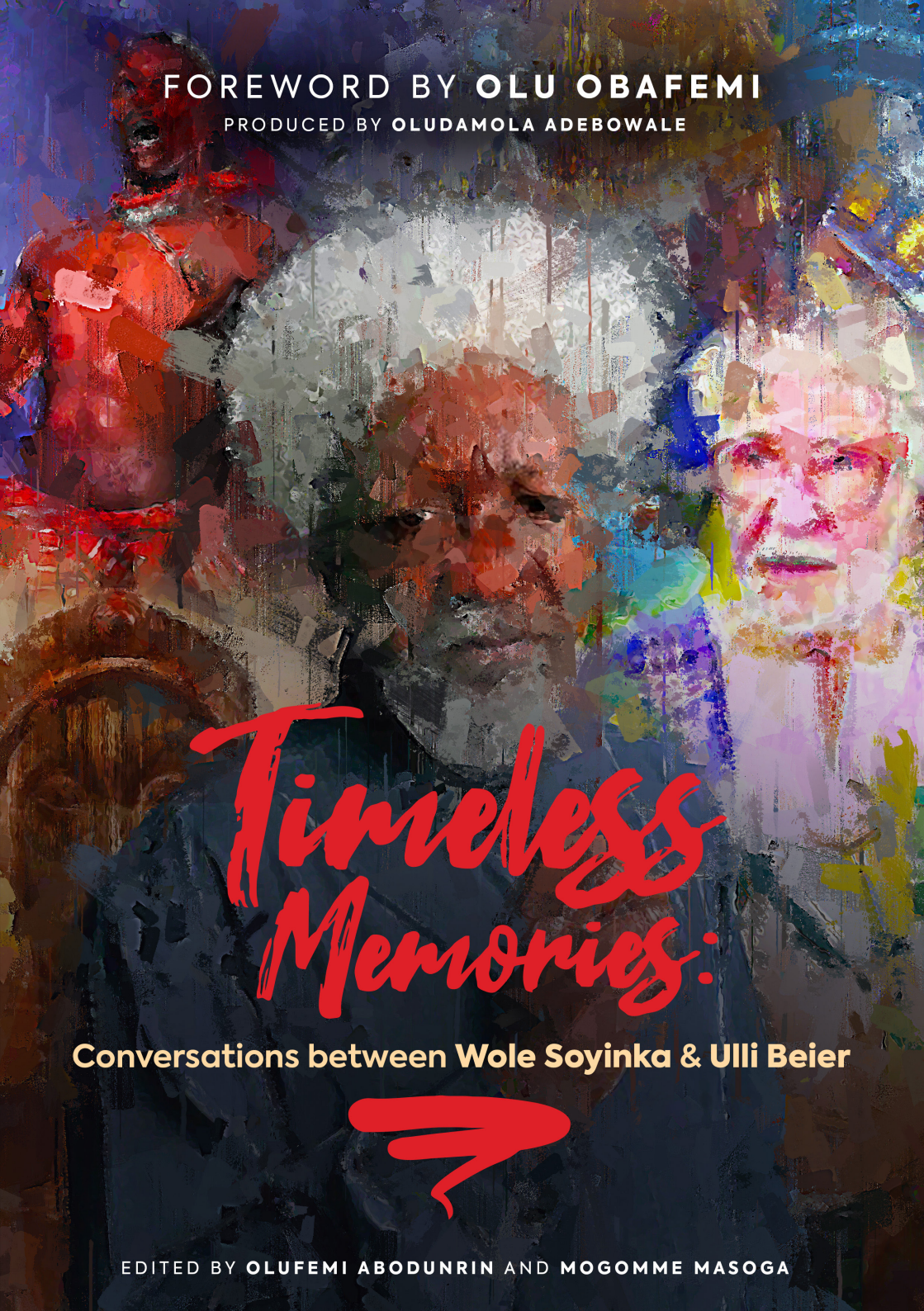
FOREWORD BY **OLU OBAFEMI**

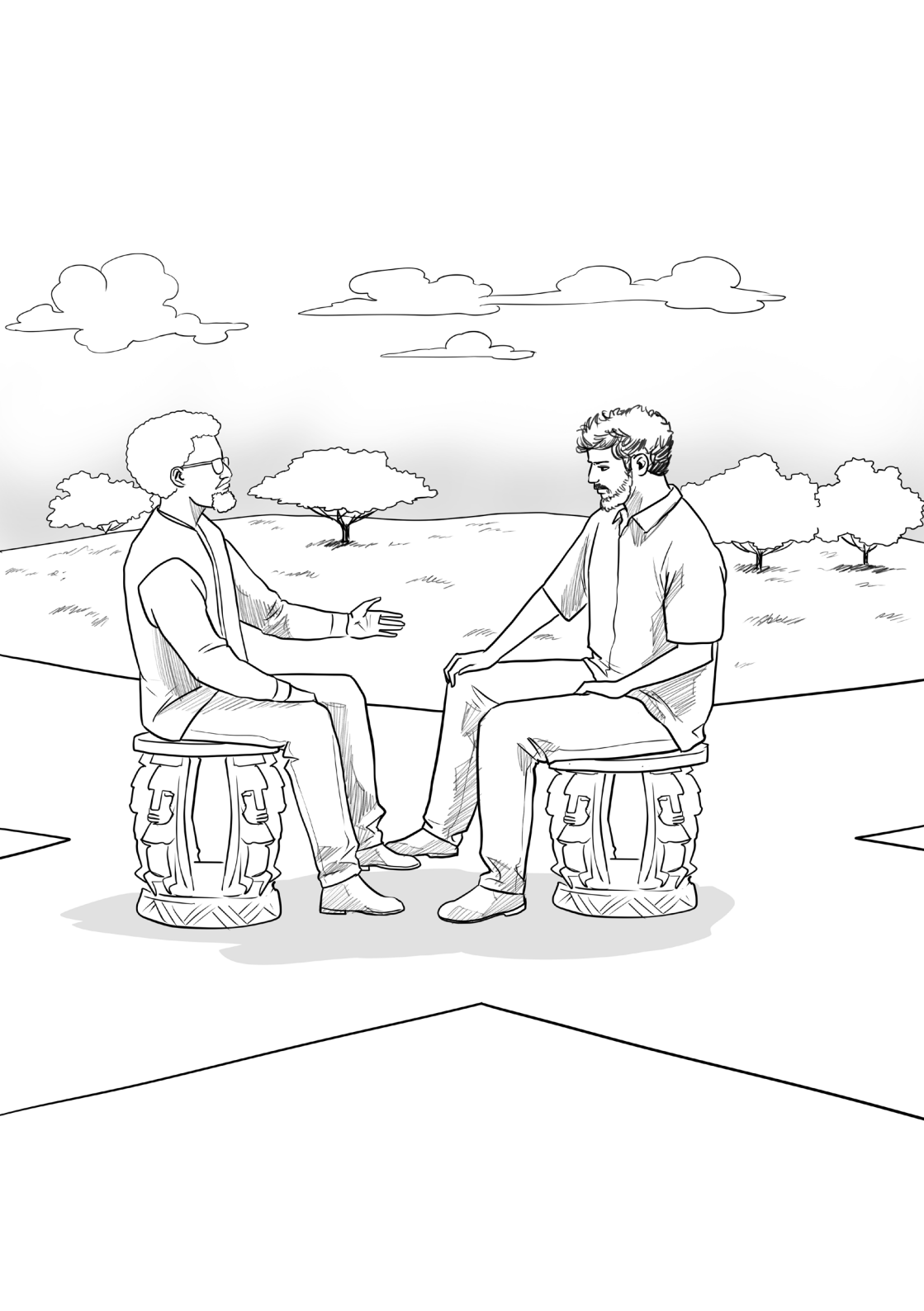
PRODUCED BY **OLUDAMOLA ADEBOWALE**



Timeless Memories:

Conversations between Wole Soyinka & Ulli Beier

EDITED BY **OLUFEMI ABODUNRIN** AND **MOGOMME MASOGA**



Disclaimer
The Contents of this book is as a result of a private conversation between two adults some years ago that was documented.
The Essence of this book is a celebratory effort to the contributions of Wole SOYINKA and Ulli Beier to the cause of Humanity and the Arts

NOT FOR SALE!
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Published by Wildeye Creative Solutions LTD
Design and Layout by 19fifty Ltd.
Illustrations Oluwale Ibukun and Sunkanmi Akinboye
Edited by Olufemi ABODUNRIN and Mogomme MASOGA

The Timeless Memories Project is supported by
University of Limpopo

This work is based on research supported by the National Research Foundation of South Africa [grant number RA190107405963].

University of Zululand

Project Name: Migration, Identity and Citizenship Contestations under the Competitive Programme for Rated Researchers No: 120297

Contents

Acknowledgement

I would like to firstly thank Mr. Dehinde Odimayo who gave me the copies of the Manuscripts. You opened the doors that gave birth to this Project.
To my Egbon, Jahman Anikulapo for always shining a light on my path whenever it's necessary. To Professor Olufemi Abodunrin of the University of Limpopo, South Africa and Professor Mogomme MASOGA of the University of Zululand for supporting the project. We did it!

To Professor Olu Obafemi. You will be honoured sir. Thank you.
To Professor Wole Soyinka, Thank you for blessing us with Timeless Memories that would last for Eternity.

To Ulli Beier, your memories we cherish endlessly
To everyone that has contributed to the success of this book and the Timeless Memories Project one way or the other. May the Almighty bless you.

-

Oludamola ADEBOWALE 2021

Dedication

This is for POSTERITY….

Foreword

Timeless Memories: A Celebration of Life and Humanity: Conversation Between Wole Soyinka and Ulli Beier

By Olu Obafemi.

Recently, the World's first black winner of the Nobel Prize for Literature (1986),Wole Soyinka, stunned the literary world with a new novel, his third, and the first since forty-years, after **Season of Anomy (1973)**. The novel, a mammoth fiction of 524 pages, titled **Chronicles of the Happiest People on Earth (2020)**, is, undoubtedly, his response to the crippling fragility of our nation and continent after the golden, renascent era of the fifties and sixties, during which Soyinka and his peers (cultural and literary patriarchs of Africa) who engaged in the redemptive cultural activism, literary upsurge and cultural entrepreneurship collaborated with that great border smasher, the Austro-German icon, Ulli Beier. It is not an accident that the cultural and literary explosion of the fifties and sixties in Africa and Nigeria generally and in the Yoruba cosmos in particular, coincided, happened and evolved with the animating presence of the iconic 'border operator',Ulli Beier. The nexus was the engagement with Yoruba culture, Yoruba traditions, music, poetry, performing arts and theatre and world view. The founding of the literary journal, Odu, the Black Orpheus (which Beier co-edited with Janheinz Jahn), the Mbari club of Ibadan and Mbari Mbayo in Oshogbo and Duro Ladipo's theatre, the artist and sculptors form part of the site of the cultural bloom of the 50s and 60s. They are the literary and cultural arena in which the bonding of Soyinka and Beier grew. As we know, the main aim of all these relationships was 'to create a platform for writers' (Beier); the physico-spiritual conversations with authentic traditional oligarchs—the Oni of Ife, the Timi Laoye of Ede and the Ogoga of Ikere and their modern counterfeits featured conspicuously in the discursive engagements between Beier and Soyinka in the series of conversations published/ curated under the apt title; **Timeless Memories: Conversations Between Wole Soyinka & Ulli Beier produced by Oludamola Adebowale and edited by Olufemi Abodunrin &Mogomme Masoga.**

Let me further re-memory the cultural ferment of that period as

captured by both icons. Said Beier:

''In the fifties and the sixties, everything was happening at the same time—political poetry,Wole Soyinka's 'first great plays' were being performed, 'the hunters were still singing their Ijala, the Sango priests were still chanting Sang Pipe, and the oracle priests were still reciting their Odu… the mother of twins improvising her songs in praise of Ibeji… the rara chanting of the bride on her way to her husband's house'… I would hear the oriki of all orisa' … In those days, even political campaigns were fought with the help of dundun drummers and oriki chanters.(273).

The conversations captured the degeneration of the Nigerian society—the loss of cohesion, the bastardization and commodification of culture, language and values, the yearning for a re-assemblage and reconstruction of that society and values.

The connection and intimate relationship between Wole Soyinka and Ulli Beier run deep in the membrane of Yoruba history, culture, indigenous knowledge, metaphysics, cosmic consciousness and the pantheons. Their immersion in the Yoruba culture is mutual, visceral in fact, and symbiotic—Ulli Beier by unparalleled acquisition, Wole Soyinka by descent—both by scholarship and practice. They both met in London in the late fifties and one of the earliest outcomes of that encounter is the founding of the Mbari community /club of performers, musicians, literary/fine artistsand so on. There were also publications; Soyinka's **Three Pays**, alongside other works by Soyinka's peers, Christopher Okigbo, J.P.Clark, Demas Nwoko, AmaAta Aidoo, and others from other parts of Africa. All these efforts were spearheaded by Ulli Beier through the Mbari Publications and Black Orpheus.

The relationship was cross-referenced and mutual. By his own affirmation, the story of Elesin Oba, which largely informed Soyinka's classic dramatic text, **Death and the King's Horseman** was first narrated to him by Ulli Beier. It witnessed their input into (the influence they enjoyed also) Yoruba theatre, the performances by key Yoruba itinerant theatre practitioners— Hubert Ogunde, Duro Ladipo,Kola Ogunmola, and others. There is their shared discourse on the Conversations published here, which is the major illustrative example of their mutual persuasion of the great attributions of Yoruba culture, religion, philosophy and metaphysics. Thisis the central motif of the exchange titled **Death and the King's Horseman: A Conversation Between Wole Soyinka and Ulli Beier (1993)**. Here, we come to understand the

fundamental difference between suicide and ritual death, the essence of tragedy in Yoruba world view in relation to the transcendent nature of fulfilment over death.

The Conversation exposes their mutual understanding of the protagonist act of choice on behalf of the collective will; that there is appeasement and joy if there is pre-death fulfilment and death as a post-fulfilment act in Yoruba cosmology. There is perception of the paling into insignificance of the hypocritical self-righteous European superiority when placed side by side with Yoruba cosmic cultural self-transformation which ensures continuity of the Yoruba race. Disruption is averted, not by saving life as in European sensibility but by fulfilling collective harmony in the Yoruba cosmos and psyche: that tragedy in the Yoruba cosmos emerges as a result of the protagonist's failure to muster and summon the act of will of dying to ensure the continuous being of the race. Beier finds this total fulfilment through ritual death as unparalleled by any society other than the Yoruba. Essentially, the rupture of the world view, 'the dome of continuity, foreboding tragedyin the Yoruba psyche and world view, captured in Soyinka seminal study **Myth, Literature and the African World (1976)** provides the central concern of the first interview: **Death and the King's Horseman: A Conversation between Wole Soyinka and Ulli Beier (1993)**

The second and third Conversations; 'The Crisis of Yoruba Culture' and 'Orisa Liberates the Mind'are continuations of the concept of rupture, the growing incoherence that has characterized post-independence Nigeria bolstered by the protracted military interregnum. In the Yoruba world, the 'Golden Age' founded on the blossoming political, cultural and intellectual life of the Yoruba (The Action Group's free primary education policy, first Television Station in Nigeria, the premier university of Ibadan, thriving, self-sustaining travelling theatres, and so on), had snapped and crumbled, leaving behind a spasm of nostalgia;the emerging fragility that Soyinka pinpointed in this interview thus:'**And how fragile it could becomeunder the buffeting of the political and economic situation'.**

Both Soyinka and Beier mutually harboured the total acceptance of the Yoruba metaphysical reality and its aesthetics; its values of tolerance, endurance, liberating power of the Orisa (pantheon of deities)

everywhere they exist across the world (Cuba, Brazil and the West Indies) in spite of its non-aggressiveness, unlike is the case with other major religions.

The Crisis of Yoruba Culture also unearthed the growth of the Yoruba theatre and the distinctive features of its main practitioners; their contribution to the growth, aesthetics and unintended theories of the modern stage, as exemplified by the growth of Soyinka's theatre—the Orisun Theatre and 1960 Masks defined both by Soyinka and Beier as the 'microcosm of Yoruba life and the extended Yoruba family principles'.

Timeless Memories reincarnates and celebrates the peerless relationship of these two icons, their immersion with the culture and cosmos/ pantheons of the Yoruba in all its manifestations and the enduring and illuminating education that they offer on culture. It must be read, as I have done with relish, by all culture workers, scholars, students, activists and enthusiasts in Nigeria, Africans, African descended and Africanists all over the world.

Professor Olu Obafemi, fnal, NNOM.

Preface

Timeless Memories: A Celebration of Life and for Humanity (Conversations between Ulli Beier and Wole Soyinka)

WS: There was ferment!

UB: There was no official planning. Little government interference. It was a natural growth. If you think back to this period, how do you view it with hindsight? Why does it appear to us now as a "golden age," rather than a mere beginning?

WS: My immediate reaction is: if only we had known what we had then! And how fragile it could become. Not that it was fragile, but how fragile it could become under the buffeting of the rapidly changing political and economic situation. We took our values for granted then.

(The Crisis of Yoruba culture: A conversation between Wole Soyinka and Ulli Beier)

Timeless Memories: A Celebration of Life and For Humanity (Conversations between Ulli Beier and Wole Soyinka) is designed primarily to celebrate the legendary writer, Wole Soyinka, Africa's first Nobel laureate, at the ripe age of 87 years and to commemorate the 10th anniversary of the transition of one of Professor Soyinka's foremost collaborators in the cultural realm, the equally legendary and iconoclastic Ulli Beier.

The University of Zululand and the University of Limpopo in conjunction with the Department of Sports, Arts and Culture, Republic of South Africa, and Oludamola Adebowale Producer of the "Timeless Memories Project" , have come together to bring salient aspects of African Indigenous Knowledge (IKS) systems that these two cultural icons epitomise to audiences, particularly the younger generations, in Nigeria, South Africa and indeed around the world.

1) The Rise of Africa and Indigenous Knowledge Systems (IKS)

The rise of Africa into cultural prominence in the second half of the

20th Century especially presented problems to Western universities. When the academic war over whether they were worth according serious scholarly interest was won, the problem of how to fit them into the traditional departments arose. Most universities in America that had serious interest in studying Africa and its history(ies), cultures, and traditional systems solved this simply by creating one kind of institute or another. Thus, although not fully admitted into the prestigious departments, some space at the fringe had been created, where these exotic disciplines could be indulged in by those who were interested, without compromising the intellectual integrity of the older, more solid Eurocentric ones.

