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Sandile Ndaba

Mythmaking as self-making and nation-building: a reading of Wole Soyinka's "Idanre"

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This paper investigates how Soyinka uses Yoruba mythology in his poem "Idanre". It avers that Soyinka uses Ogun as his tutelary deity in an attempt at self-reclamation and nation-building. It shows how Soyinka transposes the nature and symbolism of Ogun in Yoruba mythology to an interpretation of the contemporary postcolonial socio-political situation in Africa. Furthermore, the paper argues that Soyinka borrows mythical symbols from Greek mythology and blends these with those from Yoruba myth in an attempt to forge a new, hybrid African identity.

Mitevorming as selfvorming en nasiebou: 'n interpretasie van Wole Soyinka se "Idanre"

In hierdie artikel word die wyse ondersoek waarop Wole Soyinka Yoruba mitologie in sy gedig "Idanre" benut. Die afleiding is dat Soyinka Ogun as sy beskermgod aanwend in 'n poging om selfherwinning en nasiebou te bewerkstellig. Daar word aangetoon hoe Soyinka die aard en simboliese waarde van Ogun in Yoruba-mitologie transponeer om 'n interpretasie van die eietydse postkoloniale en sosiopolitieke situasie in Afrika moontlik te maak. Voorts word geredeneer dat Soyinka simbole uit die Griekse mitologie met dié uit die Yoruba-mites vermeng in 'n poging om 'n nuwe hibridiese Afrika-identiteit daar te stel.

Mr S C Ndaba, Centre for School Quality and Improvement, Catholic Institute of Education, P O Box 2083, Southdale 2135; E-mail: sandile@cie.org.za

This paper examines the use of Yoruba mythology in Soyinka's poem "Idanre". It avers that myth is used as part of a subversive project of self-reclamation and to undermine the imperial inheritance. It seeks to show the hybrid nature of contemporary African cultural reality. Myth becomes a focal point for imagining the new postcolonial nation. Furthermore, the paper demonstrates how Soyinka uses Ogun as his tutelary deity — a god that gives him guidance and the inspiration to aspire to a humanist cause. He uses the mythical symbolism of Ogun as a source of guidance for contemporary society. In the course of the paper, a reading of the poem will be offered which highlights the salient concerns of the poem as well as its essential hybridity.

1. Culture as a decolonising agent

From a point early in the colonial encounter, the adaptation of indigenous myth has represented an important mode of self-retrieval. African writers like Wole Soyinka have been heirs to vibrant extant oral traditions. Soyinka uses structures drawn from oral tradition to try to integrate the cultural life of the past with post-independence Westernised reality. During the rise of African nationalism, the system of beliefs embedded in indigenous myth recaptured the attention of African writers. They realised that indigenous myth offered them a philosophical approach that they could use to interpret contemporary Africa in their own terms. Despite the West's dismissal of figures from African myth as outworn fetishes or heathen embarassments, African writers realised that such figures had a lot to offer as a resource from which to fashion new definitions of self. Writers turned to their own spiritual traditions, therefore, both as the source of a new national identity and as a mythic resource offering symbols with which they could signify the fractured, hybrid and inverted post-independence world. This attempt to represent the antinomies, ambivalences and contradictions of post-independence Africa using symbols from the indigenous past was a decolonising strategy, as was also true of the adaptation and redeployment of Europe's defining tales to an interpretation of post-independence African reality.

Boehmer (1995: 243-50) quite accurately argues that notwithstanding African writers' determination to reclaim their selfhood, in a postcolonial context, coming to terms with the corrosion of tradition during colonial occupation does not necessitate cultural purity. Mixing the adventures of indigenous gods with European myths, Soyinka relies on hybridity — the blending of various cultural influences — to unsettle the cultural inheritance from Europe.

2. Literature and nation-formation

In his introduction to *Nation and Narration*, Bhabha (1990: 1-7) links the concepts of nation and narration. He argues that the concept of a nation is an idea, a product of the imagination, or what Hooper (1997: 104) terms "a discursive and cultural construct".

