

## Counter Discourse in Wole Soyinka's 'Revision' of Euripides' *The Bacchae*

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### Abstract

The interrogation and expansion of post-colonial theatre has introduced to the theatrical repertoire multiple African playwrights previously unknown in the West most notably Wole Soyinka, Femi Osofisan, and Athol Fugard who have adapted classical texts. Soyinka appropriates 'classical' oral aspects from Africa / Yoruba cultures aspects of performance that he puts in his plays. The aim of this article is to highlight some of the salient features of Wole Soyinka's 'revision' of Euripides' play, *The Bacchae*. It compares Wole Soyinka's delineation of spaces in African performance and Homi Bhabha's discourse of the 'in between' space. It briefly looks at postcolonial actor's reflection on his experience performing a postcolonial adaptation of a classic on a European stage.

### Introduction

The interrogation and expansion of post-colonial theatre has introduced to the world theatrical repertoire many African playwrights previously unknown in the West, most notably Wole Soyinka, Ola Rotimi, Efua Sutherland, Femi Osofisan, and Athol Fugard who have adapted classical texts. To regard and place postcolonial African performance as part of a wider literary and performance history exposes playwrights, performers and directors, and the texts to 'new forms' of inquiry. Intercultural and inter-textual research undertaken between the areas of performance, cultural and politics requires that literary critics interrogate both performance and text. Postcolonial adaptations and re-readings of Greek classics reveal signifying performance practices and 'absences', and raises political and ideological

questions. A study of these adaptations not only raises questions of literary and performance aesthetics, and cultural signification but 'it opens up new ways of seeing, and understanding' (Kobena Mercer, 1994: 2) for the critic and the performer. Lorna Hardwick and Carol Gillespie in *Classics in Post-colonial Worlds* – (2007) delineates how Soyinka, while retaining aspects of Euripides's play embed "verse that decorates cross-cultural elements [...] whose ingredients are essentially African." (2007:79) Soyinka prefaces *The Bacchae of Euripides: A Communion Rite* (1973) with notes on the racial identity of Slaves and the Bacchantes and in addition, he acknowledges the intertextual element of the text by stating that he has borrowed from his own "*Idanre*, a Passion poem of Ogun, elder brother to Dionysus'. (1973: 234)

Isidore Okpewho argument that Soyinka's adaptation of Euripides's play is "a translation of culture" (1999: 32), and that he devotes "as much of his energy to reconstruct the ethnos [...] of the play as to manipulating the language of it" (1999: 32) offers an important way of reading postcolonial adaptations of classics. Okpewho views it as a post-imperial text, "an ideological review [...] of the climate within which Euripides wrote his play." (1999: 33) His reading is clarified by Dionysus's opening speech that maps out the ideological framework of the play. Ideology then is much an issue of the dialogical relationship between performer and audience, as it is an articulation of spatial transgression in postcolonial theatre. As a post-imperial text, *The Bacchae of Euripides* comments on the asymmetrical relationship between "ancestral traditions" and "imperial culture" that affect the production of the play. In this context, Soyinka's radical revision of the classic just like John Pepper Clark-Bekederemo's *Song of a Goat* (1964), Femi Osofisan's *Tegonni: An African Antigone* (1999) or Athol Fugard's *The Island* (1974) foregrounds issues such as human rights and totalitarianism.

In his provocative essay, "A Theatre for Cannibals: Images of Europe in Indigenous African Theatre of the Colonial Period" (2006), Esiaba Irobi outlines the discourses of identity and representation embedded in the post colonial's performance statements that respond to the imperial experience. He argues that it is not possible for the Western mind to glean and understand the complex discourse of African metalanguages, for instance, the signification embedded in costumes and masks. I would agree with Irobi that it is the capability to decode these aspects of performance that keeps the African and the European performer/critics apart. This paper highlights some of these issues as it explores questions of identity and intercultural performance in the context of Soyinka's postcolonial revision of Euripides's classical text. It is linked to the Leeds Workshop theatre students' 1989 production of *The Bacchae of Euripides: A Communion Rite*.

