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Ritual and the Conversion of History: T. S. Eliot's *Murder in the Cathedral* and Wole Soyinka's *A Dance of the Forests*

The centrality of most myth-informed criticism hinges on the exploration of the universality of literature and its conveyance of what Carl Jung calls “the collective unconscious.” For myth critics like Maud Bodkin and Northrop Frye, the question of time or better still, history, is inconsequential since mythopoetic experiences generally reveal myths as timeless or eternal. But the probing issue about T. S. Eliot in *Murder in the Cathedral* and Wole Soyinka in *A Dance of the Forests* is their attempt to convert historical circumstances through the enactment of ritual, in order to create societies freed from the archetypal burdens of tyranny, corruption and moral decadence. Both playwrights reveal history as a system of repetitive patterns of human experience expressed in myths or religions and literature, as well as a scheme in which the present and the future can be purged of the extremes of the past through a conscious retrieval and acquiescence of spiritual patterns. Although spiritual experiences, everywhere and whatever the epoch, are similar, attracting diverse concerns, T. S. Eliot and Wole Soyinka are however specifically connected by their interest in addressing archetypal patterns in history and in the enactment of ritual as a pattern of expiation and reconciliation with spiritual essence.

Reading Eliot's *Murder in the Cathedral* and Soyinka's *A Dance of the Forests*, one finds examples of ritual drama which involve the commingling of the spiritual universe with

the physical by which means the pragmatic and the utilitarian functions of its spirituality are attainable. Both playwrights express the worry that Europe and Africa are losing contact with traditional beliefs. They, therefore, demonstrate a constant desire to attain a more permanent and reliable spiritual reality that determines the pulse and patterns of everyday life, through the enactment of ritual and the expression of the spiritual cosmology, its symbols and myths. D. D. Harrison says of rituals:

It is a process by which man can have direct access to the gods or spirits; a powerful social vehicle which publicly confirms social values [...]. It is transcendental in that it transforms through spirit possession, the earthly to the spiritual and thus reaffirms the relation of man to the gods (55).

In describing the process of rituals as in the quotation above, Harrison reveals a close link between ritual and myth. In a similar analysis, Isidore Okpweho also thinks that ritual and myth are two sides of the same coin:

myths are oral narratives which explain the essences and the sequence of ritual performances thereby preserving the memory of these for posterity, as such myths are second to rituals in terms of evolution [...] myths consist of explanations of rituals and not rituals from myths (45).

On his part, Ossie Enekwe says in *Ibo Masks*:

The Oneness of Ritual and the Theatre moves away from Harrison's and Okpweho's description of the process of ritual and its relation to myths by explaining their functions. To him, "ritual provides information, reduces anxiety by making people know that what has been, has been affected or will be fulfilled [...]. Rituals bring a certain reality into being" (25).

Eliot's *Murder in the Cathedral*, as a ritual drama, can be estimated, in terms of Harrison's description above of the pro-

cess of transformation from the earthly to the spiritual, as a means of reaffirming the relation between man and God. The process of Beckett's martyrdom takes a ritualistic pattern from his conflict with King Henry, to his return from France to Canterbury, his temptations and self-realization, his Christmas sermon, and the procession by the priests as a premonition of the paradoxical death of a martyr and the birth of a saint.

On the other hand, the bedrock of African drama is ritual. In Wole Soyinka's *A Dance of the Forests*, we find in a complex Yuroba mythopoesis, how rituals imbued in festivals and ceremonies such as initiations take the pattern of spirit possession, dances, tragic and comic masquerades, songs and overall narratives. Although the whole scheme of the dance in the play is the ceremony of expiation as a prelude to the ushering in of the new nation, Nigeria, ritual is enacted at three levels—the confession of guilt by the mortals (Demoke, Rola and Adenebi), the questioning of the dead pair, and the dance of the half-child.

The idea, however, is not just to explain the mythical implications of rituals, but to demonstrate why rituals become important elements for historical reconstruction in the world of T. S. Eliot and Wole Soyinka. There is a further attempt to investigate the role of time as one of the conceptual issues that reveal what Emmanuel Chukuwudi Eze describes as the relationships between “writing, time, memory and history” (25).

