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The politics of adaptation: contemporary African drama and Greek tragedy

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CHAPTER 3

Ritual and Revolution: Wole Soyinka's *Bacchae*, a Yoruba Tragedy

What has to be sacrificed is the grandeur of a Hellas that refused Afro-Asiatic syncretism. The Afro-Asian god must retrieve his place in the ancient Greek city-state so that ... a true sense of history, a history that has been heinously homogenized and expunged, may prevail.

—Chantal Zabus

When the present is intolerable,
the unknown harbours no risks.

—Wole Soyinka's *Bacchae*

In the previous chapter, I discussed two dramatic texts that explore Antigone's political relevance within contemporary African contexts. I analysed how these texts challenge Antigone's conventional status as a Western canonical figure and how they extend her political legacy, confronting the dominant conception of tragedy as an a-political genre. I identified, in other words, a "politics of adaptation" through which Greek tragedy's discursive context and definition are challenged. In this chapter, I further explore this politics in another adaptation of Greek tragedy: *The Bacchae of Euripides: A Communion Rite* (first performed in 1972, published in 1973) by Nigerian playwright and Nobel laureate Wole Soyinka. The title of Soyinka's play explicitly points to the ambiguity of its double status as both a revision of an antecedent text and a unique work of art. While the main heading *The Bacchae of Euripides* emphasises the Greek tragedy, the subtitle *A Communion Rite* flags Soyinka's departure from this pre-text, marking its modification to a different cultural context where it acquires new relevance as a "communion rite."

Euripides' *Bacchae* (405 BC) dramatises the confrontation between Dionysus, who returns to his native Thebes, and his cousin King Pentheus, who denies Dionysus' divinity and refuses to worship him. As punishment for this blasphemy, Dionysus causes the women of Thebes to be possessed by his spirit and tear Pentheus to shreds. The tragedy concludes with chaos and destruction. In his adaptation, Soyinka roughly follows Euripides' plot, but he also makes significant changes. Most importantly, he gives his play colonial and postcolonial relevance, transforming Thebes into a society of slavery, Pentheus into an oppressive tyrant and Dionysus into a revolutionary leader. In Soyinka's Yoruba-inspired *Bacchae*, the emphasis falls on Dionysus as a force of liberation.

My focus in this chapter is twofold. In the first sections, I analyse the ways in which in his adaptation of Euripides, Soyinka draws on Yoruba mythology and cosmology to emphasise the revolutionary potential of ritual sacrifice. I begin by exploring how Soyinka sets the stage for the "communion rite" that concludes his *Bacchae* through his rendition of Thebes. I then consider Soyinka's ritualist aesthetics as revealed in his refiguration of Dionysus and in his dramatisation of the sacrifice of Pentheus. In the final section, I shift focus to Soyinka's theorisation of "Yoruba tragedy." Here, I am especially interested in the cultural politics that his theory performs, through the ambiguous relation it establishes between African and Greek contexts. This politics, I argue, can also be discerned in Soyinka's refiguration of Dionysus as a god who resembles his Greek counterpart, but not quite. In the first chapter, I suggested that adaptation is per definition characterised by such a double gesture of establishing similarity and difference, familiarity and foreignness. Soyinka seems particularly aware of the political potential that this ambiguity offers and, as I hope to demonstrate, puts it to strategic use. His choice of title is a good indication of this: in referencing Euripides, Soyinka embeds him in his text, literally making the *Bacchae* his own. At the same time, however, as Mark Pizzato points out, "his play is obviously not *The Bacchae* of Euripides" (2003: 43).¹

Before commencing my analysis, let me note that Soyinka's choice to rework a Greek tragedy reflects his conviction that artists should feel free to take from other traditions, as long as they take their reference points from within their culture. Such cross-cultural eclecticism may be a suspect notion for cultural essentialists, since

¹ For Pizzato, Soyinka subverts the dominance of the European tradition in postcolonial Africa with the note of mimicry (2003: 43). The term "mimicry" is used by postcolonial theorist Homi Bhabha to refer to the process in which the colonising culture is copied in a way that contains both mockery and menace (1994: 121-131). Through its "double vision" mimicry discloses the ambivalence of colonial discourse and thereby disrupts its authority (126). As I have mentioned, in this study I want to move beyond a definition (in my view reductive) of African reworkings of Western canonical texts as responses to colonialism. I therefore consider the double gesture to which Bhabha and Pizzato refer not in terms of mimicry, but as a characteristic of adaptation more generally.

the recourse to Western tradition could be a way for non-Western artists to “earn” a place within the Western canon. Soyinka, however, insists that it is not a matter of responding to Western standards, but of refusing to “preach the cutting off of any source of knowledge: Oriental, European, African, Polynesian, or whatever” (Jeyifo 2001: 123). Soyinka’s celebration of Yoruba culture while claiming “membership of a universal republic of letters” has elicited varied responses: some find that his work demonstrates a traditionalism that isolates it from a larger international readership; others blame him of “Europhile intellectualism” and argue that his recourse to Western traditions, his use of English and his often dense style makes his work elitist, harming the possibility of finding an authentic Nigerian voice (George 2003: 145-145; Jeyifo 2001: 123). Soyinka expresses little patience with such “Neo-tarzanists,” who

lack the intellectual capacity ... to even appreciate the kind of exploration which I am making into points of departure as well as meeting points between African and European literary and artistic traditions, quite unabashedly exploiting these various complementarities, or singularities, or contradictions, in my own work. (Jeyifo 2001: 123)

As I will demonstrate, Soyinka not only uses these complementarities, singularities and contradictions to emphasise the fluidity of culture, but also to enact a politics. In order to make that visible, let me first turn to Soyinka’s rendition of Thebes in his adaptation of the *Bacchae*.

(POST)COLONIAL THEBES

Given the prominent role Soyinka ascribes to ritual, it is fitting that the National Theatre in London asked him to rework Euripides’ *Bacchae*, the Greek tragedy that takes ritual as its focus most explicitly. Soyinka’s primary considerations in taking on the commission seem of a more contextual nature. In the introduction to the first published edition, he presents the “historical canvas” of ancient Greece as analogous to that of postcolonial Nigeria, explaining that the social, economical, religious and cultural changes that Greece underwent as it developed from an agrarian to a commercial society with an imperial agenda, parallel the changes Africa underwent after colonialism (1973: vii). Soyinka draws an analogy between postcolonial Africa and imperial Greece; hence he does not align or compare European colonialism with Greek imperialism. As a result, it could be argued, Soyinka complicates a comparison that, as I discussed in the first chapter, has been employed both to criticise and to legitimise modern colonial practices. He also makes it impossible to equate Greek

tragedy with colonialism or, by extension, to reduce an African adaptation of a Greek tragedy to a response to colonialism.²

There are notable similarities between the positions of Euripides and Soyinka within their respective societies, as both were forced to write their plays abroad. No longer welcome in Athens because of his unpopular opinion about Greek politics, Euripides was living in self-imposed exile in Macedonia. From there he observed the changes Athens was undergoing as it drew to the end of the Peloponnesian War. Soyinka composed his play in exile as well, shortly after the Civil War, commonly known as the “Biafran war” (1967-1970), which followed the attempted secession of the south-eastern provinces of Nigeria as the self-proclaimed Republic of Biafra and resulted in around three million deaths. During this war, Soyinka had been imprisoned for nearly two years because of his critical and satirical pieces about the political corruption and dictatorial megalomania in Nigeria. When after his release he continued to speak out against the authorities, it became unsafe to remain in Nigeria and he left for England (Sotto 1985: 11-13).

Through various modifications Soyinka gives the *Bacchae* colonial and postcolonial resonance. Thebes is transformed into an oppressive society, ruled by the tyrannical King Pentheus. Unlike his grandfather Cadmus, who founded Thebes and was loved and respected, Soyinka’s Pentheus is feared. Lacking the qualities needed in a leader, such as “wisdom” and a “sense of balance and proportion,” he is described as “foolish,” “blind,” “headstrong” and “suicide-bent,” a man who goes at every riddle that Tiresias poses “with sledgehammer and pitchfork” (244-245, 235). From the moment Pentheus first appears on stage, “*straight, militaristic in bearing and speech,*” his aggressive and ruthless behaviour is clear, for instance when he threatens to “cut out the tongue of the next man that utters that name Bromius. Or Dionysos!” (256, 265).³ Pentheus is not just relevant to a colonial context, for his tyrannical behaviour also bears painful resemblance to the military dictators that post-independence Africa has known. In this respect, Soyinka’s approach resembles that of Osofisan who, as I have demonstrated, situates *Tegonni* in a colonial context not to restrict his focus to a particular historical moment, but to enable a critical reconsideration of history that is necessary for a critical evaluation of the present.

Under Pentheus’ rule, Soyinka’s Thebes is transformed into a society of “habitual tyranny,” in which many have been forced into servitude. Against this setting the dramatic action unfolds. The play opens with an image of “crucified slaves, mostly in the skeletal stage” and of “dim figures of slaves flailing and treading” (235). Later, the slaves make up a second chorus that Soyinka adds to that of the bacchantes. In

² Soyinka has also adapted Sophocles’ *Oedipus at Colonus* in *Oyedipo at Kolhuni* (performed in Delphi in 2002, unpublished).

³ While Soyinka refers to “Dionysos,” I use the more common English spelling and refer to “Dionysus.”

their choral songs, freedom from oppression becomes the primary theme. As the play proceeds to its climax, a number of slaves mix with the bacchantes. Together they form one chorus of marginalised people, “accentuating the tension between centre and margin and forging a true dialogue of aspirations among the oppressed” (Okpewho 1999: 46). The slaves recognise the bacchantes as “fellow strangers” and “fellow aliens,” which demonstrates that Soyinka’s sociological focus is not so much on the bacchantes as women but on their social status as foreigners (246). With regard to the cult of Dionysus this is remarkable, since the Dionysian rite was emancipatory not only in that it allowed slaves to participate, but women as well. My main concern here, however, is not to analyse the historical basis of Soyinka’s class-conscious interpretation of the Dionysian myth, but to discuss how Dionysus’ story acquires socio-political relevance in Soyinka’s hands. For Soyinka, so his *Bacchae* suggests, this is mainly achieved through an emphasis on class, ethnicity and race.

Drawing attention to the theme of slavery, Soyinka introduces a Chorus of Slaves and the new character of the Slave Leader. As he instructs, “solely because of the ‘hollering’ style suggested for [his] solo,” this character should be “fully negroid” and should speak with “the lilt and energy of the black hot gospellers,” working the crowd as in a “teenage pop audience” (234, 248). These references extend the relevance of Soyinka’s play to include diasporic and contemporary popular culture. The ecstatic singing and dancing of the chorus of slaves and bacchantes demonstrate this as well: as the stage directions instruct, their music is like “the theme-song of *Zorba the Greek*”; the Slave Leader becomes a “rock star” in the “emotional colour and temperature of a European pop scene” and has “the lilt and energy of the black hot gospellers”; and all become physically possessed “as would be seen in a teenage pop audience” (248-249).

In Soyinka’s postcolonial and emphatically contemporary rendition of Thebes, the focus is on a culturally diverse society. The slaves and bacchantes should be “as mixed a cast as possible, testifying to their varied origins” (xix). According to Soyinka, one of the things that went wrong in the premiere was that all the principal actors, including the leading Bacchante and the Slave Leader, were black, which Soyinka views as “a reduction along racial lines which neither Euripides nor I his adapter ever indicated” (1988: 77). The Slave Leader’s address to both “the near and distant dispossessed” implies that Soyinka wishes for his play to hold relevance beyond the African continent and beyond a singular historical moment (240).

