



BLOOD AND WINE. SOYINKA'S BACCHAE AS EXAMPLE OF SYNCRETIC, CIRCULAR AND MULTIDIMENSIONAL THEATRE

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ABSTRACT. This paper is a summary of Wole Soyinka's *Bacchae* of Euripides: A Communion Rite, a Nigerian dramatic rewriting from Euripides' *Bacchae*. This analysis which identifies the similarities and the inconsistencies between the ancient Greek myths and gods and the Yoruba cosmogony and rituals, will focus on the idea of drama as an ideal medium for social and political expression within a postcolonial space. The following aspects of Soyinka's *Bacchae* will be taken under consideration: the relationship between the classical prototype and its Yoruba version (the re-contextualization of time, space and characters; the similarities and the inconsistencies between the ancient Greek myths and gods and the Yoruba cosmogony and folklore); the cultural and metaphysical syncretism; third and last, the metamorphosis of the myth's identity, that is, the deconstruction of traditional western canons and themes replaced by precolonial rituals. The result is a syncretic theatre.

PAROLE CHIAVE: Syncretism, Yoruba, Stage, Chorus of Slaves.

The origin of the word syncretism is singular. It means union of the Cretans. It was said, indeed, that the Cretans, always ready to quarrel among themselves, were allied when an external enemy appeared. It was, therefore, a defensive concept that surpasses the internal political juggling that was specific to the Greeks

in general, in order to maintain freedom and to defeat a far worse enemy than the friend-domestic enemy (Spineto 2009). This desire to unite conflicting groups, this search for alliances between different parts of Crete itself, served for the subsequent transferal of the concept: from politics to religion.

The concept of syncretism, indeed, has long been linked only to religious phenomena, for which even now the two terms are associated. It denotes the process by which elements of one or more cults are absorbed and merged into another cult. This process takes place through a more or less friendly cultural exchange and obviously produces a change obtained in a completely fortuitous way. We can speak about a sort of implied pacification between winners and losers. The losers officially accepted to be converted (inserting their divinities and their religious traditions into the victorious ones) while the winners unofficially recognized the survival of the religions of origin in the suburbs of the Catholic one. The religious syncretism presented itself, therefore, once again under the sign of the defensive compromise. The invasive alliance of the dominant religion was accomplished, provided that a certain tolerance of worship was permitted (Eliade 2007).

An exemplary case is represented by Eshu (Exu), an orisha among the most important in the *candomblé* liturgy, often mistakenly confused with the devil in syncretism with the Catholic religion, as he is mischievous and impertinent, restless, dynamic and chaotic. In reality, Eshu «indifferent to the principles of good and evil» (Soyinka 2000: 18), is the messenger because correctly transmit to the divinity the wishes of the faithful and he does not interfere negatively in the ritual (Trost 2007; Sowande 1996).

Phenomena of this type saw their apex mostly during the colonial and postcolonial period (Balme, Stummer 1996), therefore they reflect those realities ascribable to Third World (Africa, India), to Creole spaces (Caribbean) and Fourth World (Australian, New Zealand and North American aboriginal cultures).

Nevertheless, for some time these syncretic modulations have begun to be inserted even within the cultural research and the complexity of postcolonial literature (Aschcroft, Griffith e Tiffin 2010).

These cultural, undisciplined and incoherent syncretisms flow at every turn in the present to subvert it, or at least to amaze it, sometimes even to confuse it or simplify it.

In the field of theatre, for example, the syncretism, which shares the same geographical and chronological parameters of the religious sphere, is given by a conscious and programmed will whose goal is to generate new textual and performative forms.

According to Christopher Balme there are two main characteristics of this specific theatricality. The first consists in the use of a European language (both for writing and for staging) habitually combined with indigenous idiomatic topics and styles, whose excess can feed the claim of bilingualism or multilingualism. The second can be defined in terms of «ritualization strategies», or the incorporation of other rituals and mythical materials within a western dramaturgical framework which, in turn, has already been modified by their presence (Balme 1999: 66). Syncretic theater, in this way, «is one of the most effective means of decolonizing the scene», because it simultaneously uses the European (form) and indigenous (content) dramaturgical traditions «in a creative recombination of their respective elements, without slavish adherence to one tradition or the other» (Ivi: 2). This particular theatrical expression, indeed, starts from large and disseminated cultural codes and, by metabolizing them, redistributes them opening new and different cultural horizons.