Ulli Beier was an unconventional scholar in the sense that, rather than make himself an "expert" in African or Indian or South Pacific Studies, he preferred to be closely involved in the lives of the societies he had been in, to be a part of their cultural lives and, where possible, to participate in their artistic productions. Thus, when he agreed to be Director of the world famous Iwalewa-Haus, University of Bayreuth, Bayreuth, Germany, it was on condition that the house would not just exhibit cultural/artistic artefacts from third world countries (a practice which often has the unintended consequence of assimilation into Western intellectual tradition and views), but would actively participate in the revitalisation and continuation of the different cultural/artistic views of those societies. Although at home in most parts of the so-called Third world, Ulli Beier's home was Nigeria – specifically Yorubaland. He came into that society in 1950 and stayed there uninterruptedly till 1966. His activities inthose sixteen years are known worldwide and need not be repeated here. What needs to be pointed out here, rather, is that in his active connection with that society, its people, and its cultural and artistic activities can be read the fortunes and misfortunes that have visited that society from the colonial era to the present postcolonial period. He came into that society when it was on threshold of mass-scale transformation from a traditional to a marginally modern society; he was pivotal to its artistic-literary renaissance that started in the 1950s and peaked so abruptly in the 1970s; and he had been witness to the crises of cultural and political identities that have beset it since the early 1980s.

Thus, the leading discussion between Ulli Beier and Wole Soyinka in this volume, for example, recalls the peace, the serenity, the integrity and the dynamism of the cultural and theatrical praxis in Ibadan a decade

before and shortly after independence. The travesty and mimicry of the present icon and symbol of traditional authority, the now untraditional traditional rulers, is the most violent testimony to the anomic state in which the essential Yoruba culture has fallen. A chaotic and hypocritical relationship exists between traditional oligarchy and modern dictatorship in Nigeria today. In the Soyinka-Beier exchange, the tangle between the then Oni of Ife and Emir of Kano, on the one hand, and the Buhari/Idiagbon administration (1983-1985) on the other hand, is seen as the turning point: but the post-independence roots go back to the days of "the penny-a-year-oba." Material greed and the need for stereotypic rubber-stamping of illegitimaterulership have produced a leprous embrace between erstwhile custodians of the people's political self-regulation and the new, cynical appropriators and manipulators of power, be they civil or military!

The rest, as they say, is history and in Wole Soyinka's words: '…if only we had known what we had then! And how fragile it could become. Not that it was fragile, but how fragile it could become under the buffeting of the rapidly changing political and economic situation. We took our values for granted then.'

2) African Indigenous Knowledge Systems (IKS) and Cultural Values

UB: I think that tolerance is one of the big qualities of Yoruba culture. Even the treatment of handicapped or mentally disturbed people – it all shows how much tolerant Yoruba culture was than Western cultures.

WS: Yes, Europeans tend to hide such people, whereas Yoruba religion actually accounts for them.

UB: You said before that Yoruba religion "liberates." Can you expand on that?

WS: I believe that the truly liberated mind is never aggressive about his or her system of beliefs. Because it is founded on such total self-confidence, such acceptance of others, that there is no need to march out and propagate one's cause. That is why Yoruba religion have never waged a religious war, like the Jihad or the Crusades.

(Orisa Liberates the Mind: Wole Soyinka in Conversation with Ulli Beier on Yoruba Religion)

To the extent that all black African societies face the same kind of crises that the Yoruba people face today, this volume is ofcourse also addressed to them. All African societies had their political identities and futures determined for them on maps in Berlin in 1884-1885. All have since then been existing precariously in the cusp between technologized modernity and traditional way. Thus, although this collection is specifically on Yoruba society, its broad concerns apply to most African societies.

In these volumes, a dialogic, reflexive debate, which is nostalgic and passionate, is palpable in the exchanges between Wole Soyinka and Ulli Beier, which collectively address the issue of the crisis of not just Yoruba but indeed African cultures in contemporary times. From their tolerance to the whole notion of Ubuntu or "I am because we are" that characterises African philosophy and ontology, the volumes underscore the identity in difference founded on, what Soyinka has described as, 'such total self-confidence, such acceptance of others, that there is no need to march out and propagate one's cause' and hopefully should generate further interest and debate in African cultural debates.

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DEATH AND THE KING'S HORSEMAN

A conversation between Wole Soyinka and Ulli Beier

May 1993

IWALEWA-HAUS, UNIVERSITY AT BAYERUTH, 1993

INTRODUCTION

Wole Soyinka's play "Death and the King's Horseman" is based on an historical incident that took place in the Yoruba city of Oyo in 1946. According to an ancient custom the Elesin Oba, the commander of the king's cavalry, was to follow the deceased Alafin (King) into the other world, so that he could lead him across the final threshold into the world of the ancestors.

As soon as an Elesin Oba has this important title conferred upon him, he commission weavers, tailors and embroiderers to make the splendid gown in which he is going to die, when the appointed time comes.

Throughout his lifetime he enjoys great power and privileges. When the day comes on which he has to follow his master, he dresses in the gown of death, dances through the town with drummers and praise singers and is given the highest honors by the entire population. As the sun begins to set he returns home, sits down amongst his relatives and friends, looks into the sinking sun, leans back and dies – by an act of will. His death is the climax and fulfillment of his entire life.

When the ritual was to be celebrated in 1946, the British District Officer went out and arrested the Elesin Oba and threw him into jail because, according to British law, attempted suicide is a criminal offence. The Elesin Oba's son, who was at that time a trader in the Gold Coast (now Ghana), rushed home in order to bury his father. On seeing him alive he was so horrified by this abomination, that he committed suicide on the spot. The Elesin Oba in desperation over his failure to accomplish his sacred task also committed suicide – but now it was too late to accomplish his ritual mission.

These are the historical events, as they were originally researched and related by Pierre Verger in the early sixties.
The conversation between Wole Soyinka and Ulli Beier touches on some of the cultural, religious and ethnical issues raised in the play

DEATH AND THE KING'S HORSEMEN

A conversation between Wole Soyinka and Ulli Beier

U: In your introduction to "Death and King's Horseman" you issue some very fierce warnings to would-be producers. You tell them in no uncertain terms that you do not wish the District Officer to become the key figure by making him "the victim of a cruel dilemma." Above all you object to that facile cliché of the "conflict of cultures".
As for the role of the District Officer – it seems to me that Pilkington is too banal a character to be even capable of becoming the "victim of a cruel dilemma". He is far too convicted that he is right.
The other point you raised is more complex. Because on surface, at least, there is conflict of cultures here. Do you see this play as an internal conflict of Yoruba culture that is merely sparked off by external event?

W: First of all, there is a background to this particular note: it was written after an extraordinary blurb on my novel "Season of Anomy" I did not think that it would be possible for any human intellect to read "A season of Anomy" and say this novel was about the conflict of the old and the new African culture. As you know we have been through this a lot. Many poets in certain period have indulged in the shallow cliché. They could not see any other issue at all and some of it was really awful literature.

U: Dennis Osadeby[1]: "My simply fathers in childlike faith believed all things" and so on…

W: Mabel Imoukhuede![2]

U: But she basically only wrote one poem in that mood

W: But the others carried on for so long. We have been discussing that phenomenon and its short-lived influence a lot. We thought we had dealt with it. Then years later this novel was published in America and I could not believe what was written so authoritatively and implanted on my book. Not just a review – which I

could ignore.

1. Dennis Osadebey was a politician and one of the earliest Nigerian poets.
2. Mabel Imoukhuede wrote the widely quoted poem "Conflict" which first appeared in ODU in 1956: "Here we stand/infants overblown/poised between two civilizations/ finding the balance irksome/itching for something to happen/to tip us one way to the other/groping in the dark for a helping hand/and finding none/I'm tired, O my God, I'm tired/I'm tired of hanging in the middle way/But where can I go? "

But my book was actually made to carry the burden of this reductionist summation. So that's why the introduction to "Death and the King's Horseman" was so strong – I wanted to caution everybody!

But having said that and explained the source of it – I also consider it true and it has historical justification. For example: one of the major wars of the 19th century was triggered off by a very similar event; in this case it was the Aremo, the eldest son of the Alafin, who refused to commit suicide, and he was even supported in this by his father, whom he was to succeed to the throne.

U: Yes, it was Alafin Atiba, who in 1858 abolished the age old custom that the Aremo, his eldest son, had to die with him. For many centuries the Aremo was considered as the King's co-regent, but he had to pay for this sharing of power and privilege by dying with the king, just as the Elesin Oba died. Atiba loved his eldest son because he had been a very loyal son who had shared many dangers with him, even before he became the king. So he got the support of the powerful war chiefs of Ibadan to help him change the custom.

W: But Kurumi the ruler of Ijaye declared this to be an abomination! He never accepted this change, and when Atiba died and Adelu was actually installed he went to war over it. But what is significant about this is the fact that this King was not a Christian. There is no record of European or missionary influence on his decision. In other words: this was a revolt against certain acceptances within the traditional set up. So if you went to look for the root of certain tragic experience in Yoruba history, you don't have to go outside.

The story of the Elesin Oba, which you told me years ago, takes on a global dimension and this enables me to interrogate the morality and the history of those who point the finger on the Yoruba as being barbaric and having primitive customs; it gives me that combative dimension to examine the whole meaning of existence and how different people interpret it. It enables me to look at the conflict of honor and obligation. You are quite right in saying that at the beginning I do make the District Officer rather a cardboard figure, but towards the end I do hope that I succeeded in giving

him some moment of dignity. He is now confronted by a situation, which he has never in his life anticipated and he responds to it with a little more sensibility. I even make him best the Elesin Oba in an argument utilizing a proverb of his own people against him – to silence him!

U: "The elder grimly approached heaven and you ask him to bear your greetings yonder; but do you really think he makes the journey willingly?" But you are very right in saying that a culture constantly transform itself and a situation arises when an age old custom becomes difficult to carry out and eventually becomes unacceptable. I remember that in the mid-fifties, the Ogun[3] worshippers in Oshogbo found it hard to carry out the sacrifice of a dog and they employed somebody from outside the cult to do it for a fee. Another, rather more sever example, is the conflict between politicians and traditional rulers in the mid-fifties. Kurumi of Ijaye, as we know, was unable to dislodge Oba Adelu and the people of Oyo accepted the new ruling that the Aremo should not die. They insisted, however, that in future the Aremo should be sent into exile after his father's death and that he should be disqualified from succeeding his father. Now you remember that in the 1950's the Action Group[4] government ordered an enquiry into the affairs of the Alafin of Oyo. The British commission could not find much evidence of the alleged corruption and exonerated him. But he politicians did not accept the verdict and they sent the King into exile in Ilesha. Then they went ahead and brought the Aremo back from exile to be installed as the next Alafin. In other words they installed the one person who was not supposed to become King! I sometimes wonder whether this was done from ignorance of the customs or whether it was a deliberate calculated attempt to destroy the institution of kingship.

W: I think this was a deeply calculated move to break a certain mould, a certain tradition, through an act that amounted to an "abomination" in the eyes of many. They were a very anti-feudalist party. They operated not merely through such negative, aggressive means, but operated also by catapulting some powerful monarches, like the Ooni of Ife[5] into the political arena where they now came under control and became themselves enticed and absorbed in the new dispensation. They were very wily – they knew what they were doing. And even from the very beginning – before they officially embraced socialism – they were at heart pretty republican.

U: Now the play has several controversial issues and one of them is found right in the first scene: I am referring to the demand of the Elesin Oba to have a new bride.

3. Ogun: the Yoruba god and iron and war
4. Action Group: a political party headed by Chief Obafemi Awolowo which dominated politics in Western Nigeria in the fifties and the sixties.
5. Ooni of Ife: the kings of the holy city of Ife and therefore considered the most senior Yoruba king. He became a minister in the first government of Western Nigeria.

before he follows the Alafin into the other world. I don't know whether this goes back to some tradition or whether it is merely a dramatic device that you invented. One thing I know is that the Elesin Oba enjoyed certain privileges during his life time and one of them was that he claim any woman – like the Oba himself.

W: Oh yes: the traditional gbesele – "I place my foot on her" a privilege that applied not only to the reigning monarch, but also to the Aremo and the Elesin Oba. The head of the King's cavalry could go to the market at any time and demand any goods or any woman. And you would be surprised how many Obas are still trying it today. I know one instance in recent years – I am talking about five years ago. This ruler went to visit his daughter on the university campus in Ibadan; she came to see him with a friend – a girl who was already married. The Oba sent two of his chiefs with staffs of authority to her to following day, summoning her to his palace, and he told her in plain terms that he had decided to marry her. When she explained to him that she was already married, he said: "Oh that's right I'll send for your husband and let him know what is my decision. That girl refused, but he harassed her so much that in the end she had to send a delegation of elders to him asking him to desist.

U: Yes, but surely whatever the traditional privilege of the Elesin was, there is a clear indication in the play that at that moment this was not appropriate. Because at that moment his thoughts should have been somewhere else.

W: Oh, of course!

U: His indulgence in fact weakened his resolve.

W: He himself actually admits that at a later point.

U: He blames his new wife for the "mystery of the sapping of his will."

W: But my position on this is somewhat dual. First there is a kind of image in my mind. There are the Abami Omo, the supra normal children who from childhood on are considered Alagbas – grownups. They have unusually privileges. They sit down with adults and participate in the conversation. Tunji Oyelana has such a child. She utters the most unbelievably perceptive statements

about things. There are children like that and of course, Yoruba society has a place for them. Naturally I have always wondered about such children and in a drama like this, when human weakness comes into conflict with a sense of duty and with one's perception of being virtually one step away from the land of the ancestors, there is a hovering sense of symmetry.

U: Between the child that has just come from the other world and the old man who is about to go there?

W: Yes. All this is just part of the metaphysical aesthetics operating in my mind. I try to use this ambivalently – also as an expression of the man's weakness. In other words: how do I make it happen? Of course, I could have just made the woman donate the daughter to the Elesin, and not make him feel guilty about snatching her from someone else, but then I would lose the element of humanity in the man. He becomes self indulgent – with the connivance of the entire city – he tries to prolong his sensuality which is his definition of his being at that moment. I put myself in the man's position – not just as a human being, but also as a product of that particular environment, both the physical environment and the spiritual one. And at the back of my mind there is the constant awareness of this Abami Omo – the extraordinary child. At that moment I could not resist the proposition that the loss of this person from the community would be compensated for by the planting of a seed; not just in the sense that one man dies and a child is born, but in the sense that this child will also be something special, something extraordinary. A suggestion…

U: …that the child would become an Abami Omo… Of course the Elesin Oba himself is a very unusual person.

W: And he believes also that he is creating something very unusual.

U: The child could even be the same person reborn. After all the Elesin says to the Iyaloja[6]. "let my going be like the death of the plantain" meaning that he will renew his existence constantly like the plantain does.

W: It could be the same, but in any case it would be a very unusual person. So – yes, there is this man's weakness and he indulges himself, but at the same time, when Iyaloja says: "What I hear is

no longer the voice of the living.

U: She has to honor that.

W: That is something different; this is not just a self-indulgent old man. He has prepared himself for this in the proper way and he is ready to do it. I wanted to leave it as ambiguous as possible: all the various suggestion

6. Iyaloja: The woman head of the markets. An important chieftaincy title

U: The point is that Yoruba culture can produce the kind of mind that is capable of performing such a feat…

W: …to sustain it, to totally believe in it and find it viable, and even to hold it up against another culture. In fact one thing that convinces me of the validity of such as world view is the fact that it can stand up to the alien, with its arrogance, its claim of superiority which is not based on any evidence. In some sense the District Officers and his interference reinforces the values of that society. This has been true for centuries. There are converts, no doubt. But on the whole – look at Yoruba society even today. Even in Lagos that society still holds on to certain elements of tradition.

U: Let us return to the District Officer. It is true that towards the ends, you have made him more sensitive, more responsive. But he never grasps the simple fact that the value of life is not its length. To him the prolongation of life is what life is all about. Even a meaningless life must be prolonged at all costs. It has not occurred to him that life has a natural span in which it must fulfill itself…

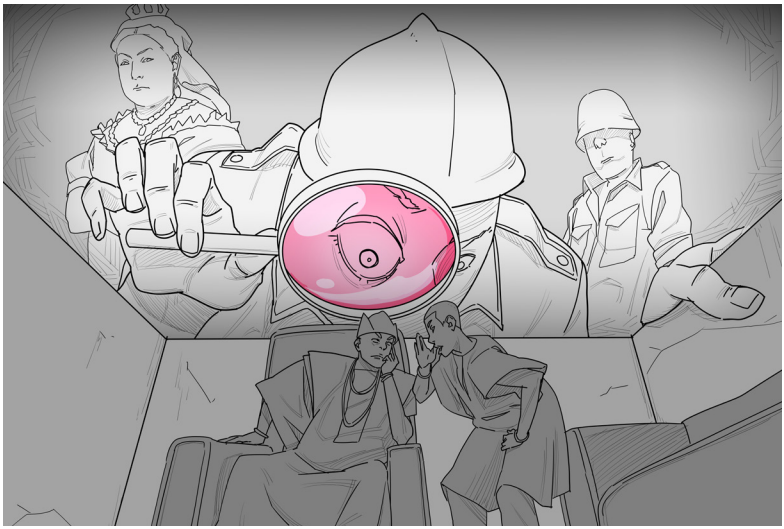
W: Yes, but the problem is that in Europe the dissidents form this point of view, the so called euthanasia volunteers – they are also problematic, like that doctor in the United States who virtually sets up suicide gadgets to enables people to kill themselves. I followed that very carefully. There are doctors, who are being faced with the evidence of the uselessness of existence at a certain point, whether it is age or terminal disease or coma, I respect their point of view very much. But unfortunately they cannot conceive of how to integrate their philosophy into society. The result is this American doctor who hawks around his suicide machine. That

in itself is for me part of the decadence of society. If you read his pronouncements – he's a man on an ego trip, a man on a power trip! He's a man who enjoys wielding power over life and death. He's invented his little machine, he's appearing before the cameras and he says: take me to court! He does not know that this requires a communal answer. That it requires a communal mental reformation. This seems to confirm the belief in Yoruba society: that life has an end if there is no more purpose left in it.

U: And again: death is painful when the person was too young to have fulfilled his purpose. Death can be joyful, if the person has fulfilled his life. And who can have a more complete life than the Elesin Oba, whose death is not an accident but the climax of his life? I cannot imagine such a total fulfillment in any other society.

W: Right, I cannot think of any…..

U: And then there is this other misunderstanding that is embedded in the European position. There is the notion that the Elesin Oba is enslaved to some blood thirsty potentate who forces him to commit suicide. But on the other hand, the District Officer with his superior morality, arrests the Elesin because he is committing a crime - not against himself - but against the Queen of England!



W: That is correct. He is depriving her of one of her subjects!

U: How absurd can you become? It is not a worse enslavement if the Queen can say: you can't kill yourself, because your life belongs to me?

W: That's why I made Sergeant Amusa – who is the comic figure in this play – insist that it is a crime: "You are committing death, it's against the law! But whose law?

U: But that was the position: you actually got jailed in Britain for attempting suicide.