Eliot's *Murder in the Cathedral* was written for the Canterbury festival in 1935, and like Greek drama, its theme and form are rooted in religion, ritual purification and the renewal of faith in a modern civilization that was falling apart because spirituality, which is the nexus of human existence, had been ignored in favor of scientific, technological and intellectual advancement. The play is an evocation of the historical con-

flict between King Henry and Thomas Becket in Christian history, in 1170. For Eliot, the first three decades of the twentieth century were characterized by some sort of a repetitive historical pattern reminiscent of 1170, a year which experienced tyranny, terror, misappropriation, corruption, treachery and murder under the reign of Henry. From the Christian worldview, Eliot, through his main character, the Archbishop Thomas Becket, introduces ritual as a means of purging the early twentieth century decadence in Europe through a series of temptations, the Christmas sermon, the procession by the priests and the attack and murder of Becket. The series of ritualistic incidents become the process by which Becket's conscience is tested and shown to triumph over history, worldly ambitions and self-willed martyrdom. Becket's transition to martyrdom reflects the ordeals of the magi in "Journey of the Magi." As in *Murder in the Cathedral*, Eliot, according to William Skaff, adopts in the poem a "dramatic mask" to reveal his own struggles with belief, suggesting his real "religious position in 1927" (421).

In Africa, colonial, and most importantly, postcolonial writers, aimed at denouncing corruption, repression, despotism, misery, alongside the projection of traditional African values. Thus, Soyinka's *A Dance of the Forests*, for example, was produced in 1960 as part of the celebrations of Nigerian independence. Soyinka's intention was to conceive an important event which brings certain mortals, their historical prototypes and the spiritual forces of the clan in confrontation with one other, in a scheme he called "The Gathering of the Tribes." By exploring the horrors of man's destructive past, Soyinka aimed at creating an awareness of man's irrational course fraught with suffering, pain, violence, treachery, corruption, barbarism, prostitution, tyranny and hypocrisy. The

“Gathering of the Tribes” was thus conceived to provide an opportunity for stock taking, self-examination, self-confession and possible self-regeneration, and to forge a new vision founded on honesty, truth and goodwill. In the opinion of Glenn O. Odom, *A Dance of the Forests* is Soyinka’s “peculiarly self-conscious metatheatrical deployment of time” (205).

Written disparately in different regions, from different cultural perspectives, and in two different eras—the early twentieth century and the mid twentieth century—Eliot and Soyinka respectively, reveal that, in the core of the human society, irrespective of time and space, the old political order is still very much in place. The worlds in the two plays are set asunder as a result of the exigencies of tyrants: King Henry in Eliot’s *Murder in the Cathedral*, and Mata Karibu in Soyinka’s *A Dance of the Forests*. The impact of tyranny, corruption and oppression place their ugly burdens on the masses that are immersed in the general suffering, hopelessness and despair, as suggested by the Chorus of Canterbury women in *Murder in the Cathedral*, and by the “ants” in *A Dance of the Forests*.

In *Murder in the Cathedral*, Eliot presents the temporal world of European civilization characterized by spiritual death, hollowness, and decadence which we find in King Henry, the Tempters and the Knights. This is revealed in a series of characters’ utterances, thus creating an overall basic framework of flashbacks that take the audience to the past. The murder of the Arch Bishop, masterminded by King Henry, is the peak of such decadence and Eliot uses the opportunity to remind the early twentieth century man that because of the absence of conscience and greed, the world was taking a sharp turn for the worst, namely the catastrophes unleashed by the First and the Second World Wars. He saw in the mod-

ern man a need for redemption which was attainable through the process of ritual martyrdom that Becket passes through to achieve sainthood, or to attain spiritual reunion with God. While philosophers such as Karl Jaspers, Martin Heidegger and Jean-Paul Sartre, in the face of the gruesome human experience, cajoled the world with philosophies extolling the non-existence of God and the need for humanity to depend on its own resourcefulness for salvation, Eliot saw a continual need for belief and salvation through mythical orders. In the opinion of Maud Ellmann,

The element of myth in his [Eliot's] art is not so much a creative method, a resumption of the role of mythic poet, as it is an intellectual strategy, a device for gaining perspective on himself and on his myth-forsaken time. (621)

Therefore, Eliot's employment of myths is not simply an allusive method or a metaphorical one: it is rather an attempt to communicate his own ideas to the established external order about the chaos of the modern world. He draws his words from the collective unconscious which inspires the myth and from the human condition, reiterating the series of questions about life and death, degeneration, death and decay, purgation, purification and rebirth, destruction and recreation.