In Euripides, the theme of slavery is not overtly addressed. By making slavery the main focus, Soyinka not only makes Euripides’ *Bacchae* relevant to the African (post) colonial context, but also “re-fashions Euripides’ map and retrieves Attica’s colonial past” (Zabus 1998: 209). Highlighting the colonial nature of ancient Greek society, Soyinka reveals what, as classicist Page duBois argues, may well remain invisible to those who commemorate ancient Athens as a founding site of Western civilisation:

that every aspect of life in ancient Greek society was informed by slaves (2003: xii). Thus, Soyinka's *Bacchae* not only emphasises Greek tragedy's contemporary relevance, but also sheds new light on the pre-text and its context. In that sense, adaptation is never simply a one-directional relation from one text to another, but always entails a two-directional dynamic.

In Soyinka's opening dialogue, the Slave Leader and the Herdsman (both outsiders to the city of Thebes) discuss the approaching rite of Eleusis, together drinking from a jug of wine:

HERDSMAN: Which of us is the victim this year?

LEADER: That old man of the king's household. The one who looks after the dogs.

HERDSMAN: [*shrugs.*] He's old enough to die.

LEADER: He had better survive!

HERDSMAN: [*fearfully.*]: Sh-sh!

LEADER: I have said it before. If another of us dies under the lash...!

[*The jug is passed to him again. He takes a long draught, sighs.*]

There is heaven in this juice. It flows through my lips and I say, now I roll the sun upon my tongue and it neither burns nor scorches. And a scent-laden breeze fills the cavern of my mouth, pressing for release. I know that scent. I mean, I knew it once. I love to know it once again.

HERDSMAN: I think I understand you. Forget it friend.

LEADER: A scent of freedom is not easily forgotten.

...

LEADER: Wait. [*Takes hold of him.*] Suppose the old man dies?

HERDSMAN: We all have to die sometime.

LEADER: Flogged to death? In the name of some unspeakable rites?

HERDSMAN: Someone must cleanse the new year of the rot of the old, or the world will die. Have you ever known famine? Real famine?

LEADER: Why us? Why always us?

HERDMSAN: Why not?

LEADER: Because the rites bring us nothing! Let those who profit bear the burden of the old year dying.

HERDSMAN: Careful. [*Points to the row of crosses.*] The palace does not need the yearly Feast of Eleusis to deal with rebellious slaves. (236-237)

In Pentheus' aristocratic Thebes, the slaves have become the standard victims of the annual rites. Okpewho expands on the correspondence with Euripides' Athens, where the Eleusinian cult was "one of those Attic cults especially favored by the old aristocracy" and where the imperial agenda had engendered (in part through the enormous flux of immigrants from Asia employed to work the mines) "a class structure marked by a very uneasy proletariat" (1999: 35-36). In Soyinka's Thebes, unease fills the air in a similar way. Dionysus' return brings the promise of change. His wine fills

the Slave Leader's mouth with a "scent-laden breeze," which is a "scent of freedom," pressing for "release."

Soyinka portrays a society in which a majority is kept poor and powerless, highlighting the politics of ritual sacrifice. The French anthropologist, historian and literary theorist René Girard discusses the function of sacrifice in his *Violence and the Sacred* (published in French in 1972, translated into English in 1977). Because human societies are founded on myths of sacrifice, he argues, they operate according to scapegoating mechanisms. Sacrifice is an act of collective substitution, whereby the community protects itself from its own violence by projecting their aggression on a victimised outsider, the scapegoat. In this way, rival humans can coexist, harmony is restored and the social fabric is reinforced (Girard 1995: 7-8). Girard explains that in order for the ritual sacrifice to be effective, the victimised have to be similar enough to the larger community to be sacrificed on their behalf, yet different enough for the divine powers to single out and harm only them; their "status as foreigners or enemies, their servile condition, or simply their age presents these future victims from fully integrating themselves into the community" (12). Individuals are chosen as scapegoats because of their marginalised position, not because they are responsible for the violence that needs to be expelled.⁴

Girard's theory finds an example in Soyinka's Thebes. Under Pentheus' rule, people have not only been enslaved, but they have also become institutionalised as human scapegoats, or *pharmakoi*, as it was called in ancient Greek religion. Terry Eagleton describes how ancient Athens "kept a supply of scapegoats on stand-by for times of crises, as a modern city keeps emergency services in reserve" (2005: 130). In Soyinka's Thebes, slaves are similarly used as mere instruments to perform the necessary rites to purify the city. But as the opening setting demonstrates, these rites do not succeed. Rather than safeguarding prosperity for the community, they serve the good of a very select elite, so that society is not cleansed but further corrupted.⁵

The blind seer Tiresias realises all too well that the ritual has been distorted under Pentheus' rule. To prevent a slave rebellion, he substitutes himself. To Dionysus he explains his political considerations, warning that in Thebes "the situation is touch and go. If one more slave had been killed at the cleansing rites, or sacrificed to that insatiable altar of nation-building..." (242). Ritual is a communal event, Soyinka suggests, and should not be turned into an instrument for nationalist politics. The reference to the "insatiable altar of nation-building" could allude to a variety of

⁴ A problem in Girard's theorisation of sacrifice is that he seems to treat the community as a singular cohesive agent. Although he analyses the social status or position of the sacrificed, he does not discuss that of the ones who initiate the sacrifice, select the victim and commit the actual act of sacrifice.

⁵ Eagleton refers to the rite of Thargyia, in which the scapegoat was not killed, but expelled from the city. The debate in classic studies about whether humans were ever murdered in ancient Greece is ongoing (see, for example, Jan Bremmer 1983).

African contexts where, both under colonial rule and during post-independence conflicts, many have been sacrificed under the banner of nation-building. The divide-and-rule strategy used by European powers to construct national boundaries has had devastating effects on existing tribal and ethnic structures, and the countless civil wars since are a consequence of that heritage, to a considerable degree at least.

“Quite a politician eh Tiresias?,” Dionysus responds. Indeed, Soyinka’s Tiresias bears more resemblance to a clever politician than a religious prophet. Believing that “it is far far easier to save Thebes from the anger of disgruntled classes than from the vengeance of a spited god,” he is willing to betray his religious vocation and perform a mock ritual (245). That a mock ritual is not a good way of practicing religion but a bad attempt at practicing politics soon becomes clear. The participants have been instructed to pretend that they are whipping Tiresias, but they get carried away because of the Dionysian incantation which, one participant explains, “soaks in your brain and you can’t feel yourself anymore” (241). Dionysus has to intervene to keep the blind seer of Thebes safe. When Tiresias gets back on his feet, he cries out:

TIRESIAS: ...Fools! Blind, stupid, bloody brutes! Can you see how you’ve covered me in weals? Can’t you bastards ever tell the difference between ritual and reality.

1ST MAN: *I was particularly careful. I pulled my blows.*

TIRESIAS: Symbolic flogging, that is what I keep trying to drum into your thick heads. (241)

Although in Soyinka’s view ritual can serve a political end, it cannot do so when it remains on the symbolical level. Ritual has to be part of reality to be effective. This is the kind of ritual that Dionysus promises: “Thebes shall have its full sacrifice. And Tiresias will know ecstasy” (244). Tiresias admits that during the flagellation he suffered, “[s]omething did begin... I feel... a small crack in the dead crust of the soul” (244). Destruction and creation together constitute the regenerative force of ritual. In the remainder of the play, Soyinka not only presents a transformation through but also of ritual, from one in which the community takes no part, and one that is nothing more than a mock event, to a communion rite that succeeds in purifying Thebes, restoring both the social and the natural order.

For Girard, Euripides’ *Bacchae* culminates in a “sacrificial crisis” because it concludes in a crisis of distinctions through the escalation of violence, affecting the entire cultural and societal order. Dionysus is “the god of decisive mob action,” who “claims legitimacy not from his ability to disturb the peace, but from his ability to restore the peace he has himself disturbed—thereby justifying, a posteriori, having disturbed it in the first place” (1995: 127, 134). In Soyinka’s Thebes, differently, there was no peace and prosperity to begin with. The social order was already corrupted, so that the violent collapse of distinctions is not so much directed against, but rather

acted out on behalf of the community. The breakdown of the social order holds the positive resolution of revolutionary change. Thus, the ritual sacrifice of slaves with which the play opens becomes the motive and legitimisation for the ritual sacrifice of Pentheus with which it concludes.

Soyinka presents Dionysus as intervening in the perverted scapegoating of the Eleusian rites, initiating in response a proper ritual sacrifice in which the one who is culpable for the violence is selected as the scapegoat. The apparent impossibility to expel violence without resorting to the sacrificial logic that underlies this violence provokes two crucial questions. Firstly, what defines one sacrifice as perverted and another as “pure” or “legitimate” and who is to decide on the difference? And, secondly, can society’s need for substitute scapegoats ever subside or is sacrifice, intended as a singular act, always in danger of endless repetition?

Philosopher Nathan Jun addresses the question of repetition. He claims that Girardian theory, which he considers a political philosophy, seeks neither to create anti-sacrificial mechanisms within existing political and economical systems, nor to abolish these systems (which are sacrificial by definition) per se. Rather, says Jun, the theory advocates “a series of on-going tactical interventions that resist sacrificial violence wherever and whenever it arises” and such interventions “would inevitably generate new forms of human social organization. What they would and could not do, however, is completely and permanently eliminate the possibility of renewed violence.” For Jun, no single revolutionary event can guarantee protection from violence. Consequently, revolution “if it is to occur at all, must be eternal” (2007: 38). Like sacrifice, revolution should be singular but cannot escape repetition.

From the start of his *Bacchae*, Soyinka shows the necessity of the communion rite that concludes the play. From the setting, the characterisation of Pentheus and the description of the annual rite of Eleusis, it is evident that in Pentheus’ Thebes “something has occurred to disrupt the natural rhythms and the cosmic balances of the total community” (Soyinka 1976: 51). I use these words, with which Soyinka describes J.P. Clark’s play *Song of a Goat* (published in 1964), because they aptly express his metaphysical understanding of material reality.⁶ In Soyinka’s aesthetics, nature is not merely a romantic, metaphoric system to describe socio-political issues indirectly. Instead, as an expression of the essence of cosmic totality, Nature—which Soyinka capitalises—is the large-scale manifestation of human reality. Accordingly, moral order should not be understood “in any narrow sense of the ethical code which society develops to regulate the conduct of its members.” Rather, “a breakdown in moral order implies, in the African world-view, a rupture in the body of Nature just like the physical malfunctioning of one man” (1976: 52).

Soyinka names this process the “metaphysics of the irreducible”:

⁶ See also my reference to Clark in the final section of this chapter.

... knowledge of birth and death as the human cycle; the wind as a moving, felling, cleansing, destroying, winnowing force; the duality of the knife as blood-letter and creative implement; earth and sun as life-sustaining verities, and so on. Those serve as matrices within which mores, personal relationships, even communal economics are formulated and reviewed ... Because of the visceral intertwining of each individual with the fate of the entire community, a rupture in his normal functioning not only endangers this shared reality but threatens existence itself. (1976: 53)

Correspondingly, in Soyinka's *Bacchae* Pentheus not only poses a threat to the community but also to existence itself. The air of Thebes is sterile: "Nothing breathes in it. Nothing—really—lives" (237). The possibility of social and political change is similarly expressed in natural terms. There is, the stage descriptions instruct, the "smell and sweat of harvest. Ripeness" and Dionysus, the god of wine and a life-giving force, observes that "something lives yet," that his green vines are "clustering" and "swelling" on the "slag of ruin" (235-236). In Soyinka's metaphysical framework those regenerative qualities take on political significance. This is why, drinking from the jug of wine, the Slave Leader not only tastes "heaven in this juice" but also smells a "scent of freedom" (236). This scent is spread by Dionysus.