W: Yes, until recently. It was not treated as a form of disturbance or illness. Nobody was looking for the cause: it was simply treated as a crime. The first time I read about it was when I was a student in England. Somebody tried to commit suicide and was jailed. It blew my mind! Now in Nigeria there was a similar case. The judge was obliged to sentence him to three months, but if you read the judgment you could see that there was a very different attitude. No moral indignation. The judge was trying to help. He told the man: life is not as bad as all that. You have a family, you have friends. Try and make a new start. Maybe, he said, these three months will be a time of reflection for you - it was a humane attitude.

U: European have another difficulty with this play: they cannot believe that the man actually dies by an act of will. They are convicted that he must take poison. I have no difficulty with this at all. Having lived in Nigeria for so long, I know that people are trained to develop certain faculties of the mind, which our society has always suppressed.

W: I have experienced many similar incidents with persons quite close to me. I know that wives decide to die after their husbands and mother after their children. There was time when my sister was very will and it looked as if she might never recover. She had been operated on and for days she was suspended between life and earth. My mother used to sit by her bedside, watching her. And when I visited my sister in hospital, I could tell that the woman had made up her mind: if my sister was going to survive that illness, she would go before long. She would certainly not remain

alive to see one of her children dying. If could tell, it was very obvious that she was sat there, sighting from time to time and the way she looked at me when I came in. she seemed to be saying: fate has played a dirty trick on me. Not long after my sister had recovered my mother and her circle of friends held a feast. My late friend Femi Johnson[7] was there and he observed the things between the two of us. She had cooked some special vegetables, some Efo Sokoyokoto[8]. She was serving around this vegetable, and it was like a communion. When she came to me I refused to take any of it. And she said: "Alright – that is your business." She was implying "I know you know why I am doing this if you don't want any of it – that is your business." I just turned away. I knew that woman has made up her mind and I wasn't going to partake in it.

Not long after that. I was traveling to Ghana. I was teaching in life at the time. It was an early flight and I was standing in a queue a long time before the counter opened. When I approached the

counter, I suddenly picked up my bad and said: I am not traveling. I told the driver we are returning to Ife. I went back to my house and I sat there for a long time. I wasn't sure why. I hadn't spelled it out. I just knew I wasn't going to travel. I sent the driver to pick up my mail and shortly after that Yemi Ogunbiyi came to the house. He started talking to me in a consoling voice and I said to him: what are you talking about? Then he said: "Oh I thought you had heard! That was the moment when I understood that my mother had died! But that is not the end of the story. I had spent the previous night in Ibadan with the Aboyades. So when the message came, I had already left Ife. People were looking for me everywhere. They went to all my friends in Lagos. By the time they came to the Aboyade's house I had gone, but Mrs. Aboyades kept saying to her husband: Wole has not travelled. He said: "Don't talk nonsense. He left before 6 o'clock this morning. But she insisted: "No he hasn't travelled."

So you see it is not uncommon for Yoruba people to decide on the time of their death. Sometime they call their family together. They distribute their property among them and then they go. Or they do it more secretively, like my mother.

U: It reminds me of another recent incident. You know that Asiru Olatunde[9], the Oshogbo Artist, died recently? He had been ill for some time, and his daughter Sinawu got very worried. Every weekend she came up from Lagos to visit him. One day he said to her: "You don't have to come here every week to check up whether I am still alive. I am going to die next Saturday at five o'clock and he went exactly at the hour.

7. Femi Johnson: a close associate of Wole Soyinka's; member of first theater group "The 1960 Masks".

8. Sokoyokoto: a popular vegetable. Its literal meaning is "it wil extend the husband's trousers".

9. Asiru Olatunde: an Oshogbo artist who was famous for his aluminum and copper reliefs.

W: Yes, yes I know very precise announcements like that.

U: Then there are the very old Olorishas[10] who have acquired tremendous spiritual power during their lives. They are so old that their body has nearly wasted away but their mind is very active

and very strong and they rule the household with great power – lying on their mat. When they decide it is time to go, they send their eldest son to the farm or the bush and say. Dig under such a tree. And when you find this medicine that I have buried there – destroy it. The moment the medicine is destroyed, the old priest released his hold on life.

W: There are these various moments for cutting through the thread of life. In "Death and the King's Horseman" It is the dance of death, through which the transition is accomplished. But it is not only old people who can accomplish this. There are even children…

U: Abiku[11]!

W: Yes, the Abiku not only threaten to die, they sometimes announce the precise time of their death. They threaten and suddenly go. But the Abami[12] do it more gently. They may say to their mother: "I hope you won't mind. I hope you won't worry too much. I will be going at such and such a time…"

U: Of course, the real tragedy in this play is not death – but the man's failure to accomplish death. Elesin Oba has to face the horrendous fact that he could not accomplish it and that in the history of the Yoruba he was the first person to fail. The sense of continuity is very strong in the culture and even in less potent situations – say during an annual sacrifice for Ogun – the people pray: "We have met here today and we have done it against, as our forefathers have done it; and we pray that we shall meet again next year to perform this sacrifices. For somebody to suddenly realize that he cannot do what he was chosen to do, that he cannot accomplish what he had prepared for all his life…

10. Olorishas: worshippers or priests of ancient Yoruba gods

11. Abiku: "a child born to die". A spirit that is born to a human mother but which has to return to its companions at an early age.

12. Abami: a child with supernatural powers or outstanding premature intelligence.

W: …it is the end of his life.

U: More than that even - it is the end of the community itself, up to a point. I have witness situations that were not dissimilar

to this. Many of the feats Olorishas accomplish during ritual performance can only be achieved, if the entire communities are concentrate-ing on this one action. And if that kind of communal concentration is not there anymore, then the individual performer cannot carry it any more. I am thinking of the Baba Elegun Sango[13], for example, during the Shango festival.

I have recently seen a Shango ceremony in Ilobu: Ten years ago these festival in Ilobu were mind blowing events. But now nothing happened. The small crowd that had gathered was part curious, part hostile. They did not participate in the event. The handful of priest could no longer evoke the power of the god. Shango did not manifest himself. The ceremony was sham.

I remember even in the fifties, when such feasts were still very powerful, how disturbing the presence of a single alien person was. I never took Europeans or upper class Nigerians into such ceremonies. But when one of them found his way there by chance, I felt extremely disturbed by the alien presence. How much more disturbing must they have been to the person who had to carry the burden of the performance.

W: Yes, I made this point in one of my Essays in "Myth, Literature & the African World". What I tried to do is to define the thin line between the possessed actor and the possessed representative of a god. That very grey area, when the ritual role that has already been predetermined is carried out almost with the precision of a rehearsed piece, but indicating that the possibility only exists when the potency of the crowd – that is the communicant chorus – has reached a certain height, a certain level, a certain pitch. Then it becomes the reinforcement of the individual. They transmit their own communication force onto the head, of that individual, and at that moment there is no question at all, that the individual becomes the voice of the entire people. It's like the transfer of all the individual potencies to the protagonists and the protagonist move into the arena of the gods. But for him, to attain that level when he becomes the embodiment of the deity – where he crosses the threshold into the world of the deity - it requires the complete and total potency of that communicant crowd.

That is for me the real meaning of the chorus in ritual Yoruba

Theater. It's not just people repeating refrains and sympathizing and empathizing with the individual going through his travails. No, the chorus is in fact that force which enables an actor to become the embodiment of the role.

13. Baba Elegun Sango: the priest chosen to "carry" the spirit of Shango during a major Shango Festival. In a state of trance he will perform feats displaying supernatural strength and insensitivity to pain.

U: The proximity between religious ritual and some kinds of theatrical performances that you are talking about became very evident in the late Duro Ladipo[14]. Over the years his performance of Oba Koso" became more and more like a personification of Shango.

W: That's right. And Duro, having separated the audience from the stage, compensated for it by the charge which, through rehearsal, he had given his actors, who were equally possessed. They were oblivious of the audience. Something was taking place on that stage which could use the audience, but which did not depend upon it. It was Duro himself, his wife Abiodun, Tijani Mayakiri[15] and Ademola Onibonokuta[16] who between them carried this charge. I believe you were not in Nigeria when Duro died but did you hear what happened…

U: Yes, thunder!

W: Unseasonable! And of unprecedented dimension. It was incredible. Such incidents really make you wonder…

U: But let me come back to the Elesin Oba. Was he being carried by his chorus? Or was the crowed wavering?

W: Oh no! The support was there. It had not reached its climax, before the intrusion came. But there is no doubt that left alone, he would accomplished his task. He was ready, he was prepared. And again: he could have made it in spite of this intrusion if, however, his weakness had not been present.

14. Duro Ladipo: founder and director of one of the most successful Yoruba travelling theaters. He became world famous through his portrayal of Shango in his play "Oba Koso".

15. Tijani Mayakiri: an actor who played the part of "Timi" in Oba Koso. Also an artist, he died in 1992.

16. Ademola Onibonokuta: the actor who played the part of "Gbonka" in "Oba

Koso". Widely known as a musician and a director of theater companies in his own right.

U: The terrible thing is, that once such an ancient ritual cycle is broken, it never be revived again. This is really frightening. Because for centuries a powerful ritual has been carried out that binds that community together, and that strengthens its ties with the ancestors. Then something interferes, which in itself, is rather trivial, and the person causing it is himself rather banal; and yet this trivial incidence has this enormous negative power.

W: Yes, it is often the trivial incident that has the most profound and far reaching consequents! And that's why for me the play is not just a thing if itself; it a parable. A parable for many things that have happen to Yoruba society. A parable of history.

U: There is a photograph in Ajisafes History of Abeokuta that shows the Alake Gbadebo with Governor Macgregor. The Alake is a giant of a man, not physically, but spiritually. A really powerful man. And next to him is the British Governor, pale, spindly, in a kilt, looking a trifle silly, perhaps. And yet this man, through his negative thinking, can destroy the whole powerful and meaningful world that his opponent stands for!

W: Of course we must never forget that the colonialists were able to utilize the dissidents in other societies, who have their own motivations, their own ambitions. You don't just do it frontally – with guns. You can rely on the meanest, on the weakest individual to exploit the situation. But basically every society carries within it the possibility of change – positive or negative. And that's why every society must constantly reexamine itself, its values, its customs, its procedures so as to reduce as must as possible these drastic changes, these insertions of alien solutions to their problems.

U: West African Society was in a relatively strong position to handle such processes, because of their very size, their highly organized political structures and their flexibility. In the tiny communities of Papua New Guinea, these confrontations were much more dramatic. A typical case is the village of Hopaiku in the Papuan Gulf. In 1930 the missionaries had made very little impact. There were

only about 30 converts in a population of several hundred but one night, the Christians went and burnt down the sacred Eravo, the ceremonial house in which all powerful objects were kept. The next morning the elders sat down together and discussed the crisis and they came to the conclusion that there was little point in reelecting the Eravo. The place had been desecrated; the community was divided; the taboos had been broken. Our ancestors they said, "have protected us all the time until now, but they are powerless against these newcomers." Very few cultures have taken such a conscious decision…

17. Alake: the King of Abeokuta.

W: It's like cultural suicide.

U: But basically it's a process everybody goes through

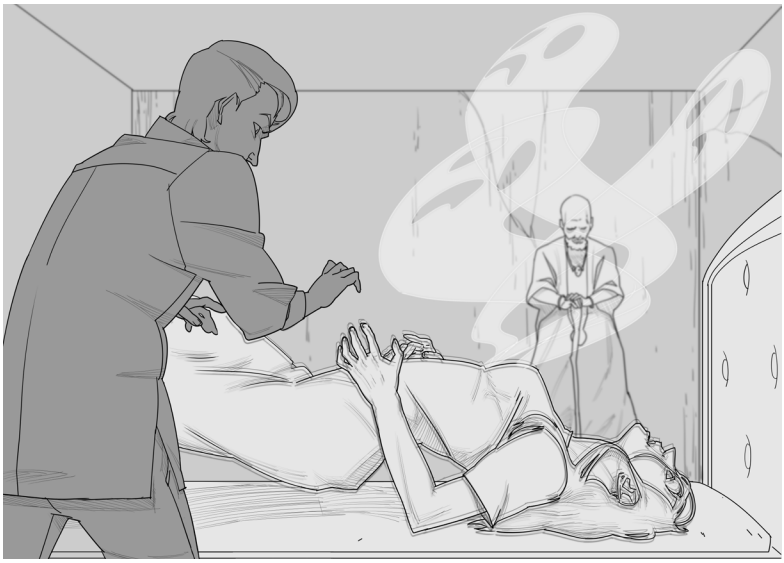
W: Yes, but on different levels of gradation. People may come back and pick up pieces, may realize that there are some things that they really need after all – and then these pieces grow again, but perhaps in a stunted form like an amputated tail of a lizard. But the Yoruba and the Orisha seem to have been singularly well adapted for this kind of situation – partial suicide and then again resurgence with greater profundity in certain unassailable aspects of their culture.

U: The flexibility of Yoruba culture has been quite exceptional. If you look at the Yoruba Orisha, you will find that the Yoruba have absorbed cultural elements from all directions: Shango has strong connection with Tapa[18] in the north; Shonpona[19] comes from Atakpame in Togoland! Many elements have been woven into a complex tapestry with different threads overlaying each other. Look at the thundergod alone: there is Shango the royal figure from Oyo - but in some village in the Republic of Benin, Shango is a woman and the wife of the thunder god Jakuta! Then there is Oramfe, the Ife thunder god, who probably proceeded them all. It is this very capacity to absorb different cultural elements that have given Yoruba society its rich culture.

W: Another good example is the Igunnuko[20] – many Yorùbás don't even know any more that they have adapted this masquerade from the Nupe.

U: We have been talking at length about the difficulties Europeans had with this play. What about America? I know that the critics could not make much sense of it, but when about your Black American cast?

W: Have I never told you this? In Chicago, the phenomenon of possession became so prominent that some of the actresses and some of the actors had to permanently exempted from the death scene – become they just fell into trance! The girl who played Mrs. Pilkington, for example, she had to keep a distance from that scene back stage; otherwise she was seized by the most weird sensations. She just felt her head swelling: she found himself being transported in a very different world. She used to go very far away, so she could not hear the music on the stage. But as for actual physical possession – that was not funny at all. Even in New York – the girls were all born and bred in that big city – and yet I had to choreograph them out of it. When the death dance began, I just had to move them out of hearing. One girl in particular: she really scared us one day because we could not bring her round again till the end of the play. We were losing our chorus! So I had to think up some device to counteract this: I gave them Kolanut and Orogbo[21] to put under their tongue and I told them that the moment the emotion started they should bite and chew it slowly, so that bitter taste in their mouth should to an extent counteract the intense sensibility of the moment. It worked for some of them. And one final thing: One night, I was told a white woman in the audience became possessed and she had to be carried out.



18. Tapa: The Yoruba name for Nupe.

19. Shonpona: the Yorùbá god of suffering.

20. Igunnuko: an ancestral masquerade that has the shape of a tall cloth pillar.

U: What does it signify? No doubt you must have used very evocative music.

W: I have Tunji Oyelana with me and Yomi Ogunleye and we worked very hard to get the right tonality and righty to get a numinous effect.

U: At the same time I feel that they were ready: There was something lacking in their lives. They must have been highly receptive to start with.

W: Definitely, because a possession cannot be forced on anybody. You have to open yourself to the possibility.

U: I have come across only one case, when a person went into a violent state of trance against her will, as it were. This was at Ibadan in the mid-fifties. There was a British architect who was an ardent

and, I must say, ruthless collector of antiquities. On one occasion he entered a compound in Ibadan, where he heard some drumming. There was a ceremony going on, which appears to be of a more intimate nature. Most Yoruba festivals are very public, but apparently this one was not, and he was asked to leave. However, he wouldn't budge. Perhaps he was hoping to locate some carvings which he might purchase later. The celebrants became visibly annoyed, but that did not appear to worry him. Suddenly his wife became very disturbed. "Please take me home," she said "Something strange is happening to me. My head feels like its growing big, and it seems to have separated from my body…" The husband got alarmed and took her home immediately, but in the car she began to talk – incomprehensibly and incessantly.

21. Olorogbo: bitter Kola nut, used in divination during Shango rituals

W: Speaking in tongues!

U: Yes, and she continued for three days and three nights until the priest, who must have imposed this state on her, released her.

W: It is very taboo to us your spiritual powers in this way, but the priest, whoever he was, acted under extreme provocation.

U: One final thing. This European notion of "suicide" is very far removed from the ritual that takes place in "Death and the King's Horseman." If you look at the mythology about the Orisha - there is always some form of so-called "suicide" involved. Shango actually hangs himself. Otin[22] throws herself on the ground and becomes a river. Oluorogbo[23] ascends to heaven on a chain and Ogun descends into the bowels of the earth. In each case there is a metamorphosis, from one form of existence to another. It always arises from a sense of tragedy: from a feeling that without this transition you cannot become what you are meant to become.

W: You have come to the end of your mission in this particular existence. How you come about that knowledge varies. But as you pointed out, it is unusually in the tragic mode.

And it is true that tragedy in Yoruba mythology and culture is not perceived as the termination of existence. Yoruba tragedy exists in a world that believes very much in the interflux and almost equal partnership or collaboration between the living and the world of

the ancestors.

It believes that one world cannot exist without the other. If you have a world which accepts this totally, the word "suicide" is meaningless. The tragic experience then leads to a new sense of awareness.

The Yoruba mythology of the Abiku, the Abami Omo, the Orishas of anthropomorphic origin, all speak of a particular perception of life which contradicts the very simplistic European translation of "tragedy" as something terminal and of no benefit to the communicant chorus. In Yoruba tragedy the chorus imbues the protagonist with the very energy that leads to his transformation and his eventual return to the living. This is really the essence of the Yoruba perception of living. That is why the Egungun[24] come out in our midst as a reminder of the world of our ancestors: People realize that there is man underneath the mask, but it is a symbolic representation. It may require less energy, a lesser act of the will than, say, the priest who becomes the embodiment of Shango. But at the same time, you know, after going through the ritual in the grove, some Egungun have to be restrained, when they come out in the mask. So it's a whole world of perception. Suicide in European terms is a negative act. It is of no interest except for the individual concerned and its terminal.

What we are talking about in "Death and the King's Horseman" is an entirely different kind: a widening of the horizon, a progression from one sphere of existence to another.

22. Otin: a Yoruba river goddess.

23. Oluorogbo: the child of the Ife heroine Moremi. Moremi had to sacrifice Oluorogbo to the river goddess Isimerin, in return for learning the secret of the enemies of Ife. But Oluorogbo ascended to heaven and became an Orisha.

24. Egungun: Yoruba ancestral masqueraders

THE CRISIS OF YORUBA CULTURE

A conversation Between Wole Soyinka and Ulli Beier
Solothurn, May 1996

Iwalewa-Haus, University of Bayreuth 1996

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U: There was a short time in Nigeria history – between Independence and the first military coup – in which we lived through a period of great optimism. Financially the people of Nigeria were relatively well off, and they assumed that with independence things were going to improve steadily. In the West people believed in the benefits of universal free primary education. They were proud of being the "First in Africa" to have set up a television station. The University of Ibadan was functioning and had a good reputation.