This theoretical shift from the concept of a nation as a political construct to a nation as a cultural and imaginative construct allows us to examine the nation through its narrative, facilitating the negotiation of the meaning of cultural and political authority.

African writers like Soyinka seek to employ literature as part of a programme to forge new postcolonial cultural identities. They seek to reclaim African cultural identity from the metropolitan centre of Europe. African postcolonial literature performs a double function: challenging European colonialist culture and proposing positive African alternatives. In the case of Soyinka, myth becomes "an instrument of interrogation" (Gagiano 1999: 130). It is used to examine the postcolonial political regime in Nigeria, to offer a critique and to propose positive alternatives.

2.1 Myth

Myth forms an important part of the African oral traditions and philosophy of life. Through myth, society tries to come to terms with the universe and its place in it. Okpewho (1983: 45-54; 1980: 19-21) observes that there are three approaches to defining myth: the structural, the functional and the qualitative approach. The structural approach defines myth in terms of its narrative structure:

> [...] myth is a type of tale which stands midway between 'history and fiction' (whether folk tale or literary fiction) and that is characterised by being based on a firm structure (Okpewho 1983: 54).

The functional approach examines the functions that myth is normally used to perform and concentrates on the role played by myth in ritual performances:

> [...] myths are oral narratives which explain the essences and sequences of ritual performances, thereby preserving the memories of these elements for posterity (Okpewho 1983: 45).

Okpewho argues that both these approaches are inadequate because they fail to account for other aspects of myth. He calls for a qualitative approach to the definition of myth, an approach which recognises the fact that myth is the essence of cultural life and that it relies on the imagination.

> Myth is not really a particular kind of tale as against another; it is neither the spoken counterpart of an antecedent ritual, nor is it a tale determined by a binary scheme of abstract ideas or a sequential order of elements. It is simply that quality of fancy which informs the creative or configurative powers of the human mind in varying degrees of intensity (Okpewho 1983: 59).

Myth, therefore, is the aesthetic foundation for all varieties of African cultural endeavour, across the generations.

2.2 Identity

Manuel Castells (1997: 8-24) observes that identity is socially constructed in a context defined by power relationships. He identifies three forms of identity and their origins: legitimising, resistance and project identity. Legitimising identity emerges out of the dominant institutions of society and their demand that people conform to dominant ideologies. This can happen in coercive historical contexts or democratic ones where various state apparatuses may be used to produce and replicate identity. Resistance identity, on the other hand, is generated in response to legitimising identity, when identity is undermined and devalued by those in power. Project identity is constructed when individuals make a conscious effort to become subjects claiming their specificity and uniqueness in society and wish to

transform society and its structures on the basis of a set of convictions or beliefs.

Castell's distinction between the three kinds of identity serves to clarify Soyinka's purpose in "Idanre": the use of myth to forge resistance identity in an effort to challenge the legitimising identity of the metropolitan centre of Europe, given the power relations brought about by colonialism and the nationalist impetus towards nation-building.

2.3 Nation-building

Nation-building is the process of mobilising a nation's cultural, political and economic resources towards national reconstruction. It is a nationalist enterprise necessitated by the destruction of indigenous cultural identity brought about by colonialism. Larsen (1997: 185) argues that nation-building is a process of belonging involving a reassessment of both collective and individual identity that culminates in a national identity. He proceeds to point out that such a process is not unique to Africa. He notes that it has been going on since the eighteenth century, when many European countries were engaged in a process of redefining themselves as nations in a new political, economic and cultural context. At the time, the Napoleonic wars were raging in Europe, and the old feudal empires were crumbling and being replaced by a new order which redefined collective and individual identities. From Europe, the concept of nation-building spread to the former colonies and other regions under the European influence, thus acquiring global status.