REVOLUTIONARY DIONYSUS

As in Euripides, from the moment Dionysus returns to Thebes, he challenges the hierarchies Pentheus tries increasingly desperately to uphold, such as that between rationality and emotion, man and gods, man and beast, masculinity and femininity and, most important to the (post)colonial context of Soyinka's play, Greek and barbarian. Because Pentheus feels threatened by Dionysus, he attempts to define him as a radical, barbarian other. He describes the god as a "foreigner" from "decadent lands" and a "thing of doubtful gender," desperately maintaining that "[w]e have more sense than barbarians/ Greece has a culture." When Pentheus hits an old slave and orders to tear down Tiresias' dwelling, the slaves stand up against him, contesting his twisted logic: "To hit an old man/ Or demolish the roof of a sage?/ Yet we are the barbarians/ And Greece the boast of civilization. We are slaves and have no souls" (256, 263-264).⁷

⁷ In Euripides' days it was common to equate barbarity with decadence and gender-ambivalence. The exemplary barbarians (foreigners) at the time were the Persians, whose civilisation was considered decadent, effeminate, and opposed to the Greek values. The modern usage of the term "barbarian" to refer to established conceptions of masculinity and to connote the savage and undercultured should be distinguished from the term's implications in ancient Greece. For more information on the Greek conception of barbarians, see Harrison (2002). For a study of the concept of barbarism in contemporary literature and art, see Maria Boletsi (2010).

Pentheus' attempt to construct Dionysus as his radical other is flawed from the start, not in the least because they are cousins and thus related by blood. Dionysus may be culturally other from Pentheus, but he shares the same biological origin. Like in Euripides, even the terms Soyinka's Pentheus uses to construct Dionysus as his other are internally contradictory. Setting out to demonstrate that, Dionysus tells Pentheus that he has seen "even among your so-called/ Barbarian slaves, natives of lands whose cultures/ Beggar yours" (264). Thus, he undermines Pentheus' superiority, showing him that his self-definition depends on a flawed conception of a barbarian other. Soyinka's Dionysus is not only a vengeful god, but also a god who "grants self-knowledge"; the lack of this self-knowledge makes Pentheus a tragic hero because it means that he "doesn't know his own flesh. When he does he'll think he's duty-bound to cut it out of himself" (253, 261).⁸

Euripides is similarly concerned with challenging the opposition between Greek and Barbarian. It could be argued, as does Suzanne Saïd, that through his dramatisation of Dionysus, he abolishes the frontier that normally separates Greek man from effeminate barbarian and that the *Bacchae*, his last tragedy, marks the logical conclusion of a development in his tragedies, showing the "gradual assimilation of the Greeks to the Barbarians":

... the *Bacchae* did away with the idea of a boundary separating Greece and Asia, showing the gradual invasion of Thebes by a barbarism that no one could escape and establishing an incessant to-ing and fro-ing between two continents so that in the end one no longer knows where the Greeks end and the Barbarians begin. (2002: 66-67, 95)

Soyinka's Dionysus resembles his Euripidean counterpart in that he too transgresses norms and traditions. He does not so much confuse distinctions, but rather, as Michelle Gellrich claims, "configures the nondifferentiation out of which such distinctions eventually arise"; rather than subverting the social order (which would ultimately maintain a similar binary logic) he dismantles the structures on which this order is built (1995: 48, 54). For this reason, Dionysus' return to Thebes poses a threat to Pentheus' rule and promises the liberation of the slaves. Dionysus will free the community by involving them in a rite in which hierarchies dissolve, including the one between aristocracy and slaves.

⁸ In a note to his translation of Euripides Paul Roche explains that in ancient Greek "penthos" means sorrow. Hence, Pentheus' tragic quality is inscribed in his name. In Euripides, Tiresias alludes to this when he tells Cadmus to "make sure/ that Pentheus, that sorry man,/ does not swamp your house with sorrows" (1998: 411). In Soyinka, the reference to Pentheus' etymological root is more explicit. There, Tiresias tells Kadmos, "in Greek the name Pentheus signifies/ Sorrow. Does that mean anything? Let's hope not" (263).

Dionysus' return to Thebes not only holds the promise of liberation, but also suggests more egocentric motives of familial vengeance. As in Euripides, Dionysus reveals his reasons for coming back in his opening monologue:

DIONYSOS: Thebes taints me with bastardy. I am turned into an alien, some foreign outgrowth of her habitual tyranny. My followers daily pay forfeit for their faith. Thebes blasphemes against me, makes a scapegoat of a god. It is time to state my patrimony—even here in Thebes. (235)

Treated as “alien” and “foreign” to Thebes, Dionysus is denied his royal lineage as grandson of Thebes' founding father Kadmos. More importantly, he is denied his divine origin, as a child of Zeus. Dionysus therefore seeks to bring vengeance “on all who deny my holy origin and call my mother—slut” (235). He is referring to the false rumour spread by his aunts about his mother Semele. According to this rumour, it was not Zeus who had made her pregnant but some mortal lover, which would deny Dionysus' divine origin, making him a bastard son of mortals.⁹ As in Euripides, Soyinka's Dionysus is of a dual and fallible nature. In light of Yoruba cosmology, however, in which it is normal for gods to be contradictory in nature and in which contradiction is understood as an intrinsic feature of experience, Dionysus' individual motives do not downplay his role as the future liberator of Thebes. Soyinka explains that, in contrast to the Christian idea of a “supra-human understanding of the creator god,” Yoruba gods (much like the Greek gods) demonstrate weaknesses and shortcomings (1976: 18). Dionysus' description of himself as “a scapegoat of a god” points, as Pizzato suggests, to the fact that Dionysus is not merely a force of revenge, but also a tragic hero, fragmented in character, torn between his divine and human, as well as his native and foreign aspects (2003: 59). The fragmented nature of Soyinka's Dionysus may be the influence of the Yoruba god Ogun, who plays a prominent role in Soyinka's theory of Yoruba tragedy. Soyinka develops this tragic theory in the essay “The Fourth Stage: Through the Mysteries of Ogun to the Origin of Yoruba Tragedy” (1973) and also refers to it in his collection of essays *Myth, Literature and the African World* (1976).¹⁰

For Soyinka, Ogun's role in the birth of Yoruba tragedy parallels Dionysus' role in the ritual origin of Greek tragedy. He explains that “The Fourth Stage” refers to the

⁹ Under the influence of Zeus' jealous wife Hera, Semele started to doubt her lover's identity and asked Zeus to reveal himself. When he did, his divine lightning killed her. Zeus took the unborn Dionysus and sewed him in his thigh. In another version of the myth, Dionysus (or “Zagreus”) is the son of Zeus and Persephone. In this account, Hera had the Titans rip Dionysus to shred, leaving only his heart, from which Zeus remade him. Zeus then implanted him in Semele, who carried him until he was born again (see John Burgess 2005: 237-238).

¹⁰ “The Fourth Stage” was later included as an appendix in *Myth, Literature and the African World* (Soyinka 1976: 140-160).

transitional gulf that Ogun had to conquer, the stage at which the boundaries between the three stages of the ancestors, the living and the unborn are crossed, revitalising the cosmos. Soyinka's Yoruba tragedy is founded on this ritual experience: it re-enacts the primal moment of transition when the Yoruba gods, longing for "their long-lost essence of totality," descended to earth in an attempt to reunite with human essence (1976: 28). Ogun led them on their journey, which makes him the "first actor," the "first challenger, and conqueror of transition"; his art "the first art, was tragic art" (26-27, 144-145). Ogun, Soyinka writes, "plunges into the transitional abyss between worlds, reenacting the alienation, lack, and fragmentation of being, to reconnect the divine and human shards of primal Oneness" (153). As Pizzato suggests, this implies that in Soyinka's *Bacchae*, it is not only Pentheus who is sacrificed, but Dionysus as well: like Ogun, he sacrifices himself, "not only to turn the tables on Pentheus, but also to reconnect the psychic worlds of living, dead, and unborn" (2003: 52, 60).

In his *Bacchae*, Soyinka incorporates qualities of Ogun into Dionysus, including lines from his poem "Idanre" (a "Passion Poem of Ogun, elder brother to Dionysus") and chants from Yoruba praise verses (234). In this way, Soyinka unites different cultures in one god (Gibbs 1980: 113). He introduces Ogun as "that elder god who is in this context *synonymous* with Dionysos and who, conceptually, I have to confess I use *interchangeably* with Dionysos as a symbol of the destructive-creative unity of Nature" (1988: 69, emphases added). As my emphases show, Soyinka highlights the similarities that cross cultural boundaries (though, as I discuss later, this description also has other implications).¹¹

By incorporating qualities of Ogun, Soyinka makes significant changes to Euripides' Dionysus. While emphasising that Ogun's creative/destructive duality resembles that of Dionysus, he complicates the gods' brotherhood in various ways. He describes his "Ogunian" Dionysus as of "rugged strength" of "rugged beauty, not of effeminate prettiness," departing from Euripides' androgen-looking god (236). In combination with his disregard for the emancipating effect of the Dionysian rite on women, this has led Zabrus to conclude that "[o]n the altar of Ogun, Soyinka has 'sacrificed' not only the feminine aspect of Maenadism, but also the feminine and androgynous side of Dionysus" (1998: 214). In the emphasis on the bacchantes as foreigners, rather than women, gender is relegated to the background. While Soyinka does not emphasise Dionysus' gender ambivalence as much as Euripides does, his Dionysus similarly avoids gender specificity. The demi-god presents himself by saying "I am the gentle, jealous joy. Vengeful and kind. An essence that will not exclude, nor be excluded. If you are Man or Woman, I am Dionysus. Accept" (235). Hence, Soyinka's Dionysus not so much confuses but rather exceeds gender. This makes him fundamentally Yoruba,

¹¹ Soyinka emphasises a similar destructive-creative duality in his description of Ogun as the god of "metals, creativity, the road, wine and war" (1973: vi).

because as J.D.Y. Peel explains, traditionally in Yoruba religion the gods (the *orisha*) were intrinsically simply powers or spirits. Their gender was a secondary attribution bestowed upon them by their devotees. Some gods were regarded as male in some contexts and female in others (2002: 139).

Soyinka explains that Ogun “can be best understood in Hellenic values as a totality of the Dionysian, Apollonian and Promethean virtues” (1976: 141). He thus adds a third virtue to the Dionysian/Apollonian relation developed by Friedrich Nietzsche in *The Birth of Tragedy* (1872). To understand Soyinka’s reference to Prometheus, it is helpful to first take a closer look at Nietzsche. He views the encounter between the Apollonian measured restraint and Dionysian ecstatic freedom as the moment when tragedy was born. The development of art is bound up with the duality between the two “art-deities” of the Greeks, representing the two “art-impulses of nature” (1995: 1-5). Because it mixes Apollonian and Dionysian elements into a seamless totality that represents human experience, Greek tragedy, argues Nietzsche, is the highest form of art.

