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Participant theatre: Soyinka's version of a Greek classic, The Bacchae of Euripides

There are numerous translations of Euripides's *Bacchae* into English. Why, then, would Wole Soyinka, who had previously written plays, novels and poems primarily focused on his native Yoruba culture, want to write an adaptation (in English) of this Greek play, making it applicable to African people? In his introduction (1973), Soyinka explains his interest in this play in both religious and political terms. After stressing its "subversive" message and relating Dionysus to the Yoruba god Ogun, he states summarily, "I see *The Bacchae*, finally as a prodigious, barbaric banquet, an insightful manifestation of the universal need of man to match himself against Nature."²

Soyinka has long been recognized as a writer who probes particular situations in terms of universal human themes. Yet while recognizing this fact, Western readers may perhaps gain deeper appreciation of Soyinka's impact by understanding the contexts from which his art derives. Having had the benefit of both African and European theatrical traditions, Soyinka forges a unique brand of theatre. This essay investigates certain political and mythic elements, which, though present in much of Soyinka's writing, are highlighted in their explicit

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² Wole Soyinka, *The Bacchae of Euripides: A communion Rite* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1973), p. viii, x. *The Bacchae*, trans. William Arrowsmith, *Euripides V: Three Tragedies*, ed. David Greene and Richard Lattimore (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1959). All further references to these two plays will be made within the text of my essay.

juxtaposition to Greek tradition. Andre Lefevere suggests that Soyinka has achieved a consummate translation with *The Bacchae*, because of his “attempt to translate not only the linguistic circle but the cultural circle and the circle of literary procedures as well”, further, by his attempt to influence “the cultural and/or the literary circle towards change.”³

When the National Theatre in 1972 commissioned from Wole Soyinka (Nobel laureate, 1986) a new version of *The Bacchae* of Euripides it was in the fully realized expectation that the distance between ancient Greece and modern world (African and European) would be readily diminished; the resulting play still belongs to ancient Greece and to us. The story is told again virtually unchanged, and its commanding metaphors are retained, with much of the same significance for our understanding of society and consciousness. Euripides’ play, beginning with serene and joyful song and dance in honor of Dionysus, ends in savage horror under the dominion of the same god, and the king is lynched in festive frenzy by the woman who bore him. Soyinka keeps the plot with a more muted opening movement. In both versions certain life-delighting and life-sustaining impulses turn sour and self-destructive. Both Euripides and Soyinka honour the old stories while exposing them to fresh experiential tests of their validity, and both put authority, order and regiment upon trial. But Soyinka’s play shows that the old turbulent energies, delight and excitements, instinctual aspirations and malignancies have assumed new disguises, put on new masks. The scourging scene, the sack-cloth and ashes, the chorus of slaves, and many other episodes and images, extend the play’s scope into Christian and socialist references and values. More strikingly, moreover, the human perspective changes. The play gets even closer than Euripides to the pathos and absurdity of human ordinariness, while at the same time being sophisticated and knowing in its treatment of the old Greek, Christian and African rituals.

When Tiresias, in Soyinka’s version, picks himself up from the procession of revellers who are featuring him in what is meant to be a symbolic scourging of the old dispensation, covered in weals, he cries

³ André Lefevere, “Translation: Changing the code. Soyinka’s Ironic Aetiology”, *Babel* (Spring 1981), p. 80.

out in protests: “Can’t you bastards even tell the difference between ritual and reality?” The theatre is neither the ritual nor reality, but it is in a position to make a spectacle of both.

The Bacchae which Euripides (480-406 BC) wrote towards the end of his life, while he was in self-exile in Macedon, has always been recognized for its astonishing power, for the classical simplicity and rigor of its structure, and for the remarkable nature of its homage to traditional beliefs from a man who has spent the greater part of his writing career expressing his scepticism and showing up the absurdity of the Gods and their behaviour according to received ideas.

