PATTERNS AND OPERATIONAL MODES OF MYTH AND MYTHIC IDEATION IN SELECTED PLAYS OF WOLE SOYINKA AND OLA ROTIMI

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Abstract

Myth as a universal mode of thinking about man and his world has been a very controversial subject in scholarship. However, whether it is a fiction, having nothing to do with actuality, or represents the naïve stage of human civilization; whether it is old and worn-out, or timeless and part of the make-up of every mind, myth has been a staple of dramatic art and, in fact, of literature in general. The aim of this paper is to explore how Wole Soyinka and Ola Rotimi interweave the patterns and operational modes of myth in their plays to depict human existence as not far from the Homeric battlefield.

1. Introduction

Motley of theories exist about myth and two fundamental reasons are responsible for this. In the first place, the exact point of the evolution of myth is not known. Secondly, the authorship of myth is usually anonymous. These factors make myth to be open to speculation and multiple interpretations.

According Henry A. Murray, myths are originally deemed to be "indubitable revelations of divine powers determining the course of natural events" (Fraser cited in Murray, 1960, p. 304). The idea that myth is a received divine revelation implies that it is an absolute truth, a historical fact, which Eliade believes "took place at the dawn of the Great Time, in the holy time of the beginnings" (Eliade, p. 23, 1975). This indicates that myth actually refers to events that occurred at the beginning of time. In support of this view, Eliade cites Vico's proposal that mythology should be read as "proto history". In support of this historical connection of myth, Irobi argues that:

> Myths are immortalized blueprints of how exceptional human beings have lived exceptional lives and are preserved as narratives of intervention and negotiation of difficulties in society's life, and they are therefore the road maps for the survival of societies and peoples. As extended or amplified discourses about certain human beings who lived extraordinary lives and in their deaths are apotheosized into deities, myths inspire in us a desire to undertake superhuman challenges on behalf of our society at the risk of our own little, fragile, mortal lives" (2002, p. 48).

The implication of this statement is that myth belongs to the past. But Akwanya has a different view, for he argues that

> The capacity for myth-making is part of the make-up of every mind, though it can be repressed by emphasizing scientific thought exclusively, but not only may what has been repressed return in disguised forms, as in the gothic literature of the epoch of realism and in science fiction following twentieth-century astro-physics and genetics as a grotesque shadow, the modernist movement had in fact disguised itself as a phase in the tradition of writing, at least in part by consciously returning to mythic ideation (2004, p. 127).

Akwanya's argument suggests two things. Firstly, it implies that myth is not an exclusive primitive mode of behaviour since

modern mind partakes in myth-making. Secondly, the statement assumes that myth is very deeply receptive to the permutations of history. Hence, mythic thought is not old and worn-out, but is constantly renewing itself in accordance with the movement of civilization. This train of thought is also confirmed in Levi- Strauss' explanation that "a myth always refers to events alleged to have taken place long ago. But what gives the myth an operational value is that the specific pattern described is timeless; it explains the present, and the past, as well as the future" (1973, p. 291).

Another theory of myth sees it as a fiction having nothing to do with plausibility. This view connects myth with fable. According to Eliade, "in the language current during the nineteenth century, a "myth" meant anything that was opposed to "reality": the creation of Adam or the invisible man no less than the history of the world as described by the Zulus, or the theogony of Hesoid – these were all myth" (1975, p. 23). The late rationalists and the positivists who saw myth as an infantile creation of the primitive people that cannot be justified by reference to experience championed this idea of myth. They generally take exception to myth having anything to do with punctual history and natural phenomena. It is obviously in support of this line of thought that Frye defines myth as "a narrative in which some characters are superhuman beings who do things that 'happen only in stories'; a conventionalized or stylized narrative not fully adapted to plausibility or realism" (1957/1973, p. 366). Frye's opinion is that myth lacks palpable evidence and does require a strong suspension of disbelief to accept it. This idea of what "happen only in stories" might have led to Murray's reading of Fraser to conclude that myths are "mistaken explanations of phenomena of nature" (Murray, 1960, p. 309). However, some scholars take exception to Fraser's conclusion. For example, Osa (1989) argues strongly

that the illogicality of myth is an eloquent statement that life is so complex and bewildering "for neat patterns of meaning to be found" (1989, p. 1) in it. In its complex and incomprehensible nature, myth shows the multiple dimensions of reality that is not "exclusively structured by reason and empirical demonstrations" (p. 3); instead, the whole world of "fact" is only a partial concept of reality.

