

Wole Soyinka: Dance Master of Appetite

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Wole Soyinka is a master of the chameleon. He has shifted shapes so often from poetry to drama to fiction, and from comedy to tragedy and back again, that it is no wonder he has confused and sometimes upset critics and readers. His early work was at times obscure and abstract, but if there is one theme that connects his comedies to his tragedies, it would certainly deal with the enormity and variety of human appetite. Whether it be for power, sex, money, or martyrdom, overwhelming appetite has been one of the constants of his work. We can study its evolution in four of his early plays: two satires—*Opera Wonyosi* and *Kongi's Harvest*, and two tragedies—*The Bacchae of Euripides* and *Death and the King's Horseman*.

Kongi's Harvest and *Opera Wonyosi* are both satires of political tyranny. The appetite in play is for absolute power in the hands of dictators like those who have dominated so much of post-colonial African history. The two tragedies also deal with these appetites for power and control as well as their opposites: the appetites for pleasure, release, sex, and wild ecstasy.

Kongi's Harvest (1065) presents us with a classic parody of an African dictator. Kongi assigns his Aweri lackeys to write his books for him so that he may appear a man of learning and wisdom. His appetite for grandeur is so messianic he wants to renumber the calendar for himself, so that the past will be measured in years B.K.H. (Before Kongi's Harvest). He poses for a photographer in savior-like postures that could be labeled "The Face of Benevolence...the Giver of Life" (WS 93) Though his enemies try to assassinate him, Kongi survives their attack and maintains his power. The final grim reality is that the tyrant still rules and his enemies, who represent the healthy appetites of love and tradition, are killed or must flee for their lives. As in much of recent African history, the excessive appetite for power rules the day.

Soyinka's appetite for satire also leads him to write *Opera Wonyosi*, his interpretation of a modern European classic: Brecht and Weill's *Threepenny Opera* (1928). Brecht's play was already an adaptation of his original source, John Gay's *The Beggars Opera* (1728). Both Gay and Brecht were out to criticize political corruption in their own societies: 18th century Britain and

early 20th century Germany. The two works satirize the human appetites for money, love, and power. In both the main characters are thieves, prostitutes, and hustlers: figures from the underworlds of London and Berlin. In other words, they provide a perfect model for Wole Soyinka.

Soyinka keeps Brecht's plot intact but moves it to contemporary West Africa, retelling the story of Mack the Knife, his rival the King of Beggars—called Chief Anikura and his wife De Madam, and Mack's troubles in love with Polly, Lucy, Jenny and other ladies of the night. He even keeps some of Kurt Weill's famous songs, especially the Ballad of Mack the Knife, for which he writes his own lyrics alluding to examples of Nigerian corruption like the marble monopoly at Igbeti. Instead of the street singer, Soyinka updates that role to a hip Dee-Jay. His main addition to Brecht's play is its setting in the neighboring Central African Republic during the coronation of His Imperial Diminutive Emperor Bokassa I. Both Gay and Brecht made use of coronation settings which usually provided major business for thieves and beggars. Gay used the coronation of King George II in 1727 and Brecht used the coronation of Queen Victoria in 1837. But Soyinka actually introduces Emperor Bokassa as one of his major characters. "Folksy Boksy" as the Dee-Jay calls him, is simply too good a target for satire. His first scene is a masterful comic riff on the blustering tyrant. Emperor Boky compares himself to Napoleon who also started out as a commoner and was not even a real Frenchman, coming from Corsica. Boky is a francophonic African, but like Napoleon he is a powerful leader who glorifies the traditions of the French Revolution, at least in his own mind. Emperor Boky sees himself as the black Napoleon who possesses true French sensitivity. He says, "You should have seen me crying at the graveside of Daddy—you know that great immortal—General Charles de Gaulle, father of modern France. Yes, I wept buckets" (OW 333). Soyinka also uses Folksy Boksy to satirize one of Africa's most notorious dictators, Idi Amin, who was in power in Uganda in 1977. Boksy treats Amin contemptuously as a second rate version of himself. The first reference in his speech is to an incompetent aid which helps launch the dictator on his rhetorical flight:

Cut out the tongue and send that silenced item to my friend Idi Amin, with my compliments. No. Stop. Send Amin the entire wretch and add that his tongue is not to be trusted. He'll know what to do...Strictly between you and me, that Amin gives himself airs. Not satisfied with being a windbag he gives himself airs...He apes me. I appear in uniform...Amin sees me and straightways he

orders a duplicate, complete with medal, plus a few more he's dreamt up. I earned my medals fair and square—in action. Indo-china. North Africa... Of course mine are pure gold—trust him to resort to a trick like gold-plated aluminum. No class... Anyway, what does he do, gives himself Victoria Cross, Long Service Medal, Medal from the Crimean War, Order of Florence Nightengale—oh it's really too embarrassing... And he's a pig... You know what a pig is don't you? And you know what a pig does with graves. Well, it's on account of Idi Amin—Moslem though he calls himself—that real Moslems don't eat pork. (332)

Like Brecht and Gay before him, Soyinka creates a connection between the little street criminals and the big ones in power. When Mack marries Chief Anikura's daughter Polly, she turns out to be a shrewd business woman who wants to upgrade his gang. No longer small time highwaymen and thugs, she dresses them in the expensive Wonyosi fabric and reinvents them as respectable businessmen. She invests the gang's money with “a new multinational corporation with special holdings in developing countries. Launched in Nigeria of course... personally backed by at least fifteen African Heads of State” (349). Even with bribing a mistress of Emperor Boky, they still manage to can earn more in three months than in the previous three years of “robbing and smuggling and killing and pimping” (350). Though Mack the Knife goes through several arrests, escapes and even a death sentence—chances for Soyinka to satirize both the army and the courts—his pardon comes as part of a general amnesty to celebrate the coronation of...

Emperor Charlemagne Desiree Boky the First, Lion of Bangui, Tiger of the Tropics, Elect of God, First among Kings and Emperors, the Pulsing Nugget of Life, the Radiating Sun of Africa. (403)

Long may such tyrants reign on comic stages rather than in real life. In Soyinka's plays they stand for the insatiable, unbridled appetite and lust for power. They demand sacrifices from the old order of traditional rulers, from all opposition that would challenge their power, and from the people themselves.

A very different kind of power underlies Sonyinka's interest in tragedy. In this genre the powers of appetite struggle with those of sacrifice in an agon of tragic tension. It is no wonder that Soyinka took a serious interest in Euripides' tragedy *The Bacchae* when he studied Greek as an undergraduate at Ibadan.

It is a classic struggle between the appetites of wildness and control. The God of Wine and ecstasy, Dionysos, is the transgressive, androgynous God who demands a scapegoat in sacrifice to cleanse the polluted city of Thebes. Soyinka makes it clear from the beginning that the pollution is caused by the tyrannical order of King Pentheus. The stage is set with a row of crucified slaves along a road. But instead of a rampaging tyrant of excessive appetite for the trappings of absolute power with a giant ego like Kongi or Boky, Pentheus is a stern figure of absolute control who scorns the orgies of Dionysos. The old prophet Tiresias, who worships Dionysos, tells us that the slaves were “sacrificed to that insatiable altar of nation-building” (*WS Collected Plays 1* 242). Pentheus clearly states his principle of power in direct opposition to the God Dionysos:

I shall have order! Let the city know at once
Pentheus is here to give back order and sanity.

...

I want an end to the drunken dancing
The filth, the orgies, the rot and creeping
Poison in the body of state. I want Order and--
I want immediate results. (256)

Pentheus represents the opposite extreme from Dionysos, the God of Wine and Ecstasy. He hates his power but secretly fears it as well. He is clearly out of balance, just as his rule has polluted the city of Thebes. His denunciation of Dionysos is also a failure of faith and trust.