Benedict Anderson (1991), one of the foremost theorists on nationalism, distinguishes particular models of nationalism and indicates how they are replicated throughout the world. He identifies, first of all, the linguistic form of nationalism in Europe which was precipitated by the demise of the Latin language and the subsequent conversion of vernacular languages to printed form, foreshadowing the disintegration of dynasties such as the Romanovs, the Hanoverians and the Ottomans. There is also a North and South American model of creole nationalism which came about as a result of creole communities' desire to free themselves from domination by the metropole. The third model of nationalism, according to Anderson, is

the official brand of nationalism espoused by European countries as a result of the growing consciousness accompanying the French Revolution.

Anderson's (1991: 116-9) central argument is that nations are imagined communities conceptualised by the bourgeoisie and then replicated as political entities. This confirms the view of Bhabha (1990: 1) that:

> [...] nationalist discourses [...] produce the idea of the nation as a continuous narrative of national progress, the narcissism of self-generation, the primeval present of the volk.

Literature plays a very crucial part in what Bhabha calls "the narcissism of self-generation" — what is referred to in this paper as "self-making". It is through literature that new individual and national identities are imagined.

3. The significance of Yoruba mythology in Soyinka's work

In much of his work, Wole Soyinka has drawn elements, motifs and subjects extensively and directly from Nigerian oral tradition. The value of the mythic dimension, as Priebe (1988: 79) observes, is that its patterns subvert the accepted or ordinary way of looking at reality. They break down any boundaries and forms within which society operates, with the immediate effect that the mythic consciousness assaults the reader, defying his expectations.

The salient feature of "Idanre" is its use of Yoruba mythology; the synthesis of aspects of that mythology into a systematic whole. The poem incorporates four main concepts: the concept of "Idanre" (a rockhill in Yorubaland, perceived as a Yoruban Olympus busy with divine activities) as Ogun's legendary dwelling place; the concept of Ogun as God of iron, metallurgy, war, exploration, art, hunting, and the road — the creative and destructive essence who consequently is "king" of this hill; the concept of Ogun as the god of transition, and the concept of Ogun as the champion of a humanist cause. These concepts serve as the rallying points of Soyinka's creative purpose and convey his ideas about the nature of the leadership required to guide

African nations, especially his native Nigeria, forward in the postcolonial world.

As Mumia (2001: 31-43) indicates about Soyinka's work in general, he uses myth as a tool with which to attempt an interpretation of contemporary Nigerian socio-political life. In "Idanre", the pilgrimage to the Idanre hills symbolises the solitary nature of the work of leading the nation and the quest for the meaning of the ambiguities of contemporary postcolonial existence. The symbolic mythical figure of Ogun is exploited in all its connotations in the poem. Other gods in the pantheon of Yoruba mythology are also used: Atunda, the rebel god who rolled a boulder over the principal deity and smashed him to pieces; Sango, the god of lightning and electricity; Orunmila, the sky-god, the essence of wisdom; Esu, the god of chance and disorder, and Ifa, the god of divination and order (Soyinka 1976: 87).

Before considering the concerns of the poem, it is essential to give a brief outline of the nature and symbolism of Ogun in Yoruba mythology. Soyinka (1976: 26-8) observes that Ogun is the god of iron and of war; the master craftsman, artist, farmer, and warrior. He embodies within his nature apparent contradictions. He is the essence of destruction and creativity, a recluse and a gregarious imbiber, a reluctant leader of men and deities. Ogun encapsulates the Yoruba cosmogony's coming into being through his own rites of passage. He is the protector of orphans, a roof for the homeless and the guardian of oaths. He represents a transcendental, humane, but rigidly restorative justice.

Titjani-Serpos (1996: 14) observes that Ogun is the embodiment of challenge, the Promethean instinct in man, constantly at the service of society for its full self-realisation. The other deities, following through the realm of transition, can only share vicariously in the original experience. Ogun alone experienced the process of being literally torn asunder by cosmic winds, of rescuing himself from the precarious edge of total dissolution by harnessing the untouched part of himself, the will. This is the unique essentiality of Ogun: as an embodiment of the social, communal will. But besides his daring gesture which almost resulted in disintegration and destruction, Ogun also represents the mobilisation and communication to others of a lived experience.

