

Miłoslawa Stepień  
University of Warsaw

## **Wole Soyinka: Cultural Encounters and *Death and the King's Horseman***

### **Resumé**

Wole Soyinka: La rencontre des civilisations, *La Mort et l'écuyer du roi*\*.

L'article est consacré à l'un des drames les plus controversés de Wole Soyinka, *La mort et l'écuyer du roi*, mis sous le jour de ses textes critiques précoces ayant trait à la littérature africaine. *La mort et l'écuyer du roi* a connu une rude critique de la part de différents critiques africains pour sa langue par trop intellectuelle et pour sa complaisance excessive en tradition d'écriture européenne. Toutefois, il faut d'abord comprendre l'approche théorique que Soyinka pratiquait vis-à-vis de la littérature africaine, afin de pouvoir saisir les fondations de sa méthode d'écrire. Son mélange spécifique d'influences variées, depuis les chants d'éloge et d'une langue métaphorique propres à l'orature d'Yoruba, passant par les pièces shakespeariennes et la tradition du drame grec, est présenté ici comme un choix fait en toute conscience par un écrivain ayant atteint sa maturité et par un théoricien de la littérature disposant des connaissances immenses. Des travaux précoces de Soyinka discutaient de différentes méthodes d'écrire pratiquées par une génération dite « première » d'écrivains africains, ce qui nous permet de dépister les motifs qui se dessinent derrière ses propres choix littéraires.

\* édition française: Wole Soyinka, *La Mort et l'écuyer du roi*, Hatier International, Paris 2002, coll. Monde Noir

Wole Soyinka, the only black African to have received the Nobel Prize in literature, remains one of the most controversial figures in the African literary world. The reasons for this are multiple: the complexity and sometimes elusiveness of some of his work, his critical approach to various aspects of African ideas on identity (specifically his criticism of Négritude and African primitivists), his political involvement in contemporary crises on the African continent (the

Biafran war in Nigeria, his engagement against the system of apartheid in South Africa or against Nigerian dictators, which resulted in long prison sentences, etc.). Soyinka's highly intellectual literary works have found both staunch defenders and feisty critics, with many of his own essays devoted to the discussion of issues of African identity, often being direct commentaries and replies to criticism others had conducted of his style and approach to literature. Critics have commented on the language of his works (most typically attacking its complexity), the tropes he uses or the form and content of his works.<sup>1</sup>

Criticism of Soyinka appeared quite early on with the staging in Nigeria in the early 1960's of his play *A Dance of the Forests*, which fuses elements of European modernism and Yoruba traditional theatre. It met with hostility from the Nigerian government who perceived it as critical of wide-spread government corruption, from literary critics for its 'elitist aesthetics' or the complexity of the play, and from what Soyinka called the "Neo-Tarzanists" for having used European techniques. Yet often what is stated about Soyinka has been shown to be a misreading or oversimplification of his undoubtedly complex approach to African literature. Soyinka has written often on problems facing African writers and emphasized the right to freedom of expression and use of multiple sources of inspiration, without being forced within artificial limitations and categorisations. At the same time he has incorporated and drawn from the African (mostly Yoruba) theatrical tradition in an attempt to heighten awareness of its richness and complexity. What is most important for Soyinka as a writer and critic is to not unwittingly allow mediocre or 'primitive' works to be considered as typical African writing – a danger he saw evolving from some black affirmation movements which often incorporated colonial stereotypes of the African into their world-view. This prolific essayist is often remembered for one short quotation against Négritude ("A tiger does not proclaim his tigritude, he pounces"), which does not do justice to the complexity

---

<sup>1</sup> The most staunch criticism of Soyinka's style of writing came from Chinweizu et al. in the book *Toward the Decolonization for African Literature*. Vol. 1. Enugu: Fourth Dimension, 1980.

and richness of his literary and theoretical works. How then should we understand Soyinka's literary texts in the context of his own writing about African literature? An appropriate place to begin this analysis would be with Soyinka's critical texts dealing with the topic of various issues connected to writing by Africans and to compare these insights with one of his most controversial texts: *Death and the King's Horseman*.