Wole Soyinka, on his part, sees Nigerian future (a cosmogony of the African future) as corrupt and bleak, with the same things being repeated. It is as though Soyinka perceived and evoked the whole of African history in his crushing powerful images of misery, from its dark past to the present, and towards its future. As Roscoe Adrian writes in *Mother is Gold: A Study in West African Literature*, "men treated each other appallingly in the past; they treat each other appallingly in the present, they will treat each other appallingly in the future" (224). By these words he comments on Soyinka's prophecies

of the past, present and future, as seen in the court of Mata Kharibu, eight centuries before the "Gathering of the Tribes," the celebration of Nigerian independence and of the prophesy of the half-child: "I will be born dead." Thus, Soyinka displays an ingenious use of the flashback technique to project a comparative view of the past and of the present, and to explore the consciences of his characters—past and present. He thus delineates his philosophy of the future, evident in the prophesy of the half-child, which can only be thwarted by a ritualistic purgation of consciences to attain spiritual oneness with the gods of the tribe, and to establish a much recommended existential order.

Like Demoke in *A Dance of the Forests*, Becket's suffering, temptation, repentance, death and martyrdom are illustrations of the Christian concept of spiritual atonement, a way of regaining cognition with the supreme, and purging the modern European society of its spiritual crises. His stereotypic ritual takes the pattern of Christ's own life, suffering and death, and for Eliot like for the entire Christian civilization, that is *the* pattern that ought to be adopted to attain spiritual stasis, a pattern which must be perceived from an intellectual perspective. Eliot says in *Christianity and Culture* that "we must treat Christianity with a great deal more intellectual respect," thus implying that Christianity is *not* treated with much intellectual respect, even by Christians themselves, adding that Christianity should be treated as "a matter primarily of thought and not of feeling" (6). Beyond the great conflict between human and divine power, Becket's death highlights the strength of the central character and a number of complicated spiritual issues. Eliot's use of verse and the ability to invest a past historical event with modern issues and themes is also linked with the ways in which lay persons react to the intrusion of the su-

pernatural in their daily lives. *Murder in the Cathedral* is thus a Christian tragedy, a tragedy of revenge as well as one of the sin of pride; it is also a modern miracle play on the martyrdom of Thomas Becket. The most striking feature of *Murder in the Cathedral*, Eliot's most successful play, is the use of a chorus in the traditional Greek manner to make apprehensible to common humanity the meaning of the heroic action. At his most devout, Eliot sees religion instrumentally—not as Plato's "Noble Lie," but as a sort of "Noble Truth," instilled in simple people, so that society may continue to believe in a delicate, ironic, and aesthetic way. In these circumstances of misjudged irony, he finds satisfaction in religion and encounters a spirituality which is so crippled by self-consciousness that one starts questioning the dramatist's understanding of faith. This, as Tony Sharpe reveals, brought his wife, Vivien Haigh-Wood, to oppose his conversion, which added to their marital problems (116).