The phenomenon is even more interesting if the cultures in question do not show historically proven relationships. That is, when the respective elaborations of axiological systems, artistic productions and fantastic reinterpretations of the sensible world follow independent paths.

Therefore, what links the important apparatus of Greek mythology, its complex variety and above all its feeling of the tragic, to the monolithic rigor of

a religious and social system like the Yoruba¹ one?

The answer is to be found in the myth (in Dionysus in this case), in its ability to spread itself in time and space, to model itself to every need, like a Procrustean bed². The myth therefore resists, molds itself, but above all transforms itself, it becomes syncretic. This is what happens in *The Bacchae of Euripides: A Communion Rite* (1973)³ by Nigerian Nobel Wole Soyinka⁴. It is a dramatic *pièce*, written and represented in English, which deconstructs the classic prototype, transcending the most obvious philosophical (the inexhaustible search for identity, Nietzsche), religious (the divine possession that generates devastation) and psychoanalytic exegesis (the theme of madness), in order to dispel or at

least weaken the white mythology of colonial superiority through the black mythology of the colonized.

Aided by his colonial heritage and the enormous expansion of cultural communication, Soyinka tried to criticize the foreign and Eurocentric model through the same materials that this model has produced and imposed over time (Gibbs 1980; Msiska 2007; Gibbs 1980).

Thus, the drama reflects the Soyinka's double dramaturgical legacy: the African and the Western one. The cultural and geographical distance with the West, in fact, has not dissuaded the Nigerian playwright from implementing his desire and form of syncretism.

The result is a complex and original system, because the transaction has created

1 Nigeria is a country of one hundred and fifteen million inhabitants divided into over four hundred ethnic groups, among these the Yoruba, to which Soyinka belongs. The Yoruba are one of the most populous lineages in Africa and their many tribes occupy the southwestern regions of Nigeria, reaching as far as Sierra Leone and Ghana. Spirituality dominates the life of this people. The main concept is based on a profound harmony, in which men and gods are on the same level and the deities have strongly humanized characteristics. The central idea is that of the cyclic nature of existence. The considerable number of divinities (more than four hundred) that make up the *pantheon* and the complexity of its cosmogony, has suggested a comparison between the Yoruba and the Olympic gods, in respect to which the former are less capricious and vindictive. The Yoruba gods often make mistakes and for this reason they are not perfect like the Christian God. They are not simply melodramatic heroes or ruthless entities; they are tragic figures of human psychology and African culture. Today, these same deities are more commonly known as *Orishas* (a mixture of Yoruba gods and Catholic saints during the postcolonial diaspora). They are not divinities, but anthropological archetypes, divine agents, emanations of the one God, Olorun, who assists and helps man by transmitting the *axé* to him, that is, the universal energy that is in all things and in the living.

2 In the Greek mythology, Procrustes (the ironer, the stretcher) is the nickname of a Greek brigand named Damastes (or also Prokoptas). He attacked the travelers and tortured them with a hammer on an anvil shaped like a bed dug into the rock or metal. More specifically, he tormented and killed the unlucky wayfarers by stretching those of short stature and amputating the members of tall ones advancing from the bed. Procrustes was defeated and killed by Theseus who inflicted on him the same torment he imposed on his victims. The locution "bed of Procrustes" or "bed of Damastes", derived from this myth, indicates the attempt to reduce people to a single model, a single way of thinking and acting, or more generally confine them to a difficult and intolerable situation. But the same locution can also indicate the idea of a flexible material, pliable, plastic and adaptable to any situation, to any time and space. Like the Greek tragedies.

