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# Audience Responses to a BBC Broadcast of Wole Soyinka's *The Lion and the Jewel*

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Plays by African playwrights have been staged in many parts of the world, but it is hard to find reliable surveys of how non-African audiences have responded to them. Reviewers may have remarked on whether a particular theatrical production was received well or poorly by those who saw it, but such reports often were impressionistic, lacking any direct input from the scores of eyewitnesses present at a performance who may have viewed the play differently. Missing from discussions of the international reception of African drama have been adequate samples of the diverse reactions of theatregoers outside Africa. We need a larger body of data on which to draw our conclusions.

One example of a good audience survey may suffice. On 19 May and 5 June 1966 the Drama Department of the British Broadcasting Corporation's *Third Programme* aired a dramatic reading of Wole Soyinka's *The Lion and the Jewel* to radio listeners in the United Kingdom. The BBC's Audience Research Department then sent out a questionnaire to more than 1300 members of their Third Programme Listening Panel asking for reactions to the play. They received 120 responses, roughly nine per cent of the total number solicited, from those who reported having heard all or most of the broadcast. Before examining the range and variety of these responses, however, it may be well to review Soyinka's activities in the United Kingdom and elsewhere before May 1966 in order to assess whether his name is likely to have been known to the British public before this radio transmission – a reliable summary of his activities during these years can be found in the first chapter of James Gibbs (1986).

Soyinka had studied at the University of Leeds between 1954 and 1957, earning a Bachelor of Arts (BA) with an Upper Second in English Honours and beginning work toward an MA that he never completed. Upon leaving Leeds he moved to London where he worked as a substitute teacher, a broadcaster for the BBC's 'Calling West Africa'

programme, and a script reader for the Royal Court Theatre. During this time he produced one of his earliest plays, 'The Swamp Dwellers', for the Annual Drama Festival of the National Union of Students held at the University of London in September 1958, and fourteen months later he wrote, produced and acted in an evening programme at the Royal Court Theatre that included performances of two other early plays, 'The Invention' and excerpts from 'A Dance of the African Forest' [*sic*], as well as readings of some of his poems. He also published a few short stories in university literary magazines. However, these accomplishments would not have been widely noticed in Britain. He was still a young, unknown writer lacking a discernible public profile.

In 1960 he returned to Nigeria on a two-year Rockefeller fellowship that afforded him freedom to travel widely and to write, act, broadcast, and form his own theatre company, the 1960 Masks. In 1962 he began teaching at the University of Ife campus in Ibadan and the following year moved to the University of Lagos, but he continued to devote much of his time and energy to theatrical activities and other creative pursuits. In 1963 he published his first three books: *Three Plays*, *A Dance of the Forests*, and *The Lion and the Jewel*, the latter two under the joint imprint of Oxford University Press in London and Ibadan. He also organized a guerrilla drama troupe, Orisun Theatre, which specialized in partly improvised performances of political and social satire. In September 1965 he was back in the UK recording his radio play 'The Detainee' for the BBC, participating in a Commonwealth Arts Festival by taking part in a Poetry Conference in Cardiff and a Festival of Poetry at the Royal Court Theatre, and serving as an adviser on a production of his new play, *The Road*, at the Theatre Royal, Stratford East. Later that year, in the midst of an election campaign in Nigeria, he was arrested and charged with holding up an Ibadan radio station at gunpoint to prevent the airing of a victory speech by Samuel Ladoke Akintola, the Premier of the Western Region, but the judge who presided over the case in court acquitted him on a technicality. News reports of his arrest, detention and trial were carried in the international press, prompting writers' groups abroad to send letters of concern to the Nigerian Government. During these months Soyinka may have gained more visibility in the UK as a prisoner than as a playwright.

This is not to say that he was still unknown there as a rising dramatist. Friends in London had been working to advance his career by arranging to stage, film and broadcast some of his plays. Chief among these helpers was Dennis Duerden, a former British Education Officer in Nigeria and producer for the BBC's African Service who in January 1962 had founded a Transcription Centre in London to promote African artists and writers by creating radio and television programmes based on their work