### **1. Approaches to Issues of Identity in African Writing**

Many of Soyinka's early essays, such as "Cross-Currents: The 'New African' after Cultural Encounters", "The External Encounter" or "From a Common Back Cloth", deal with the topic of African writing, critically analysing the underlying principles of various texts. In one of these early essays, "Cross-Currents" (1982), Soyinka discusses various approaches African writers take when attempting to write about Africa from the perspective of post-independence times – against the back-drop of colonialism and cultural encounters with Arab-Islamic and European colonisers. He distinguishes between six categories. This is an interesting point to begin the discussion of Soyinka's own texts, as it shows his intense interest in such topics and his self-awareness of choices made in the process of writing. The essay deals mostly with the so-called "first generation" of African writers from the 1950's and 1960's, who were characterised by an intense interest in issues of cultural encounters between African society and European colonialism. However, it would be justified to claim that Soyinka should be perceived as a prodigy in that his criticism can be seen as sketching the path for future generations of writers who have shown themselves able to overcome, at least to a certain extent, the legacy of colonialism and begin writing in what Soyinka saw as a liberated manner, where the African world-view is taken for granted as an element of global civilisation and where various methods and influences are used without the necessity to justify them. The essay was also written a couple of years after the publication of *Death and the King's Horseman* (1975) and shows an important phase of Soyinka's philosophical development, which, though later underwent change, has in many ways shaped Soyinka's views on African literature.

The first category of African writing dealing with cultural encounters, which Soyinka calls 'ethnic submission', is explained on the basis of the text *Ambiguous Adventure* (1961) by the Senegalese writer, Cheikh Hamidou Kane. This category involves writing which shows the author does not seem to realise the outside influences that have invaded the African world: "[t]he author recognises his being and his society in no other terms than what is easily proven historically alien". ("Cross-Currents": 180) Such an approach entails the incorporation of foreign elements without any conscious realisation that they are not part of the local culture.

The second category, 'Négritude' or 'Cartesian response', involves the well-known black affirmation movement, most prominent amongst Francophone writers, such as Léopold Sédar Senghor, Aimé Césaire or Birago Diop. "To Descartes' 'I think, therefore I am', they responded on behalf of the black man: 'I feel, therefore I am'" ("Cross-Currents": 180). This manifesto of blackness was challenged by many critics, most notably by Soyinka, in that it obviously incorporated a colonial framework of stereotypes about the African and allowed for their continued exclusion from rationality and, in some ways, from civilisation itself. By minimising their involvement in world culture to that which is emotive and intuitive and affirming the idea of the black man as being one of dance and song but not technology, this approach, Soyinka states, took "[...] refuge in glorifying the cultural retardation which has been assigned to them as their maximal development, turning it into a 'principled' aesthetic" ("The External Encounter": 236). Soyinka's own criticism of Négritude seems to have been widely misunderstood, as he has often shown himself to be an admirer of the artistic talents of Senghor<sup>2</sup> or Aimé Césaire<sup>3</sup>, but was more anxious about criticism which praised literature with no artistic merit<sup>4</sup>, neo-Tarzanism<sup>5</sup> or primitivism.<sup>6</sup> He per-

---

<sup>2</sup> "Léopold Sédar Senghor is the true griot with a false vocation", cf. "The External Encounter": 237. Soyinka thus appreciates Senghor's style of writing, but is critical of the ideology inherent in the texts.

<sup>3</sup> Soyinka writes of Césaire's "originality and craft", cf. "The External Encounter": 242.