3 The drama was commissioned to Soyinka from the National Theater of London, while the author is in exile. It was performed, for the first time, at the Old Vic in August 1973, under the direction of Roland Joffé. This particular context gave Soyinka the opportunity to expose the tyranny of slavery and colonization, by conferring authority on the history of pre-colonial Africa before a predominantly British audience.

4 Akinwande Oluwale Soyinka (Abeokuta, 1934) represents the highest, most significant and powerful voice of contemporary African culture and the post-colonial scenario. He received a Christian education of Western influence, however, balanced by his father's heritage and his place of origin, Isarà, a small Yoruba community, where the young Soyinka learns the traditions and myths of his ethnicity. Two stories attest to this period: *Aké: The Years of Childhood* and *Isarà: a Voyage Around the World*. After a period spent abroad (Leeds, London) he returned home in the '60s to help to define the identity of the new independent Nigeria. Among the works of this period we must remember: *The Trials of Brother Jero*, *The Strong Breed* (a kind of parody about ritual sacrifices), *Kongi's Harvest*, *The Interpreters*. In 1967 he was arrested and imprisoned for twenty-two months, without any court ever finding him guilty. His release coincided with abandonment of the country and with a phase of strong creativity that takes shape in *The Bacchae* and in what remains his major theoretical contribution on African aesthetics, *Myth, Literature and African World*. In 1986 he received the Nobel Prize for literature. The Nobel Foundation statement cites *Death and the King's Horseman* as an example of the unpublished literary use of African myths and rituals. In 1995, Soyinka was sentenced to death for treason by the dictator Jani Abacha, responsible for the death of writer and playwright Ken Saro-Wiwa, a great friend of Soyinka himself. The sentence fell a few years later, after the fall of General Abacha.

an indisputably new work. We can speak about a syncretic theatre because it blends different elements in a harmonious way, rejecting the mere juxtaposition between different cultures supported by the multiculturalism. In this way, it not only guarantees a level of textual and performative pleasure, but takes on a deeper meaning, finally returning to speak the language of a cultural and political chorality within a postcolonial space (McDonald 1992; Van Weyenberg 2013; Wetmore 2010).

More precisely, it summarizes stimuli, contents and representational forms in a dimension that intends to preserve the cultural integrity of the original materials, albeit producing new theatrical texts and practices. This process aims to underline changes in the meaning, function and value of the cultural elements used when they are extrapolated from the original context. This explains why it happens that other elements are incorporated into a Western dramaturgical framework which, in turn, has already been modified by their presence and by the productive process of the work (Sowande 1996; Balme 1999).

In *The Bacchae* the syncretism becomes a central component of its communicative structure:

In his visionary projection of this [Yoruba] society, Soyinka has adopted a syncretic style - fusing the disparate elements of Yoruba song and dance, proverbs and mythology, elements from an ancient tradition of mask and folk-operatic drama, interaction with an anthropomorphic pantheon of gods - in the service of a central controlling viewpoint, aimed at shedding light on the dynamics of a society in transition (Taylor 1988: 36).

Wole Soyinka, in his *Bacchae*, retain much of the Greek text of which he perceives the semantic potentialities, the expressive colors and the set of values that are condensed in the tragicity of its mythological heroes. The play in fact follows the archetypal model, but however it cannot be considered a «contemporary Nigerian

rendering of a Greek classical text» (Gilbert, Tompkins 1996: 41). This happens because Soyinka mixes carefully verses by Euripides with new material taken from Yoruba and Christian traditions (Pizzato 2011: 169) and also with suggestions from contemporary dramaturgy, such as *The Count of Oederland*⁵ by Swiss writer and playwright Max Frisch (Jeyifo 2009: 124).

The result of this contamination are five new images which dilate the plot and the *dramatis personae* of the Euripides's tragedy. Respectively:

- The Procession of Eleusis, where the Eleusinian mystery is desacralized, becoming a social ritual that celebrates the State through the sacrifice of a scapegoat, as stated by the same Soyinka: «The progression from Eleusis to Kithairon (and vice versa, historically) is as much a part of the dynamics of social change - even priesthood opportunism is part of the story - as it is a continuous human search to relate more integrally to Nature» (Soyinka 1993: 71).

