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## CYCLIC DETERMINISM IN SOYINKA'S "IDANRE"

by

Hezzy Maduakor

In the poem "Around Us, Dawning", Soyinka writes:

*Wings are tipped in sulphurs  
Scouring grey recesses of the void  
To a linear flare of dams.*<sup>1</sup>

"Linear" in the last line is immediately applicable to the amber line of landing lights in an aerodrome; but it is also transferable to the straight track of the winged machinery rushing to embrace the "flares" from the air. In this regard, the image suggests the straight road of technology, while circular metaphors which occur in the stanza that immediately follows signify the winding path of nature. Science is represented in the poem by "jet plane," and nature by man. About the human passengers in the plane Soyinka writes:

*Red haloes through the ports wreath us  
Passive martyrs, bound to a will of rotors.*<sup>2</sup>

"Halo" would have been considered an image of glory, but the epithet "red" invests it with undertones of fatality. The tragic connotation is reinforced with the image, "wreath".

Soyinka's poetry is not so much concerned with technology as it is with what he calls "the eternal cycle of karmas that has become the evil history of man."<sup>3</sup> For this reason, while linear images are rare in his first book of verse, *Idanre and Other Poems*, cyclic metaphors abound. "Halo" and "wreath" anticipate the increasing importance of circular images in this volume. When these images are endowed with some degree of motive energy, they confirm Soyinka's myth of the turning world; in other respects, they emphasize his conviction that human life and history are destined to follow patterns of repetitive cycles. Very often, the pattern is a tragic one. "Tragic fate," writes Soyinka in "The Fourth Stage," is the repetitive cycle of the taboo in nature."<sup>4</sup> The two implications of cyclic images in his poetry are interrelated, for the turning world whirls everything about in the course of its rotation.

Cyclical recurrence has been the subject of philosophical inquiry since Heraclitus, but Soyinka has not written extensively about it as has another poet, Yeats who also believes in

eternal repetition. Still, the idea is central to his poetry. In the poem "Luo Plains" which immediately follows "Around Us, Dawning," the Kenya of the era of Mau-Mau terrorism is a nation which has "milked a cycle of/Red sunset spears."<sup>5</sup> In the same poem, the cosmos is in a state of motion:

*egrets hone a sky-lane for  
World to turn on pennants.*<sup>6</sup>

In another poem "The Hunchback of Dugbe," an itinerant lunatic looks on with calm dignity as the world around him spins on under the pressures of existential routine: "the world/Spins on his spine, in still illusion."<sup>7</sup> Soyinka has intimations, in the poem "To My First White Hairs," of the threat to his own personal existence of the imperatives of the cyclic logic. Although the wheel has not come full circle in his own case, yet a mere turn in the revolution has brought him to the "hoary phase:" the white hairs on his head are unhappy reminders of the passage of time:

*I view them, wired wisps, vibrant coiled  
beneath a magnifying glass, milk-thread presages*

*of the hoary phase. Weave then, weave o quickly weave  
your sham veneration. Knit me webs of winter sagehood,  
nightcap, and the fungoid sequins of a crown.*<sup>8</sup>

Circle is recalled in this passage by such images as "wire," "wisp," "coil," "thread," "web," and "crown;" and "weave" gives them a rotational status.

In the poem "By Little Loving," the human universe is visualized as a "ruptured wheel/Of blood."<sup>9</sup> Man, a rider of the impaired wheel, is lodged in its perilous "still centre." The rupture of the wheel and the descent to the still centre of the void compel on Soyinka a penetrating insight into the nature of human destiny:

*And this, the accident of flesh I hailed  
Man's eternal lesson.*<sup>10</sup>

There are implications in the poem that the wheel ruptured under the impact of tragic winds. The protagonist of the poem has "watched thwarted winds beat cycles"<sup>11</sup> on the wheel. The "still centre" is not the end of man, however. He dies in order to be reborn; for the alternating cycles of life and death are fixed patterns in the scheme of things: "I/Fell to dying, phoenix of each pyre forestalled."<sup>12</sup>