<sup>4</sup> The essay "Neo-Tarzanism. The Poetics of Pseudo-Tradition" is a good

ceived at least some of the most notable 'Negritudinalists' (his own term) as great writers who had chosen the wrong path. His criticism was directed more at misuse of Négritude philosophy, which allowed for facile romanticisation and *naïveté* in choice of topics and poor writing. In recent times, Soyinka has returned to the topic in his book *The Burden of Memory. The Muse of Forgiveness* (1999), where he analyses the reasons and motives standing behind the development of Négritude, which he here extols as an attempt to introduce "[...] a revaluation of neglected humanistic properties" (*The Burden*: 170) and a contestation of "[...] the combined hierarchies of their [Europeans'] materialist orientation on the one hand, and their spiritual ordering of the world on the other" (*The Burden*: 171). Thus, in a revision of Négritude, Soyinka portrays it as perhaps not the perfect solution to the situation of that time, but understandable under the circumstances, retaining, however, his criticism of some primitivists' tendencies to praise literature of a low artistic level.

---

example of Soyinka's views on the dangers of haphazard criticism. It discusses the criticism of the so-called 'decolonisers': Chinweizu, Onwuchekwa Jemie and Ihechukwu Madubuike (Soyinka also refers to them as the troika critics), which he perceives as sloppy and harmful in that it raises poems on the level of nursery rhymes to being great poetry: "This trite, prosaic, coy, kindergarten drivel which my seven-year old daughter would be ashamed to write is extolled by the troika critics." ("Neo-Tarzanism": 320).

<sup>5</sup> Soyinka most fully discusses Neo-Tarzanism in his essay of the same title, where he describes it using a quotation from Chinweizu's text "Prodigal's Come Home," *Okike* No. 4: "[...] a landscape of elephants, beggars, calabashes, serpents, pumpkins, baskets, town-criers, iron bells, slit drums, iron masks, hares, snakes, squirrels... *a landscape portrayed with native eyes to which aeroplanes appear as iron birds*; a landscape in which animals behave as they might behave in Africa of folk-lore, animals presented through native African eyes" ("Neo-Tarzanism": 315f., his italics). For Soyinka this is a simplification and folklorisation of the African world and he rejects critical praise for such writing, calling it "an infantile regression" ("The External Encounter": 235).

<sup>6</sup> Primitivism is synonymous with Neo-Tarzanism in most of Soyinka's early critical work (such as "The External Encounter", "From a Common Back Cloth" or "Neo-Tarzanism").

The very influential novel *Things Fall Apart* (1958) by another Nigerian author, Chinua Achebe, is the basis for Soyinka's establishment of a third category of African writing: 'unmediated exposition'. The book shows an Igbo village at the moment when it encounters European civilisation for the very first time, faithfully portraying both the problems already existing in the pre-colonial African society and the conflicts which erupt when the alien culture begins to influence the local community. The narrator of the book does not however at any moment comment on the events or show his own perspective of them<sup>7</sup>. Both cultures are portrayed with a description of their negative and positive aspects and through this we gain access to information on various reasons why such different reactions appeared among various groups of both societies.

Soyinka at this point introduces a sub-category of the second type of writing – 'Négritude', which he names 'stylistic bridges', giving Camara Laye's *Le Regard du roi* (1954) as an example. Soyinka describes this category in his own words as: "First, black affirmation, next the synthesis of black leaven and white flour – humanism and technology – which would create a new, progressive brotherhood or being" ("Cross-Currents": 180f.). It is described as a category which attempts to recover black authenticity through universalisation of the topic, achieved through a filtering of ethnic content. Notably, Camara Laye's text ends with affirmation of the cultural value of African social structures and the strength flowing from such structures of society.