This rite involves the sacrifice of a voluntary and substitutive scapegoat, Tiresias. The Greek soothsayer recalls the role of carrier, recurrent in many African tales and present in another play by Soyinka: *The Strong Breed*. He is the transporter, the container, the courier, the one who cancels with his own sacrifice the faults of humanity (Soyinka 1997).

The presence of this procession guarantees the expansion or interpolation of ritual and orgiastic elements (like dance, orality, songs) which contaminate the models of the Western theatre. These elements are evoked by long and complex captions which complements the dramatic speech with a series of non-verbal elements. These influences also reverberate on the expressive level which alternates a high and shapely style, dense with metaphors, and a daring use of irony and the grotesque, disrupting «the comedy-tragedy binary» (Gilbert, Tompkins 1996: 41).

5 In an essay titled, *Between Self and System: The Artist in Search of Liberation* (1982), Soyinka states that the work that most resembles the *Bacchae* is *The Count of Oederland* by Swiss playwright Max Frisch. Soyinka recognizes in Frisch's text, as in the *Bacchae*, a liberating ritual as a consequence of a fanatical excitement that springs from the modern existential malaise and leads to senseless violence (Soyinka 1993: 67-8).

- The Chorus of Slaves (in the prologue) with a black leader who plays a fundamental role in the economy of drama. He, as the production note indicates, is «fully negroid» (Soyinka 2004: XIII). This indication contributes to make the cast as heterogeneous as possible and it performs a clear anti-racist ideological function. Otherwise, the Greek Choir, The Bacchantes, is composed exclusively of women from Asia. The African Chorus, therefore, doesn't replace the Greek Chorus, but integrates it, performing a new function, that is, dealing with issues unrelated to the myth. So, the Dionysism acquires a social and not only religious implication. According to Patricia Moyer, Soyinka uses the drama to emphasize the dependence of a slave culture on the ruling class and the need to organize a resistance for revolutionary political transformation (Moyer 1997: 116). In this way «the slaves and women [become] the supporters of Dionysos, the transformer» (Ibid.).

The presence of these two Chorus underlined an extremely profound link between Greek and African cultures. The physiognomy and aesthetics of these choirs are defined, once again, by the encounter between the Greek drama and the indigenous African rituals. In the first case it represented the voice and the conscience of the *polis*, remaining however helpless in the face of man's destiny. It guaranteed a dystonia (the level of happening and reflection) that dilated the story and the meaning of the story (Albini 1999: 69). In the Yoruba tradition the chorus, more static than the Greek one, accompanied the stage action with songs and dances, in an ever more constant participation in the events.

In addition, the simultaneous presence of this two choirs reveals some important features of Soyinka's poetical and existential universe, first of all, the recognition of hybrid and syncretic forms through the negotiation of conflicting cultures. This is corroborated by a second characteristic, which is the peremptory rejection to a fixed and artificial identity, a restrictive control of the meaning, and every essentialist and narcissistic idea of race (as it

happened in *A Tempest* by Aimé Césaire, for example). For Soyinka is inconceivable to hypothesize a nostalgic and indiscriminate glorification of the black African past that ignores the potential benefits of modernization: «A tiger does not proclaim its tigritude, he pounces» (Soyinka in Gibbs 1980: 43). This belief is also shared by the Indian writer Salman Rushdie who, regarding to the Commonwealth literature, metaphorically defines essentialism (authenticity) as «a respectable child of old-fashioned exoticism» (Rushdie 1991: 67). That is, asking an African writer to be African also in his narration, means conforming to the expectations and exotic desires of a reader who presupposes a link between the identity of the author and that of his country.

- The two Wedding Scenes are two long silent, mimed scenes. The first (III episode) taken from the Greek tradition (Herodotus, the story of Cleisthenes, Agariste and Hippocleides). The second is from the Christian tradition (Canaa's episode). Dionysus shows these scenes to Pentheus through a kind of mirror placed in his hand. This solution is full of symbolic meaning (voyeuristic desire, partially phallic) and it suggests, once again, how the Dionysism is linked to non-verbal forms of communication, such as rituals, dance, music and gestures. The total absence of spoken words also forces Soyinka to describe these scenes through extremely long and detailed stage directions. Both scenes sustain «images of horror and excess» where the motive of wine (Dionysus) dominates and its double effect of evasion (destruction) and reconciliation (an anticipation of what will happen, in a more significant manner, in the final) (Gilbert, Tompkins 1996: 40).