In an interview with Biodun Jeyifo Soyinka states that the play attracted him because it is "very uneven" (Jeyifo, 2001: 10); hence, his revisions to

“correct” the balance change the plot, establish dialogical links between Ogun, the Yoruba god, and Dionysus, while additions of migrants to the Greek community represented by the Slave Leader, the Chorus of Slaves, and Bacchantes alert the audience to the cultural, imperial, post-colonial, and deeper social issues informing the text. Thus, the play stages a contest between competing ideologies and discourses of power as it mirror’s the emerging consciousness relating to postcolonial conflict, colonisation and slave trade between Europe and Africa.

### ***The Bacchae of Euripides and the Actor***

In a turbulent postcolonial world within which, for example, a grassroots guerrilla war had just ended years of conflict in Uganda, the South African apartheid regime was tottering towards collapse, and Nigeria was still in the grips of military dictators, the staging of *The Bacchae of Euripides: A Communion Rite* had particular resonance for both the cast and the audience. It is one of the many African plays staged at the Workshop Theatre, University of Leeds, during the distinguished leadership of Martin Banham. In Soyinka’s view, the National Theatre production of the play had not worked particularly because the director (s) misread the codes, theatrical idioms and rhythms of the script, making the African aspects of the adaptation seat uncomfortably with the cast and the audience. In an article, “Between Self and System” (1988: 53), Soyinka is scathing about the presentation of the final scene:

“Paint, viscous paint flowed from Pentheus’ head on Tuesday! [...] Is this a school production? We get realistic, grisly innards and a mangled head but not a convincing wine fluid. Aren’t the actors supposed to drink the stuff? Why invite the audience to burst into titters when that mixture flows out after the line, ‘Its wine?’”

The Workshop Theatre performance was a very different kind of animal from the first performance. The process of performance challenged the stereotypical representation of the ‘other’ in classical performances particularly the perception of African actors as homogenous by presenting African American, Ghanaian, Cameroonian, Algerian, and Nigerian and Ugandan performers. The rest of the cast included people of Asian origin, white British and North American performers. Hence, the cultural significance of people of African and Asian origin in Greek society was translated into the cast. While the post-imperial/post-colonial perspective enabled the majority of the cast to become part of the dialogical process of being in the “Third Space” (see Homi Bhabha in Rina Benmayor and Andor Skotnes 1993: 190),

the director and some members of the cast, who knew Africa through fiction, initially engaged in "an imaginative reconstruction" (Neil Campbell 2008: 115) of the African world. Nevertheless, the play touched the lives of the cast in many different ways. The environment in Leeds was similar to its dual birthplaces of origin, Nigeria and Greece. The postcolonial binaries of coloniser and colonised were significant, contradictory yet complementary to each other. I would argue that Soyinka intends to have multiple narratives within the wider narrative framework since what the text and the performance offers is an "interpenetration of oral literary modes" (Patrick Parvis 1996: 251) whereby on stage the audience is enabled to witness a "simultaneous interpenetration" (Elin Diamond 1996: 220) of (multiple) African, European and American performance traditions.

In a scene reminiscent of Wole Soyinka's experience of the Royal Court Theatre's agit prop production, *Eleven Men Dead at Hola Camp* (1988), an unscripted scene was staged before an audience of some members of the cast, the costume designer/mistress and the director. An actor refused to try on a costume. There was a moment of silence, followed by a directive from an indignant director to the actor instructing him to wear the costume. The group of actresses gathered around him and tried to persuade him to put it on. The actor tried to explain that in his culture, both the texture of the cloth and the dye used signified a shroud used to cover the dead. As well, he had just buried his father, recently murdered by soldiers belonging to the murderous regime in his home country. This provoked the following response from the costume designer, "It is just a costume". To his dismay, the others merely supported the speaker. This annoyed and distressed the actor who stared at a people to whom death, its associated symbols and costumes were "insignificant and meaningless". (Yvette Hutchison 2005: 360) This attempt to redefine his memory implied that this group of people was refusing to acknowledge his personal narrative. However, none of the people present succeeded in convincing the actor to use the costume. He informed the director that he would not continue to participate in the production unless they designed a new costume. Unlike a selection of the cast absent from this scene, these people had no shared corresponding experience in their life, of both the culture and postcolonial violence.