As contrast to the category of 'ethnic submission' and as a step further taken than the other categories, Soyinka shows a fifth grouping of African literature which he places under the heading of 'iconoclasm'. As examples he gives texts, which were published at a much later time than the previously mentioned: Yambo Ouologuem's *Le Devoir de violence* (1968) and the writing of Ayi Kwei Armah (especially *Two Thousand Seasons*, 1973). Soyinka describes this category as including the works of rejectionists: those, who did not allow for a romantisation of any culture and portrayed history as all

---

<sup>7</sup> For Soyinka's discussion of Chinua Achebe's writing see: "Cross-Currents": 180; "From a Common Back Cloth": 11-13.

civilisations being on a “violent course of collision” (“Cross-Currents”: 182). It was thus both against the claims of imperialist colonial powers about their cultural superiority and a denial of Négritude romanticisation of the power of traditional society. Soyinka criticises such an approach as being “blanket iconoclasm [...] an undialectical proceeding on a par with blanket fetishisation of myth and history” (“The External Encounter”: 243). Armah, unlike Ouo-loguem, did attempt to portray the positive values of traditional society, yet Soyinka perceives *Two Thousand Seasons* as falling into the “[...] pitfalls of the simplistic, through this evocation of an authentic tradition” (“Cross-Currents”: 182). As contrast to this category, the father of African cinema and one of Africa’s greatest writers, Ousmane Sembene, earned a separate mention in Soyinka’s list. His text *Les Bouts de bois de Dieu* (1960) is described as: “[...] committed to a rejection of sentimentality in tradition, it nevertheless results in the triumph of the strengths of the positive in tradition” (“Cross-Currents”: 182), which Soyinka portrays as a greater achievement as it avoided the pitfalls of complete self-negation, something the iconoclasts could not avoid.

This introduction into Soyinka’s early essays on African literature shows much about his own views on what African literature should be and what dangers it must be careful to avoid – ideas, which had an enormous impact on his own works. The criticism of Soyinka’s ‘elitist aesthetics’ and use of foreign influences in his writing must necessarily be countered with an explication of his views on this topic. In the essay “Neo-Tarzanism. The Poetics of Pseudo-Tradition” (1975) Soyinka conducts a vivid description of the dangers of allowing African art to be portrayed as simplistic and primitive. Being well-versed not only in the Western classics, from Greek tragedy, through Shakespeare, to the great modernist experimentalists, but also in the intricacies of the Yoruba oratory tradition, Soyinka is in the best position to draw comparisons and show the discrepancies of approaches which allow for claims that Africa has nothing to offer to the world in this area, except for ‘emotive’ writing. Soyinka shows examples of how Hopkins’ “sprung rhythm” has been known in traditional Yoruba poetry for a long time, discusses the intricacies of the polyrhythmic musical tradition or the symbolic and metaphysical levels of contemporary Afri-

can poetry, all in order to counter the claim that his own writing is not African due to its complexity. Soyinka perceived the African world-view and cultural input into global culture as aspects which should not have to be justified and which should allow for a fluid and liberal use of other influences, similarly as European artists have drawn upon aspects of world culture, often without even rudimentary knowledge of their meanings, to enhance their own artistic expression (such as the European surrealists).

## **2. *Death and the King's Horseman***

*Death and the King's Horseman* (1975) is at once the most appropriate and inappropriate of Soyinka's texts to discuss when interested in the topic of cultural encounters between African society and the colonisers. It tells the story of an incident which "[...] took place in Oyo, ancient Yoruba city of Nigeria, in 1946" (*Death*, Author's Note, 3), involving a local custom whereby the Chief's horseman was obliged to commit suicide exactly a month after the leader's death. The local colonial police-officer, Pilkings, takes it upon himself to stop this "barbaric custom" (*Death*: 43), which leads to tragedy. This is one of Soyinka's few plays directly dealing with the topic of cultural encounters between traditional society and that of the colonialists. However, at the same time, Soyinka in the author's note to the American edition of the play emphasizes that *Death and the King's Horseman* should not be read simplistically under the "[...] facile tag of 'clash of cultures'" and he goes on further to comment that the "Colonial Factor is an incident, a catalytic incident merely" (*Death*, Author's Note, 3).

The climactic moment in *Death and the King's Horseman* has been the subject of much speculation as the most superficial reading of it would involve a comparison with Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* – the most widely known African book on culture clashes<sup>8</sup>. Pilkings' interruption of the ritual of passage should, however, be read in the context of other factors, pointed at in the text itself. Elesin Oba, the

---

<sup>8</sup> Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* also ends in tragedy with the dishonourable suicidal death of the main character, who cannot reconcile his own life with the changes slowly being brought about by colonial administration.