- The epilogue, or the final appearance (epiphany) of the god, the most substantial transformation respect to Euripides. This moment represents the climax in which the classical myth loses its identity, changes its own physiognomy, is deconstructed and becomes syncretic. It's Soyinka himself, in the introduction to the drama, who

expresses his dissatisfaction with the euripidean epilogue:

The ending especially, the patering off of ecstasy into a suggestion of a prelude to another play. But *The Bacchae* is not an episode in a historical series, and this is not merely because Euripides did not live to write the next instalment. The drama is far too powerful a play of forces in the human condition, far too rounded a rite of the communal psyche to permit of such a notion. I have therefore sought a new resolution in the symbolic extension of ritual powers, but only such as we have already encountered with the Bacchantes on the mountainside. The disruptive challenges to Nature that have been let loose in the action demand no less. Agave's final understanding is an exteriorized god-submission only on the level of itemized *dramatis personae*; it is far more fundamentally a recognition and acceptance of those cosmic forces for which the chorus (the communal totality) is custodian and vessel in the potency of ritual enactment. Admission of her last, aberrant mind after the enormous psychic strain of a wilful challenge (also a necessity for evoking the maximum powers), this last in-gathering releases the reluctant beneficence of Nature (Soyinka 2004: X).

The ending is the moment where the multicultural creativity of Soyinka reaches its summit, moving away both from the ancient model and from other contemporary reinterpretations of myth like those of Richard Schechner, Michael Grüber, Tadashi Suzuki (Fusillo 2006; Allain 2002; Wrigley-Macintosh-Hall 2004). Dionysus does not appear in scene (like in Suzuki), but you can hear his music. He is not an revengeful god, but a force that manifests his benevolence to the Theban people and that restores the life-energy. The central confrontation between the two main characters – the key scene of Euripidean drama – assumes a completely new dramatic form. In Euripides, Dionysus tempts Pentheus by provoking his latent voyeuristic desire: a moment that is often highly exploited in modern performances. From the Pentheus's head flows a blood that becomes early wine (a reverse of the Christian mystery). Agave is not punished with exile, but into a «tragicomic moment», she also drinks wine, accepting the deity of Dionysus (Pizzato 2011: 169). The end of Euripides' tragedy is incomplete, but it is not difficult to guess the consequences of the terrible judgment sentenced by the

deus machina regarding the family of Cadmus. There is no palingenesis or reconciliation, pessimism reigns sovereign and we witness an irreparable fracture between the divine, tragically indecipherable, and the human. In Soyinka, instead, the divine and the human come together in a shared and communal rite.

It is also possible to see the same idea of ceremony in *Les Negres* (1957) by Jean Genet that the Polish born-critic Jan Kott, in *Eating of the Gods*, combines with the *Bacchae*, because:

In *The Blacks* and in *The Bacchae*, it is a black ritual [...] the ritual is laid bare and destroyed through its realization on the stage [...] Greek tragedy is decorum". In this drama, in fact, as in Euripides's *Bacchae*: "murder is committed offstage and then performed and danced on-stage in masks, ecstatically, in all its cruelty and beauty (Kott 1987: 228-9).

It should be noted that the subtitle of Genet's work is *Clownerie (A Clown Show)*, but in the text appears a word that comes into competition with the aforementioned subtitle: ceremony. For Martin Esslin, the theorist of the Theatre of the Absurd, Genet's work takes the form of a ritual ceremony rather than a direct discussion of the black population and colonialism.

Soyinka writes the *Bacchae* fifteen years after the publication of Genet (1958) from which he drew some ideas. Even in the *Bacchae*, indeed, the social and ritual aspect of the circumstance is fully understood, as well as the death of Pentheus (now the scapegoat) will guarantee benefits for the whole community.