Night life was boisterous; people could afford to go out, drink beer and listen to really good bands. Even in Oshogbo, which then had 120,000 inhabitants, one could hear three or four bands at weekends. The Yoruba Travelling Theater was booming. A decade after independence 'Biodun Jeyifo counted about a hundred Yoruba theater companies, all managing to survive somehow off their performances. People actually preferred the theater to the movies; but then those were the days of Ogunde, Ogunmola, Duro Ladipo and the Orisun players. Where in the world could you find a comparable constellation?

W: There was ferment!

U: There was no official planning. Little government interference. It was a natural growth. If you now think back to this period: how do you view it with hindsight? Why does it appear to us now as a "golden age", rather than a mere beginning?

W: My immediate reaction is: if only we had known what we had then! And how fragile it could become. Not that it was fragile, but how fragile it could become under the buffeting of the rapidly changing political and economic situation. We took our values for granted then.

Let's talk about – well, let me not call it "family values", because in America that has become almost a dirty word. Let's just say: "family sense". So first of all: at the core of Yoruba society there was this family sense. It was something that extended beyond the borders of Nigeria. Remember, when I was traveling around in a Landover, doing research into West-African Theater. To Togo, to Ghana, to the Ivory Coast. It never failed to strike me, this sense of Yoruba existence and solidarity, of self-cognition.

U: So you found it even in Abidjan? In Treicheville?

W: It was incredible. Yes, even in Treicheville people would ask about their cousins at home, as if they just lived a mile or two away. There was this kind of - I hate to call it Pan Yoruba feeling, because then you think immediately of an artificial creation. It was the recognition of something that had obviously existed for hundreds and hundreds of years and which had survived the imposition of colonial boundaries. So that took a buffeting first all, as the sense of the independent nation grew more and more rigid.

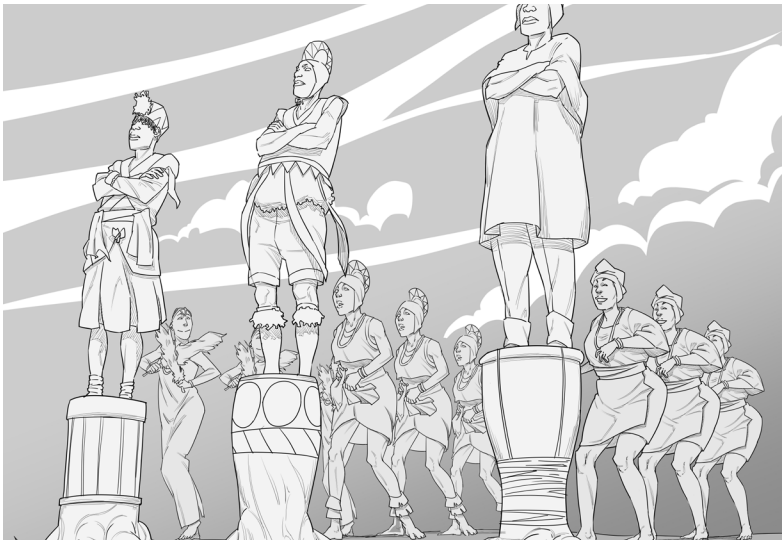
Ghana, for instance, began to take the lead in a particular direction, becoming ideologically hermetic. We use ideology here in a loose sense, but Ghana identified itself out of the West African community.

U: Starting with the breakup of West African Airways….

W: The Bank of West African…

U: The West African Cocoa Marketing Board. All these institutions became national.

W: So I think that within Nigeria the Yoruba sense of belonging became stronger – first of all. At the time the Yoruba within Nigeria including even immediate neighbours in Dahomey, had a sense of themselves as a distinct entity. This attitude was shared also by most other communities in Nigeria. In Lagos the Igbo community met weekly, had their cultural societies who contributed money towards the higher education of some of their children and supported all kinds of community projects. They organized the Atilogu dancers and they rehearsed strictly. The same thing with the Agbor dancers and the Itsekiri dancers. In the South at least, there was hardly any community that did not identify itself through such cultural groups.



This was carried, of course, into politics. The Action Group was based undoubtedly on the Egbe Omo Oduduwa, and it was founded as the political wing of that cultural organisation in order to rival the NCNC which was based on the Igbo State Union. You know very well all these different groups had a competition of self-cognizing, shall we say nation states within Nigeria. That rivalry was very palpable, no question at all. You could touch it – you could feel it.

U: And if you think of some of the politicians, like Akintola; his use of Yoruba language…

W: O yes, even the worst of Akintola's enemies had to admit that this was an exemplar of Yoruba linguistic acrobatics! And the fight between him and Awolowo – at the beginning - was like a fight within the family.

U: People took pride in their language then. And another thing was that the Obas….

W: Ooooooh yes!

U: …were still proper Obas. They were Christians and some were

Muslims, but they took their office extremely seriously. If you think of someone like Timi Laoye of Ede, Oba Adenle the Ataoja of Oshogbo, they were wise men, tolerant and true peace makers. And Moses Oyinlola, the Olokuku of Okuku, I have not seen a man anywhere in the world of whom one could have said so convincingly "every inch a king". And the Ooni of Ife then: a man of the world, a diplomat, a politician and a businessman – but a man of great status and dignity.

W: Yes the Obas were not beggars and they were not cultural relics. They were authentic spiritual. The occasional fight for succession was conducted very tersely, in a very touch manner; occasionally also using some people's political clout. But there was no betrayal to external sources of the institution of kinship. There was no cheapening of it. On the other hand the Oni of Ife today is an embarrassment.

U: I don't know whether you have come across this French picture book on African kings. It shows royal figures from Ghana or the Cameroons, even those extravagant figures from the Nigeria Delta

who sport European top hats. But they carry it off with panache! The only one who is an embarrassment in this book is the Oni of Ife. He had himself photographed, slouching on a sofa, like an Odalisque.

W: I may never have told you this, but during the coronation of the Ooni I saved institution from a serious embarrassment. Elufowoju, who was the photographer of the African Studies Institution at Ife, took the official photographs for the occasion. One day, when I was sitting in my office, a bunch of postcards arrived. Elufowoju had sent them, in case I wanted to send them to some of my friends. I looked at this picture and nearly fainted with embarrassment. You have to see it! It was composite photograph. There was the crown, which was photographed separately and the Ooni was looking at it with his mouth wide open, like obe re[1]! It was like oju orolari[2]! He was salivating at the crown! I said to Elufowoju: what is this? Is there a war going on between you and the Ooni? He said no, I took several pictures and the Ooni himself selected this one. He said that the Oni had ordered a vast quantity of them and that he had already sent out some of them. So I sent my staff out – you know, the acting company, especially those who were form Ife, I sent them round the town to all the shops to collect whatever they could find of these pictures. And I ask Elufowojo to let me have all those he had left in his office. And I said: I will compensate you by giving you some other work. But this one, forget you ever did it! Just bring me the negative. Then I went to the Ooni and said: "By the way, I have seized all those postcards". He said "Ah, didn't you like it? I thought it was rather good." I told him. If I wanted to construct an image of ojuorolari – that's exactly what I would do. I said: "You are salivating and panting looking at the crown."

1. obe re: literally "here is free booty". Implicit in the expression is: the element of surprise; that the free booty is there to be appropriated and to gorge oneself on.

2. ojuorolari: -an extension of obe re, it literally means one who, never having seen wealth before, has stumbled on it and is consuming it with all the greed and vulgarity he/she can muster.

U: If you think of his predecessor. When you entered his palace you knew you were in the presence of an Ooni. He had a position even beyond the confines of his sacred office. He knew how to combine

his traditional duties of an Ooni with those of a minister of state. Yet he was totally accessible. He would receive you at any time. He knew that an Oba must be available for his people and for strangers. Unlike this present Ooni. I once accompanied the Timi of Ede, who is a close friend of his and a business associate. But even he was kept waiting endlessly.

W: And another thing. Let's spend a little more time on the Ooni, because he is the symbol of everything that happened to the Yoruba people during the last two or three decades. Remember, some years ago, during the regime of Buhari, the Ooni of Ife and the Emir of Kano, Bayero, went to Jerusalem together. That was before we established formal relationship with Israel. They were received very well there, by the government and by the Prime Minister himself. Of course, when they came back, Buhari was furious! Never mind that some months later they started negotiations with Israel. But at the time they had to make a gesture and so they restricted the movements of the Emir and Ooni. The governors were ordered to issue restriction orders: they had to remain confined to their towns for six months. I know that Buhari visited the Emir of Kano. I don't know what he said – but I am quite sure that he apologized and explained that for political reasons this had to be done. And the governor of Oyo also visited the Ooni and explained that it was an unpleasant duty he had to perform, but that as a Yoruba son he had to pay due respect to the Ooni. In any case the restriction was administered very leniently. The Governor knew very well that the Ooni went to parties in Lagos, but he never said anything.

But the moment the six months' restriction was lifted, the Ooni gathered his chiefs and went to Oyo to thank the Governor. It was a day of shame for the entire Yoruba nation. O.K., you have to accept the fact that they are powerful enough to force the restriction on you. You bear that humiliation with dignity. You don't say a word. You just sit there. A true Oba would even have refused to travel immediately after the lifting of the ban. He would have considered it cheap to jump into a car at once. But the Ooni went to this Governor and said: "I have come to thank you for lifting the restriction. It has been a good lesson and I have brought my chiefs along because I want them to see that they are subject to disci-

pline also. So when I tell them that they must have discipline, they will know what I mean." It was shameful! Photographs, the lot and this governor, who at the time wasn't even a Yoruba, repeating those cliché phrase – we want our Obas to be respected and so on and so on.

I went to the Ooni yet again and said: "Did you really have to do that? What was the point? What did you think you would gain?" And he said. "But you heard what I said, it was for my chiefs. I wanted them to understand and he went on and on and on. But of course it was a lie. All he wanted to do is look for some contracts…

The man who is occupying the most important throne in Yoruba land is unfortunately also the man who has presided over the demise of Yoruba self-worth. He has been parading himself all over the world, even campaigning for Sani Abacha. He goes to America and says: "Look, I am the leader of the Yoruba people and I tell you that this is our position: we are in full support of the head of state.

U: He seems to be the symbol of the Yoruba malaise. Other Obas also give way to these immense political pressures. And many attach even more importance to their business deals than to their royal functions. But all the other Obas now have retained some dignity, even when they are forced to compromise.

W: He is saka jojo of Yoruba Obas. You may not know that expression. When I was a child the old films were introduced to Nigeria: Charlie Chaplin, Buster Keaton and so many other comedians. We were inspired by those films to produce our own shadow plays. We made cut out figures from card board and moved them in front of a lantern. So if I call him saka jojo I mean a card board piece of humanity clowning … making movements across the wall.

There is something else I want to say about these Yoruba crises: the figure of Awolowo, his activity, his position in those years. It is true that some people declare he was nothing but a tribalist who cared for nobody but even some Igbo's compared him favourably to Zik. The parameter is Awolowo's pride of race which something Zik never had. Zik was a compromiser. In fact he compared him-

self once to a beautiful bride, who was being courted by all those political parties. Can you imagine Awolowo sitting on the fence like that? It was something even the Sardauna of Sokoto once acknowledged. He said that he would never forgive Awolowo, because Awolowo made him get up from his exalted throne and campaign like a commoner; because during the first post-independence election in Nigeria, Awolowo had made inroads into the North, by allying himself to NEPU, while Azikiwe had a kind of pact with the Sardauna, that would not campaign in each other's region.

U: But let us go back to the 60s now and talk about the events of which you said before: "I wish we had known then what we had!" It was a period of intense theater activity and one of the big events of the period was a kind of festival you staged in which you brought Ogunmola, Ogunde, Duro Ladipo and the Orisun players all together into one big event. What was the motivation behind this theatre summit?

W: The idea was very simple. You remember I had been traveling all over West Africa and had seen the various travelling theaters, like the "Trios" in Ghana and I was impressed by the movements across the borders of many of these companies. I would arrive in Abidjan and find Ogunde performing. I would arrive in Ghana and meet a group from Abidjan. So I had the idea of organising a big festival of all these various groups – but of course, that was far too ambitious; and it was not easy to arrange either, because they were travelling theatres in the real sense of the word. I thought of this as a pilot festival, which would allow people to enjoy the richness and the variety of travelling theatre in the Western Region, because the West was easily the richest region in that kind of activity.

U: How would you assess these three companies? How would you describe each company's specific contribution?

W: Duro Ladipo was obviously the tragic genius. His plays were densely poetic. He really explored the origins of his people.

U: Before Duro the popular Yoruba theatre always treated babalowos or Orisa priests as comical figures or even as despicable once. In Ogunde's play it was always the school teacher type who flaunted

as the progressive hero. Duro was the first to restore the balance. He gave Yoruba culture back its dignity.

W: He made his audience understand the role of an orisa priest in the community. Ogunmola was of course the great comedian. I don't think that he ever denigrated traditional aspect of Yoruba culture…

U: No, he just left it out.

W: On the other hand for Duro every single aspect of Yoruba life formed part of the – I won't say jigsaw – but the composition of Yoruba society. And the thing about Duro – he didn't just play the role; he was inducted into the rite of Sango, so that when he entered the stage, he was virtually in state of possession.

U: And he had this enormous presence.

W: Yes, and is it not interesting: Duro died during the dry season,

in March. And in Ibadan – only in Ibadan – there was most unbelievable thunderstorm the night he died. And everybody remarked: Sango has passed. It was remarkable, the storm discharged itself that night and there was no more. It was really interesting…

U: I remember one night we met in Lagos and I took you to see a performance of "Love of money". It was a very long time ago,

because it was the first time you actually saw Ogunmola perform. And I remember how excited you were, particularly by the scene with the wedding preparations. Ogunmola created the impression of a bustling household of fifty or a hundred people, all milling around, doing different jobs, carrying things here and there and getting into each other's way. Yet all he had at his disposal to achieve that effect was an empty stage, no backdrop, no props and just two actors himself and his wife – to suggest a crowd.

W: Yes, that is what attracted to me his theatre: the real innovation and the economy with which the effects were produced. And

that is what I wanted my own actors to absorb: the seamlessness of it. That the theatre is a seamless continuum and in terms of innovative devices there isn't really such a thing as Yoruba theatre or European theater. And of course we were also aiming at this economy of expression and at creating a travelling theatre. So it was a tremendous experience. And I remember that organizing this little festival took so much of my energy and so much tension too that I under-rehearsed my own team. We performed both "Brother Jero" and "The Lion and the Jewel". "Brother Jero" was O.K. but I realized on the night of "The Lion and the Jewel" that it was horribly under-rehearsed. Nevertheless, it was certainly one of the great theatrical heights of that period.

U: What do you think about Ogunde's contribution to the theatre scene? Of course he was the initiator of the whole movement!

W: Well, one thing about Ogunde, his plays deepened towards the end. He became more and more aware of the possibilities of the Yoruba tradition. I never found that he succeeded in integrating his theatre. In other words, he took elements of the traditional theatre and planted them in his normal dialogue theatre. As you know, he began with a kind of Vaudeville tradition and only later began to bring in Egungun, the Orisa and he went deeper into the liturgy and dramatic incantations.

U: His weakness, as far as I am concerned, was that he was really an actor.

W: No, never! It was always Hubert Ogunde's personality on stage, no matter what he was doing. Whether it was a role from history, from mythology, whether he was a politician or a victim of British colonial rule it was always Hubert Ogunde. He had the least expressive face of all of them. He has a handsome face and a handsome figure…

U: There was a bit of vanity about it too….

W: Absolutely! The cock of the roost with all his harem around him acting on stage! And yet, he gave new dimension to the theatre scene in Nigeria.

U: When did you actually found the Orisun players?

W: O.K. Now when I arrived back in Nigeria, the first thing I did was "A dance of the Forest". And I first of all wanted to set a standard, a high standard of professionalism from the word Go. So that the young actors I would later train would understand from the very beginning that this was the standard that we wanted to take on tour. So in spite of these immense logistical problems of dealing with a cast that was partly living in Lagos and partly in Ibadan and all of whom had senior positions as teachers, public servants, broadcaster or oil company executives, we staged this play with senior people like Yemi Lijadu, Olga Adeniyi-Jones, Patrick Ozieh, Segun Olusola, Ralph Opara, Francesca Pereira. I had to take advantage of the independence celebrations to get letters which released them for rehearsals. It was sheer opportunism. It was a chance once in a lifetime; and I said, let's take advantage of this now and do something big with a high level of professionality and then start training a new generation. The young actors, Femi Euba, Sola Rhodes, were already inside, understudying. Jimmy Solanke and Tunji Oyelana came a little later. And I told Yemi Lijadu and the rest: we want to bring up this new generation and you will be the Baba Sale and the Iya sale - the fathers and mothers behind the scene. It's amazing how they actually understood and played that role. And then later, when I came to extract Orisun Theatre from the parent body, they were the ones who were handling publicity, selling tickets, while Orisun could devote themselves purely to their artistic responsibilities.

And again, they were able to work in tandem with the 1960 Masks. While the 1960 Masks were able to handle a play like "Dear Parent and Ogre" by SarifEasmon, the Orisun players went on to do political sketches…

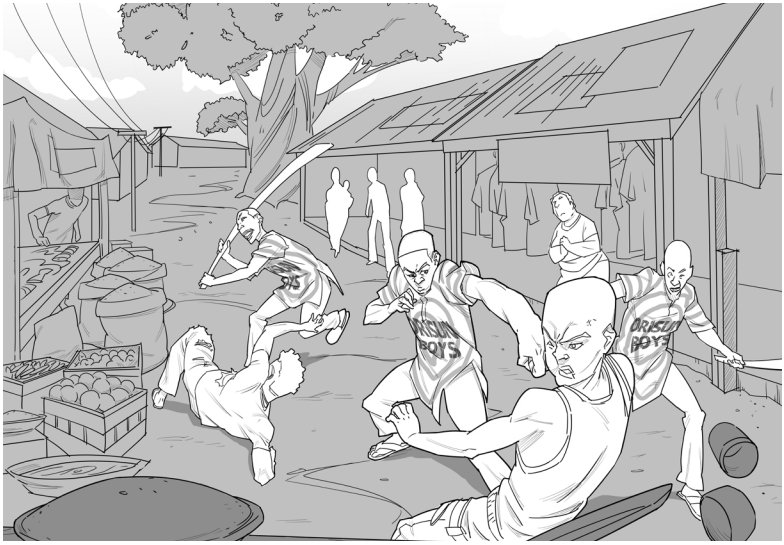
U: "Before the Black Out" …

W: By this time Akintola had gone wild. I actually had to train my actors in self-defense on stage, because Akintola and Fani Kayode sent thugs to break up our performances. They also sent the attorney general to our performance, to see whether they could charge us…

U: For sedition?