In Soyinka’s *Bacchae*, the Dionysian/Apollonian relation similarly expresses the two principles of life that make up the totality of experience. The first principle, so Tiresias explains to Pentheus, is the earth, which “nourishes man, yields him grain. Bread. Womb-like/ It earths him as it were, anchors his feet.” The complementary principle is “Ether, locked in the grape until released by man,” which makes “mankind forget his grief.” Tiresias tries to convince Pentheus that Dionysus helps man to “shed the heavy clods of earth that weigh down the ethereal man/ To that first principle” and that “Balance is the key” (258-259). But when he claims that Dionysus can even be found in Delphi, “home of Apollo, sanctuary/ Of reason,” for “[h]ow else does the priestess enter/ The oracular state?,” Pentheus blames him of blasphemy (260). Pentheus cannot accept that the oracle in Delphi, dedicated to Apollo, the god of reason, and the basis of Hellenism, would also be the residence of Dionysus. That life should consist of opposing forces is beyond Pentheus’ comprehension. Tiresias tries to open his eyes to the importance of being able to combine these two positions.¹²

Soyinka departs from Nietzsche by adding a third, Promethean feature to his description of Ogun, which, in turn, informs his portrayal of Dionysus. Prometheus is the titan who offended Zeus by stealing his fire and giving it to the mortals. As punishment, he was chained to a rock, where everyday an eagle eats from his liver. Since Prometheus is immortal, his liver always grows back and his punishment is perpetual. Nietzsche does discuss Prometheus, but not as a creative force in the birth of tragedy. The Promethean drive ultimately leads to sacrilege and subsequent

¹² Although the relation between Apollo and Dionysus is usually understood as that between a Hellenic and a foreign deity, it has been argued that Apollo’s origin was in Asia as well (see Silk and Stern 1981: 168-169). This would mean that in undermining the dichotomy between the Apollonian and the Dionysian, Tiresias not only challenges the categories of reason and emotion, but also of Greek and foreign.

punishment and suffering. The myth represents the attempt to “penetrate beyond the bounds of individuation and become himself the one world-being.” Consequently, it points to “a painful, irreconcilable antagonism between man and God”: “[t]he best and highest that men can acquire they must obtain by crime, and then they must in turn endure its consequences, namely, the whole flood of sufferings and sorrows with which the offended divinities must requite the nobly aspiring race of man” (Nietzsche 1995: 32-33). After all, Prometheus’ punishment for challenging the gods is everlasting.

Soyinka’s understanding of Prometheus is more optimistic. He views his “unconquerable will” as what “constitutes the paradoxical truth of destructiveness and creativeness in acting man” (1976: 150). Not Prometheus’ suffering Soyinka emphasises, but the value of his will-power to obtain fire for mankind. This possible political relevance is expressed explicitly in Soyinka’s prison notes *The Man Died*, where he identifies himself with Prometheus and contemplates the “regenerative continuance of the Promethean struggle,” relating the myth to his own role as an artist and activist (1972: 95). Soyinka’s inclusion of Promethean will-power in his description of Ogun suggests the political role he ascribes to this god; Ogun is the “embodiment of Will and the Will is the paradoxical truth of destructiveness and creativeness in acting man” (1976: 15).¹³

In his *Bacchae*, Soyinka draws on Ogun not simply to make Dionysus Yoruba, but to enhance his potential as a god who inspires regeneration and revolution. While the vestals of Eleusis initially refuse to follow Dionysus, the Slave Leader immediately recognise him as a leader. To the doubting slaves he says:

LEADER: You hesitant fools! Don’t you understand?
 Don’t you *know*? We are no longer alone—
 Slaves, helots, the near and distant dispossessed!
 This master race, this much vaunted dragon spawn
 Have met their match. Nature has joined forces with us.
 Let them reckon now, not with mere men, not with
 The scapegoat bogey of a slave uprising
 But with a new remorseless order, forces
 Unpredictable as molten fire in mountain wombs.
 To doubt, to hesitate is to prove undeserving. (240, emphasis in text)

The “master race,” described as a monstrous offspring, will be fought not just by rebellious slaves, but by the force of Nature. The necessity of the predicted revolution arises from the disruption of both the social and the natural order, involving both human and natural forces. In the rite that initiates it, the distinction between human and natural dissolves. That its outcome is “unpredictable” does not make revolution an

¹³ For a discussion of the theme of regeneration in Soyinka’s work, and his use of Prometheus as a symbol of regeneration in *The Man Died*, see Mary T. David (1988: 658-659).

act of “rashness,” for as the leader says, “[w]hen the present is intolerable, the unknown harbours no risks” (240).

Dionysus channels the violence of the slaves. He is a liberating deity whose worship, Soyinka explains in the introduction to the Methuen edition of his play, “released the pent-up frustrated energy of all the downtrodden” and united the mass against the “monopolistic repressions of the ‘Olympian’ priesthood, Mercantile Princes and other nobility” (1973b: viii). The Dionysian religion Soyinka therefore regards as one that “transferred its ritualism to communal participation,” a social force with great impact on the “slave-sustained economy of Greek society” (x). This class-conscious interpretation of Dionysus could take its cue from Nietzsche, who describes the Dionysian movement as a “gospel of universal harmony” that tears down the barriers between men:

Now the slave is free; now all the stubborn, hostile barriers, which necessity, caprice or “shameless fashion” have erected between man and man are broken down. Now, with the gospel of universal harmony, each one feels himself not only united, reconciled, blended with his neighbour, but as one with him. (1995: 4)

Nietzsche views Dionysus’ ability to dissolve boundaries in political terms. Soyinka understands Dionysus in a similar way. In his *Bacchae*, Tiresias describes Dionysus as a good who “has broken the barrier of age, the barrier of sex or slave and master” (255).

Despite this resemblance, Soyinka explains that his understanding of Dionysus is informed by Ogun, whom he describes as a protector of orphans, a roof over the homeless and a “transcendental, humane, but rigidly restorative justice” (1976: 26). For Soyinka, these restorative powers hold explicit and far-reaching political possibilities. Indeed, in emphasising the accommodative nature of African deities to modern-day realities, Soyinka makes a remarkable assertion about Ogun’s contemporary political significance:

Ogun ... becomes not merely the god of war but the god of revolution in the most contemporary context—and this is not merely in Africa, but in the Americas to where his worship has spread. As the Roman Catholic props of the Batista regime in Cuba discovered when it was too late, they should have worried less about Karl Marx than about Ogun, the re-discovered deity of revolution. (1976: 54)

Soyinka’s reference is not only to the African context, but also to the African diaspora, where the Yoruba tradition is widely practiced. During the transatlantic slave trade, many Yoruba were taken as slaves to Cuba, the Dominican Republic, Puerto Rico, Brazil, Venezuela and the rest of the New world. Yoruba culture and religion combined with elements from other (primarily Christian) belief systems to form new religious

traditions, such as the Santería tradition in Cuba. Although Soyinka relates his mythological interpretation of Ogun to the historical context of Cuba, he does not expand on the god's revolutionary contribution in this particular context.¹⁴

However, as an aside let me refer to Philip Zwerling, who explicitly links Soyinka's tragic theory to the Yoruba diaspora. He contends that the transitional gulf to which the "Fourth Stage" refers also has historical relevance. For oppressed Yoruba people in Cuba and Brazil, "the daily humiliations of slavery and transportation across the Atlantic were themselves psychic re-enactments of this cosmic disruption of Yoruba cosmology." For them, "immersion in the rules of the orishas is a reconnection with a cultural past, a geographical reality, a religious mythos, and, sometimes, a political agenda" (2004: 313). In this way, tragic theatre "both commemorates this great separation and acts to bridge the chasm as it re-enacts simultaneously the timeless cosmic conflict and the modern tragedy of slavery, racism and oppression" (312). Although Soyinka does not explicitly link his Yoruba tragedy to the diasporic experience, the connection between cosmology and politics is crucial to an understanding of his play.

It remains unclear what Soyinka means by presenting Ogun as the "re-discovered deity of revolution" in the above quotation. The suggestion that Ogun's political quality is essential to him and need only be re-discovered could refer to Ogun's myth of origin. In the Yoruba genesis myth (or at least in Soyinka's account of it), Ogun and the other Yoruba gods originated because a slave rebelled against the "original godhead" by rolling a rock on to him and sending him "hurtling into the abyss in a thousand and one fragments," thus creating "the multiple godhead" (1976: 27-28). More generally, it could be argued that Ogun's creative/destructive principle and his ritualistic and regenerative nature corresponds to revolution, in which the old has to die violently for the new to be able to take root.

Because of this dual nature, the influential cultural theorist Raymond Williams identifies revolution as fundamentally tragic in nature (*Modern Tragedy*, first published in 1966). That revolution is never solely liberating but always involves destruction and suffering as well, makes it not only "tragic in its origins—in the existence of a disorder that cannot but move and involve" but also "equally tragic in its action, in that it is not against gods or inanimate things that its impulse struggles, nor against mere institutions and social forms, but against other men" (2006: 102). Challenging utopian or romantic depictions of revolution, Williams calls attention to the suffering it involves. However, this does not mean that "suffering can be laid to the charge of the revolution alone" because, on the contrary, revolution is "the inevitable working through of a deep and tragic disorder" (100). As Williams states, "the real tragic danger, underlying war and revolution, is a disorder which we continually re-enact," which is

¹⁴ Social scientist Mercedes Cros Sandoval explains how Santería became a form of resistance and a powerful influence on other more hegemonic political and religious institutions in Cuba (2006).

why “[t]he only consciousness that seems adequate in our world is then an exposure to the actual disorder. The only action that seems adequate is, really, a participation in the disorder as a way of ending it” (105-106). Soyinka’s communion rite could be interpreted along the lines of Williams’ argument. It ends the tragic disorder that was annually re-enacted in the Eleusian rites, but can only do so by disrupting the order itself. By emphasising the creativeness as well as destructiveness of the Dionysian rite, Soyinka calls attention to the tragic nature of revolutionary change.

Soyinka’s revolutionary vision of Ogun and his refiguration of Dionysus pose the question whether it is possible to talk about revolution when the community does not initiate the communion rite that unites them, and the exceptional individual Dionysus (a demi-god even) steps up as their political agent. This “individual-collective polarity theme,” as Soyinka calls it, has been an important point of dispute with Osofisan, who finds Soyinka’s vision ultimately pessimistic: “If you are always thinking of individuals creating,” Osofisan claims, “history will always look like a series of tragedies. The revolution itself is a mass of people always doing things together” (quoted in Obafemi 1982: 119). But Soyinka’s revolutionary view is not a Marxist one, where the working class takes over power from the ruling bourgeoisie. Rather, it is built on the conviction that the role of the enlightened individual protagonist, like the artist, is to raise the consciousness of his society.

This relation between individual and collective finds a correlative in Soyinka’s understanding of the role of the mass in the Dionysian movement. Because the oppressed slaves and working classes are not yet strong enough to be protagonists of vengeance, the punishment has to descend from Dionysus (1973b: ix). The emphasis on the enlightened individual seems in tension with the idea of a ritualistic event, in which the individual dissolves into the communal, and in which the outcome of the community’s ecstatic outburst is unknown. But for Soyinka, ritual is primarily that moment when the individual, the communal and the cosmic coincide and influence one another, so that divine inspiration and mass action *can* go hand in hand. The “communal agency role of the protagonist ego” suggests that the welfare of the protagonist is inseparable from that of the community, and that “in the symbolic disintegration and retrieval of the protagonist ego is reflected the destiny of being” (1988: 118).

In Soyinka’s *Bacchae*, when Pentheus has chained him, Dionysus sets himself free only after the slaves and bacchantes call for him. Their chants, the stage descriptions describe, start as “*a kind of ululating which is found among some African and Oriental peoples and signifies distress, warning, or agitation*” and spreading from the bacchantes to the chorus of slaves it “*swell[s] into deafening proportions*” (271). They call for Dionysus to break free:

SLAVE: Break interminable shackles
Break bonds of oppressors

Break the beast of blood
Break bars that sprout
In travesty of growth (273)

Through the juxtaposition of words that denote political force (“shackles,” “bonds” and “bars”) and words referring to natural elements and forces (“beast,” “blood,” “sprout” and “growth”), the distinction between the social and the natural dissolves. In Soyinka’s ritualist aesthetic, this dissolve enables the reconfiguration and regeneration of both. At the climax of their incantations, Dionysus is revealed again, standing on the ruin of Semele’s grave. “You willed my freedom,” he tells the bacchantes and slaves, “I could not resist” (275). It remains ambiguous whether the Slave Leader recognises Dionysus’ revolutionary potential, or whether his recognition of Dionysus as a liberating force grants Dionysus this potential. Soyinka would probably prefer the second interpretation, because it relates to the Yoruba notion of viewing the gods and mankind as mutually interdependent. Soyinka refers to a telling Yoruba proverb, *Bi o s’enia, imale o si*, meaning “if humanity were not, the gods would not be,” suggesting the dependency of the gods on humanity, rather than the other way around, as in the Judeo-Christian theology of “in the beginning, God was” (1976: 10).