Similarly, Wole Soyinka demonstrates his yearning to move out of the anathema of socio-cosmological fragmentation, to assume a religious proportion which expresses the strength, validity and beauty of African life and culture through ritual enactment. To him, ritual can be considered as the symbolic expression of actual relations, status and role of the individual in society, attained through a kind of cyclic trinity. This cyclic trinity involves the union between the dead (spirit) the living (human) and the unborn. All three coexist and take part in each other's existence. Soyinka explores this detail in *A Dance of the Forests* with the return of the dead pair, the humans and the half-child. *A Dance of the Forests* justifies the place of excellence for communion between the dead, the spirits and the mortals. The dance itself is a ritual which underscores the interplay between the spiritual and the ordinary

existence. Aroni, the Forest Head's spokesman in *A Dance of the Forests*, directly interacts with the gods and becomes a link between the ancestors, the spirits and the mortals as well as between history, the present and the future. The aim of Aroni's transformation is to destroy the evil—selfishness, greed, excessive power, etc.—which Mata Kharibu embodies. Gerald Moore explains that the men and gods are conscious of a “primeval severance” lying between them, and that both constantly strive to bridge it by means of ritual. As Moore states, the gods, to whom appeals are made through sacrifice and ceremonies of appeasement, are not indifferent and aloof as is the Christian God in Beckett's *Murder in the Cathedral*, but are themselves filled with the “anguish” of that severance and continual yearning towards reunification with men (37).

Soyinka's *A Dance of the Forests* is a complex fusion of Yuroba festivals and traditions with the African spiritual cosmology. In this play, the author uses Yuroba myth, especially that of the Abiku child, as an embodiment of Soyinka's belief that the newborn nation, Nigeria, like the wanderer child, is born with death in its soul. The child that has to be born, has to be welcome in a special ceremony after he is a few days old, and only then is he a proper member of this world. That is why the dance of the half-child is as obscure as the future itself:

Feel this dread,
Feel this dread,
I who flee from womb
To branded womb, cry it now
I'll be born dead
I'll be born dead (*A Dance...74*)

Thus, Soyinka uses the Abiku motif to show the fate of Africa, wedged in a bondage imposed by the exigencies of greed, tyranny, corruption and prostitution. The playwright envisioned a "New Africa" that would escape its colonial past by grafting the technical advances of the present onto the stock of its own ancient traditions. Aspects of the native life were to be reformulated to integrate elements of the recent history, to form a solid foundation for the future.

The recourse to ritual dramaturgy by Eliot and Soyinka is opposed to Marxists anarcho-communists and critics who see social evolution in terms of science, reason and objectivity. They demonstrate Paul Fyeraband's argument in *Against Method* according to which "there is no idea however ancient and absurd that is not capable of improving our knowledge" (12). Seen from the perspective of Friederich Hegel's the "Zeitung," or "world spirit," which is the dominant force determining revolution in the world, Eliot and Soyinka use rituals and myths in their plays to reveal a spiritual vision, and establish a stasis fundamental for the improvement of the present and the future. Thus, *Murder in the Cathedral*, set in the cathedral, reveals the indelible sin of pride which is responsible for the conflict between the worldly and spiritual forces, and its traumatic effects on the masses. *A Dance of the Forests*, though set in the forest, deals with contemporary society, as the context of the play as well as its rituals and characters are unmistakably African (Peters 168).

The forest in *A Dance of the Forests* is important in the understanding of the African cosmological union between the living, the dead, and the spirits that control the African universe. In other words, the grove, or the forest, is very significant in African cosmic structure as a place for atonement, reconciliation and the procuring of a harmonious future. This is

different from the Christian structure in which the church, or the cathedral, is a specific building for worship, reconciliation and atonement, as it is the case with *Murder in the Cathedral*, in which Becket's ritual towards sainthood is attained. Far from the urban settlement of the cathedral of Eliot's play, it is within the forest set-up that Soyinka's rituals are actually enacted. Dramatic themes such as death and rebirth, disintegration and recuperation, destruction and creation, suffering and compassion, fragmentation and re-assemblage, fallibility and remediation are specifically achieved in the forest setting.

The African background and culture with their forests and groves settings is well-suited to the rituals of the African belief systems, as it had been from the beginning of times. Rituals are thus performed through the invocation of spirits who are masked and made to speak. In *A Dance of the Forests*, the masks speak as spirits of the Palm, Precious Stones, Darkness, Sun, Rivers, etc. In Jonathan Peters' view, the masked spirits tell the story of "man's eternal greed, dissoluteness, and the destruction of the environment, of animal and plant life, and man's treachery towards his own kind" (182). The spirits—especially the myriad of ants—symbolize the waste of human resources, as millions of lives are lost on earth to satisfy the lust of men in power. This element of destruction becomes an essential pattern in the process of the ritual of expiation in *Murder in the Cathedral*, when the Arch-bishop is murdered so as to attain a ritual, spiritual bliss, which is confirmed by the joy expressed by the Chorus after his death. In *A Dance of the Forests*, Demoke, who shares the ambivalent creative energies of Ogun, destroys the araba tree and kills Oro's servant in order to carve a divine symbol or totem for the ceremony of the "Gathering of the Tribes."