However, not all scholars of mythology are in agreement with the two divergent views. For example, Chase's description of myth as cited in Burner (1960) seems to build a bridge: "an esthetic device for bringing the imaginary but powerful world of preternatural forces into a manageable collaboration with the objective (i.e experience) facts of life in such a way as to excite a sense of reality amenable to both the unconscious passions and the conscious mind." (Burner, 1960, p. 276). Here myth is conceived as complementarily dwelling on the border land between fantasy and empiricism. There are certain issues regarding life which are clearly palpable and can be reasoned out. Yet there are innumerable others which Burner refers to as the "night impulses of life" which make up unfathomable dark sides of life, usually deemed to be controlled by the ineluctable fate.

Another major interesting study of myth approaches it as a symbolic form. This is exemplified by Abanuka (1999) who describes myth as a simple human attempt to explain in symbolic language the origin of the world, human discoveries and inventions, suffering and death, which the community accepts as belonging to it" (5). The first implication of this view is that myth is a linguistic means of apprehending occurrences in creation. The second is that since myth is a symbolic form, it merely gives hints about relationships in the universe. This is what Cassirer (1953) terms mythic ideation. For Cassirer, "the mental processes fail to grasp reality itself

and, in order to represent it, to hold it at all, they are driven to the use of symbols" (Cassier, 1953, p. 7). Cassirer insists that myth has its own form of existence that is ideational because even though a symbol can point to something specific, it tends frequently to point to a wider reality than itself, and this can provoke different meanings at different times. In recognition that all forms of symbolism harbour the notion of mediacy, Cassirer further submits that

> … the sound of speech strives to express subjective and objective happening, the "inner" and the "outer" world; but what of this it can retain is not the life and individual fullness of existence, but only a dead abbreviation of it. All that "denotation" to which the spoken world lays claim is really nothing more than mere suggestion; a "suggestion" which, in face of the concrete variegation and totality of actual experience, must always appear a poor and empty shell (1953, p. 7).

Cassirer's view seems to suggest that since myth is a function of language, its content should be seen as mere suggestion, a kind of phantasmagoria that can be apprehended in many ways because of the shifting tendency of language in terms of meaning. A major means through which myth compresses experience into symbol is through the use of name or naming principle. That is why Cassirer argues that a being's "ego, his very self and personality, is indissolubly linked, in mythic thinking with his name" (p. 49). This applies first and foremost to a holy name which its mention is deemed to release the power inherent in the god himself. The name functions as a proxy for its bearer. It is from the idea that name brings forth

the potency and significance of its bearer that the concept of the king as a divine form is developed.

Levin describes myth as a source of raw material for literary creativity:

> myth at all events, is raw material, which can be the stuff of literature. Whatever myth is, whether it is a fantasy, or an outline of distant events and experiences, great works of dramatic art bask in its full glow. The extent to which vampire heroes permeate the plays of contemporary playwrights is an indication that we are indeed not far from the Homeric world. As a literary framework, myth is one extreme of literary design, naturalism is the other (Levin, 1960, p. 135).

Naturalism is the art of similitude, an "art of extended or implied simile, while the mythic sequence deals with the "world of total metaphor, in which everything is potentially identical with everything else, as though it were all inside an infinite body" (Frye, 1973, p. 136). This is because new experiences and observable facts can be made intelligible within the context of an already existing myth.

Langer (1954) states that myth functions as a "recognition of natural conflicts of human desire frustrated by non-human powers, hostile oppression or contrary desires… its ultimate end is not wishful distortion of the world, but a serious envisagement of its fundamental truths; moral orientation, not escape" (1954, p. 179). In line with this fundamental truth Langer suggests that in literature the hero's achievements can be largely make-believe even to their investors; but the forces that challenge the hero are apt to be taken seriously. She argues

that belief in myth may appear to have been displaced by scientific thinking but myth has given birth to the art, "an important dimension of experience which we neglect at our own risk" (Guenchev).

It is necessary to point out that an essential function of myth in drama is the building of models of behaviour. Mythical archetypes are evident in plays of all times. The trials and difficulties as well as death which certain characters in the plays of Soyinka and Rotimi undergo, "are prefigured in the adventures of the mythic heroes" (Eliade, 1975, p. 35). Frye identifies three organizations of myths and archetypal symbols in literature, including dramatic texts. The first category is generally concerned with gods and demons. These two worlds, which Frye terms apocalyptic and demonic worlds respectively, correspond to our idea of heaven and hell. The apocalyptic world presents reality in the form of categories that human beings desire, while the demonic world presents reality in terms of what desire abhors. Frye describes the demonic worlds as:

> The world of nightmare and scapegoat, of bondage and pain and confusion, the world as it is before the human imagination begins to work on it and before any image of human desire, such as the city or the garden, has been solidly established; the world also of perverted or wasted work, ruins and catacombs, instrument of torture and monument of folly (1973, p. 147).

It is a world that erodes pleasure and joy; a threatening world where anguish and sorrow are the order of the day.