3. The poem as a narrative of the nation

The first part of the poem dramatises Ogun's creative sensibility. It depicts the creation of the world from the aftermath of a cosmic deluge. The deluge, as an embodiment of the god Ogun, symbolises both a destructive and a creative force. Ogun is portrayed as using his artefact of war, the axe, to perform the act of creation. The act is portrayed as a violent, daring and pioneering feat. He enlists the help of another god, Sango, the god of lightening, as is conveyed by the presence of thunder and lightning during the act of creation (Soyinka 1967: 61):

> The flaming corkscrew etches sharp affinities
> (No dream, no vision, no delirium of the dissolute)
> When roaring vats of an unstoppered heaven deluge
> Earth in fevered distillations, potent with
> The fire of the axe-handed one
> …
> And greys are violent now, laced with
> Whiteburns, tremulous in fire tracings
> On detonating peaks. Ogun is still on such
> Combatant angles, poised to a fresh descent
> Fiery axe-heads fly about his feet.
> …
> He catches Sango in his three-fingered hand
> And runs him down to earth.

Ogun restores order and tranquillity after the violence and destruction associated with his act of creation.

The poem emphasises the value of collaborative creative efforts in bringing about a new world. Soyinka alludes to the need for a leader, an artist who possesses the necessary reason, integrity, social vision and intellectual standing to lead the society to its renewal; unlike those who have recently been in power in his native Nigeria and whose only credentials are as adept raiders of the nation's treasury. There is a desperate need for such a leader who will initiate the collaborative communal endeavours that will facilitate the birth of the desired nation.

The first part closes with an allusion to one of the major concerns of the poem: society's blatant disregard for the essence of life. Society does not bother to search for the essence and meaning of existence: its concern is only with material wellbeing. This accentuates the visionary artist's loneliness and isolation in his quest for the meaning of the secrets of existence. Society waits passively for the rain and harvest, for social renewal and regeneration (Soyinka 1967: 62):

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

In this poem Soyinka borrows concepts from Greek mythology to attribute certain qualities to his tutelary deity, Ogun. Ogun is portrayed as a combination of the principles of Dionysius (ecstacy, instinct), Apollo (reason, science, measure, control) and Prometheus (defiance of gods in humanistic aspiration). The qualities symbolised by these Greek gods help imbue Ogun with some measure of balance. They enhance his sense of spontaneity, instinct, reason and abiding humanism. These qualities are sorely needed among African leaders, especially in the light of recent Nigerian dictators, who were notorious for the human rights abuses they perpetrated to ensure political docility. Hybridity — the blending of African and European cultural influences — in the conceptualisation of the new African identity helps to situate that identity firmly in the contemporary postcolonial reality and affords it some measure of credence.

The second part of the poem is a dramatisation of Ogun's creative purpose: "He comes again in Harvest". The "harvest" symbolises a celebration of the creative purpose, of fertility. Ogun comes with "earthdung", symbolising his union with the earth and the realisation of his creative effort.

The poem then captures the poet's reminiscences about his encounter with the wine-girl at the foot of the Idanre hills. In his notes, Soyinka (1967: 86) refers to the wine-girl as:

> Oya, wife of Ogun, latterly of Sango…
> Also a dead girl killed in a car accident.

The wine-girl represents the feminine principle. She is a symbol of fertility and celebration (wine). Her death in a car accident symbolises a tragic loss of creative potential. This may be an allusion to the treacherous Nigerian roads, which have claimed numerous lives over the years. The wine-girl serves as an anchor for the poet. She is a symbolic reminder of his society and its incomprehension of his solitary quest for the meaning of existence.