Soyinka therefore strives to transform the euripidean text into:

an imaginative exploration of the human revolt against deathness, stagnation, the lack of renewal which runs contrary to man's visceral identity with the nature around him; an exploration which is taken to the ultimate extremism of the expression of the Life Force through a superman arrogation of the right to existence of - the other. (Soyinka 1993: 68).

This ritual also reflects the religious nature of which the Yoruba theater is deeply imbued.

Therefore, the tragic death of Pentheus cannot remain an isolated event: it

must become part of a totality, of a *Rite of Communion* in which it is possible to perceive the non-linear and cyclic perception of the time, typical of African culture, where destruction always implies creation. The death of Pentheus becomes part of a ritual of rebirth that unites the archaic agrarian parties linked to the fertility to the harvest's cyclic nature with Christian fonts. It will become part (I insist on the anaphora) of a social renewal, of a *Communion Rite* which generates a new life. And it contains the idea of Soyinka according to which:

Divine enlargement of the human condition should be viewed dramatically through man. The mode for this is Ritual. The medium is Man. Ritual equates the divine (superhuman) dimension with the communal will, fusing the social with the spiritual. The social liberation strands in the play are not therefore arbitrary but intrinsic (Soyinka 1993: 71).

From *Communion Rite* to communal, is probably the slogan for undermining the codes and the dynamics of the African auditorium. In Africa everything, indeed, is made in function of the community. In this sense, tragedy plays the role of the dramatization of Victor Turner's idea of community, that is a model for «human interrelatedness», opposed to everyday society (Turner 1997: 127). This sharing also contemplates the need to communicate with the gods, with the ancestors and with the supernatural forces. Tragedy in the African community concurrently refers to the concrete world, to the physicality of the group and its needs, which include the desire to interact with metaphysical reality. The first condition generates the second one. The whole tragedy becomes a communal ritual performed to bring renewal and liberation to those who are oppressed and subjugated.

Soyinka superimposes the African mythological worldview on the traditional western rituals through a revolutionary process. This process replays the history of slavery and colonization in an attempt to convey the idea that civilization and drama originated from Africa. Soyinka emphasizes the similarities be-

tween the two deities, between their two myths, coming to a kind of «ontological cross-culturalism which subverts and dismantles Western assumptions of a superior cultural heritage» (Maes-Jelinek 1998: 37).

Also Martin Bernal, many years after Soyinka, in his controversial essay *The Black Athena*, proposes the afrocentric theory of the origins of Western civilization according to which the African adaptations of the Greek tragedies are, in reality, the Africans' reappropriations of African-Hellenic culture (Bernal 1991). Although strongly contested by a large number of scholars, this opinion was already shared by Soyinka who aimed to reconceptualize the history of cultural relations between Greece, Africa and the Western world.

This idea is discussed in *The Fourth Stage* (1976), where Soyinka investigates the origin of the Yoruba tragedy, identifying it in the gods' awareness of their own incompleteness, called the «anguish of severance» (Soyinka 2000: 144). The tragedy, in the traditional Yoruba drama, arises precisely from this anguish, defined by Soyinka «the fragmentation of the essence from self» (Ivi: 151). This anguish creates three dimensions: the gods, the men and among them a kind of limbo, of underground space, an abyss of negation of spirituality and cosmic abandonment, symbolized by the undergrowth of matter and non-matter that Soyinka, quoting Nietzsche (*The Birth of tragedy*), calls «the chthonic realm» (Ivi: 4, 142, 155). Ogun is able to challenge the dark forces of the abyss and defeat them, because he is the incarnation (as any tragic hero) of will and resistance, and only through them can emerge unharmed. And music, as in Western philosophy, is the expression of will, the direct copy of the will itself (Schopenhauer 2015).

To accomplish this epic enterprise, Ogun traces a path between being and not-being that Soyinka calls «the gulf of transition» (Ivi: 143, 149, 158). It is a connection, a phantasmal bridge that serves both men and the gods at the same time. In this way free traffic is guaranteed be-

tween these areas and their transitional passage.