The second category or archetypal symbolism in mythic sequence is the "romantic", with implicit mythical patterns that are more closely associated with the human experience. Here the hero is human but performs marvelous deeds. He is an

epitome of courage and performs actions quite unnatural to normal sensibility. In romantic plays, "enchanted weapons, talking animals, terrifying ogres and witches, and talismans of miraculous power violate no rule of probability once the postulates of romance have been established" (Frye, 1973, p. 33). The romance world is characterized by adventure of stupefying dimension.

The third class of archetypal symbolism is referred to as realism that lays emphasis on content and representation rather than on the shape of the story. Frye states that this type refers to ironic literature that starts as "realism but tends towards myth, its mythical patterns being as a rule more suggestive of the demonic than the apocalyptic, though sometimes it simply continues the romantic tradition of stylization" (1973, p. 140). Here the hero demonstrates great deal of wickedness that even the mention of his name sends shivers down the spine of the common man.

Finally, the various aspects of myth reviewed above shall form the basis for the examination of the mythic patterns in the plays of Soyinka and Rotimi in section 2 below. Section 3 concludes the paper.

2. Soyinka and Rotimi's Use of Myth

Myth has pervasive influence in certain plays of Wole Soyinka and Ola Rotimi. In Soyinka's *The Bacchae of Euripides,* and *Rotimi's The Gods are Not to Blame,* among others, human existence is treated as a jigsaw puzzle, a very difficult one indeed. In these plays, the pattern of movement is from the heroic altitude, the protagonist who is supplicated and speaks like a god, only gradually to be cut down, "becoming despicable and loathsome in his own eyes" (Akwanya, 1998, p. 71).

In *The Bacchae* and *The Gods Are Not to Blame,* human existence is depicted as a riddle, a difficult one for that matter. In *The Bacchae*, man dares the omnipotence of the gods. In seeking to destroy the myth of Dionysos, Pentheus discovers belatedly that human existence is "but a journey towards death". With heroic attempts he tries to discredit Dionysos and wipe away his worship from the land. In order to realize his objective of publicly disgracing the wine-god, King Pentheus becomes militaristic both in bearing and speech. For example, in threatening to deal ruthlessly with Dionysos if apprehended, he swears:

> I'll initiate his balls from his thighs once
> We have him safely bound. I'll initiate
> That head away from his body (252).

In the above statement, Pentheus foreshadows his own fate and the nature of his death in the same manner Odewale in *The Gods Are Not to Blame* does, when he swears before Ogun to blind the killer of King Adetusa, whom as a matter of urgency, he must surely find out before the end of the ongoing Ogun festival . There seems to be likelihood that Dionysos heard Pentheus' empty boast for the text suggests that he is always everywhere. Both heroes, apart from their other foibles, lack "self-control which is normally born of self-knowledge" (38). They are highly volatile, intemperate and power drunk – all this help to make their decisions and actions a forecast of worse things yet to come. Pentheus is unable to restrain his anger and orders for the demolition of Tiresias' sacred home. In utter disregard for age considered by his own father, Kadmos, to be sacred she slaps an old man, causing him to fall flat on his face. Like King Odewale who accuses Aderopo, the chiefs and Baba Fakunle of accepting a bribe to cause him social effacement,

(see Act 2 scene 2), Pentheus accuses Tiresias of infidelity and selfishness:

> Another god revealed is a new way opened
> Into men's pockets, profit from offerings.
> Power over private lives – and state affairs. Don't deny it. I've known your busy priesthood manipulation (257).

Again, just as the promise of power constrains Odewale to abandon his once cherished fugitive life to settle in Kutuje for the purpose of enjoying royal patronage, Pentheus's love of power makes him to hold both men and gods in contempt. In demonstration of excess power, he arrests the god, shaves his hair, manacles him and throws him into his dark prison. However, the corrosive hatred and action never caused events to turn to his advantage just as Odewale's accusation of everyone and his mishandling of Alaka and Gbonka never helped him. Rather they draw him quickly towards his ruin, as an object of worship of the said god. The inability to know that the forces they fight against "move on a higher plane than towers and city walls" (277) caused Odewale and Pentheus to overreach themselves. This suggests that in spite of all his claims, man has limitation in creation, his position being far less than that of the gods. The Greeks who invented tragedy used it to put their moral philosophy into action, and aspects of this philosophy include that man should know himself and do nothing in excess. According to Eze:

> man must know that he is mortal and that there is an immensurable difference of power between him and the gods. Because of this, he should revere the gods, and do nothing to

equate himself to the celestial beings; else he would be robbed of his two eyes (77).

