

# Transcending Boundaries: Wole Soyinka's Fusion of African and Western Dramatic Traditions in *A Dance of the Forests*

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Article Detail:	Abstract
<p>Received: 07 Jan 2024; Received in revised form: 09 Feb 2024; Accepted: 19 Feb 2024; Available online: 28 Feb 2024</p> <p>©2024 The Author(s). Published by International Journal of English Language, Education and Literature Studies (IJEEL). This is an open access article under the CC BY license <a href="https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/">(https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/)</a></p> <p><b>Keywords</b> – <i>A Dance of the Forests, Wole Soyinka, tragedy, African drama, Yoruba.</i></p>	<p>The objective of this research article is to investigate the innovative fusion of Western and indigenous performance traditions that Wole Soyinka employs in his celebrated tragedy, <i>A Dance of the Forests</i>. This study identifies specific indigenous and European forms and performance idioms that contribute to Soyinka's tragedy through an in-depth analysis of the play's structure, themes, and performance techniques. This article emphasises Soyinka's incorporation of Western theatrical devices and traditions, as well as Yoruba mythology and traditional performance elements such as percussion, dance, music, and song. The reclamation and affirmation of precolonial indigenous theatrical forms and performance idioms make a substantial contribution to the assertion of indigenous identity. Soyinka's use of dramaturgy in <i>A Dance of the Forests</i> exemplifies the theatre's capacity to transcend artistic and cultural limitations. This article positions Soyinka's dramatic work as a response to the asserted dominance of Western modernity, reflecting a post-colonial society's endeavour to establish a legacy of alternative modernity in the artistic sphere.</p>

Prominent African playwrights such as Wole Soyinka have been exploring the rich potential of a newly evolved dramatic form by blending Western dramatic techniques with indigenous performance traditions in modern African drama. Soyinka, who has been eloquent about the 'artificial gap between the theatre in Yoruba and the theatre in English' has been enthusiastic about dissolving the border line between European and African theatre by fusing local traditional dramatic forms with European traditions in his dramas. The fusion of Western and African dramatic traditions in Wole Soyinka's celebrated tragedy, *A Dance of the Forests*, subverts the authority

of European theatrical norms, revitalizing marginalized native cultural and artistic traditions. The reclamation and affirmation of precolonial indigenous theatrical forms and performance idioms significantly contribute to the assertion of indigenous identity. The purpose of this research article is to examine the innovative fusion of Western and indigenous performance traditions that Wole Soyinka appropriates in his renowned tragedy, *A Dance of the Forests*. This study conducts a comprehensive examination of the play's structure, themes, and performance techniques to identify specific indigenous and European forms and performance

idioms that contribute to the formation of Soyinka's tragedy.

Both indigenous and European forms and elements inform Soyinka's dramas. The Yoruba worldview, Yoruba myths, Yoruba festivals, Yoruba rites, and elements of both Yoruba oral prose and poetry, among others, give his plays their unique local flavour. One also notices the incorporation of traditional performance elements like dance, music, drumming, song, mime, pantomime, mimicry, masquerade, puppetry, acrobatics, incantation and invocation, proverbs, etc., which offer tremendous variety and energy to his plays. According to Dubem Okafor, "Soyinka's cyclical plots, spare narrative content, large number of characters, characterization that hardly elicits empathy, cryptic language, symbolic music, and oracular dances, sometimes by masked figures, are all borrowings from African rituals and festivals" (qtd. in Peyma 79). Kacke Gotrick has claimed that although Soyinka borrowed from the elements and devices of the Apidan theatre, one of the traditional forms of Yoruba masquerade theatre, and used them according to their original structural conventions, the alchemy of Soyinka's genius transformed these materials into something new, which was certainly greater than the individual sources (25-6). Most of Soyinka's plays also follow the established classical paradigm for dramatic construction. They also adhere to Western generic patterns, albeit with occasional modifications in an African context. Soyinka's dramas are also replete with instances illustrating the use of Western theatrical devices and traditions, such as classical myth, flashbacks, absurdist traditions, play within a play, and the effective utilization of light and blackouts.