And this stranger, who is he? A sorcerer?
Hypnotist? Some kind of faker I'm sure, vomited
From Lydia, or Media, those decadent lands where
They wear their hair long, ribboned, and curled,
Stink of scent and their cheeks are perpetually
Flushed with wine, their eyes full of furtive
Messages. (257)

Though he follows Euripides, Soyinka infuses Dionysos' spirit with the wild spirit of the 1960s. Instead of Pentheus' tyrannical imposition of law and order, Dionysos represents freedom for the slaves of Thebes. He is a liberator figure, and his liberation is both political and personal. His Bacchantes are imbued with

the gospel fervor of pop music. Soyinka writes,

The Slave leader is not a gyrating pop drip. His control emanates from the self-contained force of his person, a progressively deepening spiritual presence. His style is based on the lilt and energy of the hot black gossellers who themselves are often first to become physically possessed. The effect on the crowd is however, the same—physically—as would be seen in a teenage pop audience. From orgasmic moans the surrogate climax is achieved. (248-9)

The Bacchantes even tear the leader's clothes off, but he never "loses his cool." Soyinka has made the dialectic between wildness and control, ecstasy and order, relevant for the contemporary stage. In this tragedy, however, justice and the restoration of balance rest with wildness, with the God of wine and ecstasy, Dionysos. When Dionysos tries to convince Pentheus of the need to balance opposites, he says, "Wake up Pentheus, open your heart" (258). He explains the two supreme principles of life:

...First, the principle
Of earth, Demeter, goddess of soil or what you will.
This nourishes men, yields him grain. Bread. Womb-like
It earths him as it were, anchors his feet.
Second, the opposite, and complementary principle—
Ether, locked in the grape until released by man. (258)

In describing the positive effects of wine, Soyinka clearly has a very contemporary feeling of ecstasy in mind:

We wash our souls, our parched and
Aching souls in streams of wine and enter
Sleep and oblivion. Filled with this good gift
Mankind forgets its grief. But wine is more!
It is the sun that comes from winter, the power
That nudges earth awake. Dionysos come alive in us.
We soar, we fly, we shed the heavy clods of earth
That weigh down the ethereal man
To that first principle. Balance is the key. (259)

This is what Dionysos represents for Soyinka: the ability to soar above earth

and the mundane—to get high, so to speak—to escape, to soar on wings of ecstasy that inspire elevated poetry. Here one is tempted to invoke Keats’ lines from *Ode to a Nightingale*: “...for I will fly to thee/Not charioted by Bacchus (Dionysos) and his pards/But on the viewless wings of poesy” (ll.31-3). For Soyinka, wine opens the Dionysian spirit of transcendence and it inspires his poetry, just as the natural beauty of the song of the nightingale inspired Keats. In both writers, spiritual inspiration—whether through beauty, art, song, wine, or the divine-- leads to transcendence. Keats tried to soar beyond death but was ultimately brought back to the pain and suffering of this life. Soyinka’s Dionysos enables man to soar above earth and through the ether, only to be brought back as a scapegoat to the sacrifice. Dionysos, the God of tragedy, demands a human sacrifice to cleanse the world, and the fattest goat is invariably the most obsessive tyrant whose excessive control and denial of Dionysian power, make him the clearest choice for sacrifice.