All the cyclic trends that have been building in the "Other Poems" of *Idanre* come to a climax in the volume's title

poem. Soyinka places the title poem at the end of the book since it is for him the culmination of the themes and ideas that have assumed prominence in "Other Poems". Indeed, it has not always been noticed that "Idanre" is the major poem, and that "Other Poems" stand in an ancillary relationship to it. "Idanre" is the ultimate destination in a thematic journey in which the "Other Poems" are transitional milestones. The links between "Idanre" and "Other Poems" are obvious. Certain key-phrases recur in both parts of the book. In "Death in the Dawn" a mother prays:

*child*  
*May you never walk*  
*when the road waits, famished.*<sup>13</sup>

In "Idanre" Soyinka writes:

*Fated lives ride on the wheel of death when,*  
*The road waits, famished.*<sup>14</sup>

Certain key motifs also recur in both parts of the volume. The message delivered in "Abiku" that "The Ripest fruit was saddest" is recalled by the statement in "Idanre" that "growth is greener where/Rich blood has spilt."<sup>15</sup> Sectional titles in "Other Poems" appear to have been deliberately derived from the mythological attributes of Ogun, the major character celebrated in "Idanre." The poems of the section entitled "Of the Road" recall Ogun's role as the god of the road. Those of "Lone Figure" have an affinity with him as a lone deity.<sup>16</sup> The third section entitled "Of Birth and Death" anticipates the fourth, fifth and sixth sections. Birth and death suggest the curious interfusion in Ogun of "the cones of life and death." Birth and creativity belong to the cone of life, and death and destruction to the cone of death. Birth is directly linked to the poems of the fourth section, "For Women" which is essentially devoted to growth and to the development of life. From the cones of death in the third section arrows shoot directly to the poems of grey seasons in section five. The intimations of death in this section culminate in the harvest of death in the poems of "October '66" in section six. From the theme of violence and destruction in this section it is but an easy transition to the cosmic battle in section one of "Idanre," to the apocalyptic visions of war deliriums in section two, and to the battle scene in section five.

Since *Idanre* is selected and edited by Soyinka himself, the exclusion of certain poems on which his early reputation was founded becomes significant. "Telephone Conversation" does not meet the standards that would shape his first book of verse into a thematically integrated whole. The omission of the poem "Requiem" is regrettable since it would have tallied

with either the poems of section three, "Of Birth and Death," or those of "Grey Seasons" in section five.

If motifs are recurring, and trends criss-crossing one another in *Idanre*, the emergence of the cyclic concept in the major poem is not surprising. Cyclic repetition is indeed the basic metaphysical concept on which the poem is structured. The design is enhanced in this case by the role of Ogun as a god who must re-enact annually a redemptive pilgrimage to earth. Ogun's repetitive destiny is symbolized in the image of the "Mobius" Strip, defined by Soyinka as "A mathe-magical ring, infinite in self-recreation into independent but linked rings."<sup>17</sup> It is Ogun's emblem, according to Soyinka, and it signifies the "doom of repetition." The image is suggested to Soyinka by the loops which a tail-devouring snake must make before its mouth can reach the tail.

Soyinka had earlier used circle and snake to symbolize the "doom of repetition" in his poem "Abiku",

*In vain your bangles cast  
Charmed circles at my feet  
I am Abiku, calling for the first  
And the repeated time.*<sup>18</sup>

"Abiku" is the child "who dies and returns again and again to plague the mother."<sup>19</sup> The repetitive nature of the plague is suggested with the coils of a snake. "I'll be the/Suppliant snake coiled on the doorstep/Yours the killing cry,"<sup>20</sup> boasts Abiku; but here the cyclic notion has not the diagrammatic advantage imposed on it in "Idanre" by the visual impact of the "Mobius" loop. The compulsory effort of a snake to make both ends of its body embrace each other will reshape it into coils of concentric rings. The proximity so achieved between mouth and tail becomes a symbolic expression of the irony of the cyclic paradox, for it shows clearly that in the snake's beginning (life) lies its end (death). Extending this notion, one may add that in man's beginning lies his end. This idea is the basis of the commonest epigrammatic truisms in *Idanre*. "Rust is ripeness," says Soyinka in the poem "Season." This proposition is illuminated if one imagines "rust" and "ripeness" as strategic points on the opposite extremes of a cyclic wheel, and bound in consequence to exchange positions in the process of an inevitable cyclical rotation. The structure of "Idanre" itself is determined by such a cyclical dialectic. It begins with "ripeness" (harvest), then shifts to "rust" (carnage), and returns once more to "ripeness," in order to complete the full arc of Ogun's road which is a "Mobius' orbit":