In general terms Euripides dramatizes in this play the conflict which Nietzsche has observed at the basis of all Greek drama, the conflict between the Apollonian and Dionysian principles in life, between light and darkness, between reason and ecstasy, between control and liberty, between male and female. In more specific terms Euripides is concerned with the complementary nature of these principles and the difficulty in discerning the limits of one against the other. The precarious nature of the balance which subserves normality is represented by the simple but symbolic setting of Euripides’ play. Pentheus’ palace which faces us center stage stands at the meeting point of two ways: one leading to the city, the other to the hills of Cithairon. The palace is sustained by a balance between the civility, the control and rationality of established polity, and the ecstasy, the freedom and the mystery of the wild open country. Euripides’ Pentheus is unconsciously aware of this precarious balance, expressed through the attraction which Dionysus, this new-fangled god obviously created by the wily old priest Tiresias for his own material benefit, exerts upon him. He confesses:

So; you are attractive, stranger, at least to women – which explains, I think, your presence here in Thebes. (210)

But, as a ruler, he must restore order to the city suddenly deserted by its womenfolk running in pursuit of some orgiastic rites in the hills. Therefore, in spite of the warnings of Tiresias and Dionysus himself, whom he tries to imprison without success, Pentheus mobilizes his army against the worshippers of this new God. Dionysus tempts him with

safe-conduct to spy on the orgies of these female celebrants of the new cult before his attack on them. When he yields to this temptation we are aware that this is a surrender of integrity from within, a yielding to the attraction of that which he has consciously been opposing, an upsurge of that potential danger which the precarious balance has hidden so far from sight. Pentheus is led, grotesquely dressed in the costume of the female celebrants, to his death, torn to pieces by his own mother, Agave, and his aunts. The play ends with a lamentation for Pentheus, sacrificed by members of his own family who have been maddened by their resistance to the new god. The guilty members of the family go into exile under the curse of Dionysus, and the final note of the play is on the inscrutable ways of the Gods.

Soyinka calls his adaptation of *The Bacchae* “a communion rite”. It seems to me (i) that the three major changes that he makes to Euripides’ play help to define what he means by a communion rite, and (ii) that the adaptation serves his purposes as a playwright. The three major changes involve (i) the nature of Pentheus’s reign, (ii) the redefinition of the role of Dionysus and (iii) the transformation of the end of the play from a threnos of lamentation to a muted celebration, including a sudden recognition or an epiphany.

In his “Introduction” Soyinka expresses dissatisfaction with Euripides’ way of ending the *Bacchae*, “the petering 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”.⁴ Soyinka therefore creates a totally different ending, in which a forgiving god manifests his benevolence to the Theban population by transforming Pentheus’ blood into divine gift of wine. The socio-ritual character of the adaptation is fully expressed in Tiresias and Agave who comprehend the meaning of Pentheus’ death and show a readiness to let the community benefit from

⁴ Wole Soyinka, *The Bacchae of Euripides: A communion Rite* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1973), p. viii, x. *The Bacchae*, trans. William Arrowsmith, *Euripides V: Three Tragedies*, ed. David Greene and Richard Lattimore (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1959). “Introduction”, p. xi.

this insight. A section by section comparison between Euripides text and Soyinka's shows that the adaptation has a structure which largely corresponds to that of the original.

The main difference on the structural level between Euripides' *Bacchae* and Soyinka's is the latter's use of the "play-within-the-play" technique, in the form of either mime or dialogue. Soyinka also has a tendency to use the dialogue technique on long Chorus sections, where the Leader, either of the Slaves or the Bacchantes, communicates with the Chorus, building up an atmosphere of intense emotion. The presence of a Chorus of Slaves emphasizes the socio-political dimension of Soyinka's *Bacchae*. The movements on the stage of the Choruses of Slaves and Bacchantes, and the gradual merging of unfree and free, concretize very effectively the twofold significance of the Dionysian movement and the dualism of the god himself. Soyinka's interpretation of Dionysus and his brotherhood with the Yoruba god Ogun comes to the fore particularly in the prayer/praise chant passages of the Chorus sections, where Soyinka inserts whole stanzas or lines from his own praise poem to Ogun, *Idanre*. The presence of Ogun is one factor which contributes to making the adaptation of the *Bacchae* a work very much Soyinka's own.