Soyinka has often compared Dionysos to Ogun, the Yoruba God of creativity, the use of metal, artistry, and the guardian of the road (Katrak, 46-50). He too is a suffering God, a mythic figure filled with contradictions. Toward the end of *The Bacchae*, however, Soyinka associates Dionysos with Jesus Christ. When Dionysos tries to change Pentheus, he shows him a Christ figure whose halo is an ambiguous thorn and ivy crown. This Christ figure offers angry people a cup to drink that turns their anger to wonder, love, and forgiveness. When Pentheus’ own mother Agave leads the Bacchantes in tearing his body to pieces, Soyinka goes beyond Euripides and turns the sacrifice of the king into a blessing. Euripides treats the sacrifice of the hubristic Pentheus as a way to punish Thebes, but Soyinka makes his sacrifice positive and life-giving. As Agave holds the head of her son, blood appears to pour from his orifices. When Tiresias touches the liquid, however, it turns out to be wine not blood, and everyone then drinks, including Agave. In a reversal of the Christian sacrament in which wine becomes the blood of Christ, Soyinka turns the blood into the life-giving wine of Dionysos. Thus Pentheus’ tragic sacrifice as the scapegoat of the God turns into a healing ritual; the community is cleansed of his tyrannical pollution and moved to love and ecstasy. Soyinka’s tragedy leads to renewal and like Ogun and Jesus, Dionysos is revealed as a God of life as well as death, creativity as well as destruction.

In a strange but typically Soyinkan move, sacrifice can also be a form of appetite as we see in his major tragedy *Death and the King’s Horseman* (1975).

The central figure Elesin Oba is required by Yoruba tradition to dance his way to the afterlife following the death of his lord and master, the Alafin of Oyo. Early on, Soyinka emphasizes the positive aspect of this ritual. Elesin goes to be reunited with his king in the ancestral world, thus affirming traditional Yoruba belief in the afterlife. Not only is death nothing to fear, but Elesin is still so full of life that he manages to boast about his sacrifice. In his song of the Not-I Bird he boasts that he is the only one in all the world who does not fear death. "Death came calling...Did you hear it?/ Not I! swears the farmer" (7). Even the animals in the forest fear death, even the Gods themselves. Elesin says,

I heard him twitter in the gods' abode
Ah, companion of this living world
What a thing this is, that even those
We call immortals
Should fear to die. (9)

Why should Elesin Oba be the only one in this life not to fear death? Because his life in service to the king has been a royal feast, and only an ungrateful man would overstay his time.

Life has an end. A life that will outlive
Fame and friendship begs another name.
What elder takes his tongue to his plate,
Licks it clean of every crumb? (11)

With these lines, Elesin Oba introduces into the poetic language of the play, the idea that will lead to a curse: "eater of left-overs." The roots of his tragedy lie in his ego prostrating itself to his appetite. His age may be old but not his taste for beautiful young women. When he desires to marry and procreate with a young girl in the market whose marriage is already planned, he invokes the God whom Soyinka has called Dionysos' older brother:

Not even Ogun with the finest hoe he ever
Forged at the anvil could have shaped
That rise of buttocks, not though he had
The richest earth between his fingers. (15)

Elesin's sacrifice makes him an honored figure whose desire cannot be denied, especially on his last day alive. He knows he has a free hand when he unbridles his appetite. But his free-range sexual desire shows him overreaching, eager for both the best of life as well as death. His final marriage before his end captures in Soyinka's lush poetry his desire for a very physical form of immortality:

Then let me travel light. Let
Seed that will not serve the stomach
On the way remain behind. Let it take root
In the earth of my choice, in this earth
I leave behind. (16)

My vital flow, the last from this flesh
Is intermingled with the promise of future life. (32)

Is this Elesin's final farewell, or is it the hubris of a man whose appetite for life blocks the passage through which he plans to dance his way to the ancestors. In fact, we see him begin his dance to death with the encouragement of his praise singer, Olohun-iyó. As the lights fade on the scene, the audience believes that Elesin has been seen for the last time in this life.