and distributing them internationally. Early in January 1963 Duerden had written to Soyinka asking him to direct a dozen modern African plays, including three of his own, for British television, using actors from the West Indies, black America, and West, East and South Africa (letter from Duerden to Soyinka, 2 January 1964. This information, as well as much that follows, was gleaned from folders in the twenty-five boxes of Transcription Centre Records (hereafter cited as TCR) held at the Harry Ransom Humanities Research Center at The University of Texas at Austin. The details recorded here were found in TCR 11.10 and 18.1. For an account of the history of the Transcription Centre, see Moore). Soyinka, however, objected to the concept of a theatre company unified only by pigmentation, saying he had no use for theatre of the dispossessed (TCR 18.1) When Duerden wrote again in April offering to arrange a filming of *The Swamp Dwellers* with an all-African cast, Soyinka quickly agreed (TCR 18.1,11.10). After the film was shot, Duerden set up a Theatre Workshop at the Transcription Centre, calling it the Ijinle Theatre Company, the purpose of which was to work collaboratively with Soyinka's Orisun Theatre Company in Nigeria to stage and film more African plays in Britain (TCR 11.12). Soyinka and Duerden were named as co-Directors of the Ijinle Theatre Company, and a group of talented, experienced African actors and actresses based in London were recruited to get projects started (TCR 11.11, 11.15). One of their first initiatives was to rehearse two of Soyinka's short plays, *The Trials of Brother Jero* and *The Strong Breed* as well as one by South African playwright Athol Fugard, *The Blood Knot*, for presentation at the Hampstead Theatre Club from 28 June to 16 July 1966. Fugard, who was in London at that time, was brought in to direct all three plays with a cast hailing from South Africa, Nigeria, Sierra Leone, Ghana and Uganda (TCR 11.11, 11.14, 12.7). Subsequently the Ijinle Theatre Company, with South African filmmaker Lionel Ngakane as manager, was invited to perform Soyinka's *The Lion and the Jewel* at the Royal Court Theatre in December 1966 and to reprise it at the Leicester University Arts Festival in February 1967 (TCR 11.11, 11.12, 11.15). All these productions were quite successful.

However, we are getting ahead of our story of the BBC's radio premiere of *The Lion and the Jewel*, which had taken place half a year before the production at the Royal Court Theatre and may indeed have led to the invitation to the Ijinle Theatre Company to perform the play there with some of the same actors and actresses – this information, as well as much that follows, is taken from materials in the Douglas Cleverdon Collection (hereafter cited as DCC) at the Lilly Library, Indiana University, Bloomington, Indiana. The BBC's radio version was produced by Douglas Cleverdon, who the year before, on behalf of the Poetry Book Society, had

arranged for Soyinka to read his poem *Idanre*, with musical accompaniment by Akin Euba, at the Festival of Poetry held at the Royal Court Theatre (TCR 12.8, 18.1). It was then that Cleverdon had proposed to Soyinka a radio broadcast of *The Lion and the Jewel* with authentic Yoruba drumming and other music recorded in London or Lagos to enhance the production (DCC). In January 1966, a month after Soyinka had been acquitted in court and released from prison, Cleverdon reminded him of this project, informing him that *The Lion and the Jewel* was scheduled for radio transmission the following May and asking if he could come to London to supervise the musical part of the production (DCC). Soyinka, who at that time was involved in rehearsals of his play *Kongi's Harvest* for staging at the First World Festival of Negro Arts in Senegal in April, replied that he could not come to London but could have the necessary media work done by the Radio Station in Lagos (DCC, TRC 3.1). Accordingly, in March he arranged to send Cleverdon a recording of the Arithmetic Times chant at the beginning of the play, the prisoners' chant (on page 24 of the published text), the victory song of Baroka's impotence (54 and 57), the song of blessing (64), the final song 'Tolani' (64), and a bull-roarer sound. Some of this material proved to be unsatisfactory technically, so Cleverdon borrowed a Yoruba talking drum from the Horniman Museum and employed two Nigerian musicians in London, Femi Fatoba and Sanya Dosunmu, to redub the scenes requiring drumming (DCC).

Cleverdon in the meantime had consulted Duerden for advice on casting the play and had received from a member of staff at the Transcription Centre an annotated list of seven African actors and actresses and one musician (Fatoba), emphasizing their professional credentials (TCR 15.7). The BBC tried out these and other performers before selecting for the principal parts two Nigerians (Sam Iyamu as Lakunle, Jumoke Debayo as Sadiku), a South African (Lionel Ngakane as Baroka), and a Sierra Leonean (Tonie Tucker as Sidi). Another South African, Cosmo Pieterse, was chosen to play a Storyteller who narrated many of the stage directions. Five other performers from Nigeria and elsewhere played minor supporting roles (DCC) - see also the transcript of the survey issued on 8 June 1966 by the BBC's Audience Research Department (hereafter cited as BBCDCC).