In examining the Greeks perception of the gods, Bowra observes that "the gods are beautiful in a way that appealed to more than the eye, in their inexhaustible power, their self-reliance, their perfect adjustment of mind and body" (Bowra, 1957, p. 59). He maintains that because of their unlimited power, "the gods can do on an enormous scale what man can do only faintly and fitfully, and much that he cannot do at all; they are assured of unfailing success and satisfaction" (p. 59). Soyinka and Rotimi accentuate this view in *The Bacchae of Euripides* and *The Gods Are Not to Blame* respectively. In spite of Pentheus's boastings and ruthless actions against the priest of Dionysos, Dionysos himself as well as Odewale's reason that not to do something is to be crippled fast and even his actual steps to evade fate, the texts demonstrate that they can never control the situation. Pentheus suffers and dies the thought of his own heart. On his march to the mountain expedition, Pentheus had said that he would be forced to kill his own mother if he found her "really doing something disgusting at those revels" (290). If he can find courage to kill his own mother, Dionysos assures him in an ironic statement that, "You shall return, Pentheus crafted in your mother's arms" (291). So when Agave fell on him "blind to plea of pity" (296), Pentheus dies of the ugly thought of his own heart. Similarly, Odewale suffers blindness and the slow death he had wished and decreed for the killer of King Adetusa. That certain predicaments feared by these characters eventually happened to them in spite of their attempts to evade them suggests that man can never rule his life no matter his efforts. Thought in these plays is encapsulated in the slave's statement in *The Bacchae* below:

For there are forces not ruled by us,

> And we obey them. Trust them. Though they travel
> inch by inch,
> They arrive (296).

The above suggests that fate is invincible and that man can never evade or defeat it. It is an exercise in futility to seek to tackle fate through human knowledge and ability. Human power can at best help fate to realize itself. In their efforts to make dark things plain, fate seizes Pentheus and Odewale's, hands and with them, slap their faces.

However, Soyinka, unlike Rotimi, uses ritual in *The Bacchae* from Artaud's (1958) perspective to drain the abscess, awaken a new sense of self and community. Antonin Artaud saw the theatre in its ritual form as a kind of safety valve through which unwanted emotions could be caused to escape. To Artaud, the most important aspects of existence are those submerged in the unconscious, those things that cause division within people and between people and lead to hatred, violence and disaster. He believed that if given the proper theatrical experiences, people can be freed from ferocity, and can then express that joy that civilization has forced them to repress for theatre can evacuate those feeling that are usually expressed in more destructive ways. Artaud's theatre is called the theatre of cruelty because he sought to use unfamiliar and shrill sounds, physical action, intimidating lighting, incantations, masks, apparitions, groans and cries etc. to attack the audience's nervous system. Soyinka seems to use the idea of ritual sacrifice, even of unwilling sacrifice, as we find in Pentheus, to further his belief in communal regeneration. In *The Bacchae*, the concept of regeneration is emphasized in the last scene of the play which ushers in "restitution for the oppressed and

renewal of the earth for all of its people" (Akporji, 2003, p. 163).

According to Cassirer, name in mythic thought does not only express the power of the bearer, it "actually constitutes" (1953, p. 51) the entire personality. There is a bond between language and mythico-religious consciousness. Word is the primary force in which all beings and doings originate. The name and what it stands for is one and the same thing. Invoke a name and you would have called forth the power it entails. The name of a deity or a person is efficacious because it embodies the real power inscribed in the name. In some of the plays of Wole Soyinka and Ola Rotimi, certain characters are venerated and feared because of the significance of their names. Soyinka and Rotimi celebrate the archetype of the King as a divine form. In Rotimi's *Ovonramwen Nogbaisi*, the Oba is called "Alaiyeluwa" (owner of earth and honour), "Lord of Benin" (15), Your Majesty" (23). In *Kurunmi* by the same playwright, the protagonist is variously addressed as "the unfathomable Granite, "Lord that must be obeyed" (13), "demander of absolutes", "The Lion himself" (14), "a towering masquerade" (15), etc. In Soyinka's *A Play of Giants*, where the Head of State replaced the king, all the Presidents are referred to as "Your Excellencies" (22), which is a symbol of supercilious aristocracy. Kamini, the principal character, demonstrates his towering stature by answering every name that appears grandiose and intimidating. He addresses himself as "Dr. Kamini, Life President of Bugara" (10). Kasco says that he is born to rule while Benefacio Ngunema claims to be born with an "imperial sign" (10). General Tuboum is addressed as "Life President Barra Tuboum" (18). Niyi Osundare has shown that "these names go beyond poetic hyperbole", they are "calculated to overwhelm the hearer with the awesome godlike omnipotence of the King, and drive home his own impotence

before such a behemoth of divine power" (Osundar, 1988, p.102).

