoked cultural geographies of the country. What grounds may be threshed for the sharing of empathy and deploying commonalities of intent and action? When one family union, led by a wise benign patriarch, pursues a political mission as such, what are the principles that must cement its relationship with other family unions? How does one family union transform itself into a means of awakening for another without becoming itself a bastion of reaction and a threat to the integrity and self-will of the other? How create a nation out of a multiplicity of tribes and moieties?

In KONGI’S HARVEST, the Prince turns revolutionary. What are the institutional forms that would ensure the survival of the new ethic if the old order, remains the platform that grants legitimacy to new ventures? Or to bring Death and the King’s Horseman down to its rootedness in living history! We encounter a people who had witnessed the death of one King after another in circumstances that pointed to the King’s Horseman as the serial murderer. The community decides that the only way to prevent the consistent disruption of succession to kingly authority, and the instability created in society as a result, is for every King’s Horseman to die with the King. The Horseman who wishes to live long must therefore make it his business to keep his King alive. Meanwhile, every King’s Horseman is granted all the privileges and sumptuousness, artfully ritualized, while he is on this side of the metaphorical divide. Then comes this Elesin Oba, who after enjoying all the privileges of his station, weighed down by the sweetness of this world, is unable
to make the supreme sacrifice at the end of the day.

Not unlike many contemporary leaders who, without a thought to the dangers posed to the community and to succeeding generations by such dereliction of duty, see public office as a feast of self-aggrandizement rather than an opportunity for hard work, service and sacrifice for the common good! No doubt, the custom of killing the Elesin or requiring him ‘to commit death’ is barbaric! But how sustain the boggled will of the community without dealing with the original crisis that led to communal insistence on the necessity for the King’s Horseman to ride with the King to the other side of the metaphysical divide! How in such a situation to ignore the ethic of vigilance and creativity that constitute the will of Ogun? The short of it is that conceiving a world that can subsist without an Ogunnnian ethic is to imagine a world without politics or difficult choices. Where Ogun supervenes, there is a presumption of creativity untrammeled by fear, a necessity to celebrate individuals and groups who possess the requisite sense of ‘initiative’ and ‘dare’. Ogun is a god constantly seeking, through daring acts of will or song and dance, to break away from, or dissolve the jams, strictures and immobilities that become life-destroying in society. The god’s propensity to excess is however well known. It is a function of the incompleteness which humankind shares with deities. To seek to reduce it, is the beginning of wisdom; wisdom that is supposed to be covered by the Apollonian/Obatalan capacity for institution-building. This is why the parable of Ogun’s bloodbaths, the drunken bouts of Obatala, and the constant mischief of Esu testing reality beyond good and evil, is at the heart of the narrations of the animist pantheon. By ‘outing’ the intrinsic incompleteness of the gods, ample room is allowed for humankind to exercise creativity and ‘dare’.

We need to watch out however on the tendency to treat the gods of management only as personalities, as individuals. They could also be imagined as a class, as institutions, as nations. This gives us Dionysian-Ogunnnian leaders and organizations, Apollonian-Obatalan nations and institutions, in the sense in which talks about Asian Tigers have emphasized what are called Confucian values. Which ever is the case, whether pictured as individuals, groups or institutions, there is a problem of primeval proportions to deal with: an individual makes performances within a group; and a group may accede to a common cause as if it is an individual. The key term here is as if, a construction that must never be forgotten, for once forgotten that it is a construction, it disrupts what needs to be constantly willed and defended - the capacity for collective self-affirmation and creativity.

This, the eternal political question, is resolved by Plato at the feet of the philosopher-king. Machiavelli gave the ace to the Prince. Rousseau celebrated it in the idea of the Legislator backed by a political religion. Nietzsche made it a factor of the Overman, a Zarathustra, beyond good and evil. They all raise the kind of questions that Gramsci faced when he reasoned that The Modern Prince cannot be an individual but must be a political party, an organized group. Whether a party or not, as the case of the Communist systems showed in the 20th century, the wisdom supplied by the animistic code suggests that no group is beyond decay, deterioration, debasement, or the hardening of arteries that turns once innovative bodies into grumpy conservative outfits. Once the circle of decay or debasement sets in, the world sooner than later gets a Stalin, a Hitler, a Kongi or some such variation on the theme of impunity, according to the iron law of oligarchy. Needless to say, in Africa, barring a few exceptions, we seem to be always on the verge of having Dionysus, the Prince without the political party and therefore the Modern Prince without a sense of the larger nation.

Crude individualism has tended to be at the heart of collective action. The mass parties have often been dominated by the personalism and patrimonialism of the Boss-type or incompetent messianic figure who, like military dictators across the board, refuse to acknowledge that their success at democratization lies in working for the condition of their own irrelevance. The late twentieth century approach to this possibility was to say that, since every concerted programme eventually produces a Stalin, a Hitler, or a Kongi, the world must do without a party or trade union with a social programme. The paradox is that among the most anti-stalinist rhetoricians of the twentieth century was Mrs Margaret Thatcher, Prime Minister of Britain who left behind her the image of an authoritarian leader who did not believe in “society”. She is a good example of how any principle pursued to its limits turns in the opposite direction; and proof that a society deprived of core-will may forfeit it to an individual. It may be argued that British society was never forgotten, for once forgotten that it is a construction, it disrupts what needs to be constantly willed and defended - the capacity for collective self-affirmation and creativity.