Moreover, the second part of the poem dramatises a ritual ceremony — harvest time — a celebration of the creative principle, in the company of Ogun (Soyinka 1967: 63):

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

As the last line of the extract above suggests, the ritual ceremony is a form of prayer for fertility, for the preservation of the creative principle. It relives the creative act of Ogun. During the ritual ceremony, the Yoruba people dramatise the personality of Ogun by means of long sticks bearing pieces of iron wrapped in palm fronds. The palm fronds symbolise peace and restraint; the iron violence, thus creating a balance between violence and peace.

This part also explores the theme of social decay and disintegration; man's betrayal of his innate creative potential. The "cave", "castle", "shrine" and "grottos" are the evidence of this potential. However, man has brought about the disintegration of these fruits of his own toil. They have fallen into the hands of materialists (Soyinka 1967: 650:

> Cave and castle, shrine and ghostly grottos
> Plaything now of children, shades
> For browsing goats. The wheels have fallen
> To looters and insurance men, litigant on
> Spare part sales and terms of premium.

The advent of colonialism is portrayed as a violent and destructive military invasion. Colonialism, with its attendant cultural pa-

geantry, is conveyed by means of poignant images defining Europe as violent, disruptive, invasive and arrogant. The concept of the coming of the coloniser as destructive is evidenced by the use of images of violence (Soyinka 1967: 67):

> Where sprang armoured beasts, unidentifiable,
> Nozzles of flames, tales of restive gristles
> Banners of saints, cavalcades of awesome hosts
> Festivals of firevales, crush of starlode
> And exploring planets
> Whirls of intemperate steel, triangles of cabal
> In rabid spheres, iron bellows at volcanic tunnels
> Easters in convulsions. Urged by energies
> Of light milleniums, crusades, empires and revolution
> Damnations and savage salvations.

In the last stanza of the second part of the poem, the symbolic personality of Ogun is elevated as the one capable of reconciling the contradictions of life. The Apollonian principle in Ogun reconciles conflicting elements in nature (Soyinka 1967: 68):

> He reached a large hand to tension wires
> And plucked a string, earth was a surreal bowl
> Of sounds and mystic timbres, his fingers
> Drew warring elements to a union of being.

The Dionysian principle in Ogun allows for the celebration of the contradictory aspects of existence. The creative power of Ogun is restorative (Soyinka 1967: 68):

> And taught the veins to dance, of earth, of rock
> Of tree, sky, of fire and rain, of flesh of man
> And woman. Ogun is the god that ventures first
> His path one loop of time, one iron coil
> Earth's broken rings were healed.

In the fourth part Ogun outmanoeuvres all the other deities in his humanist aspiration, his quest "to fraternise with man" (Soyinka 1967: 70). There is an allusion to Ogun's denial of an offer to lead the deities. Instead he chooses to withdraw to the Idanre hills. The people

of Ire persuade Ogun to lead them. Although declining at first, he eventually relents and agrees to lead them (Soyinka 1967: 71):

> His task was ended, he declined the crown
> Of deities, sought retreat in heights. But Ire
> Laid skilled seige to devine withdrawal. Alas
> For diplomatic arts, the elders of Ire prevailed;
> He descended and they crowned him king.

This extract suggests the persuasiveness of the people of Ire who show the extent of man's abilities, from which he not only benefits, but also suffers. It also suggests the magnitude of the power in the hands of man — he is able to harness the aid of the gods. Yet, man has only his self-will to balance this force. Man's use of the power he wields is often perverse and self-destructive because his will is not equal in magnanimity to the magnitude of his material strength.

The fifth part dramatises Ogun's destruction of the Ire people. According to Yoruba mythology, Ogun is believed to have drunk so much wine during the battle that he destroyed his own men, the men of Ire, in his inebriation. Ogun's destruction of the men of Ire suggests man's incapacity to control the power he wields. The men of Ire used their powers of persuasion to enlist the help of a god, but were unable to restrain his destructive nature. Their repeated cries of "Your men, Ogun! Your men!" (Soyinka 1967: 75) emphasise their ultimate helplessness in the face of a power they cannot control. This also suggests Ogun's inability to control his blind passion. Only later does he realise his error (Soyinka 1967: 80):

> He recognised the pattern of the spinning rock
> And passion slowly yielded to remorse.