In this relation between man and gods, Soyinka also recognises a fundamental disparity with the classical Greek worldview, in which mortals are ultimately at the mercy of the gods, whereas in Yoruba metaphysics they are what the gods depend on for their existence. According to Soyinka, the Greek deities are like the Yoruba deities in that they commit serious violations against mortals. The difference, however, is that “the morality of reparation appears totally alien to the ethical concepts of the ancient Greeks” and “punishment ... invariably take place only when the offence happens to encroach on the mortal preserves of another deity and that deity is stronger or successfully appeals to Father Zeus, the greatest reprobate of all” (1976: 14). This relation between divine and human agency is of crucial importance to Soyinka’s understanding of tragedy. As Ketu H. Katrak states, where the positive resolutions in Greek tragedy are “wholly engineered and stage-managed by the gods,” in Soyinka’s tragic universe, “[g]ranted that this human being is an exceptional individual; granted also that the breath of Ogun steadily and quietly inspires his actions; nonetheless, the final resolution is in the hands of human agents” (1986: 34). Man is ultimately responsible for the future; the emphasis on metaphysics does not render human agency impossible. Although Dionysus inspires the communion rite, in Soyinka’s *Bacchae* the slaves and bacchantes are the ones who exercise it.

THE MYTHOLOGISATION OF HISTORY

In this section, I consider the communion rite that Dionysus inspires in more detail. Above, I referred to Girard's ideas about sacrifice and scapegoating. Here, I briefly turn to the British anthropologist Victor Turner, who has expanded on the societal and political function of ritual. Turner introduced the useful concept of *liminality* to denote the intermediate phase within ritual experience. Liminality, he explains, is a phase of anti-structure, an "instant of pure potentiality when everything, as it were, trembles in the balance," when signs are reconfigured in a way that not only allows for symbolic but also social revision. In other words, Turner locates not only a symbolic but also a concrete political potential in ritual. In the annihilation of hierarchic social structure all participants to the ritual are treated equally so that they become a *communitas* (1982: 44-45). Ritual is presented as something that unites those who were divided in the previous social order. Soyinka conceives of ritual in the same way in his *Bacchae*: the marginalised slaves and bacchantes unite as equals and form a *communitas*, together taking part in the final communion rite.

Turner describes the intermediate liminal phase as "both more creative and more destructive than the structural norm" (47). His words correspond to Soyinka's emphasis on the creative/destructive principle of Ogun. In his *Bacchae*, the creative force is evident in the regenerative and revolutionary nature of the communion rite. The destructive side is expressed most violently in the killing of Pentheus. Different from Euripides, where the killing of Pentheus is primarily inspired by Dionysius' wrath, Soyinka presents it as a political necessity. There is one way in which Thebes can be saved: not by diverting the anger of disgruntled classes, as Tiresias tries to achieve, but by channelling it, through Dionysus' worship, to a ritual sacrifice that will free the community from its tyrant. The community can only be saved by expelling what threatens it most. Pentheus has to die, but his death has to be performed ritually for it to yield political effect. As Dionysus tells him, Pentheus' responsibility towards his people can now only be at his own expense:

Yes, you alone
Make sacrifices for your people, you alone.
The role belongs to a king. Like those gods, who yearly
Must be rent to spring anew, that also
Is the fate of heroes. (293)

This shift of the scapegoat from oppressed to oppressor, from slave to king, corresponds with Soyinka's class-conscious understanding of Dionysus as a deity who liberates the community. Through his sacrifice, in which he is *made sacred* as he becomes a gift for the gods, Pentheus will undergo a posthumous transformation. In the role of the

pharmakos, or human scapegoat, Pentheus is no longer solely the poison, but becomes the cure that will heal Thebes.

Jacques Derrida connects this double status of the *pharmakos* to the etymologically related *pharmakon*, which in ancient Greek significantly means both poison and remedy. Hence, Derrida explains, the notion can be related to the notion of difference:

The *pharmakon* is “ambivalent” because it constitutes the element in which opposites are opposed, the movement of play by which each relates back to the other, reverses itself and passes into the other: (soul/body, good/evil, inside/outside, memory/forgetfulness, speech/writing, etc.) ... The *pharmakon* is the movement, the locus, and the play (the production) of difference. It is the *différance* of difference. (1981: 127)¹⁵

Derrida’s *différance* plays on the fact that the French word *différer* means both “to differ” and “to defer.” The *pharmakon* embodies difference but also defers it, as the *pharmakon* becomes the site where difference temporally collapses and ceases to exist.

Throughout Soyinka’s *Bacchae*, Dionysus has tried to show Pentheus that the divisions he tries to uphold cannot be sustained. Since Pentheus refuses to acknowledge this truth, the only way Dionysus has left to prove his point is to turn Pentheus into a site of ambivalence. He dresses him as a bacchante, making him both man and woman. The duality Pentheus has suppressed now breaks loose, which is made literal when (like in Euripides) he sees “two suns/ Blazing in the heavens. And now two Thebes” and can no longer distinguish whether Dionysus is man or beast: “Are you a bull? There are horns newly/ Sprouted from your head” (291).

Under the spell of Dionysus, Pentheus walks to his death. He shouts “Death to the Bacchae!” but his voice dies off as the Chorus of Slaves “sets up a dog-howl, a wail of death” (294). Together with the Bacchantes, they evoke the spirit of Dionysus and start their hunt of Pentheus. “Now we shall see the balance restored,” says one slave, “O justice! O spirit of Equity, Restitution/ Be manifest! A sharp clear sword/ With blood in its edge—drive/ To the gullet of Pentheus” (295). The messenger then recounts how Pentheus’ body is torn to shreds by his raving mother Agave and the bacchantes. When he comes to his senses, Pentheus tears off his wig and touches his mother’s face in the hope that she will recognise him as her son, but in vain. To her, Pentheus is not her son, nor her king, nor male, nor Greek; not even human. She thinks she is slaying an animal, a bull, lion, mountain-goat or deer (301). Pentheus’ body thus becomes the site where difference is constructed, where it reveals itself as a construct and collapses. Only in his death can he be poison as well as cure.

¹⁵ Jonathan Culler explains that Derrida’s discussion of the term *pharmakon* departs from Plato’s *Phaedrus*, in which Plato has Socrates describe writing as *pharmakon*, as a poisonous, misleading practice. As Derrida points out, by using the term *pharmakon*, which not only means poison but also remedy, Plato simultaneously undermines his own judgement (1983: 142-144).

Unlike in other plays by Soyinka that dramatise sacrifice, Pentheus is neither a willing nor a conscious victim.¹⁶ He goes to his death convinced that he is on his way to destroy the bacchantes, never realising that he is dressed as a bacchante himself, embodying the very femininity and barbarity he detests. But for Soyinka, the fact that Pentheus marches to his death under Dionysus' spell does not make his sacrifice less justifiable. Unlike Euripides, Soyinka never invites his audience to question its legitimisation: the Dionysian excess is legitimate because it is necessary to restore the corrupted balance. Yet, its necessity does not make the killing of Pentheus less horrendous. As in Euripides, he dies at the hands of his mother Agave and her sisters. When they tear his arms of his shoulders and peel his flesh until all that remains is his rib-case, "clawed clean of flesh," they perform the main element of sacrifice: dismemberment, or *sparagmos* (299).

Where in Euripides, Thebes is left in chaos and destruction with the house of Cadmus forever cursed, Soyinka's conclusion is more optimistic. Once Pentheus' head is impaled on a wand, it begins to spray wine rather than blood. The play ends with everybody drinking from this fountain of wine, a symbolic act of *omophagia*, the raw eating of the victim.¹⁷ This final scene invokes communion in catholic mass. The description of Agave ripping her son "like bread across a banqueting board" and wine gushing from Pentheus' head, refer to the bread and wine that symbolise the body and blood of Christ (300). The play ends as follows:

[Slowly, dream-like, they all move towards the fountain, cup their hands and drink. Agave raises herself at last to observe them, then tilts her head backwards to let a jet flush full in her face and flush her mouth. The light contracts a final glow around the heads of Pentheus and Agave]. (307)

Like Christ, Pentheus dies for the good of humankind, so that the communion of the subtitle not only alludes to the communal aspect of the play, but also to this final communion in which Pentheus is consumed by (and thereby also united with) the community.¹⁸

The mixture of Greek, Yoruba and Christian traditions in this closing image suggests the syncretic nature of religious practice common in certain regions of

¹⁶ For a discussion of ritual in Soyinka's plays, see Derek Wright (1993: 23-41).

¹⁷ In the Dionysian ritual, the elements of *sparagmos* and *omophagia* re-enact the moment when the infant Dionysus, in the Zagreus version of the myth, was himself torn to pieces and devoured by the titans.

¹⁸ The death and posthumous transformation of king Pentheus reveals an interesting parallel with that of the Yoruba god Sango. As a historical figure Sango is known as the tyrant king who, after suffering defeat, took his own life in humiliation. However, his followers deified him, saying that the king did not hang but metamorphosed into a god. Since then, so Katrak explains, Sango is not only the god of thunder and lightning, but also of justice and retribution. Despite his historical role of a harmful monarch, as a mythological figure he has come to represent beneficial social principles (1986: 32).

Africa and the African diaspora, where, as Sandra L. Richards explains, Christianising influences have resulted in religious practices that consist of a blend of Christian and pre-colonial African belief systems (1999: 97). The distinction between Christ and Dionysus is blurred most explicitly in an earlier scene, where, to challenge Pentheus' belief in rationality and reality, Dionysus presents him with two illusions. Both are bridal scenes. Of significance here is the second one, which presents a variation on the account in the Gospel of John of the wedding at Cana, where Christ performed his first miracle, transforming water into wine for the guests. Soyinka presents the "*traditional Christ-figure*," yet with an "*ambiguous thorn-ivy-crown of Dionysus*" as a halo (286). The Christian thorn and the Dionysian ivy together constitute an ambiguous mixture of different religious traditions.¹⁹

Soyinka's communion rite not only presents an image of religious syncretism, but also demonstrates that, as Terry Eagleton explains, a revolutionary view of sacrifice involves more than the celebration of the creative forces it releases and the political possibilities it generates. In the killing of the scapegoat there is not a simple passage from death to life, but rather "a movement from a living death (that of the destitute, the scapegoat) to a life that can flourish all the more richly because it has absorbed this death into itself in the form of an abiding awareness of human frailty, neediness and dependency." This awareness is vital within the revolutionary context, because "[o]nly the political action that maintains this fidelity to failure can bear fruit. Only in the knowledge that failure is definitive of us can we succeed" (2005b: 13). Eagleton's argument corresponds to that of Williams, who finds that the only way to maintain revolution is to see it in its tragic perspective, to recognise rather than romanticise the suffering it entails and to acknowledge that it involves real people, rather than merely an abstract idea (2006: 108). Williams' emphasis is important: liberation does not cancel terror, but is connected to it, and this connection is tragic (107).

Soyinka calls attention to the tragic nature of revolutionary change. Although the legitimisation of Pentheus' sacrifice is unambiguous, it is not celebrated as an unambiguously romantic act, nor is the suffering it involves disregarded. The character of the Old Slave laments:

OLD SLAVE: The ways of the gods are hard to understand
 We know full well that some must die, chosen
 To bear the burden of decay, lest we all die—
 The farms, the wheatfields, cattle, even the
 Vineyards up on the hills. And yet, this knowledge
 Cannot blunt the edge of pain, the cruel

¹⁹ Comparably, in the early Christian empire and through the Middle Ages, Christianity was heavily influenced by the pagan myths it incorporated—Dionysus, for example, came to be viewed as a proto-Christian figure. For more information on this, see Wolfgang Liebeschuetz (1995).