W: Oh yes, sedition was very popular then. Remember Sam Aluko, who had been charged. But when they had their caucus meeting, they decided, they didn't have a strong case in court so they would rather break up our performance with thugs. That's why I called my boys together and trained them in self-defense.

U: Orisun was much more than a theater company.



W: O absolutely. It was a family. Apart from the politics.

U: It was also a total way of life…

W: Completely. Those boys, Jimmy Solanke, Tunji Oyelana, Yomi Obileye, Yewande Akinbo… it was a commune. Whatever we had, we shared. You remember we took over that house in Agodi, the one you engineered as a "Headquarters for Black Orpheus". They lived there. The ones who had no homes. And they cooked there. And whatever food I could get I brought into the house. There was no replication of that period! And the real tragedy is, you know, there is no possible replication! What is left is the reality of

something valuable, which still exist in the careers of Tunji Oyelana, Yewande… and any time I have a production, anywhere I can, I call them, rely on them. They form the core of the new company and they immediately help to form a community. In fact, I recently had an "Orisun" production in London.

U: You can actually say that of all the companies who were active in the sixties: they had a total commitment to this new way of life. If you think of Duro's company. Many of them came from routine jobs: shop assistant, petrol station attendant, pools manger, where they had earned more than in the theater. They didn't really have any career opportunity - not in the theatre either, as far as they could see – but they saw a new meaning to their lives when they joined the company and that became more important to them than money.

W: Tunji Oyalana had been the private secretary to an Oba, but he just turned has back on that kind of life. Orisun became a microcosm of Yoruba life, extended family Yoruba principles. And of course, it wasn't just Yoruba people in my kind of company.

U: No. it was a remarkable time form that point of view. As you opined out before: Yorubas, Igbos, Efiks all put a lot of effort into making and projecting a separate cultural identity within the larger nation state, but there was also a genuine faith in Nigeria and many organisations cut right across these groupings. After all, we also had Mbari!

W: Thank you. Mbari which cut across the languages and also across the different arts. In Mbari we had the painters, the poets the musicians and the actors. And once people came into that kind of community, they simply absorbed the principles. And as I said earlier: none of us at that time knew what a great thing we had, because we could not imagine what a terrible level of national disintegration we could reach.

U: For a while, I think Mbari was a worthwhile institution.

W: Oh yes, it was terrific!

U: Of course, we did use outside funds, but it was not really very much.

W: Considering the achievements, Mbari was a shoe string operation. And comparing it to art institutions in Europe and America, I know what kind of budgets they consume.

U: You know when the idea of a Mbari first occurred in my mind? I had sent "A dance of the Forest" to the Nigeria Council suggesting it as the official play for the independence celebrations. The secretary returned it to me with the commentary: "We can't make heads or tails of this." Then I thought if this is the official Nigeria body making decisions on cultural matters, then we must create an independent organization in which a few like-minded young artists can have the freedom to pursue their own aims.

W: Well, the timing was perfect, if you remember. I was looking for premises to start an arts club and you arrived from Paris. You had made contact with that foundation and you said: "Look give me a proposal quickly. Can you and Chris Okigbo and J.P. Clark get together? So things just came together at a propitious moment.

But there is something else I want to mention that was very important at the time. The Cooperatives in the West. I have never before or since seen an organ that operated at state level – and we are talking of a state with a population of at least 20 million – that led to a movement which kept its roots firmly in the community. Remember the Coop in Ibadan. That was the most prominent. But there were branches of that Coop everywhere, where the farmers and the craftsman brought their goods and the Coop paid them generous prices. The leather workers, the carvers - but mostly it was food. I am not talking of cocoa now. That was a thing of its own. I am talking of the pretty producers, who brought their goods to the Coop and were paid immediately. And they could actually see what was needed, what was moving, I cannot remember any complaint about it. There was never any scandal about the running of it. And it integrated the peasantry, the smallest tier of productivity in the entire Western Region with the highest level of distribution in the state.

These cooperatives were the symbols of the cohesion of society, because when you have productivity organised on that level, in such a way as not to alienate the people - that is a real testimony to the family feeling within the community. And when that goes,

something really serious has happened to the community itself. Under Akintola, the cooperatives began to decline, because that is when the government began to dip its hand into the purse. The farmers weren't paid any more and they stopped bringing their goods. One after the other, the Coop shops disappeared until in the end the one at the centre of Ibadan also closed. First the goods became fewer less varied, until finally it was turned into just another shop. It was like a symbol of the disintegration of our society.

And this happened at a time when the region was pretty well off. There was no financial crisis. In fact even junior clerks, primary school teachers and farmers were living comfortably. So it was really a wilful destruction.

But let us return to Mbari for a moment. Two of the absolute highlights for me were the first performances of "Brother Jero" and "Song of a Goat." "Brother Jero" with Yemi Lijadu as Jeroboam and Ralph Opara as Chume. That was a performance bristling with energy and with and irony. One of the greatest theatre performance I can remember anywhere J.P's "Song of a Goat" was something else again. It was no longer a performance, it became a ritual and a distinctly uncanny experience Francesca Pereira went into something like a trance.

W: O yes. That was an incredible experience. I think we were all a little bit possessed that night. Certainly Segun Olusola was sufficiently terrified during the crucial moment of the ritual…

U: When you actually scarified a goat on stage.

W: You remember that Segun Olusola played the part of Tonye, the young man who cuckolded his senior brother. And you know he as to escape through the window. We made us of the library window, which adjoined the stage. I played Zifa, the senior brother, and when I was charging him, instead of just escaping, he began to barricade himself in. He put chairs and tables against the window. And when I tried to get in and couldn't I got wild. I smashed the window down. And at the other end of the library there was a door. That narrow door that led onto the street. And as I climbed through the window I saw Segun standing there with his hand on the door and the next thing, he was running up the hill towered

that church… you know St. Emmanuel's Church. I saw his fat bottom waddling and disappear over the horizon and at that moment I came to myself. Later I said to Segun "What happened?" And he said: "I took one look your eyes and I decided I wasn't staying around that night! This was no play acting."

U: Well, it started off as play alright, but it was the spilling of the goat's blood that got into Francesca's head.

W: Yes, she was the first to get wild and that affected everybody else.

U: I believe that this kind of thing could only have happened at Mbari. On a proper stage the artificiality of the situation, the presence of technicians and stage hands would have kept everything within prescribed limits. To me it was the informality of Mbari that was its great asset and that made such extraordinary experiences possible. I guess after the civil war it was not possible to resurrect this anymore.

W: There was an irony about the loyalty during the war. Somebody like Dapo Adeluga who become a senior director of the Orisun players, he arranged with television to have a weekly play to keep the company alive. First of all it's impossible. You can't have enough materials for a half hour play every week. And the kind of rehearsal time you get… so the standard really went down. And when I came out of prison and took one look at it, I was appalled and immediately terminated the whole thing. Better to have no theatre, than to have a theater at that level. The ensemble playing had disintegrated and even the core members had lost their standard. And Wale Ogunyemi turned out plays at an appalling rate.

U: The civil war destroyed a lot of things. The artists and writers of Mbari dispersed in different directions, and different loyalties, found themselves suddenly on opposing side. It was not so easy to restore the same kind of trust after the war. But Mbari itself began to disintegrate before the civil war.

Personally I lost interest in it, when they decided not to renew the lease of the original premises, but to move to the Central Hotel. I thought it was too big, too ugly and it had the wrong atmosphere. I conceded the point that one could build a proper stage and that Demas Nwoko could make good use of such of such a stage. But it

was expensive. It took up virtually the clubs entire grant, and with it one also bought a lot of useless space. All those hotel rooms.

Besides it was a nouveau-riche concrete monster. I couldn't see how the atmosphere of Mbari could be recreated. So even though Chris Okigbo tried to offer me the chairmanship of the new club, at least for the first year, I decided to leave and concentrate more on Oshogbo.

W: It had become a committee thing then. You could never recreate that atmosphere: the combination of that old Lebanese man and his own enclave there then being situated in the middle of the market. It was right in the heart of throbbing Yoruba life. They didn't see what they were losing. The size was totally irrelevant. The very makeshift quality of the original Mbari was a challenge. And it didn't alienate anybody. Moving into the central alienated a lot of people.

U: "Threshold fear." In the old Mbari everybody could feel at home. There was no class or clique that dominated the place.

W: You had students, you had the Peace Corps. You had crooks, you had con men, and you had pickpockets. I described a scene in "Ibadan" when a whole lot of con men cheated women who had come to do their shopping in Ibadan. They came from Ondo or Ekiti or even further afield. The crocks came with lucky dips. You were supposed to bring one Naira and pick up our luck in a box. Of course it wasn't the dip itself that was the business. It was very good psychology. They would watch those women who had come from the interior, having collated money from their fellow traders to do their Christmas shopping or Ramadan shopping. They would watch and assess which of them had money. Suddenly they would cause a commotion and snatch her purse. And it was through our own self-policing that we were finally able to invite the police to come and arrest them. They were heavy thugs. They were difficult to tackle on one's own. And of course they had friends in the police also. But eventually we were able to break up that ring, and one of their leaders became a very good friend of mine.

U: I gather it was the Orisun boys who broke up the ring. They were a wonderful link between Mbari and the wider public. It was they,

also I feel, who spread the popularity of the Mbari shirt. In the fifties, Adire was worn exclusively by women. And even when we started wearing it as shirts, it did not catch the imagination of a wider public. It was only when the staff of Mbari, like Ademola, the Alake's grandson, started wearing them and above all the Orisun players that you began to see people hawking Adire shirts on the street: young boys with long poles and twenty, thirty shirts of different size hanging from them.

A: A whole culture developed. You could go to East African or South Africa at the time and see the Mbari shirt. You remember Herb Shaw? The American who taught drama in East Africa? I think it was in Makerere. He was the one who spread the Mbari shirt in East Africa.

U: Now we have said that the civil war destroyed many things in Nigeria and caused some irreparable damage to the different cultures. But in some sense the country emerged from it intact. In fact there was a kind of high spirit. Think of the University of Ife under the leadership of Dr. Oluwasami. It was highly motivated.

W: There was some optimism because there was the feeling: O yes, we can overcome even a civil war.

U: A sense of indestructibility of Nigeria. It was exhilarating to visit the University of Nsukka after the war. It was a tremendously inspiring place when the student first went there, cleaned the place up and more or less twisted the government's arm to reopen the university.

W: A determination to rebuild.

U: Remember the "Ant Hill", the Uli art movement. The place was bursting with creativity.

W: It was still the Mbari spirit that carried on. They had been involved in it and set up their own centers. All that was encouraging, but the economic productivity had gone to pots. War had become a business. You remember the famous cheroots, the cigars that used to be manufactured behind Bamgbose Street in Lagos? We used to go there and purchase them for about 10 shillings a hundred. I went there when I came out of detention and a found the shop closed down. Why? The woman had become a trader

supplying materials to the army during the war, food, clothing, blankets – she had become an army contractor.

Before the war there had been this little industry. She personally supervised it and she did very well on it. But the war was much more profitable than that. And she didn't just go there and make big money and keep the little cheroot factory on the side. No she stopped it completely. And that was true of many small scale industries. When the war was over they never want back to it. They now began to chase contracts. Their whole life was entirely commercialized. They took up more and more contracts with the corresponding bribery. The famous 10 percent became institutionalized.

U: It became a hell of a lot more than 10%.

W: Thank you. It went to 15, 20, 25 %. And they became agents rather than producers. And to make things worse: if the economy had remained at that level, some of them might have returned to their former trade. But then the oil money came. That finished off the entire productive responsibility.

Remember the Ikorodu ceramic factory? Never mind what you thought of the quality of design at the time. But things were being produced there that were put to immediate use in the country and it cut some of the imports. But that just disappeared. Let's not talk about Abuja. The war industry, followed by oil, totally disturbed our lives.

U: It also meant that the states just relied on their share of federation oil money, which was enough to keep them going. They allowed their small industries and even their agriculture to go to ruin. In the late seventies Nigeria even began to import palm oil. The West was particularly affected. Land became an object of speculation. Whole villages lost their land, selling under pressure or seduced by their own greed. In the Oshogbo area you can't see a yam field anymore. The yam people eat comes from the Midwest or from the North.

With this new commercialism other things started to happen. Money began to play an ever increasing part in the installation of Obas with the result that Obas in tune have to become business-

men. One of their lucrative businesses nowadays is to sell chieftaincy titles…

W: To all and sundry!

U: The popular currency for chieftaincy title is a V-Boot[3]. Another alarming symptom of the disintegration of Yoruba society is the language itself. If you listen to a Lagos area boy or a taxi driver: The language has become hard. The rhythm has gone, the tone levels have been flattened, the text interspersed with English words and uttered at tremendous speed.

W: Even the language of music doesn't sound like it anymore. The lyrics have gone. It is linked thoroughly to commercialism. A new phase of praise singing has developed, different from the spontaneous praise singing we used to know in the night clubs of the sixties, which was bestowed on you the moment and appeared on stage, the moment you entered the bar. The singer did not really expect any reward; it was part and parcel of the performance. Maybe you put a few token coins on his forehead or you bought a couple of drinks for the band. But now: what it means is that the singer takes the same Agbaga of praise singing – he takes it off you when he's finished with you and puts it on the next person. No inventiveness – just using the same sequence of praises for each individual.

U: This has been triggered off by this obnoxious "spraying."

W: Thank you, I was coming to that.

U: Lavishing money over the performer has nothing to do with the quality of the performance or with the personality of the singer. It is a form of self-display of the nouveau-riche: "I can spray more than you!"

W: Why should the singer waste his creative energy, when all the man wanted to hear was his name interpolated into the same formulistic singing.

U: I remember how well informed the old juju bands were about people's lives. Black Morocco would refer to recent events in your life. He certainly knew one's Oriki. He would who your recent girlfriend was.

W: That's right and his praise would be specific to her: the texture, the completion, her specific variety of beauty as opposed to the last one. But now it is standard. They will sing about anybody you bring in – as long as she is a sprayer. She can be as thin as a rake, if the praise they used last had to do with a real market mammy type, they would just repeat the same phrases and there would be no shame in it, no sense of impropriety. And she would be basking in it, all that matter is that her name is mentioned. It doesn't matter what accolades; wherever they used over and over again, for the opposition, for the enemy. And from their music moved into the sanctimonious. It's almost as if to compensate for this worship of money and status. It is very difficult to analyze the relationship, or what stimulated what, but I have observed that the music now also indulges in fulsome prayers to God, the standard invocations to hope and good luck. There have now become the centre piece of the new social music repeated and nauseam and inflated in its worth. In other words you can have that thin phrase repeated with the most unctuous kind of voice. A new religiosity has been born through new social music whose literacy is of the lowest – in fact which has no imagination whatsoever. So you can have a whole thing lasting for 15 minutes – in fact longer, LP length – consisting of nothing but: "May my head not encounter evil on the way" And that will be repeated throughout in a more and more unctuous manner. No more imagination, no more creativity. And then a combination of that with all the new technical effects

Compare that with the beautiful music of Tunde Nightingale, Black Morocco, Orlando Owo with his beautiful husky voice. Compare the original juju music with the social music of today and you and see collapse of the group personality, the total social decay.

3. V-Boot: the model of Mercedes Benz produced in the mid and late 1980s. Very popular in Nigeria as a status symbol of the nouveau riche

U: One problem is, the public no longer demands the imagination and creativity we have known. Another fact is the political hopelessness and frustration. People have lost their faith and their sense of belonging. So they just play along with whatever corrupt government is in power and try to get out of it what they can for

themselves. They become Muslims and go to Abuja to look for contracts.

W: Yes that's another phenomenon. Changing your name so you can be associated with the feudal power.

U: That amounts to a deliberate negation of your own identity. The question is, with political power permanently concentrated in the North and with the money monopolies centered more and more in the North – what chances has Yoruba culture got to survive? And more seriously: How much do Yorùbás care about their culture and their identity nowadays?

W: Now here we come to the positive side, or the negative one; I don't know what to say, it depends whether you look at it as a Nigerian nationalist or a Yorùbá nationalist.

The reverse process has begun. There is now a feeling of self disgust by the younger generation and in the I include the forty, forty-five years olds, who looked at the entire phenomena and said: wait a minute, we are Yoruba people and that bastardisation of our existence, the lowering of the quality of life from our original existence, the humiliation of our people by those traitors who go begging cap in hand, betraying the political cause for their own profit – we will not stand for it any longer. There is a swell of reaction against it. It is exemplified in the most frightening way in the kind of experience we encounter today, when we try to mobilize political opposition to the dictatorship, and our people say clearly to us: Listen, we are ready for struggle, but we are not willing to struggle for a Nigeria nation. There is only one nation we are willing to recognise and that is the Oduduwa nation.

In the States along there are at least four Yoruba movements that I know: Egbe Omo Oduduwa, Yoruba Progress Union, Oduduwa Nation… and one of them was so blatantly Yoruba that I had to say to them: Listen at his stage and least this is a national struggle. If you want to become affiliated to NALICON (the "National Liberation Council") you have to change your name. I cannot accept a sectional-based organisation. You know what they did? They went and had a meeting and they came back and said to me: "O.K we've changed our name. We are now 'Action Group for Democracy'[4]".

U: Very clever.

W: Look, I roared with laughter. I thought it was one up on me. I had no choice but to register the organisation. I thought it was so witty and at the same time is showed such a resolve. They got back to me within ten minutes and said: "Action Group for Democracy – any objections?" I was defeated on this one. Some of them were collecting money and not only in America. Even before I left Nigeria, there was a group – professionals, doctors, engineers, pharmacists, journalists and between the age of 25 to 45, some of whom have researched the resources that exist in the Yoruba part of the country. I was impressed by their industry. They had identified the minerals that could be explored. On one occasion they invited me and said: we have always admired you and we will always give you support. But today we have not invited you to talk about how to terminate this dictatorship. We have made up our mind. We have not invited you to ask your opinion. We want to tell you what we want to do and we want to ask you whether you can help us. They said we have examine our history; we have looked at the treachery of our leaders. We have asked you because you are not one of the traitors. But we feel that you are wasting your energy, and we do not want to be wasted. You have described your generation as the wasted generation. We are determined not to waste ourselves and we are sure that you are wasting yourself because you continue to believe in a certain chimera called "Nigeria"… We don't. This is our programme. It dovetails with yours, fine. But this is the platform on which we stand. We want nothing less than a Yoruba state. Our minds are made up. However long it takes, we cannot lose this vision. We do not believe in Nigeria. And they showed me why the Yoruba nation should stand alone.

I just sat there amazed, while I was being lectured for over an hour. And they said: O.K. this is our programme. How can you help us – if you want to. And that movement is gaining ground all the time.