*Ogun is the god that ventures first*

*His path one loop of time, one iron coil.*<sup>21</sup>

In the poem itself, "wheel" is one of the images that suggest cyclic repetition. "Fated lives", writes Soyinka, "ride on the wheel of death when, / The road waits, famished." The "wheel" is relevant here to Ogun in his role as the god who supervises over modern means of (land) travel; but the image is reminiscent of the "ruptured wheel / Of blood" in the poem "By Little Loving", where it is Soyinka's euphemism for a turning world. The first wheel image indicates that Ogun can manipulate the cyclic wheel in its relation to human destiny but he is himself helpless before the machinery of cyclic repetition. In the section of "Idanre" entitled "And After", Soyinka enumerates the agencies of this machinery. They include the "first Boulder", the "errant wheel / Of the death chariot", and the "creation snake" whose tail is spawned in the mouth. The tail-devouring snake is not an active agent; it is included in Soyinka's list only as a reminder of the "doom of repetition." It invokes of course the "Möbius" symbol. This symbol, Soyinka emphasizes, has a relevance that is applicable to human and divine relationships. The "Möbius" ring, is to Soyinka the "freest conceivable symbol of human divine . . . relationships".

In "Idanre", human and divine relationships are distinguished, either separately or collectively, by one common constant; conflict. Conflict can recreate itself into circles of inter-linking plagues both in the spheres of divine relationships and in those of man. It rotates in each orbit with a cyclic consistency. Thus, Soyinka can say of "Idanre" that the bloody events narrated therein anticipated the blood-bath in Nigeria during the civil war:

*In detail, in the human context of my society, "Idanre" has made abundant sense. (The town of Idanre itself was the first to cut its bridge, its only link with the rest of the region during the uprising of October '65.) And since then, the bloody origin of Ogun's pilgrimage has been, in true cyclic manner most bloodily re-enacted.*<sup>22</sup>

In *A Shuttle in the Crypt* published five years later Soyinka recalls the civil war as a phase in the "eternal cycle of karma":

*Yet blood must flow, a living flood  
Bravely guarded, boldly spilt  
A potency to rejuvenate  
Mothers-of-all earth, the river's  
Endless cycle with the sap  
Of trees, wine of palm, oil*

*Of kernels, lamp-light in rock bearings  
 Let even as treasures are  
 An offering to red pulses  
 Beating to the larger life.*<sup>23</sup>

Yet conflict can traverse both spheres of existence with impunity. In such an inter-cosmic traffic the path of conflict is cyclical. This point seems to be the main conclusion of those passages in section two of "Idanre" devoted to what Soyinka calls "Apocalyptic visions of childhood and other deliriums". The apocalyptic passages reveal in the opening lines a panorama of cosmic engagement:

*Vast grows the counterpane if nights since innocence  
 Of apocalyptic skies, when thunderous shields clashed  
 Across the heights, when bulls leapt cloud humps and  
 Thunders opened chasms end to end of fire:  
 The sky a slate of scoured lettering*

*Of widening wounds eclipsed in smoke.*<sup>24</sup>

Broadly speaking, the apocalyptic visions etch a graph of conflict stretching from the cosmos to earth. The idea that Soyinka wishes to put across here is that there had been a cosmic conflict (or war between the gods) before man began to engage in human conflict. For instance, in the essay "The Fourth Stage", Soyinka writes:

*Yoruba tragic drama is the re-enactment  
 of the cosmic conflict.*<sup>25</sup>

Perhaps it would not be too far-fetched even to suggest that Soyinka believes that man learnt the art of war from the gods themselves. If this is so, it becomes obvious that the phrase "Apocalyptic visions of childhood and other deliriums" is fraught with subtle implications. The cosmic conflict with which "Idanre" opens is a primaeva battle fought between the gods before the world was created. Such also is the case with the conflict described in the passage just cited from the apocalyptic visions. "Childhood" would be applicable to the art of self-destruction inherited by man from the gods. Therefore, the opening lines from the apocalyptic visions refer to primal conflict between the gods themselves:

*Vast grows the counterpane of nights since innocence  
 Of apocalyptic skies.*

These lines echo the opening stanzas of "Idanre" although the conflict is archetypal. It is correlative to the primal war in all mythology - in the classical mythology of the Greeks

(Soyinka himself encourages this comparative perspective),<sup>26</sup> it is the war of the Olympian gods and in Biblical mythology it recalls the war in which Lucifer featured as archvillain, and Archangel Michael as hero. Coming nearer to home to the beliefs of the Yoruba on which "Idanre" is founded, the primal war resulted in the fragmentation of the godhead essence of Orisa-nla (the first deity) by a jealous slave-god, Atunda.

From the ancient origin of conflict one wonders whether Soyinka has disharmony in cosmic as well as human areas of existence in mind when he says in section two of "Idanre" that "Through aeons of darkness rode the stone/Of whirling incandescence".<sup>27</sup> It appears that the path of the whirling incandescent stone of conflict is an imaginary whorl whose broadest base is sunk in the cosmos from where conflict began. As the spirals of the inverted whorl narrow down towards earth, towards mankind, the fever of the frenzied delirium begun in the cosmos is caught by man. Human conflict, in its various ramifications, is the re-enactment of the war of the gods. The human side of the cosmic battles is heavily emphasized towards the closing stanzas of the apocalyptic passages:

*Whorls of intemperate steel, triangles of cabal  
In rabid spheres, iron bellows at volcanic tunnels  
Easters in convulsions, urged by energies  
Of light millenniums, crusades, empires and revolution  
Damnations and savage salvations.*<sup>28</sup>

The climactic evocation in this passage of the vortex of destructive energies in nature recalls the whirling motion of the gyres in Yeats's poem "The Second Coming". And in a true Yeatsian logic, a second coming is expected at this particular point in the poem, for "The world was choked in wet embrace/Of serpent spawn, waiting Ajantala's rebel birth".<sup>29</sup> Ajantala is "Idanre's" "rough beast". Soyinka sees him as a "Monster child, wrestling pachyderms of myth".<sup>30</sup> In the Notes he is described as

*Archetype of rebel child, iconoclast, anarchic,  
anti-clar, anti-matriarch, virile essence in  
opposition to womb domination.*<sup>31</sup>

Ajantala's double in "Idanre" is the traitor-god, Atunda who introduced the diversity principle in the Yoruba pantheon. About Atunda Soyinka says in "The Fourth Stage":

*Myth informs us that a jealous slave rolled a  
stone down the back of the first and only deity  
and shattered him in a thousand and sixty-four  
fragments. From this first act of revolution*



*was born the Yoruba pantheon.*<sup>32</sup>

In Section III of "Idanre" entitled "Pilgrimage", the lone deity is presented as an unblemished kernel enthroned on Idanre's columns; and the iconoclast Atunda is called a Boulder. The upper case "B" of "Boulder" suggests the supremacy of the rebel slave over an erstwhile master-god; for this reason "kernel" is printed with a lower case "k" in the stanza of "Pilgrimage" in which the fragmentation of the godhead essence is narrated:

*Union they had known until the Boulder  
Rolling down the hill of the Beginning  
Shred the kernel to a million lights  
A traitor's heart rejoiced, the gods' own slave  
Dirt-covered from the deed.*<sup>33</sup>

Since that first Boulder had rolled down the hill of the Beginning, it can no longer go "Up the hill in time's unwind"; in human terms, men's lives are fated thenceforth to be "spilt again/On recurrent boulders".<sup>34</sup> Divine conflict must of necessity have its human counterpart. The recurrence of this tragic destiny is theoretically proposed in the passages on apocalyptic visions, and practically proven in the battle section of the poem. The "whorls of intemperate steel" are re-enacted in the fatal swing of Ogun's sword in this section. From a dangerously lethal angle it wheeled itself into a full circle:

*A lethal arc  
Completes full circle*

*Unsheathed  
The other half  
Of fire*

*Incinerates  
All subterfuge  
Enthrones  
The fatal variant.*<sup>35</sup>

The carnage unleashed by Ogun on his own men is a "fatal variant" of the tragic cycle inaugurated by Atunda. Only after his destructive fury had lulled did he recognise "the pattern of the spinning rock" in his own action:

*He recognised the pattern of the spinning rock  
And Passion slowly yielded to remorse.*<sup>36</sup>

For Soyinka, cyclic recurrence is a pre-ordained, pre-willed order of things. "The chronicle," he writes, "abides in

clay texts/And fossil textures".<sup>37</sup> To those who may be skeptical about the truth of its logic he says through Ogun

*Let all wait the circulation  
Of time's acrobat, who pray*

*For dissolution.*<sup>38</sup>

The inevitability of the cycle implies that Ogun is no more responsible for his action than is Atunda. Atunda may have acted from pique of revolutionary zeal, but he is like Ogun an instrument of fate, a victim of the doom of repetition. The inexorable cycle ran its course using Atunda and Ogun as its agency. What is more important is the reaction of the sinner to his sin, and of iconoclast to the wreckage he leaves behind. In this regard, Ogun is an iconoclast of a different order from Atunda. Atunda acted from cunning, Ogun acted from error for which he recognised the need for expiation. Atunda rejoiced after his crime, but Ogun, perceiving the "grim particular" of the assertive act of Atunda in his own action, was overwhelmed with remorse. Ogun's sense of remorse is indicative of the moral distance between slave and master in the divine hierarchy. Ogun is stung into remorse by a deed of error that had degraded him to the rank of a slave:

*He who had sought heights inaccessible to safeguard  
The vital flint, heard, not voices whom the hour  
Of death had made all one, nor futile flight  
But the assertive act of Atunda, and he was shamed  
In recognition of the grim particular.*<sup>39</sup>

To regain his respectable status in the divine order he had to seek "the season's absolution, on the rocks of genesis".<sup>40</sup>

However, Ogun's seasonal absolution corresponds with the rhythm of the seasons; it is indeed indistinguishable from the seasons themselves. When Soyinka says of Ogun that "Annually he re-enacts his deed of shame,"<sup>41</sup> he means that annually the seasonal cycles run their course. The benevolent side of Ogun's personality (creativity) corresponds with the benevolent phase of the seasonal cycle--rain, harvest, life; the vicious side with the unpleasant aspect of the seasons--drought, scarcity, death. The massacre of the men of Ire may have been a mythological reality, but it serves Soyinka as a metaphor for the cruelty of the seasons and is also correlative to the harsh realities of life.

Ogun's association with the seasons establishes a kinship between him and such vegetation deities as Adonis, Osiris, Attis, and Tammuz. Their disappearance from earth implies death and

drought; their reappearance means life and harvest. Ogun's road is a "Möbius" orbit, that is, all nature is caught in the "Möbius" noose; for the alternating cycles of the seasons are eternal. Earth's rings will always be broken by drought or warfare, but the shattered rings will always be "healed" by the restorative sympathies of rain and harvest.

Ogun's tragic noose hangs albatross-like on the neck of every individual. For the creative artist especially, it is a tight noose for he is fated to experience a spiritual equivalent of Ogun's pilgrimage before he can create. This is so because Ogun is himself the "primogenitor of the artist as the creative human".<sup>42</sup> "Every creative act," writes Soyinka, "breeds and destroys fear, contains within itself both the salvation and the damnation."<sup>43</sup> He has in mind, one suspects, the idea that every creative effort is fraught with its own ordeal and recompense. The ordeal is the agony of composition; the recompense the post-natal elation that accompanies the birth of an art-work. On his return from the pilgrimage to the Idanre hills which was both sacramental and aesthetic Soyinka became the beneficiary of a divine "boom" which he translated into a creative art:

*I returned home wet from overladen boughs, brittle  
as the herald lightning to a storm.*<sup>44</sup>

In literary terms, the overladen bough is an image of creative inspiration, for Soyinka affirms that "By nightfall that same day, "Idanre" was completed."<sup>45</sup>