Soyinka, however, is a cunning trickster who loves to play with our expectations. In *Kongi's Harvest* he reversed the plan of his enemies to kill him and suddenly turned the tables on them; as if to say, so much for our desire to see the tyrant overthrown-- as if such powerful men could be so easily deposed. In *Death and the King's Horseman* Soyinka introduces a major counterpoint to the Yoruba ritual of Elesin Oba's sacrifice through the characters of the British District Office Simon Pilkings and his wife Jane. They regard the sacrificial death of a royal courtier like Elesin as barbaric. Jane Pilkings tells Elesin's son Olunde, "The King dies and a chieftain must be buried with him. How feudalistic can you get?" (43). She does not approve of voluntary suicide: "Life should never be thrown deliberately away" (42). It's not just that they represent a cynical colonial view of Africans as savages; that would be too easy an opposition for Soyinka and his audience to dismiss. The problem is that they represent a modern secular point of view that cannot understand religious sacrifice. Simon Pilkings is supposed to be a Christian and thus should have some sense of why Jesus Christ was crucified; but early on he shows us that he has no interest even in his own religious tradition. The Pilkings mock the

Yoruba ancestors when they dance a tango in the costumes of the Egungun, thus demonstrating that life for them is about the pursuit of pleasure and career, and not something to be discarded because of old-fashioned rituals. The mere hint of human sacrifice suggests stereotypes of Africans that are offensive to them. The Pilkings have no time for Ogun, Dionysos, Jesus, or the tragic concept of a scapegoat. This modern secular view is introduced as the pragmatic European world view, but when the climax occurs it seems to carry some weight with the central character himself.

Soyinka hits us with a surprise punch. The opposite point of view to the Pilkings comes from Elesin Oba's eldest son Olunde, who has returned from England to honor his father's death. It is he who defends the traditional Yoruba ritual. Soyinka deliberately sets the play during World War II when Olunde can point to many sacrifices among the British themselves. Suddenly, Olunde and Jane Pilkings are shocked to hear the living voice of Elesin Oba, both believing that he has just died. The living Horseman himself then come running in, escaping from his police captors and appears before them. Olunde takes one look at his father still alive and denounces him: "I have no father, eater of left-overs" (50).

Afterwards, while imprisoned and manacled, Elesin blames everyone but himself for his failure to complete the sacrifice. He blames the white man for arresting him and stopping his dance to death. Then he blames the Gods for deserting him when he lost his faith. Finally he blames his young wife whose beauty and youth were irresistible attractions. His desire for her means that "... there was also a weight of longing on my earth-held limbs" (53). It was Elesin's appetite that played the role of trickster and blocked his sacrifice.

The denouement comes about when the market women bring in the dead body of Elesin's son Olunde who has performed the Horseman's ritual sacrifice his father could not complete. Seeing the destruction he has wrought, Elesin immediately loops his hand chains around his neck and strangles himself. He has finally killed himself but not as part of the ritual sacrifice he had once boasted of so proudly. Soyinka seems to be striking a final modern note of tragic ambivalence. The true sacrifice done by Olunde is based on a strong belief in the traditional Yoruba faith, but it took place off-stage-- mysteriously. The very visible suicide of Elesin Oba that we finally witness is not rooted in self-sacrifice but in shame. The old father has caused the sacrifice of his young son. Like Oedipus, Elesin cannot bear to face the tragedy he has brought about. Soyinka

seems to suggest that we no longer know how our elders used to enact the true rituals of self-sacrifice, but we do know what it means to fail terribly in fulfilling our personal responsibilities. Soyinka has finally sacrificed the great ambition rooted in human appetite. We leave the ritual chastened by the catharsis surrounding what we have lost—a sense of control over our wayward human selves and our appetites.

Soyinka has brought the human forces of appetite and sacrifice into a delicate balance. He has brutally satirized the excessive appetites for power, wealth, and love. On the other extreme, the desire for complete control of the appetite tragically brings a tyrant like Pentheus down. But the seeds of hubris can also underlie sacrifice. Elesin's hubris leads him to boast about his ritual sacrifice, but that proud appetite masks a deeper one for the pleasures of love and life. Thus enthralled, we watch the dialectic of sacrifice and appetite dance its way to a steady beat through the drama of Wole Soyinka.

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