The men of Ire, too, realise the truth too late. This suggests man's tardiness in becoming aware of the truth: "Truth, a late dawn" (Soyinka 1967: 80).

The magnitude of the consequences of Ogun's inability to control his passion and man's incapacity to control his power is symbolically dramatised by means of the image of a very bad harvest, the destruction of the creative potential (Soyinka 1967: 75):

There are falling ears of corn
And ripe melons tumble from the heads
Of noisy women, crying.

The sixth part of the poem celebrates an individual effort to transform society; the solitary dreamer who constantly contemplates saving and renewing his society, the one who is (Soyinka 1967: 82):

…plunged to the mind's abyss
in contemplation of a desert well.

It is essentially this concern for a solitary dreamer who is the potential transformer of his society that wins our sympathies for the Ogun figure. Soyinka believes that it is this sensibility of Ogun that is capable of transforming a society redolent with the decay and disintegration brought about by corruption. Soyinka's praise for individual effort is clearly demonstrated in his praise of Atunda, the rebel god (Soyinka 1967: 84):

All hail, saint Atunda, first revolutionary
Grand iconoclast at genesis – and the rest in logic
Zeus, Osiris, Yahweh, Christ in trifoliate
Pact with creation, and the wisdom of Orunmila, Ifa
Divining eyes, multiform.

The poem ends on a positive note. The harvest is a productive and positive one, unlike the one which followed Ogun's error when he attacked and killed his own men. It is a celebration and affirmation of the creative principle (Soyinka 1967: 85):

The first fruit rose from subterranean hoards
First in our vision, corn sheaves rose over the hill
Long before the bearers, domes of eggs and flesh
Of palm fruit, red, oil black, froth flew in sun bubbles
Burst over throngs of golden gourds.

Another positive symbol is the Mobius Strip, a symbol of optimism offering an illusion of a possible escape from the eternal cycle of creation and destruction. It is the ultimate symbol of self-recreation.

Soyinka's "Idanre" mirrors a concern very common in postcolonial literature: self-making and nation-building. Its defining mode and

pre-occupation is the ways in which writing is used to project autonomous identity, to recreate traditional, communal relationships within new national formations. This identity is hybrid, however, as it emerges out of a synthesis between traditional myth and that of Europe, thus unsettling the colonial heritage. Osakwe (1999: 63) notes the hybridity and syncretism apparent in "Idanre". She observes that Soyinka translates some Yoruba concepts into the English language but that they retain their uniquely African meaning. She also notes that in the characterisation of Ogun, Soyinka has borrowed concepts from Greek mythology and applied them to an African setting.

Soyinka exploits the mythical symbolism of the god Ogun in its full potential to explore the contradictions of postcolonial Africa. Since Ogun, in Yoruba mythology, forged a way between the supernatural realm of the gods and the land of the mortals, he is the god of transition. As such, his presence is sensed in all transitional spaces, including the transition from colonial to postcolonial rule. Ogun's attributes are essential in dealing with postcolonial problems in Africa: his dangerous violence; his revolutionary outrage; his exploratory, experimenting will and risk-taking energy; his artistry; his protective powers; restorative justice; his guardianship of sacred oaths, and above all his individual daring.

4. Conclusion

This paper demonstrated that in the poem "Idanre" Soyinka plumbs Yoruba mythology and chooses the god Ogun as his tutelary deity. He accentuates Ogun's symbolism as a god of creativity, reason, transition and humanism and offers these as positive qualities that may enhance African leadership. It is further shown that Soyinka uses Yoruba mythology to offer an authentic African interpretation of contemporary African reality. By means of myth he arrogates to himself, and by implication to all Africans, the right to define their experience and their identity in their own terms.

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