King's horseman, has been preparing for the ritual of death, but had that same day decided to go against customary behaviour and take a young wife, earlier promised to his own son, to sweeten his passage to the other world. Iyaloya, leader of the women from the market<sup>9</sup>, criticises this decision, predicting that this will bring about unforeseen circumstances as it is obviously an affirmation of life and a sign of the Horseman's tie to earthly pleasures, when Elesin should be preparing for death. Thus, Pilkings' interference with the ritual is perceived by the local community simply as a convenient escape for Elesin, as he had been immersing himself in the sweetness of life and was himself reluctant to fulfil his accepted duty. Elesin tries to lay the blame on the colonialist: "My will was squelched in the spittle of an alien race" (*Death*: 57), but Iyaloya, who comes to visit him in prison where he is being kept in order to stop the suicide from taking place, comments:

I warned you, if you must leave a seed behind<sup>10</sup>, be sure it is not tainted with the curses of the world. Who are you to open a new life when you dared not open the door to a new existence<sup>11</sup>? I say who are you to make so bold? (*Death*: 55)

Thus, Soyinka, both in the text and in the author's notes to it, is leading us to the interpretation that the cultural clash in this context is nothing more than a scapegoat to allow Elesin to escape a fate he had chosen for himself, yet obviously without fully embracing all the consequences, in accordance with custom when he had taken on the function of the chief's companion, a function which had involved an honourable place in society and special benefits and treatment throughout his life.

---

<sup>9</sup> The market in Soyinka's play fulfils a double function. It introduces the local people and their everyday life and at the same time it is suggestive of the Yoruba saying: "The world is a marketplace (we visit), the otherworld is home" (Quoted in "The Yoruba World": 72), which suggests a more metaphysical level of symbolism.

<sup>10</sup> Reference to Elesin's wedding night and his having impregnated his young wife on the eve of the ritual of death.

<sup>11</sup> Reference to the passage into the next world.

The difficulties of these cultural encounters are, however, present in other ways in the text, especially in the dialogues conducted between Pilkings and his wife, Jane, often in the presence of their servants, where they show their paternalistic attitude towards the local population and their lack of understanding of its workings. Such comments as Jane's statements: "I thought all bush drumming sounded the same" (*Death*: 21), their donning of the sacred *Egungun* costume for a masquerade at the colonial residency (an affront to the holy character of the masks as part of local ritual) and a conversation conducted in front of Joseph their servant, in which, oblivious of his presence, Pilkings states that on the one hand "these natives" will disclose even their family secrets at the earliest opportunity, while on the other, they are "sly, devious bastards" (*Death*: 23), show how little they even try to understand of the culture they have been living next to for so many years and how they do not treat Africans as equals. They also do not understand how converts to Islam or Christianity can still hold respect for such sacred symbols as the *Egungun* masks, when Amusa, one of the local police-officers and a Moslem, does not agree to speak with them when they are wearing the costumes.

The most interesting exchange, however, is between Jane and Olunde, Elesin's son, whom the Pilkings had helped to send to England for medical studies against the wishes of his father, who had hoped that as oldest son he would continue in his footsteps as King's Horseman. Olunde had returned that day for his father's funeral as he had known from the moment of receiving information about the King's death of the impending ritual suicide. Jane seems to have expected Olunde, after experiencing Western education, to have repudiated his ties to local customs and is surprised when he criticises her for wearing the ancestor's mask simply to impress the English prince attending the ball that day and states that one thing he had discovered during his studies is that: "[...] you [the British] have no respect for that what you do not understand" (*Death*: 41). Soyinka has met with some criticism of his stereotypical portrayal of the British in this text, yet, it would seem justified to state that the Pilkings are sketched here more as typical colonialists as background for the choices the main characters of the play make. The play ends with the death of both Olunde, who takes it upon himself to fulfil his father's

role after the latter's failure to do so, and Elesin, who hangs himself on his chains upon seeing his son's body laid before him.