In these plays, royal distance is maintained through language and the politics of address. Royal distance elevates respect to the level of reverence and worship. In *Kurunmi*; *The Gods Are Not to Blame* and *Ovonramwen Noghaisi*, royal presence is heralded by praise singing, and the people follow this up with "back-breaking bows, genuflections, prostrations and other groveling gymnastics" (102), as well as the chorusing of kabiyesi –o. Indeed, the King is a god, and the people are expected to worship him, sate his pleasure and obey his orders without question. The equation of the king with a god compels his subjects to seek help from him in their moments of trouble and pain. When we first see Odewale in *The Gods Are Not to Blame,* we see him as a god being supplicated to by the people of Kutuje. The people throng his throne for the purpose of obtaining cure for common ailments. The idea that the king is omnipotent may have informed this action. Kamini's perception of himself as a god in ***A Play of Giants*** propels him to extort royal distance and fear from the sculptor by force. Kamini feels that the sculptor demystifies his godhood by seeking to sit on the same pedestal with him, by thinking that there is another person higher than him he can report him to and by assuming that Kamini's status is only fit for exhibition in the "Chamber of Horrors" (20). For all these presumed attempts to destroy Kamini's omnipotence, the sculptor pays dearly. The stage direction describes his experience as he tries to evade Kamini's wrath thus:

> He is hardly half out through the door when his body is forcefully propelled from outside. His muffled screams are followed by blows and the sound of stamping boots. Further groans and

> blows, then the sound of a body being dragged on the floor (34).

Furthermore, characters like Pentheus, Odewale, Oba Ovonramwen, Kurunmi, Kamini, Ngunema, Kasco and Tuboum bubble with divine exuberance and demonstrate, according to Frye, "the greatest possible power of action" (134) for they see themselves as being above the law. According to Akwanya, the absolutism of these characters is "symmetrical, and overlies the rampage of power naked in mythic times" (*Verbal Structures* 152). In their reckless exercise of power, they show that they hold the power of life and death in their hands. In *A Play of Giants*, we see despots turn into chimeras and sphinxes. Having wipped out all the supposedly subversive elements in his country, Tuboum reserves three out of the ring-leaders to be "served up at cocktail" (18). By eating human flesh, the despots not only taste power physically, but use their crimes to magnify their appearance on the statecraft. For Kamini, anyone whose view is perceived to be contrary to his own is automatically branded a "Kondo", which means subversive element. According to him, "I catch a Kondo, I make him smell his mother's cunt" (2). Just for his usage of a figure of speech, which Kamini finds derogatory in describing Bugaran currency, the Chairman of Bugaran Currency is branded by Kamini as Kondo. To punish him for what he sees as an act of economic sabotage, Kamini orders his Task Force Special thus:

> Take this coat and tie Kondo inside that toilet room there and put his head in the bowl …. Each time tank full, you flush it again over his head (8).

This display of cruelty to his governor of the central bank is an indication that the despot has no respect for human dignity whatsoever. Kamini's abuse of power reaches its peak when at the end of the play, he orders that everybody - the demonstrators and the hostages be brought to a common ruin. The last stage direction of the play sums up this gruesome display of power:

> Guns and rocket launchers open up everywhere. The whine of rockets mingles with the boon of exploding grenades. Screams and panic (69).

To Kamini, therefore, everyone must go to blazes if he does not rule. Benefacio Ngunema's vengeful action appears even worse. For him, the punishment for any offence against him must be felt by the relations of the offenders. According to him, guilt "extends beyond the grave" (17). This implies that he can rip open the bowels of the earth to punish an offender's loved ones if they are already sleeping with their fathers. To maintain absolute control, Ngunema combines terror with voodoo. In his own words, "I surveillance all my subjects – wherever I am" (26). Of course, he does this with the help of charms.

Similarly, when *Ovonramwen Nogbaisi* opens, we are immediately confronted with brutality. Certain Chiefs are agonizing in Oba's prison for killing Uwangue Egiebo in retaliation for the King's killing of their brother who fail to support his ascension to power. In a show of palpable influence upon his subjects, the Oba, in order to maintain control sentences the Chiefs to death. The aim is to warn his ruling elders that his reign is "unopen for rivalry throughout the empire" (7), as well as to let the people know that he is "set to rule as king after the manners of his fathers before him" (6-7). Similarly, for maintaining double loyalty, he places an embargo

on Ijekiri traders and when they plead for clemency, he tells them:

> I deal lightly with men no more.
> Indeed harshly now have I learned that if like soap you try to make men clean, Like soap you will dwindle in the act (8).

To lift the ban, he asks for twenty thousand zinc sheets before "the face of rainy season begins to spit" 10). In the same manner, outraged that Udezi of Akure fashions for himself royal swords, he commands Opele his war Lord to go and seize them:

> I must have them here on your return, or kegs of gunpowder will remind him that Akure is still part of the empire handed me by my fathers" (9-10).