The play opened with a brief summary of the plot:

> For this delicious comedy of African village life, Wole Soyinka has used verse-rhythms for the dialogue and drums for the mimed dances. It is the story of Sidi, beloved by the Europeanized school teacher. When a full-length photograph of her appears as a two-page spread in a glossy magazine, her status soars far above that of Baroka, the elderly chieftain

> of Ilujinle, who reflects that it is five full months since last he took a wife (BBCDCC).

In the survey conducted afterwards by the BBC's Audience Research Department, it was estimated that the broadcast had reached 0.1 per cent of the population of the United Kingdom. Reactions to the play, gleaned from the 120 questionnaires returned by members of the Third Programme Listening Panel, ranged from A+ to C-, with a large majority at the high end of the scale: A+ (23), A (39), B (27), C (10), C- (1). This sample gave 'a REACTION INDEX of 68, close to the average (66) for Third Programme features during 1965. In Week 18, *Nokhwezi* (a Zulu folk tale) by Alexius Buthelezi had an index of 71' (BBCDCC). So *The Lion and the Jewel* was one of the better features aired on the Third Programme in the first half of 1966, ranking two points above the average and only three points below the leading broadcast.

The full report of the Audience Research Department then followed:

> References to *The Lion and the Jewel* as a 'delicious' and 'enchanting' piece cropped up freely in the comments of the largest proportion of listeners in the sample audience who certainly seem to have found much that was charming in this comedy of Nigerian Village life. However, in this group (not far short of two-thirds of the reporting sample) some listeners came less easily than others to recognise and respond to the qualities of the writing. As was said, interest in the earlier part of the play was held in check by an unaccustomed and, indeed, distinctly exotic setting and only gradually grew to thoroughpaced [*sic*] enjoyment, or, as a Housewife put it, 'just a little difficult to get into this piece, but once well launched it became more and more acceptable as it went along.' On a more critical tack, several listeners took the attitude that, fascinating as this was as an insight into African ways of seeing life, it failed in rapport with a Western audience because as a Cartographer's Draughtsman observed, 'one could not naturally identify oneself with any of the characters, be in sympathy with them or understand people living under the sway of emotion, custom and so on.' He continued, 'there was a gulf; it was slightly too un-British for one to feel at ease in it.'
>
> From a distinctly unenthusiastic minority came complaints that Wole Soyinka had laboured his piece out of proportion to its theme. There was a certain amount of boring repetition, listeners said here, regarding the crux of the plot—the virility of the elderly and much-wived Chief in whose village the action is set. In addition, there was some feeling that *The Lion and the Jewel* was not best suited to radio treatment, as

containing a number of situations that called for visual representation, it was said[;] none was [more] so, perhaps, than the mimed dances (with characterisations and action described by a Storyteller) which did not come over very effectively, it was held.

For all this, the play was far more commonly assessed as having an unusually strong appeal and a many-sided one at that, incorporating, as the enthusiasts made clear, special felicities of style and language as well as memorable character-drawing, much humour in the telling of the story and a most attractive freshness of flavour overall. To begin with, many listeners reflected that they had rarely heard a play (or feature) with so much atmosphere ('it portrayed very vividly and colourfully personal and village life in Nigeria. I was there in 1958-59 and could easily recapture this'). In addition (said a Lecturer, who had also lived in Western Nigeria), 'the characters were portrayed with that essential (but in so many modern plays, apparently outmoded) attitude—love of the artist for this extraordinary, marvelous and funny creature, man. Moreover, the locale, characterization and mixture of social attitudes rang true. Soyinka does communicate the spirit of his people living now: not a dead culture.' In addition to plenty of inventive human interest, other listeners pointed out, the writing (both in the storytelling and dialogue) had a richness and lusty turn of phrase that resembled the Elizabethan style ('very Shakespearean, but not just an imitation', said a Farming Student), with 'lively imagery' and easy-flowing transitions from speech to verse-rhythms and songs—'altogether energetic and eloquent writing, and very amusing withal.' In particular, however, listeners who relished 'this vital and entertaining play' reflected most on the insight it gave into the stresses occasioned by the impact of Western ideas upon the unsophisticated but nonetheless subtle patterns of African village life. The character of Lakunle, the Europeanised schoolteacher, wooing Sidi, the local beauty, whose status soars when her photograph appears in a Lagos magazine, was very shrewdly observed, by all accounts, and, as a Chemical Engineer remarked, his reactions to Sidi's involvement with Baroka (the Bale, or chieftain) 'rightly portrayed attitudes of mind derived from the superficial things in Western culture.'