Language is another playground upon which questions of cultural encounters can be shown to be important. The issue of choice of language in African writing has long been a contested one: from calls to introduce one of the African languages, usually Kiswahili, as the language of the continent (Şoyinka proposed this himself in the essay "Language as Boundary"), through choices made to write in local languages (the Kenyan Ngugi wa Thiong'o began to write in Kikuyu after having published some of his works in English), to subversive games played with the language of the colonisers. Şoyinka's works have met with criticism due to the complexity of the language used. One of the play's most interesting features is the incorporation of various registers of language (Queen's English, stylised Yoruba praise-singing, Pidgin English, standard text book English, etc.) and of elements of Yoruba mythology and metaphors. The most linguistically complex, and, for the European audience, most difficult to fully understand, fragments involve exchanges between Elesin Oba - the King's horseman, Olohun-Iyo - the praise-singer, and the chorus of women from the marketplace. These parts of the text are written with the use of traditional forms of dialogue, with many references to Yoruba cosmology and the use of direct translations of Yoruba metaphors and sayings, all of which make some fragments of the text extremely elusive for European audiences. As an example the following fragment will suffice:

ELESIN: When the horse sniffs the stable does he not strain at the bridle? The market is the long-suffering home of my spirit and the women are packing to go. The Eşu<sup>12</sup>-harrassed day slipped into the stew-pot while we feasted. We ate it up with the rest of the meat. I have neglected my women (*Death*: 5).

---

<sup>12</sup> Eşu – "The Yoruba trickster god often associated with doubleness, ambivalence, duplicity" (*Death*, footnote 5)

In order to fully understand this fragment, it would be necessary to know that the market-place is also symbolic of the living world in Yoruba culture and women here indicate also worldly pleasures of the flesh, important in the context of Elesin's choice to marry on the eve of his death. Eṣu, as a trickster god, here entails that the day has slipped past, as if they had been tricked into wiling his last day away. Metaphors of food play an important role in the text: the King's Horseman has dined with the chief throughout his life and they will go on to the Next World for new feasts, yet when Elesin does not go through with the ritual, Iyaloya tells him that he prefers to "[...] fight [...] for the left-overs of the world" instead of choosing an honourable after-life in the world of the ancestors, he has opted to hold on to pleasures which are no longer his due.

Pilkings, his wife and Olunde converse in the proper standard English, while Pidgin English is introduced in the speech of Amusa, the police-officer under the command of Pilkings, who first brings him news of the planned ritual suicide. One of the most comic fragments of the play involves a scene between Amusa, who has come to arrest Elesin, and the market women, who do not want to allow him to enter the chamber where he is spending his wedding night with his new wife. Amusa is frustrated: "Iyalola, make you tell dese women make den no insult me again. If I hear dat kin' insult once more..." (*Death*: 29), to which the young girls, probably educated in local missionary schools, react with ridicule by mimicking "the white man" (*Death*: 32):

GIRL [...] –What's your handicap old chap?

–Is there racing by golly?

–Splendid golf course, you'll like it.

–I'm beginning to like it already

–And a European club, exclusive.

–You've kept the flag flying.

–We do our best for the old country.

–It's a pleasure to serve.

–Another whisky old chap?

–You are indeed too too kind.

–Not at all Sir. Where is that boy? [With a sudden

bellow.] Sergeant!

AMUSA [snaps to attention] Yessir!

(*Death*: 31)

This exchange, which ends with Amusa making a fool of himself, finally wins the day for the women, who force Amusa and his policemen to leave. It is also a vivid commentary on the function of language: Amusa, who is estranged from his own culture due to having chosen to side with the colonisers, at the same time has not been able to gain mastery of their language for which he is also looked down upon by the whites, while for the young girls – language is used to manipulate Amusa, it is a convention they have learned and are capable of using subversively.