From the transformations, the prophecies, the purgation and the ritual cleansing, Soyinka attains spiritual stasis within Demoke's own conceptual framework, the same way like Eliot, attains spiritual stasis through his protagonist, the Arch Bishop, Thomas Beckett suffers and dies because of his religious predilections and thus attains sainthood in the process. Although the half-child says he will be born dead, Soyinka's vision is clearly explicit at the end of the play as Rola, the emblem of sensual corruption, and Demoke, the artist tormented by the guilt of murder, pass through the fire that transforms and purges them. As Agboreko, the spiritual agent between the living and the dead, points out, Rola is regenerated and chastened. Both Rola and Demoke undergo a spiritual catharsis through total introspection, a kind of purification which, to the dramatist, is only possible when leaders in society readily confess their past evil deeds, in order to guarantee a glorified future. Soyinka's drama, in David Cook's opinion, therefore echoes through the reader's mind, creating unexpected moments within which he wrestles with the implications of familiar psychological and religious dilemma (126).

The kind of introspection that Rola and Demoke go through is reminiscent of Thomas Becket's after his confrontation with the Fourth Tempter:

Now is my way clear, now is the meaning plain:
Temptation shall not come in this kind again.
The last temptation is the greatest treason
To do the right deed for the wrong reason.
The natural vigour in the venial sin
Is the way in which our lives begin (*Murder...52*).

Had Becket sought martyrdom out of a personal desire for immortality, rather than selflessly accepting the risk of

death to defend what he believed in, he would have been committing treason against the very Lord he was supposedly serving. The Christmas morning sermon which forms the interlude of the play between the sowing of the seeds of martyrdom in the first act and the fulfillment of the act, in the second act, is a profound process of self-purification through the awareness that martyrdom is never the decision of the mortal, but one that follows the will of God. Indeed, Becket's self-purification is complete when he finally submits his will to the will of God:

A Christian martyrdom is never an accident, for Saints are not made by accident. Still less is a Christian martyrdom the effect of man's will to become a Saint, as man by willing and contriving may become a ruler of men. A martyrdom is always the design of God, for His love of men, to warn them and to lead them, to bring back to his ways (*Murder...57*).

He now senses that he is approaching the proper attitude of selflessness, that he is truly accepting martyrdom in defense of the ideas and ideals of the Church, rather than selfishly seeking martyrdom for personal reasons of fame or glory. Becket's death establishes a new order in Canterbury. The Chorus, like the Third Priest, gain hope and discover the spiritual salvation involved in the murder of Becket. They undergo a complete metamorphosis from fear to faith through ritual martyrdom, since the cathedral where the murder takes place harbors a Saint.

The language of ritual is terse and solemn, clearly illustrated in Eliot's *Murder in the Cathedral* and Wole Soyinka's *A Dance of the Forests*. Both playwrights enrich the ritual element with abrupt imagery, proverbs and sayings and other technical devices. The intensity of poetic imagery used in *Murder in the Cathedral*, especially by the Chorus made of the

poor women of Canterbury, projects the seriousness and solemnity of the ritual process into sainthood, under the supreme paradox of Christmas, which, according to Becket, is both the celebration of death and the birth of Christ. The images of putrefaction and dryness in the play illustrate the degree of spiritual decadence in Western civilization and suggest the urgency for spiritual redemption symbolized by the death of Becket in *Murder in the Cathedral*.