4. Action Group of Democracy: Action Group was the name of the political party that ruled in Western Nigeria prior to Independence and until 1963/64. Originally a cultural organisation that transformed itself into a political party, it enjoyed pride in the Yoruba race. That a group now should revive the name is symptomatic of both the political and cultural trauma that the Yoruba people have gone through in the past thirty years.

U: An interesting rider on this: a few years ago I met a Yoruba Oba, a man of rare integrity. He told me that a certain mineral had been found on his territory. But he said: "I have no intention to do anything about it. Because if I do, some Northerner will get the contract. Maybe some businessman from Lagos will get the subcontract. But this town will get nothing out of it. All that will happen is that they will destroy our environment. Let it stay there."

W: That's right. That is the mood right now. That is precisely the kind of language those young men are using. And even in the recent constitutional agenda – even some of the women amongst them – they say: We only went there to let them know we want a Yoruba State.

There are similar movements in different areas. And what we are witnessing is a phase of "to your tents Israel!" that is the expression we use when we want to translate the Yoruba expression Let each person cling to his mother's breasts. It is essentially the political expression of this sense of race humiliation.

U: It is a potentially dangerous situation. Who could have thought ten years ago that we could witness the rise of violent Hindu chauvinism in India. The Yoruba people certainly must reassert their culture identity but we must hope that they will not lose sight of the essential values of their culture in the process.

But when you think of the sixties, which we have been talking about as if they are the golden age in the history of Nigeria, I am sure that most people, certainly the intellectuals accepted the concept of Nigeria.

W: We certainly tried to make it work.

U: There was a lot of good will. People thought, we'll give this a go! But somehow these so-called leaders had frittered it away; they have sold out this idealism. Nigeria has just become the personal property of a few.

In the sixties I was amazed by people's optimism. But they said to me, look, with the spread of modern education we shall see the rise of a new elite in the North. A new generation will think more like us. They will be bless conservative, more liberal, more open to

the world and we will grow together. You may remember that in the last numbers of Black Orpheus" I published quite a few stories from North Africa. I tried to encourage this optimism by showing people that there was this other, liberal and open minded aspect of Islam. And up to a point I think you can say it's happening. Look at the last election. There was a definite breaking down of cultural and religious borders.

W: I was coming to that. Yes.

U: The Emir of Kano. He is a modern statesman. Nobody could accuse him of being a mediaeval potentate. Some change has actually taken place but these people are not having the say in the North.

W: Absolute not. Its that clique. And I emphasize it in my forthcoming book. But to come back to the election. I have videos of Abiola's campaign. I have not seen such ecstasy on the faces of people. Not since the time of Awolowo. You want to see those videos. You want to compare them to that of Tofa, campaigning in the same state, in his own state. And you will see that on the one hand there is total absolute rapture at the reception of this man. On the other side: duty and support, but nothing compared to Abiola. All that bullshit that Northerners weren't ready for a Yoruba. It was exploded totally.

U: I suppose it is the frustration over the annulment of this election that has produced those extreme Yoruba nationalists.

W: Precisely. Their feeling is: if the nation went this far, and if there is a self-interested clique so determined, ruthless and unpatriotic as to actually fritter away this galvanising moment of the national feeling and the nation will – well, in that case let's not waste any more energy on an ideal that those who are in a position of power are willing to nullify. It's incalculable what June 12th has done[5].

U: But let me come to a last issue. Because whatever happens politically, supposing even that the political problems can be resolved one way or the other, there still remains a cultural problem, because for several decades Yoruba children have been educated away from their culture at school. They have been educated away from their culture at school. They have been educated to

actually despise their history, their religion. We have seen sparks of cultural revival in the sixties – Duro Ladipo and your own activities have jerked people out of this complacency and made them rethink their history and gave them a new awareness. Nevertheless we are forced today by a profiteering class of Yoruba entrepreneurs who are only too willing to exploit their own people - so that political autonym in itself is not the answer. There is a cultural vacuum.

I met a new generation of Yoruba academics who come to me and say: I missed out on this important period of our history. I was too young to experience the ferment of the sixties. I have never seen a Duro Ladipo performance. I never knew the Mbari Club. There is a deep sense of loss, of being cheated out of one's heritage, to the extent that I find myself playing the role of an "informant", an eye witness, to this younger generation.

5. June 12th, 1993: the date of the freest and fairest general presidential election ever held in Nigeria. Chief Moshood Abiola, a Yoruba, won, but the fact that he is a Muslim who assiduously and expensively cultivated friendship of the dominant Hausa-Fulani Muslim North did not stop him from being contemptuously brushed aside and the election annulled

W: Yes, and we did not event touch on the role played by foreign interests. What I call the "Walkman Culture". When I was running the cultural center at the University of Ife, you remember we ran a bar in the foyer of the theatre and we had the rotunda. I made a rule that there should be no foreign Pop music played in the Foyer of the theater. I said: the students have their own club. Let them play what they want there, whatever is to their own taste. But I run this place. This is Ife. This is an Ife cultural center. I will not have this kind of Pop Music played here. We played Juju musicians like Orlando Owo, we played music from the East, the wonderful singer Njemanze, we played professor Majority. And I said, if any students bring in records of Rock or Pop, I'll get them smashed. I said this is an opportunity for all you students who come here to know that is an alternative. This is an option. This is the purpose of this place. But it is interesting, they kept bringing their Pop music and it was not until I actually grabbed a Pop record and smashed it, that the barman understood I was serious about this.

Unfortunately, for them, this was the one place on the campus where they could relax. It was the one place where the toilets worked, where they could get cheap snacks, see some shows and get reduced tickets. Whereas they were charging high prices in their own club. They were fleecing one another. Some of them gradually got interested in the music I played in the center. But it is tragic that a whole generation had been lost to their own popular music. They said, what sort of music is this, this is square stuff. I said: "Your father is square."

U: But this is something that went wrong very early on. Do you remember the "Universal Free Education Scheme" introduced by S. O. Awokoya in the then Western Region of Nigeria in 1956? He was one of my best friends, but I quarrelled with him continually over that issue. People in those days had a blind faith in that magic thing called "education" that was supposed to solve all the problems of society. Nobody thought of what the purpose of education was. What are we educating our children to become? What will they learn about their own society? Their history? The philosophy of the Yoruba? Where will their identity lie, when they have passed through that education? Will they learned anything at all about the other cultural groups in Nigeria with whom they will have to cooperate in forming a nation?

If the education is merely job orientated, if all its does it to enable you to earn more money than those who did not go through that system successfully, are you not training a class of egoistical exploiters? If you don't known what the impact of this type of education will be on society, why simply more of the same?

Nobody, literally nobody, would listen to me then. Only in the seventies Prof. Babs Fafunwa started his experience in Yoruba education at Ife. In six selected schools he introduced Yoruba as the language of instruction, right through Primary school from class I to Class VI. He argued correctly that to impose English as a language of instruction too early would alienate them from their society and that it was not even an efficient way of teaching them English. He carried out this experience with great enthusiasm and with considerable success, but of course nothing came out of it in the end. It was never adopted as general policy of education.

W: Yes, and what did he do to himself? After he became Federal Minister of Education he declared publicly that he must not longer be called Babs Fafunwa, that he was now Aliu Fafunwa.

U: Was that the price he paid for becoming a minister?

W: That's right. When a senior person gives an example like that, of opportunism, which denies your own origin, how can people then take his project of promoting the Yoruba language seriously? It affects it, whether you like it or not. You cannot objectivate what you are doing and separate yourself from it by example. You are going the way of all others, to be acceptable to a section of the country that happens to be distributing the goodies at the moment. You abandon a name by which you have been known for decades – Babs for Babatunde – and you publish it in all the papers that you want to be called Aliu.

U: You know last night Al Imfeld said something to me that is quite relevant to this issue. You know that Al Imfeld is a cousin of the famous rebel Catholic theologian Hans Kung.

W: O really? I didn't know that.

U: He told me that he said Hans Kung: all your ecumenical meetings and get-togethers and conferences and services. I do appreciate that you want to break down differences between the different churches and you are stretching out a hand towards Judaism and Islam, but at no time ever has any of you considered African religion. Now if you look at the Yorùbá people themselves, all these younger people we have talked about, who have developed a new pride in Yoruba language and history and identity. When it comes to religion…

W: They shy away.

U: Yes. And it amounts to a form of schizophrenia. If you are really going to have this Yoruba revival that you are talking about – regardless of which political framework it will take place I – sooner or later they will have to face the issue of Yorùbá religion squarely. And I am not thinking of the Yorùbá theologians, like Dr. Idowu, who pick elements from Yorùbá religion and create some kind

of construction that will make it look "kosher" from a Christian point of view. And all those elements that do not fit the Christian world view will be declared a subsequent degeneration of the original "true" essence of Yoruba religion. That doesn't help.

What has to be done is to show that Yoruba religion had some universal human values which are valid today as they were a hundred years ago that there were elements of this religion that were superior to the so-called "universal" religions. For example its tolerance. But apart from you, nobody has stood up and said this.

W: Well I have met some people of my own persuasion. You know at Houston Texas they have this huge festival every year which features one country. And this year it was the whole of West Africa. And there was a Yoruba there who stood up and said: You cannot simply separate Yoruba religion from the Yoruba world view and from all what you call Yoruba civilization.

U: It has been a taboo subject.

W: Yes, and you know, I take every opportunity to push it. And I say: Look at you people with you big, so-called universal religions. All you have is a history of bloodthirstiness, I said: You cannot find a single example of any Yoruba religion waging a war on its own behalf. There is no Orisha community that has gone aggressively proselytizing. Inspite of this total lack of aggressiveness it penetrated and infiltrated other religions and has created whole new viable systems of values in Cuba and Brazil.

There is at least one lesson to the world which divides itself into two or three religions to the neglect of every other viable system, of values. I do agree, of course, that there has been a lot of superficial, sometimes ambiguous flirtation with African values, particularly in America – like the Kwanza. They have set up their own Black New Year Festival and it has become a big thing, thoroughly commercialized like Christmas. They send out Kwanza cards and they have a festival – rather like Harvest. They start preparing long in advance, they have write ups, they light candles and they wear Akwete[6] cloth.

U: That reminds me of Mr. Amu. Do you remember that charming musician in Accra who performed baroque music on atentebem[7]

flutes? For his daughter's wedding he invented an "African wedding cake". It was made of Fufu[8]. You cut it with a knife and it contained pepper stew. But what was the point?

W: Precisely. Because there is already a traditional form of wedding in that kind of society. So why use the cake symbolism? But you are right about the relevance of African Americans to focus on a recognisable and still existing (I doesn't have to be Yoruba) symbol, saying: this has a meaning for the contemporary black person in America. They don't do that. They substitute.

U: But there are many things that you could use, Many Yoruba rituals have a universal meaning – they cut across all cultural boundaries. Tunji was very lucky, because when he was born in Papua New Guinea, there was a Yoruba doctor, one Doctor Lucas who was there on a WHO mission. And he held a proper Yoruba naming ceremony for him, with pepper and honey and all the rest of it. And for us it was a great deal more meaningful than baptism and it had an equally powerful appeal for all the New Guinean friends who were present.

One thing which everybody loved: instead of the parents dictatorially imposing a name on the child, every friend could confer his own chosen name on the child. So you teach the child from beginning that he will be different things to different people in his life, and that he is part of a larger community; that his parents are not the only ones who take responsibility for hi and that his own responsibilities extend far beyond his nuclear family.

W: And we don't need a priest to do it. Anybody can do it, and you can use whatever foodstuff is available. You can adapt to circumstances and even add new meanings. Because the symbolism is the earthing of the child.

U: And giving him a taste of what life has in store for him.

W: Giving him a little bit of bitter and little bit of sweet. Even I myself have performed many naming ceremonies. In face right now, Olaokun, my son is waiting for me to come and name his new born child. So he is also an example of this kind of sensibility. Even though he grew up in England and married a white girl. But the passion with which he has integrated himself into the society,

both politically and culturally is amazing. So you see evidence of that phenomenon all around.

6. Akwete: a colourful cloth woven in Igbo country.

7. atentebem: Ghanaian bamboo flute

8. Fufu: staple food in Ghana – a mixture of pounded yam and plantain.

U: But how will these values be imparted to a new generation?. I find that my Nigerian friends in Germany face this problem. Their children grow up in alien environment. It is natural for them to come home and expect to be served by their parents, because that's what the children in their environment do. It takes a huge effort to teach them elementary rules of Yoruba behavior, politeness and respect under the circumstances. How much more difficult to impart essential values? How will children growing up in exile retain the subtitles of their language? How will they understand what Orisa is or ori? And is a child in Lagos not as alienated from its culture as a Yoruba child growing up in Africa

or Europe? Do we need to create instructions? Some new form of school?

W: Something like this has been undertaken by a group in California. They call themselves the "League of Patriotic Nigerians." They actually want to raise a structure which they call Nigerian House, because they are acutely aware of the loss of this culture to their children. They have been exiled for a long time. They teach their children Yoruba at home, or Igbo as the case may be, but they want to institutionalize this. They are going to make it open to Americans too. So this is a tendency, and I doubt if it is going to be short lived, because there is a real need. And part of it arises from the fact that many children have been growing up accepting American values unquestionably and some parents have become so upset with it, that they swore they would not let children lose their culture. So I think all is not lost.

U: Sometimes one wants to despair. But the Yoruba people have demonstrated a remarkable sense of survival throughout their history. So that gives one hope that they will survive this latest and most dangerous crisis.

ORISHA LIBERATES THE MIND

Wole Soyinka in Conversation with Ulli Beier on Yoruba Religion

Iwalewa 1992

WOLE SOYINKA ON YORUBA RELIGION

A conversation with Ulli Beier

U: I wanted to talk to you about Yoruba religion, because you seem to be the only writer who has seriously tried to come to terms with it. Even many of the Yoruba scholars, who do research into language, literature, history and of the Yoruba, shy away from the subject – as if they were embarrassment about it…

Now in your own case, given the type of upbringing you had, I have asked myself how you became interest in Yoruba religion. There in an image "Ake", that has made a very strong impression on me. You were living in the Christian school compound, that was surrounded by a high wall and when the Egungun masqueraders were passing by outside, you had to ask somebody to lift you onto the ladder, so that you could watch the procession going on outside. Your upbringing was designed to shield you from the realities of Yoruba life… and later on your education in the Grammar school, the University in England – they all were designed to take you further away from the core of your culture.

How then did you find your way back into? How did you manage to break the wall that had been built up around you?

W: Curiosity mostly, and the annual visit to Isara- which was a very different situation from Abeokuta! There is no question at all, that there was something, an immediacy that was more attractive, more intriguing about something from which you were obviously being shielded. If you hear all the time "Oh, you mustn't play with those kids because their father is an Egungun man…" you become curious: and then you discover that there is nothing really "evil" about it… that it is not the way they preach about it. Even my great uncle, the reverend J.J. Ransome Kuti, whom I never met, composed a song whose refrain was: "Dead men can't talk …" One was surrounded by such refutations of that other world, of that other part of one's heritage, so of course you asked questions about it. Yes, and even if I realized quite early on, that there was a man in that Egungun mask, that did not mean that a great act of evil was committed – any more than saying that Father Christmas was evil.

I had this rather comparative sense and I wrote in "Ake" that I used to look at the images on the stained glass windows of the church: Henry Townsend, the Rev. Hinderer and then the image that was supposed to be St. Peter. In my very imaginative minds, it didn't seem to me that they were very different from the Egungun.

So one was surrounded by all these different images which easily flowed into one another, I was never frightened of the Egungun. I was fascinated by them. Of course, I talked to some of my colleagues, like Osiki, who donned the masquerade himself, from time to time.

The Igbale[1] was nothing sinister to me: it signified to me a mystery, a place of transformation. You went into Igbale to put on your masquerade. Then when the Egungun came out, it seemed that all they did was blessing the community and beg for little bit for alms here and there. Occasionally there were disciplinary outings: they terrorised everybody and we ran away from them but then, some distance away you stopped and regathered… maybe my dramatic bent saw this right from the beginning as part of the drama of life.

I never went through a phase, when I believed that traditional religions or ceremonies were evil. I believed that there were witches – I was convinced of that – but at the same time there were good apparitions. And of course I found the songs and the drumming very exciting.

1. Igbale: The secret grove of transformation, where the mask is doned.

U: You never really took to Christianity at any stage…

W: Never really – not even as a child I remember distinctly my first essay prize at secondary school – that was in my first year. My easy was entitled "Ideals of an Atheist." Yes, I went through all these phases. I just felt I couldn't believe in the Christian god and for me that meant I was an atheist.

U: How old were you then?

W: I was eleven! But I also enjoyed being in the choir – I was a chorister. I went regularly to rehearsals. I enjoyed the festive occasion, the harvest festival etc. Then we processed through the congregation, rather than sneaking in through the side entrances. At Christmas and New Year I enjoyed putting on the robes of a chorister. On the way to church I went to see my friend Edun, who lived in Ibarapa. And my Sunday was made even more interesting, when we met the Egungun masquerades on the way – which was quite often.

U: Do you remember we went to a conference in Venice; it must have been in 1960 or 1961…?

W: Oooooh yes…

U: There was a writer from Northern Nigeria… I think it was Ibrahim Tahir. And he made a statement, the gist of which was that Nigeria was, or was about to become, an Islamic country…

W: I have actually forgotten that, but it wouldn't surprise me.

U: I am no quite certain what his real argument was or how it was phrased. But I do remember your rather fierce reply! The gist of which was that both Christianity and Islam were conservative forces that actually retarded Nigeria's ability to cope with the modern world, whereas traditional religions – Yoruba religion at least – was something much more open, and much capable of adaptation….

W: Yes, and for that very reason liberating! I am glad you brought up the issue of Islam, because that was also contributory to my entire attitude to imposed foreign religions. You know all this nonsense

of religious intolerance which is eating into the country now – it didn't exist in my youth! During the Ileya we celebrated with our Muslim friends, because they would send us meat from their ram; the Oba would go to the mosque, even if he was a Christian, and vice versa: during Christmas and Easter, our Muslim friends would come to the house.

There was always equality between the religions – acceptance. And that in turn made it impossible for me to see one as superior to the other. And of course, the more I learned about Yoruba religion the more I realised that that was just another interpretation of the world, another encapsulation of man's conceiving of himself and his position in the universe; and that all these religions are just metaphors for the strategy of man coping with the vast unknown.