Ovonramwen's actions indicate his unwillingness to tolerate any form of secession, as well as his readiness to hold the empire together by all means, especially by means of force.

In *The Gods Are Not to Blame*, Odewale invokes his almighty power when he feels that human intrigue is behind what he considers to be Baba Fakunle's presumptuous accusation. As a god who determines the fate of his subjects, he banishes Aderopo for supposedly being behind all the attempts to dissolve him socially and morally. He threatens Alaka with a matchet for prevaricating in telling him all he knows about his origin. However, it is his threat to Gbonka that reveals to him in detail, the devastating picture of his precarious existence and the real face of fate.

In gambling with his community, Pentheus, according to Adebayo Williams, shows himself, as "a symbol of mindless aristocracy" (38). As *The Bacchae* opens, we see the slaves in

deep anguish of the soul, for one of them is soon to be flogged to death in the name of rites of passage. In spite of the complaint that the slaves do not in any way benefit from the rites, Pentheus would agree with Kadmos his father that, "If circumcision is what is needed to make a 'Bacchae smock', a couple of thousands of slaves can be forcefully circumcised" (252). The implication is that the slaves are sub-human beings and are only valuable as objects of sacrifice. However, Kadmos' statement that "Thebes has fallen out of love with the fossilized past and needs to embrace a new vitality" (252), can be interpreted to mean that the people are tired of Pentheus's despotic rule and, therefore, require a new lease of life, even if it is only a spiritual one. So the people's alignment with Dionysos is as a result of their urgent need for regeneration, Dionysos being the god of vitality as it were, is deemed to be "the storehouse of life", as well as the "eternal ivy on the wand of life" (251). At the end of the play, Pentheus instead of the slave, is slaughtered by the people in the rites of passage as a sign of liberation. Adebayo William argues that "Pentheus's ritual sacrifice becomes an atonement … not only because the aristocracy is tyrannical but also because of its alienation from nature". (41)

In portraying the King as a divine form, the plays of Wole Soyinka, *A Play of Giants*, and *The Bacchae* showcase the crudest barbarities men sometimes display when intoxicated with power. Pentheus and the presidents never considered any opinion except their own. They seem to have crossed human boundary and now operating on the plane of monstrosity. Kurunmi and Ovonramwen accept and respect opinions. Kamini is very inconsiderate and for him, everything must go to blazes if he does not rule.

Soyinka and Rotimi's mythical plays are constructed upon solid metaphysical foundation. Here attempts are made to

show the reality of the spiritual world through the establishment of contact between men and the region of the gods, and spirits. Metaphysical awareness is created through the visible appearance of gods, and spirits, as well as through their explicit imagistic symbols. Contact is equally established through rituals and communual festivals. In Soyinka's *The Bacchae,* the god Dionysos appears in physical form as a dramatis personae. In Rotimi's plays such as *The Gods Are Not to Blame*, *Kurunmi* and *Ovonramwen Nogbaisi*, they appear in their imagistic symbols such as shrines or metallic objects representing Ogun for example. Agave does not kill Pentheus out of a conscious will, but does so under possession by Dionysos. Of course, when she regains consciousness, she regrets her action and mourns the loss of a dear son. This demonstrates the veracity of Akwanya's view that

> At the narrational level, the insertion of myths and legends leaves a sense of there being something deep in the bowels of history that is engineering the events, which undercurrent then is the ultimate cause of the incidents and recruits and puts the characters to work in realization of a purpose of which they know nothing" (Akwanya, 2004, p. 151).

In *The Gods are Not to Blame*, and *Ovonramwen Nogbaisi*, man is depicted as a prisoner of his past. Having lived a life of crime, Odewale is caused to produce children through his own mother while Ovonramwen is forced to suffer the type of anguish and sorrow he had subjected his people to.

Another major way of establishing contact between the humans and the invisible world in mythic literature which the plays of Soyinka and Rotimi exploited in detail is ritual.

Adedeji submits on this that, "the strategy of the dramatist of folkloricism is to ritualize the dramatic action, to bring about a new reality through spiritual intuition" (Adedeji, 1987, p. 106). Ritual is used here to explain the relationship between matter and essence, the physical and the spiritual realms. But Soyinka and Rotimi seem to use ritual in their plays for different purposes. With respect to Rotimi's use of ritual, Uwatt (2007) states:

> It could be rightly concluded that in Rotimi's plays, ritual presence is not just an impulsion to Africanize or to establish a definite cultural identity for the Nigerian Theatre. Rather, ritual is significant in his overall dramaturgical conception and practice. In ritual, Rotimi has found an idiom … which he uses to initiate, resolve or intensify situational or human conflict. He uses ritual to achieve unity of time and action, anticipate and foreshadow events, as well as bridge the gap between present and past dramatic action (Uwatt, 2007, p. 39-40).

