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Author

Amankulor, James N.

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REVIEW ESSAYS

1. PHILOSOPHY OF AFRICAN LITERATURE AND MYTH

by

James N. Amankulor

The Nigerian playwright and Africa's foremost dramatist, Wole Soyinka, has been acclaimed in international literary circles as one of the most effective users of the English language in this century, that is, including the owners of the language themselves. Such a gift of rare literary effervescence has also been a major source of attack by Soyinka's critics who accuse him of being so enamored of a foreign tongue that he forgets those who should benefit from his creative genius--his fellow Africans most of whom are not as highly accomplished literarily, as himself and for whom twists of his literary genius is like threading a maze. Much as I can share the reality of the difficulty which makes the poetic barrier stand between the reader and Soyinka's meaning, I also see that beyond the facade of literary inventiveness and creativity lies the real man and his philosophy of creativity. Once we can dig through the surface rubble of poetic costuming we encounter Soyinka the African who is so steeped in his indigenous Yoruba culture and philosophy that we cannot tell one from the other. The language which so frequently discourages further exploration of meaning in his works is revealed as what he himself calls the "mask idiom." And in the masquerade who stops to tell the man and his costume apart?

Soyinka's creativity has largely been successful when he transmutes the symbology and imagery of his Yoruba culture into fresh contemporary significance without losing the relevance of the original. It should be said that without a proper understanding of the socio-cultural and philosophical attitudes of the Yoruba images, symbols and idioms (or other African equivalents) that he so skillfully transmutes in the process of creativity, it would be impossible for one to approach Soyinka's drama and literature with any meaning that is worth talking about. It is for this important reason that Wole Soyinka's recent work, *Myth, Literature and the African World*,¹ is indispensable for any student of the man or his creative works. The book is an answer to those critics who appear to be turned off or otherwise mesmerized by the author's poetic flights. It is equally an effort to describe the relevance of African culture and philosophy in African creativity and a confrontation of

contemporary Euro-centric and Western aesthetic standards frequently employed to describe or judge indigenous African creativity.

Myth, Literature and the African World came to be written following a series of lectures given by Soyinka in England in 1973 while he was Fellow of Churchill College, Cambridge and visiting Professor at Sheffield University. In his preface, the author adopts a stand which informs the reader's understanding of the work. He does not suggest a detailed uniqueness of the African world, however:

Man exists...in a comprehensive world of myth, history and mores; in such a total context, the African world like any other 'world' is unique. It possesses, however, in common with other cultures, the virtues of complementarity. To ignore this simple route to a common humanity and pursue the alternative route of negation is, for whatever motives, an attempt to perpetrate the external subjugation of the black continent. (p. xii)

There are four chapters to the book. The first chapter which I consider the most important, discusses "the ritual archetype" and how morality and aesthetics are linked in the practical observation of African myth and ritual. Religion, ritual and myth are linked in the expression of culture and interpretation of world-view in the traditional African society. The gods therefore have always played active roles in the lives of human beings. To this end Soyinka illustrates with three Yoruba gods whose rites of worship are also observed in the diaspora under syncretic circumstances. They are Obatala the arch divinity, Ogun the god of iron and Sango the god of thunder and lightning. Their worship and the drama which has emerged out of it reflect the "passage rites of the hero-gods, a projection of manic conflict with forces which challenge his efforts to harmonize with his environment, physical, social and psychic." (p. 1) Here man plays the role of an "intermediary quester," who explores the territories of what Soyinka calls "essence ideal" on whose edge man hangs.

Yet this drama of the gods is marked by psychic and cosmic apprehension alone, it is also man's opportunity to express his "conscious creativity" so that his existence within the "cyclic consciousness" of time may be enhanced. Thus the ultimate features of the "drama of the gods" include the control of aesthetic conventions and the provision of multi-level experience of the mundane and the mystic in every performance. Social questions and morality are raised and controlled in the process. Soyinka's illustrative examples cover the most clas

African, Asian, American and European mytho-religious examples, and they tend to give this section of the book a somewhat universal meaning in consonance with his own stated precept that every culture is not only unique but shares common complementary virtues with other cultures.

This chapter of the book is so crucial that the reader must read it slowly and comprehend its meaning properly if he is to understand Soyinka's approach to drama, literature and philosophy. It is absolutely essential in the search for meaning in most of his plays such as *The Dance of the Forest*, *The Road* and *The Strong Breed* to mention but a few. It must be read in conjunction with the book's appendix, Soyinka's classic philosophy of creativity, "The Fourth Stage" which he has carefully revised here and sensibly included as part of *Myth, Literature and the African World*.

The second chapter of this book is a critical appraisal of some attempts to use classic traditional material in contemporary playwriting and drama. To this end he arouses new insights into J.P. Clark's *Song of a Goat* and Duro Lapidó's *Oba Koso*. These plays reveal the unfolding of both cosmic and social drama against a background of autochthonous environment. They depict the location of ritual and tragedy on the edge of the same "transitional gulf."

The third chapter of *Myth, Literature and the African World* opens a new vista with the works of a variety of African authors while exploring the same mytho-poetic and socio-cultural implications and content of their creative efforts. It is titled "ideology and the Social vision" and subdivided into two: the "religious factor" in the third chapter and the "secular ideal" in the fourth. In these chapters Soyinka discusses the works of prominent African novelists and playwrights. These include Chinua Achebe, Lewis Nkosi, Yambo Oulouguem, Cheikh Hamidou Kane, Ayi Kwei Armah, Ousmane Sembene and Camara Laye to mention some of these authors. While condemning Euro-centric theories affecting interpretation of socio-cultural phenomena, Soyinka also denounced ideological excesses especially when they are inspired from outside. In fact he had said in his preface, "When ideological relations begin to deny, both theoretically and in action, the reality of a cultural entity which we define as the African world while asserting theirs even to the extent of inviting the African world to sublimate its existence to theirs, we must begin to look into their political motivation." (p. xi) And even though Soyinka does not delve into the literary and social implications of such political motivations, his critical stance in the third and fourth chapters support his condemnation of critical and artistic demagoguery whether by Africans or Europeans.

Myth, Literature and the African World is Soyinka's philosophy of African literature at its best. More so, it is an extension of his own creative credo, a combination of talent and common-sense with the reality of metaphysical essence. The book is indeed another milestone in African philosophy. It is a must for the critics of African literature as well as the creators of it. *Myth, Literature and the African World* creates a feeling of participation in the process of creativity. Soyinka's language is so compelling and so well wrought that one is tempted to fly in the wings of its poetic vibrations. However it is poetry not intended to befuddle but to elucidate in clear concrete terms the man's exegesis of African philosophy applied to literature and mythology.

Footnotes

1. Soyinka, Wole, *Myth, Literature and the African World*, Cambridge University Press, 1976 168 pp + xii.

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J. NDUKAKU AMANKULOR is a Ph.D. candidate in Theater Arts and a former editor-in-chief of this journal.

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