The critic of Soyinka is most often infatuated with the playwright's incorporation of ritual, myth, lore and idiom which make the works essentially poetic in tone (Nkengasong 153). Soyinka also exploits to a large extent the proverbial elements, drawn principally from their cosmic set-up. Proverbs are also instruments of ritual with which African playwrights use to unravel some of the truths hidden in the heart of their universe as they become sublime extrapolations and exploitation of Yuroba ontology. Agboreko's constant interjection of the statement "Proverbs to bones and silence" hints at some inexplicable essence in the spirituality that surrounds the forest setting in *A Dance of the Forests*.

Soyinka re-enacts ritual in drama as a means of averting the uncontrollable agony of the African continent in the wake of independence and the postcolonial epoch, ensuring a solid platform for progressive nationhood and forging an enduring cultural identity for Africa. In a review of Biodun Jeyifo's book, *Wole Soyinka: Politics, Poetics, Postcolonialism*, James Peck states that Jeyifo

competently contextualizes how Soyinka's restive quest for forms, philosophies, and concepts – both African and non-African – is prompted by a need to make sense of a political and existential situation in which Africans have found themselves since the fifteenth century, when they started the battle with the rigors of a

brutal modernity imposed by European intrusion into the African universe. (149)

Thus, in *A Dance of the Forests*, Soyinka literarily brings the events of eight hundred years under the reign of Mata Kharibu to contemporary experiences, to show the repetitive nature of history and humanity's needs, to avert and convert historical experiences into a more meaningful existence achieved through the summoning up of the conscience of Demoke, the artist in *A Dance of the Forest*, just like Thomas Becket's, the Archbishop in *Murder in the Cathedral*.

Apart from the problems posed by the imposition of Christianity and other Western religions in Africa, the question of an all-embracing African religion is a crucial one. As Bolaji Idowu suggests, [...] the basic obstacles to any study of Africa with reference to cultures and beliefs are the size of the continent, her historical rape and her consequent disruption, racial, social and spiritual. There is also the important fact of the complexity of her cultures and systems of belief. (103)

There are common features or structures which, as Idowu points out, are linked with belief in God—the divinities, spirits, ancestors and the practice of magic and medicine which are often enacted by means of rituals. As, from the XIXth century, African religions were considered by the colonizers as crude polytheism, a combination of magic and sorcery, Soyinka cautions his readers in the preface to his seminal work *Myth, Literature and the African World*:

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 in theirs, we must begin to look seriously into their political motivation (xi).

African writers, therefore, defend their positions by arguing that African beliefs cannot be considered as fetishes because they recognize the existence of God through incantations, sacrifices, ancestral worships and other forms executed mainly through the medium of ritual.

Becket in *Murder in the Cathedral* and Demoke in *A Dance of the Forests* are therefore imbued with messianic visions that aim at the conversion of history's decadence and horror to a glorious present and future. In other words, both plays are evocations of European and African histories, but they are as well remarkable indictments of the past and the ushering in of a new dispensation of existential harmony. The two protagonists are imbued with conscience, which makes them their author's spokesmen, and the harbingers of their respective cultures and belief systems. Through determination, sheer courage, the acceptance of humiliation and the spirit of self-sacrifice, they redeem their societies and establish spiritual orders. But this makes sense only if the different myths are enacted to suit their respective cosmic or environmental realities. In other words, social and spiritual malfeasancesses may be universal, but they do not require the same belief systems or ritual patterns to serve as means of attaining spiritual goals. Thus, European rituals become fundamental in the quest for spiritual stasis as is obvious in literature, especially drama, which in the European tradition took its rise from the religious rituals of the Greek celebration of the dithyramb in the fourth century B.C. African drama on the other hand, reveals that African life, from the beginning of times, is predominantly ritualistic, as shown by the fact that it is profoundly incorporated in its belief systems, customs and worldviews. African spirituality, far from being degrading and harmful as it was often conceived by the West, has huge educational, so-

cial, moral and religious implications, as revealed in Soyinka's *A Dance of the Forests*, *The Strong Breed*, and *The Swamp Dwellers*. *A Dance of the Forests* in particular demonstrates the dire quest for a spiritual vision attained by means of rituals which articulate the African's origins, the nature of his being, the determining forces of his history and what he hopes and expects for the future.

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