I became more and more intrigued and it is not surprising that, when I went to study in England I nearly took "Comparative Religion" as one of my subjects; but then I decided that I would enjoy it more, if I just read into it and visited all sorts of place…

I remember going to this small Buddhist meeting; I visited the so-called fundamentalist religions, the spiritualist churches… I went to one or two séances. I have always been interested in the spirituality of the human individual. So when people like Tahir – and there have been many of them – have made that kind of statement, I have always risen to counter it very fiercely. Traditional religion is not only accommodating, it is liberating, and this seems logical, because whenever a new phenomenon impinged on the consciousness of the Yoruba – whether a historical event, a technological or scientific encounter – they do not bring down the barriers – close the doors. They say: Let us look at this phenomenon and see what we have that corresponds to it in our own tradition. That is a kind of analogue to this experience. And sure enough, they go to Ifa and they examine the corpus of proverbs and sayings, and they look event into their, let's say, agricultural practices or the observation of their calendar. Somewhere within that religion they will find some kind of approximate interpretation of that event. They do not consider it a hostile experience. That's why the corpus of Ifa is constantly reinforced and augmented, even from the history of other religions with whom Ifa comes into contact. You have Ifa verses which deal with Islam; you have Ifa verses which deal with Christianity. Yoruba religion attunes itself and accommodates the unknown very readily: unlike Islam, because they know: they did not see this in the Koran – therefore it does not exist. The last Prophet was Mohammed, anybody who comes after this is a fake. And Christianity! The Roman Catholics: until today they do not cope with the experience and the reality of abortion! They just shut the wall firmly against it. They fail to address the real problems of it; they refuse to adjust any of their tenets.

U: The Yoruba people have always been willing to look at another mythology and find equivalents in their own tradition. For example: when I first met Aderemi, the Late Oba of Ife – that was at Easter 1951 – he told me about the different shines in his town and he said: "You know, in Yoruba religion we know the story of Mary and Jesus" and he told me the myth of Moremi (Mary) who sacrificed her only son in order to save her town. And he said: "Really, Moremi is Mary" I was impressed, because he could see that there was some basic metaphor that remained valid across a

variety of cultures: He knew that the basic truth is the same – only the trappings are different…

W: The Yoruba had no hostility to the piety of other people.

U: Yoruba religion, within itself, is based on this very tolerance. Because in each town you have a variety of cults, all coexisting peacefully: there may be Shango, Ogun,Obatala, Oshun and many more...

W: Even in the same compound!

U: Even within the same small family - because you were not supposed to marry into the same Orisha!

But there is never any rivalry between different cult groups; they all know they are interdependent. Because they are like specialists: everybody understands specific aspects of the supernatural world. Nobody can know everything. The Egunguns know how to deal with the dead; the Ogun worshippers know how to handle the forces that are symbolized by Iron. But for the Ogun worship-

pers to functions, it is also necessary that Shango worshiper and Obatala worshippers and all the other Olorisha perform their part. Only the concentrated effect of all them will bring peace and harmony to the town.

So naturally: when the Christians first appeared, the Olorishas could hardly suspect…

W: …. how hostile the new religion would be…

U: I think that tolerances is one of the big qualities of Yoruba culture. Even the treatment of handicapped or mentally disturbed people – it all shows how much more tolerant Yoruba culture was than Western Cultures.

W: Yes. Europeans tend to hide such people. Yoruba religion actually accounts for them.[2]

U: You said before that Yoruba religion "liberates" can you expand on that?

W: I believe that the truly liberated mind is never aggressive about his or her system of beliefs. Because it is founded on such total self confidence, such acceptance of others, that there is no need to march out and propagate one's cause. That is why Yoruba religion has never waged a religious war, like the Jihad or the Crusades.

U: In fact they never make converts! It is orisha himself who chooses his devotees…

W: The person who needs to convert others is a creature to total insecurity.

U: There is this beautiful Yoruba proverb: "The effort one makes of forcing another to be like oneself, make one an unpleasant person!"

W: And even in practical terms, in day to day terms, take Shango for instance. Shango becomes the demiurge of electricity, so that this new phenomenon does not become an object of terror; it does not alienate you, because Yoruba religion enables you to assimilate it. The ease with which the Yoruba moves into that world and adapts to phenomena that had not come into the purview of his religion until recently – it means that he does not see the need to protect

his family or his town from the benefit of this new technological experience. This is another evidence of this liberating attitude; which becomes ingrained in one. It is not just a bag of tricks that helps you to cope with the world: the mind is already prepared.

The same thing applies to human relationship. Social relationships. The whole experimental nature of what the modern world should be. The way other religions absolutely block your entry into new progressive fronts – Yoruba religion just doesn't do that!

2. The Yoruba creation story relates that Obatala created human beings out of clay and that one day he was drunk on palm wine and made cripples, albinos and blind people. Since then, all handicapped people are sacred to him.

U: It is significant that when a Yoruba says "Igbagbo" (a believer) it means "Christian", because it is nonsensical to say I believe in Shango or I believe in Ogun. One is too secure in one's world view. I think I have mentioned to you once that remarkable replay of an old Olorisha, to whom his grandchild said: The teacher said, your Obatala doesn't exist. He simply answered. "Only that for which we have no name does not exist." He could not be shaken.

W: That is a brilliant way of putting it. And you have been to Brazil and Cuba. In that part of the word you find Europeans – not just Mulattoes – but people of pure European descent, who accept the humanism of this religion and who recognise it as their own way of truth. And cannot conceive of any other way of looking at the world. This a proven ability of this religion, which is well documented.

U: A few days before I came to Nigeria, I received a letter from a Portuguese student at the University of Munich. She came across a small community of Olorishas in Lisbon and again she found this a more realistic and intense way of looking at the world.

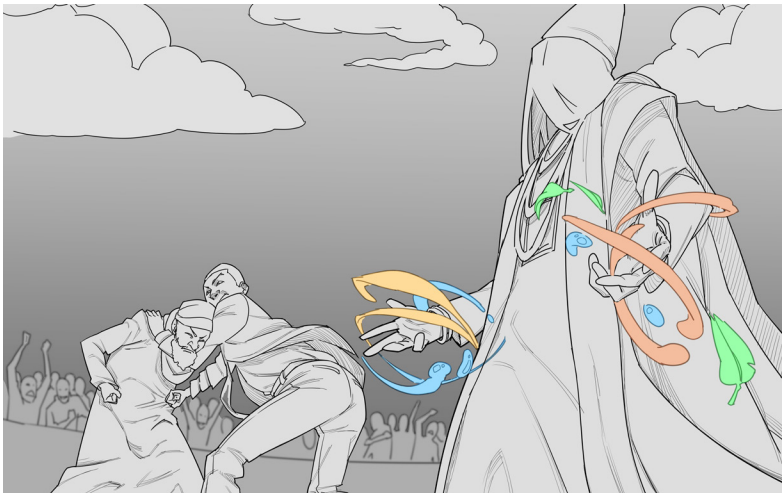
W: I know a number of people like that. On the other hand, what you said earlier on about Yoruba scholars and their reluctance to come to terms with Yoruba religion... It is a very curious phenomenon…

U: So you agree with my estimation?

W: Oh yes, I agree with it absolutely – and worst part of it is that those fellows who speak about "false consciousness"– and I

don't just mean the dying breed of Marxists – they are all totally preconditioned. Even when they are trying to be objective about African religion in general – or about their own traditional belief system – they are totally incapable of relating to it. They say: "This is a contemporary world. What use is our traditional religion today…", and I feel tempted to say to them: What use is a system of beliefs like Islam and Christianity in the contemporary world? And they cannot see that they have totally failed to make that leap. To take Yoruba religion on the same level as any system of belief in the world, that they are committing a serious scholarship lapse. In other words, they are totally brainwashed by what I call these "elaborate structures of superstition" - Islam and Christianity particularly. They have accepted these as absolute facts of life which cannot be questioned.

They lack the comparative sense of being able to see Yoruba religion as just another system – whether you want to call it superstition, belief, world view, cosmogony or whatever – you have to do it the same level with any other system. Once you do that, many questions which have been asked become totally redundant, because they have not been asked about religions. But when our scholars come up against their own religion, their faculty of comparison completely disappear.



U: There is a whole body of prejudices – which have their roots in the ignorant or malicious misinterpretations of missionaries – and which still persist in the minds of many Nigerians.

A typical one is the accusation that the Egungun try to "deceive" woman and children by pretending that they are spirits. Whereas of course every child knows that there is a man in the mask…

W: Absolutely! I did.

U: Everybody knows that the mask is carried by a dancer who is specially trained for that task – but at the height of the dance he becomes the ancestor. That is a totally different matter. These "wicked" man who allegedly try to intimidate women – can't people see that during the Egungun festival they are in fact blessing women and that those who pray for children dance behind them?

W: And again, if you take the communion: here is a thing that happens every Sunday, sometimes twice a week. In which the officiating priest actually gives you a wafer and says "This is the flesh of Christ" and he gives you a drop of wine and says "This is the blood of Christ"…

U: Another defamation of Yoruba religion is the nation that is it a form of exploitation of the people. But surely it is much less so than Christianity! Take a babalawo, for instance: when you consult a babalawo, you put down three pence. A token fee! There is no money involved in divination. Have you ever seen a rich babalawo?

W: (laughs)

U: A traditional babalawo was a poor man. He was not even interested in being rich. In fact the whole society did not even know wealth in our modern sense. What kind of possessions could you own, that others didn't have? Another Agbada? Everybody had enough yams to eat. Everybody lived in spacious compound that would accommodate him, his wives and his children. Everybody had enough cloths to wear…everybody had access to land. What else could you want? There was nothing to buy.

The grand old Olorisha priest I knew in the fifties: the Ajagemo of Ede, the Akodu of Ilobu… they were poor people, in spite of

their influence. There was no such thing as a fat priest. Whereas now: some of these new Churches really do exploit their congregation. Only a week ago one these self styled "prophets" went to see a friend of mine and told her: "I had a vision. The child you are going to give birth to will born dead, and you too will die in childbirth. The only way you can survive is to fast for three days without water and to give money to the Church!" Now here is not only exploitation but also blackmail!

W: It is happening all the time. All the time. This whole spate of prophesying, this competitive mortification of people is nothing but an attempt to bring powerful and wealthy people under the control of the priest. Even ordinary individuals are not exempted. They have succeeded in some cases. Oh yes. They rush to them and say: You must do this and that. And sometimes when people take no notice of them, their relatives will! There was a relation of mine, he got so frightened when one of these prophets predicted a likely death for me, that he ran to him and asked him what to do. And I said to him: I will curse you, if you go again to that church. I will follow you there and break up that ceremony. So they do succeed on so many levels and it has become competitive…

U: Now let us talk about the way in which some of these traditional Yoruba concepts have been used in your play. If I am not mistaken, it was in "A Dance in the Forest" that you have first used some kind of Yoruba symbolism in a play.

W: Yes, of course by that time I had written the draft for "The Lion and the Jewel" but that was a very different thing. It was on a different level…

U: The striking thing about "A Dance in the Forest" is the character of Ogun. This image of Ogun has accompanied you through your writing; but it has been said that the Ogun of Your play is a rather personal, "unorthodox" orisha – that you have, in fact, created a new kind of Ogun.

W: Hmmm…. That is true.

U: But of course, even in purely traditional Yoruba terms, that is quite a legitimate thing to do. Ogun has never been a rigid defined being, the orisha can only live through people – by "mount-

ing somebody's head" – you could go so far to say that when the Orisha fails to manifest himself in this way through his priest and worshippers, he ceases to exist. If the priest who personifies Ogun is an unusually powerful Olorisha he can modify the image of Ogun. So that even in Yoruba tradition Ogun consist of a variety of interrelated personalities.

Any traditional priest would accord you the right to live Ogun your own way, in fact they would think it the normal thing to do. You recreate Ogun – or perhaps one could say you are sensitive to other aspects of his being. Because Ogun is a very complete being…

W: Yes, indeed.

U: It is again the typical Yoruba openness and tolerance that we are talking about. It applies not only to the relationship between the different orisha cults, it also applies to the variants of interpretations within one and the same cult group.

W: And in the Diaspora of course – the same thing. The concept of Orishala or Oshun are very different in Brazil or Cuba; and in turn the manifestations of the orisha over there have affected the interpretations of some of the scholars and they in turn have transmitted some of these ideas to our most traditionalpriests. So that when you speak to a Babalawo you may notice a new perception, a slightly altered perception.

U: Actually Pierre Verger was instrumental in establishing contacts between Brazilian olorisha and their families in Dahomey and Nigeria. Messages were sent back and forth, which were ultimately followed by exchange visits. Today there is quite a bit of movement between the two countries. Look at Sangodare, for example: the young Shango priest who grew up in Susanne Wenger's house. He was invited to Brazil four times by groups of olorisha.

W: Take Eshu for instance. The stature of Eshu has grown considerably, so that the original myths of Eshu that I knew as a child have grown even more colourful.

I believe Eshu became so strong in Brazil because he had to defend himself against this very facile Christian interpretation…

U: …"the devil"

W: That's right, and again Wande Abimbola admitted once that these aspects of Eshu are now found here in Nigeria as well. It is this movement…

U: And of course it shows that the whole things is alive. But you know what Melville Herskovitz though about Verger's travels between Brazil and Nigeria? "Terrible man", he said to me "he is destroying laboratory conditions."

W: Oh perfect! That's perfect. That's beautiful: it really sums up the whole lame battle scholarship faced with a living phenomenon.

U: Now the Ogun you created in "A Dance in the Forest" stresses particularly the creative aspect. He is not merely the warrior, he is also the creator!

W: This was for me very obvious, because the instrument of sculpture belong to Ogun; many sculptors are his followers and so is the blacksmith, again a very creative person, not just an artisan. And then of course there is the Ijala[3] – he is therefore by implication of father of poetry. All this made me delve more into the complexity of Ogun and given my own creative bent, I explored that a lot more. An also given my own acknowledged combative strain, I found a fine partner in Ogun. It was a kind of liberation for me, having grown up in a narrow form of Christianity

U: Which is very simplistic.

3. Ijala: The poems of Yoruba hunters. The hunters are worshippers of Ogun, because they use iron.

W: Very simplistic, everything has to be black or white: you are either a good child or a bad child. When I grew up and was given a little bit to self – analysis and introspection, I wondered why I should be inclines toward the creative – I really feel alive when I am creating – while at the same time I would readily drop my pen or typewriter without hesitation and pick up whatever combative instrument necessary…

Yoruba religion made me see that there was no contradiction – it was the most normal thing in the world to have within the same person these two or more aspects.

U: Each orisha contains and bridges contradictions, and human beings are the same. To pretend otherwise is hypocrisy. People don't realize how unrealistic Christianity is. Yoruba religion portrays the world as it is and makes you live with it, the ways it is, it teaches you how to turn a dangerous situation, how to diffuse tension, how to turn a negative situation into something positive even.

But in "A dance in the Forest" - you created another character called Esuoro. I find it hard to relate this figure to any Yoruba tradition – I am tempted to say you simply invented him.

W: Oh, that was purely dramatic. That is something I have not taken beyond the pages of the book. It's purely dramatic. I created him in the same way – I suppose – in which Puck was created by Shakespeare, taking parts from various mythological beings. As you know: Oro is one of the most intangible being… So I fleshed him out, somehow.

U: By far the most important statement you have made about Yoruba culture is your play "Death and the King's Horseman". I don't know whether you remember this, but it was Pierre Verger who found out about this famous incident in Oyo. He was even about to verity it, by writing to the District officer, who was then living in Canada.

W: I do remember that you gave me a kind of summary of the story…

U: I thought that the material was crying out for a play. But for several years, you didn't do anything with it.

W: Well, I wasn't ready for it.

U: I then gave the materials to Duro Ladipo who produced "Oba Waja" in 1964. Then, maybe a decade later you wrote the "Horseman". What was it then that prompted you to go back to this material finally? Why new insight had occurred? What new preoccupation with Yoruba religion, maybe?

W: That's a question that's always very difficult to answer. Because it has to do with the entire active creative process: gestation, something that takes place on different levels of consciousness or sub consciousness. But don't forget, I wrote this play in Cambridge,

when I was there for a year as a fellow in Churchill College.

And it could have been the resentment of the presumption! Because you know in a Cambridge college named after a personality like Churchill, you have encapsulated the entire history of the arrogance of your colonizers; the supercilious attitude towards other cultures, the narrowness, the mind closure – it could be all of that. It was not a year which I enjoyed particularly. There were a few stimulating intellectual contacts, which made it worthwhile; but I think there was the basic underlying question "What the hell am I doing here? What the hell are we doing here?"

I felt like a representative; a captured, individual having to deal with another culture on its own terms, in its own locale. And passing the bust of Churchill on the top of the stairs almost every day – with all that Churchill meant. The big colonial man himself! It could have been all of this that brought back the memory of this tragic representation of the way their culture would always impinge on ours.

I suspect that is the way it must have been. I must have been tempted to challenge this: How dare this smugness be! How dare it be exported…!

U: They came without the least attempt to come to terms with the culture they ruled.

W: Hardly ever!

U: This was particularly so in Southern Nigeria. They referred to Yorùbás and Igbo's as riff-raff., whereas Northerners, of course, were gentlemen.

W: Of course, the North appealed to their sense of feudalism.

U: You have given a very plausible explanation for the immediate stimulous that prompted to write this play. But of course the far more difficult question is: what actually happens in the poet's mind? What are the secrets and maybe subconscious processes that produce the particular images and the particular kind of magic of a play like "Death and the King's Horsemen"?

This is almost unanswerable, and many writers would simply refuse to be drawn into any discussion about it. But you have in fact

attempted to find a metaphor for the creative process which you described at length in "The Fourth Stage". I am fascinated by that essay because it seems to me that you are giving a very Yoruba explanation and one that seems to have some parallels in Yoruba religious thought. You speak about the artist going on a kind of journey; a trip into another dimension from where he returns with a kind of boon … and inspiration … but maybe you better summarise it yourself.

W: I think what I was referring to was the mystery of creativity itself. Which is almost like a dare, a challenge of nature secrecies. One goes out almost in the same way in which Ogun cleared the jungle – because he had forged the metallic instrument. He is very much the explorer.

The artist is in many ways similar; each time, he discovers a proto world in gestation; it's almost like discovering another world in the galaxy. The artist's view of reality creates an entirely new world. Into that world he leads a raid; he rifles its resources and returns to normal existence. The tragic dimension of that is one of the disintegration of the self in a world which is being reborn always, and from which the artist can only recover his being by an exercise of sheer will power. He disintegrates in the passage into that world. He loses himself and only the power of the will can bring him back. And when he returns from that experience, he is imbued with new wisdom, new perspectives, a new way of looking at phenomena.

I was using Ogun very much as an analogue: what happens when one steps out into the unknown? There is a myth about all the gods setting out, wanting to explore and rediscover the world of mortals. But then the primordial forest had grown so thick, no one could penetrate it. Then Ogun forged the metallic tool and cut a way through the jungle. But the material for that implement was extracted from the primordial barrier.