Nature of his death. Oh this is a heartless
Deity, bitter, unnatural in his revenge.
To make a mother rip her son like bread
Across a banqueting board. I pity her. (300)

Kadmos similarly grieves that the god is “just but he is not fair,” that he lacks “compassion, the deeper justice” (304). Both pity Agave, yet there is little room for her own lament, for her own pain. When she awakes from her spell and realises that she has brutally murdered her own son, Agave “*screams and flattens herself below [Pentheus’] head, hugging the ladder,*” but the play’s final image shows her drinking from the wine gushing from her son’s head, joining in the communion rite (307). As a result of Soyinka’s emphasis on the communal, the personal, individual element remains obscured.²⁰

When Agave and the other people of Thebes together drink the wine from Pentheus’ head, they absorb not only freedom. The ecstasy of the ritual killing has instantly been replaced by a profoundly tragic awareness of the paradoxes, insecurities and ambiguities of existence. As the Old Slave reflects earlier on in the play:

What does it mean life? Dare one
Hope for better than merely warring, seeking
Change, seeking the better life? Can we
Control what oppresses by anticipation? Can we?
Dare we surrender to what comes after, embrace
The ambiguous face of the future? It is enough
To concede awareness of the inexplicable, to wait
And watch the unfolding... (292)

The “ambiguous face of the future” is intrinsic to the ritual; the state of liminality is necessarily temporary. Any *communitas* is ultimately converted into normative structure and law (Turner 1982: 47). It remains to be seen, then, what Soyinka’s postcolonial Thebes will look like. Hopefully Pentheus’ sacrificial death will succeed in putting a definite end to dictatorship. Hopefully Soyinka’s Thebes will be organised in such a way that violence does not, once again, become institutionalised. Hopefully Dionysus will have introduced a “new or changed law,” like Antigone in Gillian Rose’s analysis, to which I referred in the previous chapter (1996: 35-36). Hopefully, because the problem with sacrifice, as Eagleton states, is that “sacrifice is needed when the community falls sick,” but “the community is always sick” (2005: 130). As Williams reminds us, there is always the danger that “the most active agents of revolution can become its factual enemies, even while to others, and even to themselves, they seem its most perfect embodiment” (2006: 107).

²⁰ I expand on the relative absence of Agave’s suffering in Soyinka’s *Bacchae* in Chapter Five.

Soyinka suggests that Dionysian ritual reconfigures Theban society. The question remains whether expelling the tyrant and freeing the slaves is sufficient to transform a class-divided society; whether a ritual event can allow for social revision and, if so, whether this revision can last beyond the event. Looking at the conclusion of Soyinka's *Bacchae*, it seems difficult to answer this question in the affirmative. As Goff identifies, "the interest at the end ... narrows down to the aristocrats, and the exploited populace is largely left out of the equation," so that ultimately, "[t]he account of the political city is abandoned for and superseded by an account of the unknowable gods" (2005b: 84). Soyinka emphasises but does not address class; class simply dissolves as an effect of the communion rite. For this reason, I concur with James Booth that the new order Dionysus creates seems a matter of "purified consciousness and transcendence, rather than coherent social reorganisation" (quoted in Pizzato 2003: 44). Derek Wright offers a similar criticism, arguing that ritual and politics make "strange bedfellows" and that, by using ritual to equate the communal to the cosmic dimension, Soyinka does not allow for the socio-political dimension between the two. The mythologisation of history and society, claims Wright, implies that everything that goes wrong is ultimately an aberration of human nature, rather than the result of social and political forces (1993: 18-20, 64).²¹

Booth's and Wright's criticisms are directed at Soyinka's tendency to absorb all experience, traditional as well as contemporary, into a pre-existing cosmic totality. Osofisan also disapproves of this defining characteristic of Soyinka's aesthetics. According to him, it locates Soyinka's practice outside of history, prohibiting real political change: "[h]owever one may regret it, myth and history are no longer complementary, and to insist otherwise is to voice a plea for reaction," because "the world view which made for animist metaphysics has all but disintegrated in the acceleration, caused by colonialism, of man's economic separation from Nature" (1982: 95). In an interview, Osofisan further explains that "[a]s long as the Archetype remains on the objective level of historical symbol rather than eternal paradigm, the wedding of ritual form and revolutionary ethos should be possible" (quoted in Onwueme 1991: 64). This comment specifies the most important point of difference between Osofisan's and Soyinka's revolutionary vision of myth and history, a difference that is illustrated by their different reconfigurations of Hellenic mythical figures. While in *Tegonni*: an African *Antigone* Osofisan presents *Antigone* as a historical symbol that can be applied to different historical moments, Soyinka gives his "Ogunian" Dionysus the status of eternal cosmological essence.

²¹ Chidi Amuta observes that much of Soyinka's later writings witness the beginning of a move away from myth to more secular and more radical political inclination, relating this to Soyinka's experience of the Nigerian civil war and his imprisonment (1988: 127).

Like Booth, Wright and Osofisan, I find it difficult to be convinced by Soyinka's combination of myth and history, ritual and politics. It seems important, nonetheless, to observe that Soyinka does not ignore history; his many calls for social justice and criticism of oppressive institutions and regimes in various historical contexts bear witness to this. Rather than evidencing an anti-historical approach, suggests Marxist literary critic Biodun Jeyifo, Soyinka's recourse to Yoruba metaphysics displays a mythopoeic attitude to history, in which all experience is transformed into trans-historical dimensions (Soyinka 1988: xxvii-xxviii). Chidi Amuta similarly insists that while Soyinka's "consciousness is ultimately historical," his "imagination and idiom of creative expression derive from a fundamentally mythic source and a religious sentiment" (1988: 116). Through his mythologisation of history, Soyinka also emphasises that traditional Yoruba mythology and metaphysics are not at odds with modernity and that, rather, "tradition is now and is born of every experience, not buried in the stillness of antiquity" (quoted in Wright 1993: 21).

This mix of metaphysics and history in Soyinka's aesthetics could explain the problems that arose when his *Bacchae* was first brought on stage. At its premiere, it received a number of negative reviews, but perhaps the most fervent criticism came from Soyinka himself. Apologising for "the occasional expression of strong feelings" because "the scar is still fresh," he recollects: "There we were, with the Bacchantes waving the banner of revolution at the world in a manner that calculated to put the world off the very idea of change for ever" (1988: 72). It was change, then, that had been foremost on Soyinka's mind, but in the hands of director Roland Joffé this objective was lost. In a hostile note to both Joffé and artistic director of the National Theatre Peter Hal, Soyinka explains what went wrong. He intended his *Bacchae* as an expression of the "periodic human need to swill, gorge and copulate on the same gargantuan scale as Nature herself":

My emphasis is on the human; you keep putting things back into the laps of gods, game-playing gods at that. Divine enlargement of the human condition should be viewed dramatically, through man. The mode for this is Ritual. The medium is Man. Ritual equates the divine (superhuman) dimension with the communal will, fusing the social with the spiritual. The social liberation strands in the play are not therefore arbitrary but intrinsic. (1988: 70-72)

In taking recourse to the divine, the director bypassed the communal dimension that to Soyinka, as the subtitle *a communion rite* implies, is of primary concern. Soyinka teaches Joffé and Hal a lesson in Yoruba tragedy, in which the human is interconnected, through ritual, with the communal and cosmic dimensions and in which ritual, because it equates the communal will with the divine, holds the potential of social change. In the context of its performance (in a British theatre, for a British audience),

perhaps the dominant conception of tragedy as about “game-playing gods” stood in the way of staging Soyinka’s Yoruba tragedy as he had intended it.

YORUBA AND GREEK: A COMPLICATED BROTHERHOOD

While Soyinka emphasises the *Bacchae*’s shared relevance in ancient Greece and contemporary Africa, the anecdote above also points to a crucial divergence. Different from Euripides’ bleak conclusion, Soyinka ends his tragedy with a communion rite, an image of utopian communion, which not only “evinces Soyinka’s firm commitment to social equality based on ritual enactment” but also “solidifies his rejection of traditional Western tragic structure” (Robert Baker-White 2006: 395). Soyinka’s play does not emphasise the powerlessness of humans at the hands of “game-playing gods”; its focus is not on the individual’s tragic fall, but on communal change. This tragedy ends positively, which again points to the play’s ambiguous status as both a revision of an antecedent text and a unique work of art. It could be argued that Soyinka not only adapts Euripides’ tragedy, but that he also adapts the genre.

Soyinka’s tragic theory corresponds with two other theories that seem incommensurable: those of Nietzsche and Williams. While I have found it useful to call on both, once they are viewed in relation to each other they reveal a conflicting logic. Williams theorises tragedy’s contemporary, revolutionary potential through emphasising history:

If ... we think of [tragic theory] as a theory about a single and permanent kind of fact, we can end only with the metaphysical conclusions that are built into any such assumption. Chief among these is the assumption of a permanent, universal and essentially unchanging human nature ... But if we reject this assumption ... the problem is necessarily transformed. Tragedy is then ... a series of experiences and conventions and institutions. ... the varieties of tragic experience are to be interpreted by reference to the changing conventions and institutions. (2006: 69)

Soyinka shares Williams’ belief that tragedy is not about an unchanging human nature but about the possibility of change. In that respect, he too emphasises history. But while for Williams historical understanding opposes metaphysical theories that view tragedy as “a single and permanent kind of fact,” in Soyinka’s tragedy, history and metaphysics pose no contradiction to begin with (2006: 69). Soyinka also draws on Nietzsche’s theory, which in many ways stands diametrically opposed to that of Williams. For Nietzsche, the existence of a metaphysical totality exceeding individual suffering, the “change of generations” and the “history of nations”—exceeding history, in short—provides consolation. The focus is not on the individual’s fall, but on being,

which goes on forever, and this constitutes the “metaphysical comfort” of “every true tragedy” (1995: 22-23).²²

While Williams’ and Nietzsche’s tragic theories seem incommensurable, Soyinka’s theory of Yoruba tragedy shares important characteristics with both. His emphasis on the communal dimension, mediating through ritual between individual and being and between history and metaphysics, allows him to encompass a revolutionary politics as well as metaphysical totality within one theory. Appropriately, it is through an adaptation of the *Bacchae*, dedicated to the disruption of distinctions, that Soyinka bridges these conflicting views.

But Soyinka achieves more. To analyse this, let me turn to his *Myth, Literature and the African World* (1976). This collection of essays sheds further light on Soyinka’s aesthetics and, I suggest, reveals a specific cultural politics. Soyinka expands on the “African worldview” by distinguishing it from the “European worldview.” Here, the emphasis is not on correspondences but on differences.

In the European worldview, claims Soyinka, gods and humans are distanced, whereas in the African worldview they are interdependent, their realities constituting a cosmic totality. The boundaries between their realities can only be crossed through ritual, so that it is through ritual that humans try to reunify with the gods. According to Soyinka, this is what Yoruba tragedy enacts. He claims that in Greek antiquity “man did, like the African, exist within a cosmic totality, did possess a consciousness in which his own earth being, his gravity-bound apprehension of self, was inseparable from the entire cosmic phenomenon” (1976: 3). Hence, Soyinka argues that classical tragedy, with its ritual roots, is more akin to the African worldview than modern European tragedy, which, primarily under Christian influence, changed its focus to the hero’s individual moral flaws (1976: 40). Already in medieval European theatre it is clear that:

²² Nietzsche writes: “in spite of the flux of phenomena, life at bottom is indestructibly powerful and pleasurable, appears with objective clarity as the satyr chorus, the chorus of natural beings, who as it were live ineradicably behind every civilization, and who, despite the ceaseless change of generations and the history of nations, remain the same to all eternity.” Still, the comfort tragedy offers lasts only briefly: “as soon as we become conscious again of everyday reality, we feel it as nauseating and repulsive” so that the escape from history that tragedy offers cannot last (1995: 22-23). According to Richard Seaford, Nietzsche “abstracts tragic contradiction from history and makes it a purely metaphysical principle, a principle of eternal unity that is also eternal contradiction: the Dionysiac” (quoted in Goff 1995: 205). Giacomo Gambino claims, however, that in Nietzsche’s theory, despite its metaphysical aesthetics, tragedy articulates the paradoxical tendencies of Greek culture and, as such, is a mode of political discourse: while the Apollonian demands restraint and measure (important to polis’ foundations), the Dionysian has to do with the rituals that undermine the conventions on which the polis is built and promote a sense of community in which all distinctions vanish (1996: 417, 427). Nietzsche’s description of the Dionysian movement as one of liberation (which I discussed above) seems to support Gambino’s claim. His observation that an emphasis on metaphysics does not automatically imply the negation of history and politics, is relevant to Soyinka’s aesthetics.