Uwatt appears to suggest that for Rotimi, ritual is not just a mythic tool of unraveling the messages wafted in the spiritual realm from cultural perspective, but chiefly an instrument of realizing dramatic purposes and intentions. Such purposes include foreshadowing, conflict generation and resolution, temporal expression, among others.

A major dramatic function of ritual in Rotimi's plays is the foreshadowing of future events. Duruaku (1997) observes that "Foreshadowing indicates the playwright's awareness of the need for an organic structure in his plot, such that nothing is

'sudden' and no turn of events will be seen as incredible or intrusive" (Duruaku, 1997, p. 8-9). Through the use of divination ritual, Rotimi foreshadows the fate of the heroes early in *The Gods Are Not to Blame* and *Ovonramwen Nogbaisi*. In these plays, the heroes are led through divination, into the cosmic sphere for the purposes of knowing what fate has for them in terms of future events. It is the diviner that tells us that Odewale will kill his father and marry his mother. The future doom that waits Oba Ovonramwen is revealed to him by the Ifa priest thus:

> Oba Alaiyeluwa, Lord of Benin … the shadows I see over your empire are heavy. Too heavy and … and dark … Your Highness the death I see here is not the death of one man. Bodies of men … fire … and blood … bodies floating (15).

These foreshadowed events initiated the first conflict in the plays because the heroes are not prepared to allow the doom to occur. For Odewale, man must struggle, though the future is not bright. Oba Alaiyeluwa adopts the tactics of surveillance in order to ward off fate. He commands Okavbioghe, his Chief security officer thus:

> Every town must, night and day,
> keep watch on the movements of the white men,
> and report at once the route and manner
> of any strange advance (20).

However, the Oba's road-map to avert the predicted doom actually turns out to be the shortest route of bringing about the doom. The white men defy Alaiyeluwa's surveillance tactics,

entering Benin in her most sacred week. This inauspicious visit throws the Oba-in-council into pensive condition and deep dilemma. Iyase touches on this when he says:

> Your Majesty, our teeth have touched a bone.
> Which end must we crack?
> To break custom and so anger the gods
> of our fathers, or to break the white man's
> pride with resistance to his coming
> and thereby rouse his wrath? (33).

While this situation throws the Oba into a deep moment of equivocation and his council suffers a major crisis of conscience, the soldiers on surveillance jubilantly enter, carrying decapitated heads of white men. This act which does not amount to an exercise of caution as warned by the Ifa priest, combines with the reverberating voice of the prisoners that had earlier warned the Oba about the coming of the white men, to push the Oba into the abyss of fear and despair. Like Macbeth, he feels that Benin has murdered sleep:

> Children of our fathers, Benin, I fear, has this day swallowed a long pestle; now we shall have to sleep standing upright (37).

The killing of the white men is akin to opening the mythic Pandora box. And this turn of events compels the Oba to accept the option of war because he is fully aware that as King Odewale would say, "He who pelts another with pebbles asks for rocks in return" (7).

Furthermore, ritual festivals such as the Ague festival in *Ovonramwen Nogbaisi* and the Ogun Festival in *The Gods Are Not to Blame,* are used for "temporal dramatic expression"

(Uwatt, 2007, p. 152). It is at the commencement of the festival of Ogun that Orunmila reveals the killer of King Adetusa. Now Odewale swears before Ogun that he must find out the killer of Adetusa and punish such person with blindness and slow death before the end of the festival. Setting a limit of time for the accomplishment of this task accounts for the urgency employed by Odewale in his search and the quick succession in which events turn out and discoveries are made. In *Ovonramwen Noghaisi*, the Ague festival becomes the moment of physical combat, a period of clash of wills between the Oba and the white men. The moment of mere verbal quibble is over. The chord of patience snaps and the two bulls must lock horns.

Again, oath-taking is another type of ritual employed in these plays for the purposes of dramatic dividends. Oath is used to create, heighten and resolve dramatic tension, it being the stamp of finality in decision-making. In *The Gods Are Not to Blame*, Odewale swears to Ogun when 'trouble brews in the land' and "peace too is no more" (6), not to rest on his oars nor shift any ground until he finds and destroys the killer of Adetusa. This exacerbates the conflict of the play because in order to prove his indefatigability, Odewale pitches himself against everyone. First, he accuses the Chiefs of accepting bribe to mastermind the death of their former king. As saboteurs, they must be feared because "when crocodiles eat their own eggs what will they not do to the flesh of a frog?" (23). In Act 2 scene 2, he takes another oat, which enables him to banish Aderopo now considered the chief suspect of the ploy to bring him down. In anger, he wishes Aderopo to marry his own mother and "to bear children by her" (31). It is a pity to conceive in his heart and utter with his own mouth the same evil for which the gods make sport of him. He threatens Gbonka and Alaka especially for suggesting that he is a

bastard. He had earlier referred to Baba Fakunle as a pig, a sentient and blind corrupt priest. However, at the moment of truth, he realized that he is not a loosener of riddles as he had claimed, but indeed a pig in a deep mire, a dweller in darkness, who through a presumptuous claim of innocence seeks to bribe the gods to be on his side.