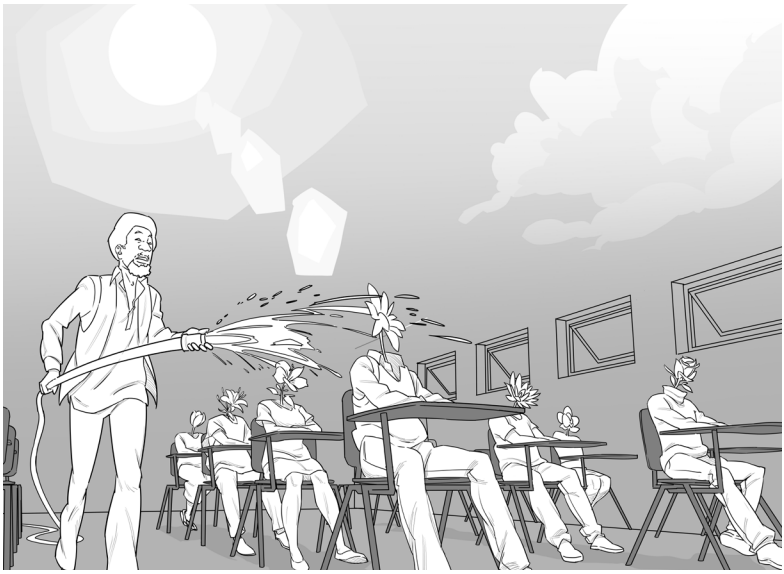
This I took as a kind of model of the artist's role, the artist as a visionary explorer, a creature dissatisfied with the immediate reality – so he has to cut through the obscuring growth, to enter a totally new terrain of being; a new terrain of sensing, a new terrain of relationships. And Ogun represented that kind of artist to me.

U: I can find parallels to Yoruba concepts here on several levels. The artist as the "creature of dissatisfaction with the immediate reality" is really very reminiscent of the orisha, who starts life as a human being – a king or a warrior – but because of his dissatisfaction with the immediate reality leads a raid into that other world", losing himself on the way: Shango hanging himself at Koso, Ogun descending into the ground at Ire, Otin turning into a river at Otan Aiyegbaju – all these are examples of the creative human being breaking through the limitations of ordinary human existence. Of course, the orisha does not return – he undergoes a metamorphosis and becomes a divine being. But he is there to remind us of the existence of that other world, to remind us that we can dare to penetrate, however briefly, that other sphere of existence.

Similarly the Olorisha going into trance crosses the border, "rifles the resources" of the divine world and retunes with a new understanding. His personality undergoes significant changes through such repeated experiences. The maturity of the old Orisha priest, their wisdom and tolerance, their insight into the human mind are the result of these raids into the divine sphere. Am I right in thinking that this is something very similar – almost identical to the experience you are describing in the "Fourth Stage"?

W: Yes, definitely!

U: I think you can describe the act of the priest who goes into trance also as a creative act; because he has to personify the orisha, recreate him through his performance, through song and dance. So in that sense there may be some real hope left: For a while we must helplessly watch the culture crumble in front of our eyes, there are still some individuals, like yourself, left who can capture something of the spirit of this culture through the very individual process you have descried and who can keep the orisha alive in some new form of existence.



W: There is a lot of hope left. I'll give you an example: when I gave a lecture in Ibadan recently titled "The Credo of Being and Nothingness" when I explained certain aspects of Yoruba beliefs, the role of the orisha, the reaction, the forcefulness of response which I could see on the faces of the young people was really very encouraging. It was more than just an expression of their misgivings towards the way in which they were brought up, more than just a feeling of deprivation. These young people are really looking to new directions in their lives. I believes there is real hope.

Notes on Contributors

***OLUDAMOLA ADEBOWALE** is the creative director and founder of ASIRI Magazine, Nigeria's foremost vanguard when it comes to history, great archival content and well-researched content. He is a major contributor to the Arts and Culture page of Guardian Life – the Sunday Magazine of Nigeria's Guardian newspaper. His groundbreaking articles on topics like Women Arise in the face of Misogyny: A Cultural and Historical Perspective; Jaja of Opobo: Rivers of Oil and Blood; Re-Discovering the Benin Art: A Universal Vessel for Cultural Importance; ÀBÍKÚ: A Thin Line that cuts between Tradition and Science, have been cited by Academic scholars within and outside Nigeria.*

As an archivist and Curator, Oludamola has been managing and curating the ASIRI Magazine Archives for 8 years running. He has also curated Exhibitions for the Ogun State Government (African Drum Festival 2019), British Council 75th Anniversary Virtual Exhibition, (2020). Cycles of Fashion, A Terra Kulture and Federal Ministry of Information and Culture Production. (2020), Vintage Nigeria Digital Campaign (A Nigeria at 60 Archival Celebration of the Past Times) Collaboration with The Rockefeller Archive Center and Ford Foundation (2020), Timeless Memories: ELASTIC EFFECTS OF WOLE SOYINKA (2019) (2020) (2021) and many more.

He was one of the few Nigerians selected for the Horniman Museums and Gardens (UK) for the #ThenandNow Nigeria at 60 Interrogative Project.
He currently serves as a Senior Curator with the Nigerian- Brazilian Public History Project.

***OLUFEMI ABODUNRIN** is a Professor of English Studies and Performing Arts at the University of Limpopo, South Africa. He studied at Bayero University, Kano, Nigeria and holds a PhD degree from Stirling University, Scotland, UK. He has taught at universities in Nigeria, the UK, Germany, Malawi and eSwatini. His major publications include Blackness: Culture, Ideology and Discourse (BASS, 1996, 2008).*

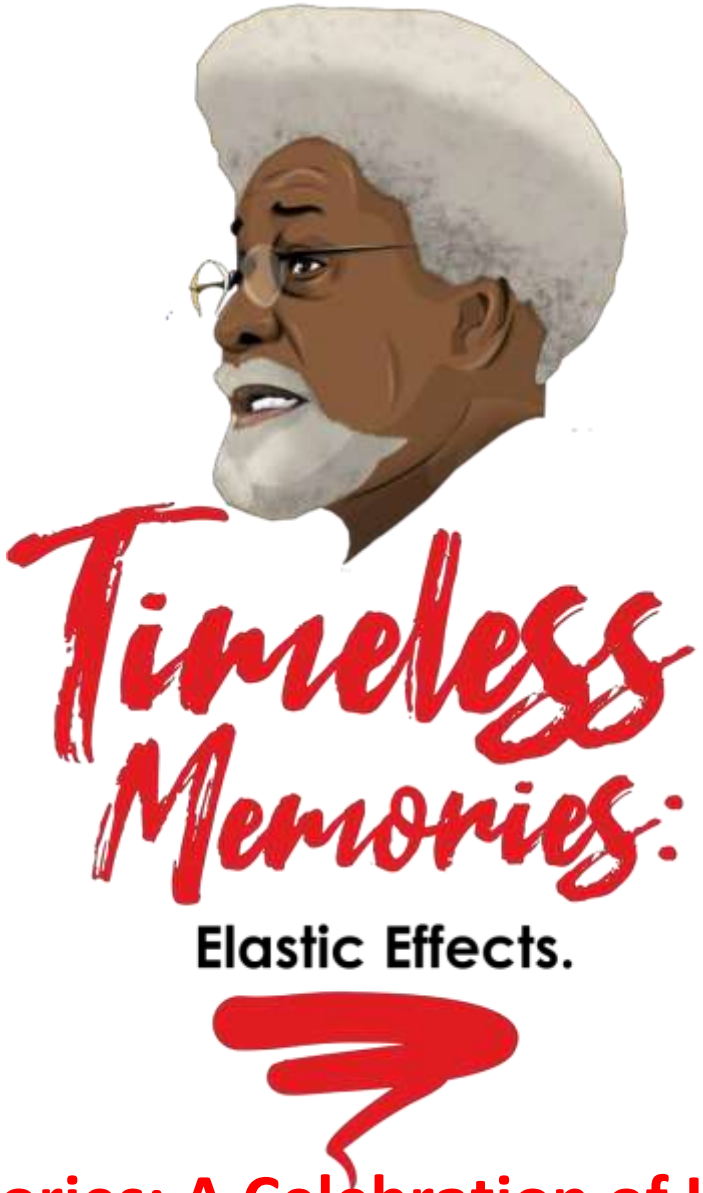
***MOGOMME ALPHEUS MASOGA** is Professor and Dean of Arts faculty at the University of Zululand, South Africa. Mogomme's research in African indigenous research and Decoloniality follows a 25-year experience. He has managed to develop Afro-sensed approaches and frames for conducting research in and with local communities. Pushing for a strong place of local communities in research and challenging researchers to 'negotiate space' in their work. He is the book series editor of the series publication working under the title, Knowledge Pathing: Multi-, Inter- and Trans-Disciplining in Social Sciences published by AOSIS. Recently published books: Studies on Indigenous Knowledge (2020) and Narratives of Culture, Identity and Community: From Mother to Son (2021).*

***OLU OBAFEMI**, retired Professor of English and Dramatic Literature, is the Pro-Chancellor and Chairman of Council, Federal University of Technology (FUT), Minna, Nigeria, and a Member of the Advisory Board of the **NNLG** Prize for Literature and Literary criticism. He is the sole recipient of the Nigerian National Order of Merit **(NNOM), 2018**.*

In these volumes, a dialogic, reflexive debate, which is nostalgic and passionate, is palpable in the exchanges between Wole Soyinka and Ulli Beier, which collectively address the issue of the crisis of not just Yoruba but indeed African cultures in contemporary times. From their tolerance to the whole notion of Ubuntu or "I am because we are" that characterises African philosophy and ontology, the volumes underscore the identity in difference founded on, what Soyinka has described as, 'such total self-confidence, such acceptance of others, that there is no need to march out and propagate one's cause' and hopefully should generate further interest and debate in African cultural debates.

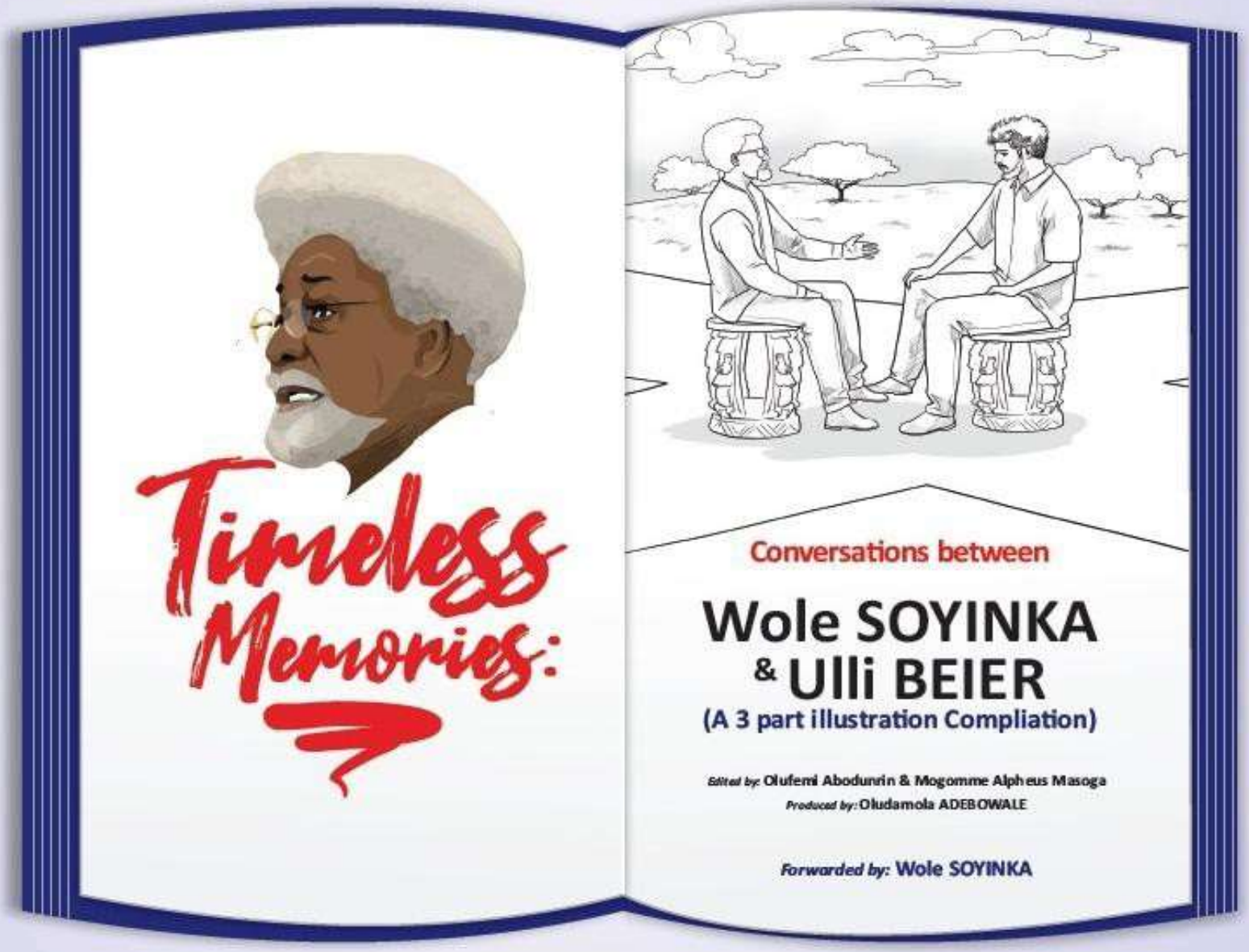
Timeless Memories: Conversations Between Wole Soyinka & Ulli Beier produced by Oludamola Adebowale and edited by Olufemi Abodunrin & Mogomme Masoga, reincarnates and celebrates the peerless relationship of these two icons, Soyinka and Beier, their immersion with the culture and cosmos/pantheons of the Yoruba in all its manifestations and the enduring and illuminating education that they offer on culture. It must be read, as I have done with relish, by all culture workers, scholars, students, activists and enthusiasts in Nigeria, Africans, African descended and Africanists all over the world.

Professor Olu Obafemi, fnal, NNOM



Timeless Memories: A Celebration of Life and For Humanity (Conversations between Ulli Beier and Wole Soyinka).

Cover Page to the 2021 Timeless Memories illustration Art Book



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Elastic Effects.

- *Timeless Memories: A Celebration of Life and For Humanity (Conversations between Ulli Beier and Wole Soyinka)* is designed primarily to celebrate the legendary writer, Wole Soyinka, Africa's first Nobel laureate, at the ripe age of 87 years and to commemorate the 10th anniversary of the transition of one of Soyinka's foremost collaborators in the cultural realm, the equally legendary and iconoclastic Ulli Beier. The Timeless Memories: Elastic Effects project is curated by foremost culture and arts curator, writer and researcher Oludamola Adebowale to interrogate and preserve literary works of icons in Nigeria and in Africa.

  The University of Zululand and the University of Limpopo in conjunction with the Department of Sports, Arts and Culture, Republic of South Africa, and Kongi Harvest Gallery, Freedom Park, Lagos Island, Nigeria, have come together to bring salient aspects of African Indigenous Knowledge (IKS) systems that these two cultural icons epitomise to audiences, particularly the younger generations, in Nigeria, South Africa and indeed around the world.

  The rise of Africa into cultural prominence in the second half of the 20th Century especially presented problems to Western universities. When the academic war over whether they were worth according serious scholarly interest was

won, the problem of how to fit them into the traditional departments arose. Most universities in America that had serious interest in studying Africa and its history(ies), cultures, and traditional systems solved this simply by creating one kind of institute or another. Thus, although not fully admitted into the prestigious departments, some space at the fringe had been created, where these exotic disciplines could be indulged in by those who were interested, without compromising the intellectual integrity of the older, more solid Eurocentric ones.

Ulli Beier was an unconventional scholar in the sense that, rather than make himself an "expert" in African or Indian or South Pacific Studies, he preferred to be closely involved in the lives of the societies he had been in, to be a part of their cultural lives and, where possible, to participate in their artistic productions. Thus, when he agreed to be Director of the world famous Iwalewa-Haus, University of Bayreuth, Bayreuth, Germany, it was on condition that the house would not just exhibit cultural/artistic artefacts from third world countries (a practice which often has the unintended consequence of assimilation into Western intellectual tradition and views), but would actively participate in the revitalisation and continuation of the different cultural/artistic views of those societies.

Elaborating on the project and cultural ferments that provoked it, second generation playwright and cultural scholar, Olu Obafemi, surmised as follows:

"It is not an accident that the cultural and literary explosion of the fifties and sixties in Africa and Nigeria generally and in the Yoruba cosmos in particular, coincided, happened and evolved with the animating presence of the iconic 'border operator', Ulli Beier. The nexus was the engagement with Yoruba culture, Yoruba traditions, music, poetry, performing arts and theatre and world view. The founding of the literary journal, Odu, the Black Orpheus (which Beier co-edited with Janheinz Jahn), the Mbari club of Ibadan and Mbari Mbayo in Oshogbo and Duro Ladipo's theatre, the artist and sculptors form part of the site of the cultural bloom of the 50s and 60s. They are the literary and cultural arena in which the bonding of Soyinka and Beier grew. As we know, the main aim of all these relationships was 'to create a platform for writers' (Beier); the physico-spiritual conversations with authentic traditional oligarchs—the Oni of Ife, the Timi Laoye of Ede and the Ogoga of Ikere and their modern counterfeits featured conspicuously in the discursive engagements between Beier and Soyinka in the series of conversations published/ curated under the apt title; **Timeless Memories: Conversations Between Wole Soyinka & Ulli Beier produced by Oludamola Adebowale and edited by Olufemi Abodunrin & Mogomme Masoga".**

The Timeless Memories Project is supported by

University of Limpopo
This work is based on research supported by the National Research Foundation of South Africa [grant number RA190107405963].
University of Zululand
Project Name: Migration, Identity and Citizenship Contestations under the Competitive Programme for Rated Researchers No: 120297

The following constitutes the breakdown in chronological order of the "Timeless Memories 2021: Celebrating Wole Soyinka at 87":

- 1st to 13th July 2021: Launching of Timeless Memories illustration Art Book

- Art Exhibition of Timeless Memories July 13th 2021 - Professor Soyinka's Birthday

- Art Exhibition of Timeless Memories and Launching of Timeless Memories illustration Art Book– University of Zululand, Ngoye, South Africa
  Heritage Day September 25th 2022 –By Prof Wole Soyinka

- Art Exhibition of Timeless Memories and Launching of Timeless Memories illustration Art Book – University of Limpopo, Turfloop, South Africa

- Heritage Week – Spring Lectures September 27th 2022 –By Prof Wole Soyinka
- Art Exhibition of Timeless Memories and Timeless Memories illustration Art Book – Travels around South Africa and neighbouring countries

- Heritage Week – Spring Lectures September 28th to 30th 2022 –Profs Olufemi Abodurin & Mosomme Masoga; Oludamola Adebowale (Curator) and Dr. Chris Akinola

Curator Oludamola Adebowale and Professor Wole Soyinka: Timeless Memories 2021

After the Lagos, Nigeria Kick-Off. Exhibition would also Travel to the University of Limpopo and the

University of Zululand in South Africa.

Exhibition held either in July 2021 in Lagos at the Kongi Harvest Gallery at Freedom Park Lagos. Official Gallery and Office of Professor Woke Soyinka