[c]osmic representation has *shrunk* into a purely moral one, a summation in terms of penalties and rewards. The process continued through successive periods of European partial explorations of *what was once* a medium of totality, achieving such analytical aberrations as in [the] sample of compartmentalisation which claims that the right (actor's) wing of the stage is "stronger" than the left. We shall not encounter any proofs of this *ludicrous* assertion in *the beginnings of theatre*, Greek or African. (1976: 41, emphases added)

The European imagination lacks a sense of cosmic totality, demonstrating "a compartmentalising habit of thought" that "periodically selects aspects of human emotion, phenomenal observations, metaphysical intuitions and even scientific deductions and turns them into separatist myths (or 'truths') sustained by a proliferating structure of presentation idioms, analogies and analytical modes" (1976: 37). Although in modern European theatre "transient parallels, brief visual moments of this [ritual] experience" remain, these merely demonstrate the search of European dramatists for ritualist roots, showing their "deep-seated need ... to *recover* this archetypal consciousness in the origins of the dramatic medium" (41-43, emphasis added).

As my emphases show, Soyinka uses temporal terms to articulate the difference between the European and the African worldviews, offering a clear sense of a Europe that has lost something that in Africa is still present. In talking about "the beginnings of theatre, Greek or African," he positions Greek and African as equivalent and simultaneous "origins" of theatre, presenting European tragedy as a derivation, or even a perversion, of these origins. He thus overturns the historicism of the traditional Eurocentric comparative paradigm that continues to present Africa as behind in time; Africa is "further" than its European Other. Soyinka additionally emphasises that "Greek" is not synonymous to "European."²³

Looking at Soyinka's rhetoric, the question arises whether his emphasis on a "pure essence," a "wholeness" still there in Africa but lost in Europe, does not maintain a similar dichotomy as that of the nativism he criticises, only substituting the categories of European intellect and African emotion for "European compartmentalisation" and "African holism" (Wright 1993: 182). Soyinka has often been accused of nativism, especially by the younger generation of Nigerian playwrights, like Osofisan, who, as I discussed above, feels that Soyinka's use of tradition cannot live up to the demands of

²³ Soyinka's statement reminds of that of Jean-Paul Sartre, who in his essay "Orphée Noir" (Black Orpheus, 1948) claims that, opposed to European poets, "[t]he blacks of Africa ... are still in the great period of mythical fecundity" (quoted in Wetmore 2003: 16). "Orphée Noir" was the preface to Léopold Sédar Senghor's anthology of Francophone poetry by writers of African descent. For good analyses of the Eurocentric paradigm described here, see Dipesh Chakrabarty (2000) and Rey Chow (2004).

the contemporary world. In addition, Soyinka's presentation of an "Africa" as a unified concept does not correspond with the reality of a continent of numerous nations, tongues and traditions. Moreover, it seems to entail the substitution of a general Africa with what is in fact particularly Yoruba.

The pan-Africanism Soyinka displays has also been criticised by Ghanaian-British philosopher Anthony Kwame Appiah.²⁴ He points to the role African intellectuals have played in pan-Africanist thought, describing Soyinka as one of the Western-trained group of writers and thinkers who "mediate the trade in cultural commodities of world capitalism at the periphery," known by their compatriots "through an Africa they have invented ... for each other, and for Africa" and known internationally "through the Africa they offer ... an Africa they have invented for the world" (1992: 149). Appiah holds Soyinka responsible for perpetuating the essentialism that characterises Eurocentric thought. I concur with Appiah that "[i]f you postulate an either-or choice between Africa and the West, there is no place for you in the real world of politics" and that Soyinka's construction of an "African worldview" as wholly different from the "European worldview" at times indeed gets close to the binary thinking he opposes (Johnson 1992: 8). However, as I try to demonstrate, Soyinka's construction of Africa is part of a political dynamic that is more complex than Appiah accounts for, actually working to challenge the Eurocentrism it seems to perpetuate.

To achieve a better understanding of this, let me turn to the anecdote with which Soyinka introduces his collection *Myth, Literature and the African World* (1976). He sketches the context of Cambridge University where he had become a fellow in 1971 and where, in 1973, a series of lectures were held on African literature and society. Soyinka informs his readers that, tellingly, these lectures took place in the Department of Social Anthropology. As he recalls, "[t]he Department of English did not believe in any such mythical beast as 'African Literature'" (1976: vii). Soyinka expresses his frustration:

We black Africans have been blandly invited to submit ourselves to a second epoch of colonisation—this time by a universal-humanoid abstraction defined and conducted by individuals whose theories and prescriptions are derived from the apprehension of *their* world and *their* history, *their* social neuroses and *their* value systems. (x, emphases in text)

²⁴ Kenneth Inyani Simala defines pan-Africanism as a political and cultural phenomenon that aims at developing an African consciousness and asserting an African identity in order to apply this idea of "African-ness" to a whole continent. The ideology expressed in pan-Africanism was indeed foremost intended to oppose the negation of African societies through the slave trade and colonisation. While the idea of "Africa" has played an important part in race-conscious anti-colonial movements, it extends from the European (colonial) imagination in which it satisfied the need for otherness (2003: 2).

Soyinka refers to the traditional comparative paradigm described by cultural critic Rey Chow as “Europe and Its Others,” in which Europe remains the grid of reference to which literatures of others may be added, always to remain subsequent and subordinate. Non-European literatures are reduced to anthropological objects of study (2004: 294). Soyinka fiercely criticises the neo-colonial African elite who still depart from Eurocentric perspectives, but has equally little patience with those who, in reaction to this, develop their own version of Manichean thinking, such as the intellectuals of the Négritude movement, who rejected colonial racism on the basis of a common black identity.

Soyinka’s tragedies never pose Africa and Europe as clearly separated or opposed, dramatising an ongoing dialogue. As I hope to have demonstrated, Soyinka’s *Bacchae* is a good example of this. His essays in *Myth, Literature and the African World* define Europe and Africa as distinct categories for their intended audience of English academics in the late 1970s. Seen in this context, Soyinka’s construction of Africa is not a mere reiteration of a colonialist construction of Africa but a particular strategy. Of all critics who have written on Soyinka, and there are many, Olakunle George seems most sensitive to what this strategy entails. He points out that the essentialism Soyinka demonstrates acquires meaning “only in the relational logic of a preconstituted discursive field, in which there is something called the West, and something else called the non-West” (2003: 149). In front of English academics, the most effective way to displace Eurocentric terms was through the construction of an Africa-against-Europe dichotomy that his audience would recognise. The fictional category of an idealised native Africa may be false, but at the same time becomes a useful (and thus tolerable) part of a process of reconstruction, a flawed but rhetorically enabling strategy (George 2003: 149).²⁵

As discussed in the first chapter, genealogical models of influence, whether they depart from Eurocentric or Afrocentric assumptions, are ultimately reductive. I also suggested there, however, that Soyinka’s “reverse genealogy”—which I compared to that of Martin Bernal in his *Black Athena* project—should be understood as strategically effective. To clarify this strategic quality, let me refer to an exchange between Appiah and Soyinka about the uses of tragedy. Appiah asks whether the concept of tragedy is not too distant to most people, to which Soyinka replies:

Yes. But that’s only if one begins by accepting the European definition of tragedy. I remember my shock as a student of literature and drama when I read that drama originated in Greece. ... What are they talking about?

²⁵ Despite his criticism of Soyinka’s construction of “Africa,” Appiah himself recognises that the “false” idealization that presents a coherently “native” Africa can under particular conditions also be a “tolerable falsehood by whose instrumentality a particular kind of African agency has historically been mediated and activated” (as rephrased by Korang 2004: 55).

I never heard my grandfather talk about Greeks invading Yorubaland? I couldn't understand. I've lived from childhood with drama. I read at the time that tragedy evolved as a result of the rites of Dionysus. Now we all went through this damn thing, so I think the presence of eradication had better begin. It doesn't matter what form it takes. (applause)

Appiah: Nevertheless, whatever their origins, tragedy does have a specific, formal...

Soyinka: But I've never made a claim that I'm presenting tragedy in European terms. Tragedy ... whether we translate it in Yoruba or Tre or Ewe, I think we'll find a correlative somewhere in which we're all talking about the same thing. (1988: 782-783)

Again, Soyinka does not accept the European definition of tragedy. Nevertheless, the phrase "Yoruba tragedy" inevitably embeds the dominance of the European understanding. Similarly, in her discussion of the genre of the novel, Chow explains that, once outside the arena of Western Europe, the term "novel" is almost always invoked with a national or ethnic qualifier, such as "Japanese" or "Russian," indicating that the ultimate reference remains European (2004: 295-296). The qualifier "Yoruba" in "Yoruba tragedy" contains a similar implication: it lends an ethnic specification to a genre that, without it, is assumed to be Western.

To some readers, the exchange with Appiah may seem to contain a contradiction. Although Soyinka emphasises that he does not accept the European definition of tragedy, he simultaneously promotes a universal notion of tragedy, a general sensibility, stemming from rites that we all experience. Soyinka's approach is located in this seeming contradiction, because it stops being a contradiction once the reader stops equating "universal" with "European," or "tragedy" with "European tragedy." As George explains, Soyinka gives the specificity of the Yoruba worldview a double function that avoids the universal/particular binary. Soyinka's Yoruba tragedy is both: particular because the tragic action is located within a Yoruba context; universal because the tragic essence carries a resonance that transcends history (2003: 168).

Soyinka's view can be compared to that of fellow Nigerian playwright J.P. Clark. Critics dispute whether Clark's *Song of a Goat* (published in 1964) is influenced by Greek tragedy. Its title suggests that it is, since the etymological root of "tragedy" is the Greek word for "goat song" (Wetmore 2002: 62). Clark addresses the question as follows:

The implication is not that one group of people borrowed this and that property from another but that there can and in fact do occur areas of coincidence and correspondence ... For example, the orchestra and leader-chorus arrangement of characters occupies as much a principal part in Nigerian theatre as it did in Greek theatre. But this is not to say one is debtor to the other. It is a matter of correspondence and coincidence. (quoted in Wetmore 2002: 64)

Similar to Soyinka in his exchange with Appiah, Clark views tragedy's occurrence in both Western and African culture as a mere "coincidence of comparison," to use Rada Ivekovic's phrase (2000: 224). Neither Clark nor Soyinka seem concerned with reclaiming tragedy, but with presenting it as a form and sensibility that originated also—if not exclusively—in their (Ijaw or Yoruba) cultural traditions.²⁶

Soyinka's Yoruba tragedy becomes a strategic demand for a dialogue on equal terms. By substituting the vertical, historicist axis with a horizontal, structural one, he can claim universality precisely because he goes beyond history.²⁷ Soyinka situates European tragedy next to Yoruba tragedy. He not only undoes the former of its higher position, but also pushes the limits of the term "universal." George phrases it well when he says that "Soyinka is writing back to Europe by seizing a discursive form and filling it with a different content" and that, "in so doing, he acts out a basic self-refutation that centralists of the canon act out all the time: he plays politics, so to speak, by insisting that we take our minds out of the gutter of politics" (2003: 169). Soyinka's refiguration of Dionysus reveals a similar cultural politics. Hence, I end this section on a return to Soyinka's Ogun-inspired Dionysus.