How does this relate to this discussion? First, it is arguable that Soyinka's writing is informed by the fact that Greek playwrights have no respect for other people's bodies, and cultures, black or brown, who have made Greek civilisation possible. These foreign subjects, however, were the agents of the revolutions that unseated people like Pentheus. Second, occupying the "in between" space (on a European stage) in a postcolonial adaptation of a classic has its challenges. It means listening to the multi-vocality within the text and foregrounding the anti-aesthetics without which the classical

African concept of theatre would remain muted in performance. In the process, you begin to examine notions of subjectivity, race, ethnicity, language and space.

Performance is not static but migrates and dialogues with other performative cultures. As Africa is performed in its diasporas, its ideological boundaries (as in Soyinka's *The Bacchae of Euripides* and *Death and the King's Horseman*) change creating new forms and styles. These articulations beyond the borders show the notion of Africanness expressed in Soyinka's play, specifically through the performative styles he employs as he borrows, translates (Okpewho 1999), rewrites and transforms the language of the classical European theatre, to create a new drama. The fact that Soyinka's play is re-presented by a cast with disparate identities contributes to the notion of Africa as iconography and myth. By extension, it reminds us that Africa exists as a "migratory" concept, reconfigured and presented in multiple performance contexts. When Soyinka's 'African' performance is displaced and disrupted by new cultures, the meeting creates a new space where questions of originality, myth and meaning of 'Africanness' arise.

The quality of the text and its ability to re-present facets of postcolonial performance and cultural practices, through its relationship to slavery and empire, inspires us to reflect on our 'in between' (Bhabha 1993: 190) position in the post-imperial world. As Bhabha has argued persuasively, this is the 'Third Space':

[...] where I saw great political and poetic and conceptual value in forms of cultural identification, which subverted authority, not by claiming their total difference from it, but were able to actually use authorised images, and turn them against themselves to reveal a different history.' (1993: 190)

What Bhabha proposes here is important since the stage becomes the space that allows the performer to subvert the 'authorised images' (1993: 190) and create his own counter discourse. Soyinka, in his analysis of the post-colonial world engaged with the notion of the space in African performance long before Bhabha's work on the "The Third Space" was written. As Mpalive-Hangson Msiska has shown, Soyinka (1976:140-160) identifies the multiple spaces that he engages in his writing as: "the world of the living; the world of the dead; the world of the unborn; and the space of transition between the different modalities of being" (Msiska 2007: xxx). However, according to Mpalive the concept of the space of transition signifies "change and transformation more clearly than does Bhabha's [Third Space]." (2007: 39) In various ways, all these interpretations of multiple spaces are important to our understanding of how Soyinka identifies the notion of space

of transition occupied by his characters, more specifically the Old Slave who occupies the Africa (Yoruba) and the Greek worlds.

Soyinka's perspective from the postcolonial world enables a critical interrogation of colonisation and slave trade beyond African to Asia. The Slave Leader is an interesting character who, obsessed by memories of his homeland, the landscape, believes in Dionysus as a Messiah, and dreams of a life after slavery. The imperial master's desire to control and conquer the "other" is embedded in Pentheus whose name in Greek "signifies / Sorrow" (1973: 263). His appearance, costumes and props capture his obsession with power; before Dionysos dresses him in a toga he is in military regalia complete with a sword. The sword and his militaristic vocal projections echo his "desire" to order, control and oppress others. His imagination is to control the human and the immortal worlds but this, Tiresias warns, is "but a journey towards death." (1973: 259) The violent assault of the Old Slave, who beseeches him not to destroy Dionysos's hut, is a visible extension of his violent streak that gives the Slave Leader the opportunity to confront the colonial regime. Here the Greek and African texts meet for, Pentheus is an imperial master whose character is constructed to mirror contemporary dictators like the now deceased Mobutu Ssesseko (Zaire), Idi Amin Dada (Uganda) and Emperor Bokassa (Central African Republic) whom Soyinka references in the play. In addition, through the Old Slave Soyinka is able to comment on the "ritual of regeneration" (2001: 84) as a universal concept for, he argues, it "covered the entire spectrum of socio-economic consciousness as well as the religious experience of the people" and is as relevant to Africa today as it was to Euripides' Greece.