Ogun⁶ is the most important, most powerful and fascinating deity of the Yoruba's *pantheon*. He is the god of war, of creativity, of metals, of the road, «symbol [like Dionysus] of the destructive-creative unity of Nature» (Soyinka 1982: 69) but he is also, above all for the purposes of our discourse, the guardian of rights and Explorer (the one who goes first). He is precisely the one who opens the path and gives voice to the oppressed, inaugurating a new cycle. Ogun's fate was to fight the forces of this underground dimension to reduce the distance between men and Gods, thus restoring the lost complementarity.

Within the Soyinka's *Bacchae*, the presence and the choice of Ogun's myth represents an aesthetic challenge and an epistemological pattern: it offers to a society in search of self-definition the philosophical model of a regenerating transformation through an act of the individual will.

In syncretic terms Ogun is considered the twin or the older brother of Dionysus, better still a totality, «a combination of the Dionysian, Apollonian and Promethean principles» (Ivi: 26). Dionysus has many features of Ogun as pointed out by Soyinka:

The Phrygian god and his twinhood with Ogun exercise irresistible fascination. His thyrsus is physically and functionally paralleled by the opa Ogun borne by the male devotees of Ogun. But the thyrsus of Dionysus is brighter, it is all light and running wine, Ogun's stave is more symbolic of the labours of Ogun through the night of transition. A long willowy pole, it is topped by a frond-bound lump of ore which strains the pole in wilful curves and keeps it vibrant. The bearers, who can only be men, are compelled to move about among the revellers as the effort to keep the ore-head from weighting over keeps them perpetually on the move. Through town and village, up the mountain to the grove of Ogun, this dance of the straining phallus-heads pocks the air above men and women revellers who are decked in palm fronds and bear palm branches in their hands. A dog is slaughtered in sacrifice, and the mock-struggle of the head

priest and his acolytes for the carcass, during which it is literally torn limb from limb, inevitably brings to mind the dismemberment of Zagreus, son of Zeus. Most significant of all is the brotherhood of the palm and the ivy. The mystery of the wine of palm, bled straight from the tree and potent without further ministrations, is a miracle of nature acquiring symbolic significance in the Mysteries of Ogun. For it was instrumental to the tragic error of the god and his sequent Passion (Soyinka 2000: 158-9).

Both deities mediate between heaven and earth, but while the Greek god is the incarnation of dichotomies or polarities (Fusillo 2006), Ogun is transitional. These differences reside in the Western and African conception of reality. The former tends to operate in Manichaean terms, opposing good to evil, reason to emotion and so on. The Yoruba conception, on the other hand, believes in a cohesive cultural reality devoid of a priori contrastive structures.

Behind the mask of Dionysus, however, not only Ogun is hidden (which remains indisputably the main source of inspiration), but also other spirits and deities of the Yoruba's *pantheon*. There is the aforementioned Eshu, the trickster, whose shadow hovers over Dionysus when he manipulates his human worshipers and his nemesis Pentheus. There is also Obatala, the Yoruba Apollo, whose serenity balances the Dionysian impetus of Ogun, as shown in the first caption of the *pièce* and in the subsequent first monologue of the god:

A spotlight reveals DIONYSOS just behind the rise, within the tomb of Semele. He is a being of calm rugged strength, of a rugged beauty, not of effeminate prettiness. Relaxed, as becomes divine self-assurance but equally tensed as if for action, an arrow drawn in readiness for flight.

DIONYSUS: Thebes taints me with bastardy. I am turned into an alien, some foreign outgrowth of her habitual tyranny. My followers daily pay for their faith. Thebes blasphemes against me, makes a scapegoat of a god.