Although not all found it easy to accustom themselves to African accents, most listeners in the sample who mentioned this aspect of the performance liked the voices of the cast very much (one recognising from personal recollection the 'lilt' of the Western area). The parts of Baroka, Sidi and Lakunle (taken by Lionel Ngakane, Tonie Tucker and Sam Iyamu) were frequently said to have been memorably played, with action

> that could always be understood, according to comment. In regard to the production, the commonest feeling was that the 'put over' matched the matter to perfection, especially suggesting that high-flown exuberance of Nigerian life and theatre. Plenty of its sparkle and verve came across, said a Lecturer, and he was among many who also enjoyed 'the varied effects' and the music, particularly the Yoruba singing and drumming – 'every bit as thrilling as the 'High Life' I can remember so well,' said a General Practitioner in retirement. (BBCDCC)

What is most striking in this report is the contrast between the unenthusiastic and uneasy reactions of listeners with no experience of African life and the overwhelmingly positive responses of those who had lived and worked in Nigeria or other parts of West Africa. Indeed, it appears that much of the sample audience had tuned in because they were eager to hear an African play, particularly one by a playwright whose name they may have recognized and a few of whose extant works they perhaps may even have read. In this sense the majority of the audience surveyed may have been predisposed or readily inclined to applaud a work that reminded them of the 'spirit' or 'atmosphere' of a colonial or postcolonial African culture they had once experienced. They could recall the situations, social attitudes and sounds of indigenous village life as authentic and amusing, whereas listeners like the Cartographer's Draughtsman, who evidently felt excluded from such intimacy with anything African, found only a gulf of understanding because the world the play evoked was 'slightly too un-British,' too alien, for him to feel at ease in it.

Nonetheless, even some of those initially put off by the exotic setting — someone like the Housewife, for example — were gradually drawn into the play as it went along, charmed perhaps by the voices of the cast and the 'high-flown exuberance,' 'sparkle and verve' of their acting. Despite a few complaints about the 'boring' overemphasis on the elderly Chief's virility and the inadequate treatment on radio of scenes requiring visual representation, the production evidently did not fail to entertain its listeners. The respectable score the play achieved on the BBC's Reaction Index testifies to its success.

One wonders if the same broadcast would have done so well in the United States, where audiences would have been composed of far fewer individuals with direct experience of African life. Soyinka sometimes has had difficulty in mounting his plays in American cities. A case in point is his production of *The Road* at Chicago's Goodman Theatre in 1984 that he admitted was 'a traumatic experience,' 'a harrowing, painful experience,' partly because he was working with an African-American cast, the leading actor of which did not understand the role he was called upon to play

as Professor (Mike 25, 49). Soyinka felt compelled to keep cutting his lines until the play was 'totally unbalanced [and] lopsided,' leading to 'general bafflement' among the audience (Mike 50-51). Chicago's *Sunday Times* called *The Road* 'a long, bumpy ride' (Saunders 47). Of course, *The Road*, even in a masterful production, would still bewilder most American theatregoers because it is far more deeply invested in Yoruba metaphysics than are his comedies and satires. *The Lion and the Jewel* would stand a better chance of being understood and enjoyed in America, but it is perhaps significant that, like most of his other plays, it seldom has been performed in any of the fifty states. The British colonial experience may have guaranteed Soyinka an audience in the UK and regular opportunities for producing his plays there – advantages that he has been denied in much of the rest of the English-speaking world outside Africa.

This situation is not unique to Soyinka. Many other talented African playwrights have suffered the same neglect abroad. Their national and ethnic cultures may be regarded as too foreign or unfamiliar to be readily understood and appreciated by non-Africans, and their writings may be totally unknown in distant lands. However, what the BBC's survey seems to suggest is that a good performance of a well-made African play dealing with a universal theme — in this case, a humorous love triangle — and written in comprehensible English or translated into a local language would very likely appeal to international audiences. One proof of this is that not long after *The Lion and the Jewel* was broadcast in the UK, the BBC heard from a Danish radio station that wanted to borrow the BBC's tapes of the singing and drumming to use in their own production of the play (DCC). Perhaps radio transmission is one very effective way of extending the global reach of African drama. Hearing a play may lead some listeners outside Africa or the UK to desire to read it, see it, or even stage it. Like the Jewel's picture in a pop magazine or the Lion's stamp-making machine, the ability to project and disseminate a positive image of Africa and Africans by harnessing the power of far-reaching media technology can be both seductive and productive of better human relations.

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