Soyinka's analysis of tyranny and interrogation of the Greek imperial codes may read as anti-classical to some people while to others it is an exercise in other people this is an exercise in re-presenting the Classical Greek text. In my view, Soyinka uses the classical form as a foundation to explore critical issues whereby he focuses on filling in the gaps. He engages with its structure, style and conventions, interpreting and redeveloping/redefining the classical to enable it to enable it to migrate to new spaces. By creating this dialogical relationship between African and Greek dramatic forms, rooted through an African/slave narrative he redefines it for an African postcolonial perspective. Hence, this allows us to ask ideological questions about how it has been read and performed. For example, the slave community, comprising of African and oriental slave women form into a formidable oppositional force led by the Slave Leader. What Soyinka achieves in the scene where the Old Slave is slapped is emblematic of the play's central theme specifically because the Slave Leader sees the possibility of liberation.

Soyinka dismisses out of hand the notion that tragedy is in some way necessarily connected to European identity; to him this is “erroneous history” (Barbara Goff and Michael Simpson 2008: 74). Instead, he “finds the Greek myth of Dionysus to be a significant parallel, rather than the canonical origin” (see Goff and Simpson 2008: 74), and his comments, in an interview with Anthony Kwame Appiah (Appiah 1988: 777-785), regarding the Eurocentric definition of tragedy make visible the different ways in which different communities relate to the concept of tragedy. In response to Appiah remarks that it is probably difficult to stage a tragedy for an American audience because “the concept of tragedy” is distant to many people, Soyinka states that this may only be true if one accepts a Eurocentric definition of tragedy. He continues:

“I remember my shock as a student of literature and drama when I read that drama originated in Greece. What is this? I couldn’t quite deal with it. What are they talking about? I never heard my grandfather talk about Greeks invading Yorubaland. I couldn’t understand. I’ve lived from childhood with drama. I read at the time that tragedy evolved as a result of the rites of Dionysus. Now we all went through this damn thing, so I think the presence [sic] of eradication had better begin. It doesn’t matter what form it takes.”

In addition, he explains that all communities have experiences of tragedy but “It’s only in the details we differ. What happens to a man psychologically in terms of his valuation within the community in which he resides, the fall from – to use a cliché- grace to grass, that’s the element of tragedy.” In “The Fourth Stage” Soyinka, drawing from W. F. Nietzsche’s theories of tragedy (Nietzsche trans. Douglas Smith 2000), relates Yoruba tradition and European antiquity. He states that while ancient Europeans lost the chthonic connection in ancient European theatre and by extension a sense of “the cosmic totality” (1976: 3) as a result of the expansion of the “Platonic-Christian tradition”, Yoruba (African) tragedy is still able to move into the “chthonic realm” (1976: 142). He equates Dionysos to Ogun arguing that although Ogun is “a totality of the Dionysian, Apollonian and Promethean virtues” (1976: 141), he is the elder brother to Dionysos. In addition, “Dionysos’s thyrsus is physically and functionally paralleled by the *opa* Ogun borne by the male devotees of Ogun” (1976: 158) as evidenced by the thyrsus carried by the chorus in *The Bacchae of Euripides: A Communion Rite*. It is arguable that both Ogun and Dionysos both appear in Soyinka’s *The Bacchae of Euripides*; hence, he successfully intersects ancient Greek drama/theatre with African ritual, gods and theatre.