It is time to state my patrimony - even here in Thebes. I am the gentle, jealous joy. Vengeful

⁶ Ogun has been often protagonist of Soyinka's dramas. I think to *Idanre* for example, from which Soyinka has borrowed some lines for the composition of his *Bacchae* (Soyinka 1987). Soyinka's Dionysus has many traits of Ogun, but he is also associated to Christ, according to an ancient tradition dating back to the famous cento *Christus Patiens* (*Christ Suffering*), a kind old Byzantine tragedy about XII or XIII century that tells the story of Christ's Passion by sewing together classic quotations, mostly Euripides (McDonald 2003: 195).

and kind. An essence that will not exclude, nor be excluded. If you are Man or Woman, I am Dionysos. Accept (Soyinka 2004: 1-2).

Returning to the gulf of transition, this also links the three areas of existence defined by the Yoruba ontology: the world of the ancestors, the living and the unborn, or past, present and future that merge into a circular structure: «the past is not a mystery and that although the future (the unborn) is yet unknown, it is not a mystery to the Yoruba, but co-existent in present consciousness» (Soyinka 2000: 149). After all, the circle is essential in African cosmology, as it symbolizes eternity and guarantees continuity.

Most of the Yoruba theaters (and Africans in general) present an appropriate circular structure in order for these concepts to be understood by the African audience. The idea behind this kind of theatre in the round is holistic, because it must combine all the arts: music, dance, theatre, singing. The particular conformation of these representative spaces does not foresee the presence of a proscenium and amphitheater, because these elements are foreign impositions, colonial legacies, used *ob torto collo* on the Nigerian stage. They created a sort of theatrical apartheid that separated the spectators from the actors. In fact, the actors must be so close to the spectators that they can touch them. This closeness forces the interpreter to act in an authentic and revealing way, while the spectator actively participates in the show seen as a ritual and as an authentic form of African dramaturgy (Banham 2004; Odom 2015; Kerr 1997).

Moreover, this circular structure is the only one that comes close to the indigenous arrangement of the theater and its adaptation to modern scenes and other performative models such as Kabuki, *Nō*, Chinese Opera in which respect for their respective origins is given through the use of dances and music, acrobats in an open and circular space.

This last consideration recalls the theatrical anthropology of Eugenio Barba who speaks of pre-expressive, pre-cultural

and transcultural principles, that is, the set of performative practices present in all human cultures before such practices are informed by specific cultural traditions, or by performing techniques and styles individual (Barba 1993).

In this way, the path of Ogun, the gulf of transition, is the fourth stage or the fourth dimension. Better still, it is the fourth scene in the sense of space: fourth theatrical space. A scene on which the Yoruba tragedy takes shape becoming a ritual tragedy, as it repetitively represents the cosmic conflict shown in the Ogun tragedy. It is a reality that is simultaneously physical, metaphysical and symbolic. More specifically, in a metaphysical context, like that of Soyinka, the scene is seen as the symbolic representation of the earth and the cosmos.

Stage, moreover, is a word that refers to the scene, even if the semantic nuances orbiting around its etymology give it a range that goes beyond a simple arena of action. It is therefore a representative, performative space, but also available to the struggle, to any enterprise destined to produce a transformation at different levels.

In conclusion, the Euripides's *Bacchae*, the most ambiguous and indecipherable tragedy of an experimental author par excellence as Euripides has become therefore the filter through which Wole Soyinka has explored new forms of theatrical expression, dealing with other ancient scenic practices, rituals and myths. This fusion of seemingly antinomial elements has been made possible by the fact that the images and models belonging to these two extraordinary cultural systems (Greek and Yoruba) are «familiar and closest to hand; they are not governed by rigid orthodoxies; a natural syncretism and the continuing process of this activity is the reality of African [and Greek] metaphysical systems [...] expressed in the idiom of deities, nature events, matter or artifacts, are an obvious boon to the full flow of this imagination» (Soyinka 2000: 121).

Soyinka, indeed, performs an act of re-writing, looking simultaneously at another tradition and at his own, in an attempt «to present in theatrical terms a post-colonial

society in the process of change» (Sowan-
de 1996: 15).

Like any literary space, even the theat-
rical space is essentially configured as a
fictional space, as a potential reality that
springs from experience and becomes
metaphorical representation. The charac-
teristic of the scene, in the Soyinka's play,
is that of imposing itself in a dynamic of
recovery and transformation, or rather of
syncretism.

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