In the Preface to "Idanre" Soyinka discloses that he experienced a creative unease with the first draft copy of "Idanre." He described the unease as "a sediment of disquiet which linked me to lingering".<sup>46</sup> To exorcise the demon of unease he had to perform the poet's rite on the hills of Idanre: "I abandoned my work - it was middle of the night - and walked."<sup>47</sup> The walk is recorded in the first stanza of "Recession":

*I walked upon a deserted night before  
The gathering of Harvest, companion of a god's  
Pre-banquet. The hills of Idanre beckoned me  
As who would yield her secrets, locked  
In sepulchral granite.*<sup>48</sup>

The ordeal here is the rite which the poet must perform before the creative secrets hidden in the sepulchral granites of imagination could be unlocked for him. The pattern of ritual and recompense will continue, for every creative act has its own damnation and salvation. As an artist, Soyinka might have said with Ogun:

*This road have I trodden in a time beyond*

*Memory of fallen leaves, beyond  
Thread of fossil on the slate, yet I must  
This way again.*<sup>49</sup>

For the creative artist, once more, Ogun's tragic noose holds no illusion of a "kink". The ritual pilgrimage is inescapable. All things, Yeats says, must "run/On that unfashionable gyre".<sup>50</sup> The consolation is that those who make them must learn to be gay; and this is for the maker or the artist, the only available "kink" in the "eternal cycle of kamas".

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### Footnotes

1. Soyinka, Wole. *Idanre and Other Poems*, Methuen, London (1967), p.12. Hereafter cited as *Idanre*.
2. *Ibid.*, p.12.
3. *Ibid.*, p.88.
4. Soyinka, Wole. "The Fourth Stage", in *The Morality of Art*, ed. D.W. Jefferson, Routledge and Kegan Paul, London (1969), p.131.
5. *Idanre.*, p.13.
6. *Ibid.*, p.13.
7. *Ibid.*, p.19.
8. *Ibid.*, p.30.
9. *Ibid.*, p.41.
10. *Ibid.*, p.41.
11. *Ibid.*, p.41.
12. *Ibid.*, p.41.
13. *Ibid.*, p.11.
14. *Ibid.*, p.64.
15. *Ibid.*, p.65.
16. Ogun is addressed as "O lone being" in "The Fourth Stage", p.120; in "Idanre" he is frequently referred to as a lone deity. See *Idanre*, pp.70 and 81.

17. *Idanre.*, p.87.
18. *Ibid.*, p.28.
19. *Ibid.*, p.28.
20. *Ibid.*, p.30.
21. *Ibid.*, p.68.
22. *Ibid.*, p.58.
23. Soyinka, Wole. *A Shuttle in the Crypt*, Hill and Wang, New York, (1972), p.11.
24. *Idanre*, p.66.
25. "The Fourth Stage", p.126.
26. He frequently implies in his writings that common grounds for comparison exist between Yoruba mythology and that of the Greeks. Ogun, for instance, is an embodiment of the "Dionysian, Apollonian and Promethean virtues," "The Fourth Stage," p.120. In the Notes to "Idanre", Soyinka invokes a parallel between the Yoruba pantheon and that of the Greek Olympians: *Idanre*, p.87.
27. *Idanre.*, p.64.
28. *Ibid.*, p.67.
29. *Ibid.*, p.67.
30. *Ibid.*, p.67.
31. *Ibid.*, p.87.
32. "The Fourth Stage", p.127.
33. *Idanre.*, p.68.
34. *Ibid.*, p.69.
35. *Ibid.*, p.77.
36. *Ibid.*, p.80.
37. *Ibid.*, p.69.
38. *Ibid.*, p.69.

39. *Ibid.*, p.81.
40. *Ibid.*, p.69.
41. *Ibid.*, p.87.
42. Soyinka, Wole. "And After the Narcissist?" *African Forum*, Vol. 1, No.4 (Spring, 1966), p.59.
43. *Ibid.*, p.60.
44. *Idanre.*, p.57.
45. *Ibid.*, pp.57-58.
46. *Ibid.*, p.57.
47. *Ibid.*, p.57.
48. *Ibid.*, p. 81.
49. *Ibid.*, p.69.
50. Yeats, W.B. *Collected Poems*, Macmillan, New York (1974), p.291.

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