Soyinka emphasizes right from the Prologue the dual nature of Dionysus – he is "vengeful and Kind" – and the dual purpose of his presence in Thebes – a god seeking revenge for disrespect and a force inspiring revolt against oppression and injustice. The socio-political aspect that Soyinka reads into Euripides' play is emphasized from the very start in the dialogue of the Slave Leader and the Herdsman, and in the Slave Leader's attempts to rouse the Slaves from their apathy. Throughout the drama this aspect is interwoven with the metaphysical.

Tiresias' part as Dionysus' priest and his significance to the political context are also made clear in the Prologue. His involvement in the Procession of Eleusis and his ensuing dialogue with Dionysus point to his twofold role in the play.

The socio-ritual character of Soyinka's *Bacchae* is also expressed in the double role played by Pentheus, worldly ruler of Thebes and sacrificial king, tricked by the god into acting the scapegoat's part. The process of temptation and divine magic to which Pentheus is exposed

is considerably enlarged by Soyinka, and the two Wedding scenes, performed as mimes, are crucial to the breakdown of Pentheus' defence. Mime is also used to emphasize the irrevocable nature of Pentheus' fate, and the final stages of the ritual are performed as a hunt.

Euripides' *Exodus*, of which long passages have been lost, becomes, in Soyinka's adaptation, a resolution of conflicts. The sacrifice is accepted by Dionysus and in return he proves his benevolence by turning the blood into wine. The communion rite is completed and a new season can begin on favourable terms.

Although Soyinka was obviously very much aware of Euripides' text when writing his adaptation, it is quite clear that he created a drama entirely his own, qualified by a subtitle, *A Communion Rite*, and by detailed instructions to a would-be director. As mentioned above, Soyinka's dissatisfaction with Euripides' ending made him create a totally new final scene, to which he refers as "a new resolution in the symbolic extension of ritual powers".⁵ The centripetal effect of his final scene, in which the bewildered and desperate humans draw together around the fountain of wine, a manifestation of divine goodwill, contrasts with Euripides' ending of rejection and misery. Soyinka's image of the god Dionysus is qualified by this final scene, too. The cruel vengeance to which the humans are exposed in Euripides' play is toned down in Soyinka's; the new season rests not merely on satisfaction on the god's part but on a form of agreement between the god and the humans.

The paradoxes of Euripides' *Bacchae* are woven into Soyinka's own Yoruba concepts of the coexistence of creation and destruction, and of the ultimate triumph in his version of *The Bacchae* of life-forces over death-impulses. Soyinka explains in his introduction to the drama:

No other play of Euripides and few others among Greek drama are [*sic*] so thoroughly impregnated with image and essence of human passage in conflict and resolution: life itself and death; womb and destroyer; order and chaos (inchoate essence): the ecstasy and serenity; hubris and humility; the visceral and formalistic ... the list is endless. Its totality: a celebration of life, bloody, tumultuous, an extravagant rite of the human and social psyche. (p.xi)

⁵ "Introduction", p. xi.

The creative aspect of Dionysus enables people to discover their true essence. The group of male slaves is, in fact, attracted to Dionysiac worship because the god infuses the slaves with courage to struggle for freedom, which is a first step toward self-discovery. Ogun too, like Dionysus, has the prerogative of bringing people in touch with their inner selves, for, after all, Ogun's establishment of the primary contact between gods and humans led to the next step, namely, human striving for self-knowledge.