As I discussed above, Soyinka attributes Dionysus with African qualities, drawing on the Yoruba god Ogun in his understanding of Dionysus. In his *Bacchae*, he also expands Dionysus' territory from Asia to Africa, alluding to Eritrea, Libya and Ethiopia (Zabus 1998: 223). Through this added cultural difference, Soyinka's Dionysus comes to resemble his Greek counterpart even more, at least in his rejection of any clear-cut cultural definition. Goff expands on the ambiguous cultural origin of Dionysus in ancient Greece, explaining that while Dionysus' myths present him as an "alien outsider intruding on a Greek civilization," he was in fact part of Greek culture in Mycenaean times; "Dionysus" was therefore "how the Greeks pretended that they knew the difference between themselves and Barbarians" (2005b: 75). Paradoxically, in Dionysus, that difference collapses, so that he in effect challenged the Greek self-definition he was supposed to affirm.

I have demonstrated how Soyinka emphasises the similarities between Ogun and Dionysus. However, a closer look reveals a more complex dynamic at play in this "brotherhood" between African and Greek. To explain what I mean, let me repeat

²⁶ Clark's *Song of a Goat* tells the story of fisherman Zifa, whose impotence causes his wife and brother to start an illicit love relationship. Outraged, Zifa ritually slaughters a goat, foreshadowing both his brother's and his own suicide. The play is rooted in the tradition of the Ijaw, who live in the southeast area of Nigeria. Its first performance was directed by Soyinka (Hardwick 2004: 243). For a discussion of the dispute among critics about the possible influence of Greek tragedy on Clark's play, see Wetmore (2002: 63-64).

²⁷ While going "beyond history" is supposed to typify universalism, Soyinka calls attention to the fact that universalist claims often conceal particular historical and ideological positions. I borrow the description of a vertical, historicist axis and a horizontal, structural one from Rada Ivekovic, who uses these terms in her discussion of Indian philosophy's relation to Western philosophy (2000: 230).

Soyinka's presentations of Ogun. In the acknowledgements to the *Bacchae* he talks about "Ogun, elder brother to Dionysus" (1973: 234, emphasis added). Elsewhere, he describes Ogun as "that elder god who is in this context synonymous with Dionysos and who, conceptually, I have to confess I use interchangeably with Dionysos" (1988: 69). Above, I italicised "synonymous" and "interchangeably" to point to Soyinka's emphasis on cultural similarities. Here, I want to call attention to the word "elder," which holds a different implication. These descriptions not only denote Ogun's close relation to, or brotherhood with Dionysus, but also present the African as pre-dating the Greek, Europe's often-claimed origin. Soyinka thus uses a simple two-word phrase to play politics of an ambiguous kind. As in his theory of Yoruba tragedy, he overturns the historicism of traditional comparative paradigms, stating the relation between African and Greek in familial terms, but reversing the Eurocentric genealogical model that views Africa as backwards or belated. Soyinka further challenges the notion of the Greek as Europe's point of origin by stating that he finds "Europe totally alien to a true conception of the essence of Dionysos who, it is often forgotten, was never a European Deity" (1998: 69).

Just as it is too facile to dismiss Bernal's *Black Athena* project as essentialist and Afrocentric, it is too facile to regard Soyinka's Ogun-inspired Dionysus and his Yoruba tragedy in terms of a strategy to reclaim the Greek as African. As Zabrus claims, Soyinka's alterations end up not so much "Africanising" the play as "exploring the syncretism of an imaginary proto-Dionysian myth or *Ur-Bacchae*," so that "[a]ttempts at Africanization are therefore subsumed to the overall scheme of syncretization" (1998: 205). Indeed, as an amalgamation of different contexts, traditions and mythologies, Soyinka's work refuses Afrocentric interpretations as much as it refuses Eurocentric ones. From this respect, he would no doubt agree with Bernal who, in response to claims of Afrocentrism, has declared that "my enemy is not Europe; it's purity" (Walter Cohen 1993: 23).²⁸

THE TERMS OF COMPARISON

My focus in this chapter was twofold: I examined the ways in which in his adaptation of Euripides' *Bacchae* Soyinka employs Yoruba mythology and cosmology to emphasise the revolutionary potential of ritual sacrifice, and I explored the cultural politics that Soyinka's theory of Yoruba tragedy and refiguration of Dionysus perform. I discussed, in other words, two levels at play in the politics of adaptation.

²⁸ Bernal does not conceive of himself as an Afrocentrist, but admits that he has a number of points of agreement with them and that, with respect to their appropriation of the name *Black Athena*, in some ways, he is "very pleased to provide ammunition for them" (Cohen 1993: 7).

I suggested that Soyinka's combination of ritualist aesthetics and revolutionary politics raises a fundamental question about the function and place of sacrifice within society. In Soyinka's *Thebes*, the annual killing of innocent slaves epitomises the tragic perpetuation of disorder, so that the killing of Pentheus in the Dionysian rite is a necessary, and therefore legitimate, act. At the same time, sacrifice, while intended as a singular, restorative act, is in danger of becoming institutionalised as the continuous repetition of violence. To me, this is the most urging problem that Soyinka's *Bacchae* poses. On the one hand, Soyinka presents ritual sacrifice as something that interrupts the cycle of history; on the other hand, in Soyinka's aesthetics the ritual through which political change could be effected is contained within the cosmos it periodically revitalises. To Soyinka this poses no insoluble contradiction, nor does it imply that change is impossible or that action is futile. In his view, metaphysics and history are not opposed. Ritual is a mode through which the community can be inspired to act, which makes Yoruba tragedy the art form that most effectively inspires social and political change.

It remains difficult to establish if and to what extent theatre can generate a communal experience and political change, and whether the chorus of bacchantes and slaves will succeed in inspiring revolutionary ideas among the audience. In this respect, Pizzato suggests that the title of Soyinka's essay on Yoruba tragedy, "The Fourth Stage," could also refer to the theatrical notion of the imaginary "fourth wall" which separates the audience from the action on stage. In realistic performances, this wall remains intact, with the audience conditioned to believe that the world of the play is real. The question how this fourth wall is dealt with relates to the political potential of ritual drama. Pizzato refers to Antonin Artaud and Bertolt Brecht as two modern theorists of drama who influenced ritual's reinvention in spiritual and political directions. While Artaud envisioned the actor as a "transcendent scapegoat," victimised "for the sake of audience communion and catharsis," Brecht conversely "saw a great communal danger in the lingering ritual temptation of Aristotelian mimesis—not only from the ancient to the modern stage, but also in the social theatre of Nazi Germany in the 1930s" (2003: 37). Pizzato observes that although Soyinka's theatre corresponds to both Artaud's and Brecht's concerns, he simultaneously distinguishes himself from these European paradigms (39). Soyinka's dramaturgy seems closer to Artaud than Brecht: while Brecht sought to break the fourth wall to distance his audience from, and make them reflect critically on the action, Soyinka breaks it to include them in a ritualistic experience.²⁹ The political potential of this experience is complicated, however, by the possibility that the actors ultimately act on behalf of their audience,

²⁹ From a Western point of view, the preservation or dissolving of distance distinguishes theatre from ritual, but Soyinka emphasises that theatre is rooted in ritual and in his theory, as I have discussed, it is precisely this ritualist origin and nature of theatre that gives it political potential (1976: 41-43).

offering them a communal and cathartic release from the politically subversive desires they might have.

Despite the promise of future change that Soyinka's tragic theory offers, historically speaking the idea that ritual sacrifice interrupts history only to restore the cosmic balance offers little solace. It means that sacrifice and the violence it performs are included within a larger metaphysical totality, part of a never-ending perpetuum mobile. The question remains, then, whether in Soyinka's mythologized conception of history, ritual can ever succeed in changing the socio-political structure it disrupts, or whether it ends up conserving the status quo. I am inclined to locate the political potential of this play not so much in its combination of ritual and revolution—which, applied to actual historical contexts, proves problematic—but in its ambiguous relation with the Euripidean pre-text and with dominant ideas about tragedy and cultural influence more generally. It is not primarily the message of revolutionary change it proclaims, I argue, but rather the politics of adaptation it performs that grants Soyinka's *Bacchae* its primary significance.

As in the reworkings of *Antigone*, this politics of adaptation is played out through the dual emphasis on similarity and difference. Soyinka's dramatisation of sacrifice is similar to Euripides', yet different; his Dionysus is similar to Euripides', yet different; his Yoruba tragedy is similar to Greek tragedy, yet different. Through this dual emphasis, Soyinka calls attention to both the cultural specificity of his own version of the *Bacchae*, of his refiguration of Dionysus and of his tragic theory, while simultaneously hinting at a shared sensibility and a mythological relevance that transcends cultural boundaries: in short, at something that could be called "universal." This simultaneous emphasis on particularity and universality might seem contradictory, but as I have attempted to demonstrate, it is precisely in this ostensible contradiction that Soyinka's politics is located.³⁰ Soyinka leaves only one way to make this contradiction disappear: by forcing his readers to historicise and contextualise the universal. As Kwaku Larbi Korang explains,

the history of Empire—and the philosophies and mythologies that accounted for and justified it—shows how, over time, an idea of the universal was appropriated and assumed by a particular civilizational and cultural identity, the Western one. This proprietary idea of the universal incorporated into a particular identity has functioned as a global marker of the competitive value of Europe, a value that as such devalues all other identities (2004: 55-56).

³⁰ One of the underlying arguments in this study is that within the contemporary contexts I look at, contradictions and ambiguities are more effective ways of challenging dominant discursive paradigms than unambiguously oppositional discourses. This is why I appreciate Biodun Jeyifo's choice to introduce his book on Soyinka with this epigraph by Bertolt Brecht: "Contradictions are our only hope" (2004).

Presenting a culturally specific form of a universal sensibility, Soyinka insists on a “competitive share or stake in the universal” (Korang 2004: 56).

Because of the way it relates to particularity and universality, Soyinka’s Yoruba tragedy might be best described as an instance or expression of singularity. Bal makes this distinction in her book on Doris Salcedo’s political art, where she presents singularity as a term that surpasses the division between particularity and universality. The singular, she explains, is that which “maintains difference, without turning it into the (generalizable) ground for group identity” (Forthcoming 11). Singularity prevents the reduction of differences either to isolated, individual expressions that hold no meaning beyond their particular contexts, or to mere illustrations of general ideas they have no influence on. Unlike particularity, which can only be thought of in terms of a universal, singularity does not exist in a relation of opposition to or dependency on universality, but, rather, exceeds it. Through the ambiguous, double gesture of adaptation, establishing both familiarity and difference, Soyinka’s Yoruba tragedy achieves precisely that: it performs a “dialogue between the particular and the universal in favour of the singular,” through singularity demanding reflection on what “particular” and “universal” imply (Bal 198).

In this way, Soyinka does what according to Chow is necessary to reverse the conventional comparative paradigm of “Europe and its Others”: he demands of the viewer or reader a reflexive judgement of the terms of comparison itself, strategically pushing for these terms to be de- and reconstructed (2004: 303). Soyinka does with “tragedy” what Bernal does with “Greece”: challenging its conventional Eurocentric definition and thereby challenging Eurocentrism in general. His Yoruba tragedy is more than the expression of a Yoruba-inspired ritualistic aesthetics, also suggesting what could be described as an adaptation of genre. Soyinka performs a cultural politics that holds wider relevance, demonstrating that adaptation, both as a product and as a process, holds considerable strategic potential.