Understandably, there may well be a tradition of seeing the primeval gulf as an outlandish outpost through which Ogunnnian personages deploy a will of iron to clear paths to solutions. The secularization implied by management science terrestializes it however so that it could involve the perception of organizational strategy, not just as a plan or a programme of action: but, as organization theorist Henry Mintzberg has proposed, the pattern that emerges from a stream of decisions. The consequence of this proposition is to view the activism of the gods as manifest not only in
critical situations but in responses to work-a-day circumstances. This resolves the common tendency, in the face of hard and difficult times for a country, to put the notion of a revolutionary break permanently on the agenda. No doubt, without breaking the mould that constrains the affirmation of life, one trashes in vain for therapy, harmony and lasting deliverance within the frames of ossified power. But it is also quite crucial to appreciate the animist intimations which suggest that, for it to stand, any revolutionary break, requires an ethic, ritualized (formalized in everyday terms) rather than flightily or gratuitously, acceded to, in grand theoretics. So to say, organization may be the weapon and the best protection of the weak, but only if the frenzy of Ogun’s creativity can be normalized through the serenity of Obatala’s accession to rules, ordered action, bureaucracy.

It is the self-revising way, within the animist intimations of the pantheon, to neutralize excess. This is why, in the end, it is illusionist to set gods against one another. Setting the gods at each other’s throats amounts to creating dogma where cooperation and inclusiveness (at least, on the divination tray) constitute the media of problem-solution. Where however the gods, for reasons of ambition, sheer imperviousness or willed deviation, do not cooperate, or go against their assumed nature or attributes by breaking into areas where they have no competence, it seems to me normal that there should be argument, debate, and in the final analysis, confrontation. Soyinka’s repudiation of proselytizing religions appears to be no way out. Anyone reading ART, DIALOGUE AND OUTRAGE, and his trenchant response to his many, rather unfair, critics will agree that his distaste for proselytizing religions is not even skin–deep. The reality is that although there may be no one way to organize, and different routes may lead to a common destination, it is not every way of organizing and not all routes, yield organizational effectiveness from the standpoint of social reconstruction. Contexts, for that matter, do generate the rationale for proselytization when differences between gods yield divergent rituals.

In a world in which sociology and anthropology may not allow art and analysis their innocence, the ideal is, first of all, to accept dissimilarities as normal between people, then seek balance on the basis of commonalities to ensure that every difference does not necessarily yield or imply antagonisms. All the same, since the Ogunnian ethic is mostly about taking hard decisions, making choices, within the absolute recognition of the co-existence of a creative and destructive essence in social being, it obliges devotees to appeal not to dogma, whimsy, artifice, or mere prophecy, but to some form of inter-subjectively accessible experience which can carry, or be tested, across religious and cultural differences. The emergent knowledge is assumedly one that can be applied in running a shop, a school, a barracks or a shoe factory while awaiting the realization of prophecy. In effect, the activism of the gods is placed on a secular counterpane that approximates a proto-science -- as in the social sciences - which tests arguments and claims against a referent out there in the more objective world thus reducing, in relative terms, the circularity and hence dogma of contending claims.

All that I have said so far is, properly speaking, to make a case for and argue a basis for such a proto-science. In particular, I think that the feats of the historical Ogun authorize devotees and non-devotees alike, to visualize a model nation-builder whose temper may not be coincident with modern demands but whose strategy of grasping and making use of knowledge wherever it could be found remains a standard to be emulated. The distinguishing practice of Ogun’s reign, of seeking out people with outstanding capabilities, and creating for them a conducive atmosphere for the prosecution of their special skills, is not dissimilar to the current practice of the United States of America which sources skills from all over the world for the aggrandizement of her industries, her arts and sciences. To pursue such a path with zeal is to have a view of knowledge which does not allow prejudices of nationality and the biases of religions to over-determine knowledge acquisition. It also implies a certain level of civic responsibility on the part of the state for the protection of the faithful as well as dissentients, strangers as well as indigenes. It offers a challenge to modern day nation-builders in Africa especially those who make a fetish of the distinction between the West and the rest of us thus creating an irresolvable culture-clash in the building of Knowledge Industries.

The Ogunnian ethic, as it works out, takes Knowledge as One, with diverse roots feeding the common, universal, tree. It posits the necessity to revise the notion that African traditional religions, based on ancestor-worship or the animistic tropes around gods and goddesses, are necessarily anti-science or pre-scientific. The disparagement of the religions, pressed beyond certain limits, merely exposes the monologue of Western assault on subjected peoples which appropriates for its uses the very elements that it decries in other cultures. Or, rather, it belongs to the genre of bad science, which is not just about witchcraft, juju, or magic, but the absence of an inter-subjective rationale or approach to knowledge acquisition. If nothing else, such ‘bad science’ makes it axiomatic: that the conquered who fail to acquire the knowledge with which they were conquered may be re-conquered again and again. Those who do not want to be re-conquered, in my view, have something to learn from Soyinka’s Ogun who I insist is the fifteenth century Oba of the Edo Kingdom, deified. The Edo people in the 15th century stood by the hermeneutics of their King, and prospered. If the country of which the Edo are now a part dares to learn from that past, the travails of the Edo Century, as I have
described it, will come to an end.

Egharevba Memorial Lecture Delivered at Motel Benin Plaza, in Benin City On 19th December, 2003