Soyinka's *A Dance of the Forests* is a signal contribution to the repertoire of postcolonial African drama. It is also a kind of artistic response to Western dramatic tradition from an African writer. In the course of the action of the drama, a group of characters are estranged from each other in a dense forest by some outside divine forces, and during such wanderings caused by the manipulation of such forces, they recognize their true selves and destinies. Finally, they return to the normal world, infused with a renewed sense of self and heightened awareness. This brief outline of the plot clearly echoes

Shakespearean plays like *A Midsummer Night's Dream* or *As You Like It*. Gerald Moore identifies the play's basic structure as that of classical comedies involving transformation of character or restitution of lost power or friendship (30). However, the play's prevailing mood is far from the comic mood of Shakespearean or classical comedies, as it depicts the iterative nature of human suffering at the hands of a corrupt oppressor. The play maintains a pervasive tone of gloom throughout by exposing the repetitive futility, folly, and waste of human history, thereby endowing it with its tragic appeal. Thus, Soyinka, while borrowing the basic form of Western drama, has moulded it to his own artistic imperatives, as he is concerned with awakening his countrymen, who are celebrating their independence, to the awareness that their future might prove worse than their past unless they learn from the past and abstain from repeating their wrongs.

Among the Western dramatic devices employed, the example of 'A Play within the Play', which resembles a 'masque' and represents the actions that occurred in the court of the African emperor Mata Kharibu in the 12<sup>th</sup> century, might be cited. The intent behind such insertion is to allow the past to interact with the present and offer the selected characters a glimpse into their past to enable them to have consciousness of their sins, which would call for atonement. Again, such insertion provides Soyinka with the opportunity to introduce classical tragic notions of 'hubris' and 'hamartia' into the confines of his play (Msiska 57). Mata Kharibu fails to recognize the underlying meaning of the soothsayer's prophecy, as he predicts, "I see much blood Mata Kharibu. On both sides of the plough" (Soyinka, *CP1* 52). At this, an insolent Kharibu, who considers any rare gesture of opposition as a crime, replies, "I will be satisfied with that. Does it not mean a great battle?" (52). Like classical tragic heroes, Kharibu suffers from 'hubris' and makes a judgement of error that ultimately leads to his downfall.

Like Soyinka's other ritualistic tragedy, *The Strong Breed*, *A Dance of the Forests* also depends on the structure of the cinematic alternations between scenes of the past and present. But while in *The Strong Breed* only living characters participate in such scenes, in *A Dance of the Forests*, these scenes introduce both the world of the living and the world of the dead. Modern

Western modes of representation borrow important techniques like 'flashbacks', which give seemingly contemporaneous actions their historical and cosmological origins. Gibbs finds in 'The Chorus of the Ants' a clear inspiration from an episode in the Kapek brother's expressionist drama *The Insect Play* (30). He also notes that the inclusion of the bloody 'triplets' clearly reflects the influence of the Triplets, who provided suggestions about Macbeth's future in *Macbeth* (30). Demoke's suffering on the burning tree reflects the passion of the crucified Christ. Both Demoke and Christ looked at sacrifice as a means of regeneration. Mary T. David, in the play's emphasis on the necessity of regeneration as a remedy to the repetitive sinfulness of nations or individuals, notices its Christian spirit through consciousness of sin and expiation (62-3).

Despite the influence of Western dramas, dramatic modes, motifs, and traditions, Soyinka, determined to establish a unique style of African drama for his compatriots to follow, imbues *A Dance of the Forests* with an African flavour. This is achieved through his intricate use of traditional Yoruba cosmology as its backdrop and his dramatic exploitation of a variety of indigenous performance idioms. For Soyinka, the play proves to be fertile ground where he can intermingle African history and cosmology with European history through his introduction of the theme of the slave trade as depicted during Mata Kharibu's reign. Mata Kharibu's General demonstrates a paradigm of redemptive leadership that is quite similar to Soyinka's other tragic protagonists, such as Eman (*The Strong Breed*) and Olunde (*Death and the King's Horseman*). Soyinka's use of the motif of the reenactment of the past to help people benefit from it can be traced back to the traditional method of Ifa divination, in which every Ifa priest makes his client see the incidents of the past so that the client may learn from them. As Wande Abimbola comments, "History is the language of Ifa divination, and histories make men wise" (qtd. in Dugga 73). Regarding the play's borrowing from Yoruba traditions, James Gibbs comments: "Its cast-list includes Yoruba deities, and variations on them, and it incorporates Yoruba-style purification rituals and dance drama within a structure which is derived from a New Year festival" (30-1).