Soyinka bases his play on Euripides's classical text but he also departs from it significantly to create an intertextual text that demonstrates the interpenetration of African and European (read Greek) performance forms. Reading his exploration of the relationship between Dionysos and Ogun, rooted in his exegesis of Nietzsche's theory of tragedy, and its applicability to Yoruba ritual in "The Fourth Stage", we see how far his *The Bacchae of Euripides : A Communion Rite* evidences inter-textuality; specifically making the invisible visible. Simon Gikandi in his discussion of the relationship between Picasso's work and African art claims, "[s]trong inter-textuality is evident when the "borrowed" textual unit is "abstracted from its context and inserted as if in a new textual syntagm as a paradigmatic element." (Simon Gikandi 1982: 469) Gikandi's phrase, "a new textual syntagm as a paradigmatic element" describes with clarity clarifies Soyinka's exercise in re-visioning Euripides' text. The emergency of other alternative forms from within the classical form, personified in the Slave Chorus absent in the canonical narrative of Euripides, and Soyinka's way of filling in the absences, embeds alternative forms from outside giving the silenced postcolonial a voice in the performance.

Despite its combination of actors from different backgrounds the University of Leeds Workshop Theatre production blends European performance techniques, not Greek, with indigenous African styles, but made relevant to the audience and the (British) performance context. The context and performance codes are contemporary African, the narrative ancient Greek and African, but using relevant performance codes, the production addresses its target English audience. Soyinka in his note to the director underlines the importance of a multicultural cast stating He recommends that while the Slave Leader should "be fully negroid" and "The Slaves, and the Bacchantes should be as mixed a cast as is possible, testifying to their varied origins." (1973: 233). This note not only highlights the colonial role of Ancient Greece but also the African cultural performance traditions, specifically the call and response style evident in the performance. The interpenetration of the black gospel tradition and contemporary European pop in a European classic not only highlights the historical encounter between European and African societies but also enables the director to blend performance style from both traditions. Hence, it acknowledges the connections between past and present, and Africa and Europe.

Soyinka 'writes back' Africa into European classics, he "pairs the theatrical significance" (Kevin J. Wetmore, Jr., 2002: 87) of the ritual enactment of tragedy with its political importance particularly uprisings among the slave population. In the Workshop Theatre performance, the silent chorus of dead slaves lining the stage helped to redefine the performance space and may be the answer to the question: Where is Europe (Greece) in Soyinka's *The*

*Bacchae* of Euripides: A Communion Rite? Its juxtaposition with the 'live' Slave Chorus on stage underlined how through performance Soyinka had turned to Greece for its classical drama without being involved with its colonial politics. The consequence of the contrast between the Slave Leader and Pentheus' speeches is to foreground the African aspects of the play and draw a distinction between Greek and Slave culture. The Slave Leader's speech is an interpenetration of African and Greek worlds/ discourses (Goff and Simpson 2008: 229) while the gospel tradition operates as a metaphor for the prolonged encounter between black and white that defines so much of American history. In the scene in which Pentheus slaps a slave (1973: 263-4), the Slave Leader's response evidence a meeting of African and Greek discourses. Hence, whereas the play is an intersection of Greek and African elements within a largely English medium, the discourse of the Slave Leader intersects African and English elements framed within the larger play and its Greek component. In performance this contrast has a significant impact helping to foreground the African "medium of the play" (Goff and Simpson 2008: 229) enabling the audience to distinguish between European (read Greek) characters and the slave other.

Arguably, Soyinka's project aimed to recognise the African presence in Ancient Greece while at the same time showing that significantly Greece is not the source of modern drama but shares aspects of ritual and other performative forms with Africa. Whereas the multiple personal Slave narratives are essential to Soyinka's revised text, the play remains a narrative of Ancient/colonial Greece. He changes the classic because he does not narrate the story in the same old way but uses musicality/dialogue and the iconography drawn from Africa and Europe. Just as Euripides' play examined ancient Greek society, Soyinka's revision excavates Africa, Europe, America and Asia in the post-imperial age.

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