Dionysian worshippers attain this goal of self-discovery through two human means, dance and music. Pentheus misunderstands the value of both. His tragedy lies in his refusal to step into the rhythm of the dance as explained by Tiresias to Kadmos:

When you step into the dance you'll lose all your silly notions. You accept, and that's the real stature of man. You are immersed in the richest essence of all – your inner essence. This is what the dance of Dionysus brings forth from you, this is the meaning of the dance. Follow the motion of my feet and dance Kadmos. (255)

The dance experienced under the Dionysiac influence is itself “the dance of life”. As Kadmos instinctively feels, the dance brings forth a “new surge of life”, which he can't explain. It is as if by beating Dionysus' thyrsus on the ground, Kadmos is infused with fresh energy. Music in Yoruba tragedy, as “the embodiment of the tragic spirit” conveys in *The Bacchae* “a strange quality [...] with its strange mixture of nostalgia, violence and death” (248). As music leads Dionysus devotees deeper into themselves, they discover a bedrock of violent tendencies which can lead them to acts of murder such as the slaying of Pentheus.

Another means to self-discovery is active, conscious suffering which Dionysus himself, as a “suffering god”, embodies. Dionysian suffering is experienced by Agave, Pentheus, and Tiresias. Because Agave's intense sorrow at killing her son also embodies joy for the people, it marks the culmination of the Dionysian paradox. Agave's is an epiphanic type of suffering in Soyinka's adaptation: her crime is directly valuable for the community and she understands the meaning of her agony.

Tiresias suffering is different from Agave's in that it is willed consciously. Tiresias chooses to be the one who bears the evils of the old year by being flogged. As he collapses under the whiplashes, Dionysus enters and halts the ritual midway. "What deep hunger unassuaged by a thousand lifelong surrogates drove you to this extreme self-sacrifice?" asks Dionysus (243), probing for the reasons behind this voluntary pain. Tiresias' reply unravels the meaning of suffering. This Yoruba-ized Tiresias has a desire "to know what flesh is made of. What suffering is. Feel the taste of blood instead of merely foreseeing it." (243) Only through experiencing the pain of physical disintegration can he taste the ecstasy of rejuvenation.

Norma Bishop says that speaking at Harvard in March of 1981, Soyinka described the roots of African Guerilla Theatre.⁶ In situations of cultural oppression, actors and writers are forced to use "hit and run" tactics, at times performing in abandoned buildings risking arrest or even death for offending government leaders. Even audiences are at risk, where such performances are known to be illegal. Soyinka's comments brought to mind the role of the Greek chorus, since, like the audience of guerrilla theatre, the chorus is forced to be involved, not simply to react to the play. Here the term *participant theatre* has specially real significance; it is not merely an intellectual construct. Soyinka spent twenty-seven months in jail for his involvement in the Biafran War, so he is certainly aware of political oppression. In rewriting *The Bacchae* of Euripides, he has made Euripides' treatment of oppression and religious conflict "relevant" to a new context. He has translated Euripides' temporal setting, after the Peloponnesian Wars, to the period of the post-colonial African Wars.⁷ This transformation may lead readers to look at both the original and the new versions of this play with revived intensity.

Within Soyinka's theoretical framework, religion and politics can not be separated. For example, the slaves join the Asian Bacchantes in Soyinka's play because both are minorities. And although Soyinka's

⁶ "The Guerilla Movement in African Theatre", Theodore Spencer Loeb Memorial Lecture, March 4, 1981, at Harvard University.

⁷ Lefevere, "Translation", p. 80.

version of *The Bacchae* is verbally similar to that of Euripides, it is Yoruba, written while the African states continue to battle for independence. Therefore we cannot read this *Bacchae* as we might a classical Greek play, if indeed we should ever have read the original in such pristine fashion. Soyinka's situation and that of his culture continually intrude. Soyinka mediates between our European sense of literary tradition and the immanence of political events. The beauty of Soyinka's adaptation is precisely that, despite similarities, it transforms the work by transferring its context, as we do in reading it.