Şoyinka himself has often explored the cultural richness and complexity of traditional African (often Yoruba) art forms, using elements in his literary works and discussing them in his critical works, through which he had hoped to challenge racist ideas of the simplicity of the African oral tradition. In *Death and the King's Horseman* we find conventions and idioms taken from Yoruba traditional and popular drama and such elements as music, dance and song, customs connected to masks and African sayings and proverbs play an important part. On the other hand, Şoyinka's works have been criticised for being over-intellectualised and elitist, which is only partially true as he has written both extremely difficult and linguistically challenging texts and worked with popular theatrical groups in Nigeria which performed using elements of dance, song, mime and Pidgin English (e.g. Unlimited Liability Company).

However, it is impossible to understand Şoyinka's works without looking towards other influences that have gone into the creation of his style of writing. Şoyinka was well versed with the works of Shakespeare, having studied under the famous scholar G. Wilson Knight, it is also possible to trace the influence of experimental modern playwrights such as Beckett, Brecht or O'Neill on his work, as well as that of Greek tragedy<sup>13</sup>. Patrick Chabal adequately sums

---

<sup>13</sup> For a discussion of the influence of Greek tragedy on *Death and the King's Horseman* cf: Henry Louis Gates, Jr. "Being, the Will, and the Semantics of Death", *Death and the King's Horseman*, 155-164; other influences apparent in the works of Şoyinka are discussed in most introductory texts to his works.

up that Wole Şoyinka's "[...] work is at once utterly modern in the Western sense but also fundamentally African in both inspiration and artistic sensibility" ("The African Crisis": 4). What Şoyinka in fact proposes is that the African tradition no longer be perceived as simply of anthropological interest and as being folkloristic and static, but as a living and growing input into world civilisation, no longer burdened with colonial stereotypes and the weight of constantly countering them, allowing it to finally enter the global stage on equal footing. Şoyinka opened the door to this stage for future writers, such as Ben Okri, Chimamanda Adichie or Yvonne Vera, through his artistic and critical works, so that for them the words below are obvious and no longer need to be stated:

I cannot claim a transparency of communication even from the sculpture, music and poetry of my own people the Yoruba, but the aesthetic matrix is the fount of my own creative inspiration; it influences my critical response to the creation of other cultures and validates selective eclecticism as the right of every productive being, scientist or artist. Şango is today's god of electricity, not of white-man magic-light, Ogun is today's god of precision technology, oil rigs and space rockets, not a benighted rustic cowering at the iron bird ("Neo-Tarzanism": 329).

Thus Şango, the Yoruba god of lightening and thunder, or Ogun, the god of fire and war, are shown to be mythical tropes, the meaning of which can change with time – it is not an idea which should become a symbol of static concepts of Africanness, especially anthropological accounts of what 'authentic' Africa is.<sup>14</sup> They become part of the fluid cultural 'matrix' that African writers can draw upon in their writing, yet allowing at the same time for finding inspiration in a myriad of other concepts, ideas and styles from around the world.

---

<sup>14</sup> Interestingly enough both Şango and Ogun become symbols of resistance against European colonisation.

## Bibliography:

Appiah, A., 2003, "Wole Soyinka and the Myth of the African World", in: Soyinka, W., 2003, *Death and the King's Horseman. Authoritative text. Backgrounds and Contexts. Criticism*, ed. by Simon Gikandi, New York: Norton and Company, 103-112.

Asante-Darko, K., 1998, "Discourse, tradition, and power in a literary transition", *Mots Pluriel*, 8. October 1998, <http://www.arts.uwa.edu.au/MotsPluriels/MP898kad.html>.

Chabal, P., 1996, "The African Crisis: Context and Interpretation", in: ed. by Richard Werbner and Terence Ranger, *Postcolonial Identities in Africa*, London – New Jersey: Zed Books.

Drewal, H.J., J. Pemberton III & R. Abiodun., 2003, "The Yoruba World", in: Soyinka, W., *Death and the King's Horseman. Authoritative text. Backgrounds and Contexts. Criticism*, ed. by Simon Gikandi, New York: Norton and Company, 67-73.