Although ritual may appear to have been used in Soyinka's plays to achieve similar dramatic objectives, Soyinka utilizes ritual especially ritual of self-sacrifice in which the protagonists are destroyed, chiefly as a means of atonement. In *The Bacchae*; the blood of the tyrant Pentheus fertilizes the ground. In *Death and the King's Horseman* ritual suicide is carried out for the sake of communual renewal. It is used to forge a bond among the living, the dead and the unborn – an aspect of Yoruba cosmogony. It is used to ensure existential continuity. The praise-singer reminds Elesin Oba as he dances on the threshold of the abyss of transition that "Our world was never wrenched from its course". Elesin assures him that he will not fail the community; that since that world never got smashed on the boulder of the great void in the "time of my father". "…it shall not in mine". About his preparedness, he tells the Praise-Singer:

> My rein is loosened.
> I am master of my fate.
> When the hour comes watch me dance along the narrowing path
> Glazed by the soles of my great precursors
> My soul is eager. I shall not turn aside (153).

However, when the love for life and Pilkngs's intervention constrain Elesin to betray his people, Olunde kills himself in his father's stead in order "not to let honour fly out of the door".

Another individualizing feature of mythic plays used in the plays under examination is the keeping and usage of slaves as objects of sacrifice. As *The Bacchae* opens, we are immediately confronted with this human perfidy. A slave is about to be flogged to death in an unspeakable annual rites of passage. When the leader of the slaves in anguish of the soul complains, "why us? Why always us", the Herdsman in a show of contempt retorts, "why not?" (237). Of course, the death of slaves is no death at all. This is primarily the reason Kadmos says, "If circumcision is what is needed to make a "Bacchae Smock", a couple of thousands of slaves can be forcefully circumcised" (252). Similarly, in *Ovonramwen Nogbaisi*; the Oba in thinking of defying tradition instead of facing the superior power of the white men suggests to his council:

> The Gods are a part of our existence …
> They feel with us our dangers; they share with us the peace. The blood of slaves spilled upon their altars in prayer for wrongs done them, is enough to calm their anger and win them back into our existence again (34).

Ovonramwen's statement is ironical and pregnant with meaning. The Oba is afraid of challenging his fellow men in battle, but he thinks that he can placate offended gods through cruelties meted to the slaves. Of course his banishment into a strange land at the end of the play is akin to being sold into slavery. In his mental agony he blames both men and gods for allowing him to experience abominations unknown to his fathers before him.

Overall, the issue of slavery is raised in these plays in order to reveal human perversity. Here, man seeks to liberate himself from fate, but he creates situations of bondage around

himself. If a man carries a heavy baggage of guilt on his head as a result of conscious exercise of his free-will, he certainly constitutes part of his existential problem. This appears to be another aspect of the light which mythic plays shed on the ultimate cause of the human predicament. This is corroborated by two statements made by Odewale in Act Three Scone 4, where he says:

> No. no! Do not blame the Gods. Let no one blame the powers … The power would have failed if I do not let them use me … I once slew a man on my farm in Ede. I could have spared him (71).

This implies that Odewale realizes that he falls short of contemplative life. He ought to have known that he who lives in a glass house does not throw stones. In full awareness that the wages of sin is death, he tells the Chiefs who try to prevent him from moving out of the palace into exile thus:

> Let no one stop us and let no one come with us
> or
> I shall curse him …
> When
> The wood – insect
> Gathers sticks,
> On its own head it
> Carries
> Them (72)

3. CONCLUSION

This paper examined diverse views on myth and its associated concept – mythic ideation before exploring the

mythic patterns and operational modes in selected plays of Wole Soyinka and Ola Rotimi. The study posits that myth illustrates the complex and startling state of human existence and cannot be wished away as mere fabrication. It equally shows that Soyinka and Rotimi used their plays to illuminate the dark impulses of life as well as the humans' contribution to their predicament. The texts are used to elaborate the theme of fate, the notion of the king as a divine form, the modes of supernatural influence on man and man's misconception of his position and limit of knowledge. They also reveal the tenuous gap between man and beast and, through an unending tapestry of violence, depict that human existence has not differed at all from the Homeric battlefield and the fact that existence is not exclusively structured by reason and empiricism.

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