Other elements from African tradition that are incorporated in this play include the employment of the *Egungun* masquerade tradition in "The Dance of Welcome," presented by three masked mortals; the use of the traditional belief in the forest as the abode of the spirits; the employment of the belief in four modes of existence; the exploitation of the traditional concept of an 'Abiku' represented in the play by the Half-child; the use of Yoruba purification ritual; the use of a festival like "The Gathering of the Tribes" as the play's background; the use of African children's games; the use of the concept of talking animals represented by the ants; Agboreko's rites of divination; and so on.

Soyinka was following Fagunwa and Tutuola in using the forest as a mediator between the supernatural world and mortals. However, European literature also employs the 'forest' as a dramatic setting. O'Neill's *Emperor Jones* or James Barrie's *Dear Brutus* could be cited as examples (Gibbs 62-3). As Moore suggests, both the forest and dance motifs are drawn from "a deep layer of African spiritual experience" (30). The forest is chosen as a site for renewal or self-discovery for the characters. In fact, Soyinka was attempting to create a total theatre with the fullest exploitation of total theatre idioms like music, dance, masquerade, and mime.

Obi Maduakor identifies several categories of dance employed in the drama that are not always physical and often illustrate the rhythm of a life: the dance of welcome, the dance of the Half-Child, the dance of exorcism, the dance of the unwilling sacrifice, the dance around the totem, etc. As Maduakor claims, "The word 'dance' operates at various levels of meaning in the play, and is not always associated with agitated body movement. In most of the Yoruba ritual dances, a step or two might be sufficient. We have dance as drama, dance as ritual, dance as the movement of transition, and dance as festival. The entire dramatic enactment itself, as the title of the play implies, is conceived as dance" (qtd. in Dugga 78).

The miserable plight of the Dead Woman and the Half-Child prompts Soyinka to use two finely composed dramatic songs. Another exciting feature of *A Dance of the Forests* which marks its distinctive African character is exhibited in the playwright's deep penchant for using Yoruba proverbs and sayings. The play also employs forms of English that capture the

metaphoric style of Yoruba speech. Many of the characters' speeches contain expressions that resemble the style of Yoruba proverbs. As Bruce King observes, "Soyinka's plays often contrast characters who use creatively the metaphoric, elliptic form of Yoruba sayings with stuffy, often corrupt traditionalists who attempt to impress with obscure proverbs" (84).

Soyinka's accommodation of alien European artistic devices finds its parallel in the accommodative nature of African metaphysics. In the article "The Fourth Stage," Soyinka writes:

The Yoruba metaphysics of accommodation and resolution could only come after the passage of the gods through the transitional gulf, after the demonic test of the self-will of Ogun the explorer-god in the creative cauldron of cosmic powers. Only after such testing could the harmonious Yoruba world be born, a harmonious will which accommodates every alien material or abstract phenomenon within its infinitely stressed spirituality. (145-46)

One could interpret Soyinka's dramatic work as an attempt by a post-colony to establish a legacy of alternative modernity in the artistic sphere, a reaction to the assertion of Western modernity's dominance. Simultaneously, his dramas are the product, as a postcolonial writer, of his dual inheritance of indigenous and European cultural and intellectual traditions, as well as a vigorous refutation of the popular Eurocentric discourses preaching Africans' intellectual and cultural inferiority.

Soyinka's dramaturgy in *A Dance of the Forests* is a testament to the theatre's ability to transcend cultural and artistic boundaries, thereby fostering a more inclusive and diverse global stage. Soyinka's approach to articulating intricate post-colonial identities and histories involves the integration of Yoruba mythology and ritual with Western narrative and dramatic conventions. By making a perfect synthesis of indigenous dramatic forms and elements that form part of African performance tradition with the dramatic forms and traditions of European drama, Soyinka has generated a highly energetic and

innovative brand of modern African drama. Instead of ignoring indigenous performance traditions as 'traditional,' Soyinka has revived, popularised, and made them palatable to a global audience. He has modified these traditions by incorporating some valuable elements from the Western literary corpus to make them acceptable in a modern context.

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