Gates Jr., H.L., 2003, "Being, the Will, and the Semantics of Death", in: Soyinka, W., *Death and the King's Horseman. Authoritative text. Backgrounds and Contexts. Criticism*, ed. by Simon Gikandi, New York: Norton and Company, 155-164.

Gikandi, S., 2003, "Introduction" [to]: Soyinka, W., *Death and the King's Horseman. Authoritative text. Backgrounds and Contexts. Criticism*, ed. by Simon Gikandi, New York: Norton and Company, vii-xxiv.

Jeyifo, B., 1988, "Introduction. Wole Soyinka and the Tropes of Disalienation", in: Soyinka, W., 1988, *Art, Dialogue & Outrage. Essays on Literature and Culture*, ed. by B. Jeyifo, Ibadan: New Horn Press, viii-xxxii.

Şoyinka, W., 1988, *Art, Dialogue & Outrage. Essays on Literature and Culture*, ed. by B. Jeyifo, Ibadan: New Horn Press.

Id., 1993, *The Blackman and the Veil: A Century On. Beyond the Berlin Wall. Lectures delivered by Wole Şoyinka on 31<sup>st</sup> August and 31<sup>st</sup> September 1990*, s.l.: Sedco Publishing and W.E.B. Du Bois Memorial Centre for Pan-African Culture.

Id. 1999, *The Burden of Memory. The Muse of Forgiveness*, Oxford: Oxford UP.

Id., 1988, "Cross-Currents: The 'New African' after Cultural Encounters", in: Şoyinka, W., 1988, *Art, Dialogue & Outrage. Essays on Literature and Culture*, ed. by B. Jeyifo, Ibadan: New Horn Press, 179-189.

Id., 1988, "Drama and the African World-View", in: Şoyinka, W., 1988, *Art, Dialogue & Outrage. Essays on Literature and Culture*, ed. by B. Jeyifo, Ibadan: New Horn Press, 37-60.

Id., 2003, *Death and the King's Horseman. Authoritative Text. Backgrounds and Contexts. Criticism*, ed. by Simon Gikandi, New York: Norton and Company.

Id., 1988, "The External Encounter: Ambivalence in African Arts and Literature", in: Şoyinka, W., 1988, *Art, Dialogue & Outrage. Essays on Literature and Culture*, ed. by B. Jeyifo, Ibadan: New Horn Press, 221-246.

Id., 1988, "From a Common Back Cloth. A Reassessment of the African Literary Image", in: Şoyinka, W., 1988, *Art, Dialogue & Outrage. Essays on Literature and Culture*, ed. by B. Jeyifo, Ibadan: New Horn Press, 7-14.

Id., 1988, "Language as Boundary", in: Şoyinka, W., 1988, *Art, Dialogue & Outrage. Essays on Literature and Culture*, ed. by B. Jeyifo, Ibadan: New Horn Press, 132-145.



Id., 1999, "L.S. Senghor and Négritude: *J'accuse, mais je pardonne*", in: Soyinka, W., 1999, *The Burden of Memory. The Muse of Forgiveness*, Oxford: Oxford UP, 93-144.

Id., 1976, *Myth, Literature and the African World*, Cambridge: Cambridge UP.

Id., 1999, "Négritude and the Gods of Equity", in: Soyinka, W., 1999, *The Burden of Memory. The Muse of Forgiveness*, Oxford: Oxford UP., 145-194.

Id., 1988, "Neo-Tarzanism. The Poetics of Pseudo-Tradition", in: Soyinka, W., 1988, *Art, Dialogue & Outrage. Essays on Literature and Culture*, ed. by B. Jeyifo, Ibadan: New Horn Press, 313-329.

Id., and Beier, U., 1992, *Wole Soyinka on "Identity". From a Conversation with Ulli Beier*, Bayreuth: University of Bayreuth, Iwalewa House.