"THE LAST PROOF OF THE HUMAN IN YOU": WOLE SOYINKA AND THE OEDIPUS MYTH

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Updated Abstract
My paper deals with Wole Soykinka's use of the Oedipus myth in his early radio play *Camwood on the Leaves*, as well as in his later plays *Death and the King's Horseman*, *Madmen and Specialists* and *The Strong Breed*. Although Soyinka highlights the incestuous and parricidal elements of the myth, I argue that Soyinka's interest in Oedipus is not primarily psychoanalytic but political, philosophical and anthropological. Soyinka suggests that symbolically incestuous or parricidal actions (which seem to disobey universal human laws and thus merit the punishment Oedipus inflicted on himself by gouging out his eyes) may in fact be the most significant gestures humans can make. Soyinka's self-consciously Nietzschean celebration of Dionysian excess, madness and self-destruction challenges many of the pieties of political correctness, but he also uses these motifs to critique specific aspects of Nigerian politics. For instance, Bero's boasts about cannibalism in Madmen and Specialists are commentaries on the Nigerian civil war and its atrocities. This violation of "civilized" human values, while not explicitly Oedipal, is part of Bero's revolt against his father, a revolt that culminates in an act of parricide that (since his father was about to murders an innocent beggar when Bero kills him), paradoxically affirms the humane values Bero professes to have abandoned. My paper will place Soyinka's complex responses to the Oedipus story in the context of Yoruba myth, and compare him briefly to the Nigerian writer Ola Rotimi, the less well-known author of the play *The Gods Are Not to Blame* (an adaptation of Sophocles's *Oedipus Tyrannus* in light of African tribal conflicts). I will argue that both Rotimi and Soyinka rely on provocatively ambiguous ideas about the coexistence of fate and free will in human affairs (Rotimi's description of the pre-natal process of *akunleyan*, or "kneeling down to choose" will be a case in point).

The Oedipus myth has frequently been portrayed as a peculiar feature of Western culture, and those who (like Freud) have made claims for its universal appeal have often been deemed Eurocentric. Yet the fact that Wole Soyinka, a writer whose work is rooted in both African lore and Nigerian politics, has repeatedly commented on and employed Oedipus and his crimes (parricide and incest) in his plays suggests that the ancient myth has a greater appeal than many would believe. Soyinka also reminds us that the true meaning of the myth does not reside in sexual or violent transgression, per se: it lies in Oedipus's status as a representative human being in conflict with divine powers.

This interpretation of Oedipus's story as a parable of the struggle between humanity and divinity (and the ultimate dissolution of humanity's pretentions to autonomy) is not unique, nor is it especially novel; it was perhaps the most common way of reading Oedipus before Freud arrived on the scene. In Sophocles's *Oedipus Tyrannus*, for example, Oedipus boasts of his human mental prowess and sneers at the sacred, prophetic wisdom of Tiresias, who has access to superhuman secrets (including the truth about Oedipus's own divinely chosen fate). The classical scholar Bernard Knox suggests that *Oedipus Tyrannus* embodies a major anxiety shared by many at the time: a suspicion that human intelligence was usurping divine prerogatives. Knox posits that "the intellectual progress of Oedipus and Jocasta in the play is a sort of symbolic history of fifth-century rationalism" (ibid., 47-8), and suggests that Oedipus's self-induced disaster is a sort of warning to those who would rely too much on human rationality.

Nineteenth-century philosophical accounts of Oedipus suggest that he has continued to function as an intellectual hero who shows human beings their godlike powers of understanding: for instance G.W.F. Hegel saw Oedipus as the hero who first recognizes himself as a human being, and understands that this very recognition enables him to gain power over nature. This power is a very dangerous one, however, according to Friedrich Nietzsche, who, in his 1872 book *The Birth of Tragedy*, argues that in Oedipus's case the "edge of wisdom" is "turned against the wise man," a state of affairs that suggests an uncomfortable possibility: that human "wisdom" is "a crime committed on nature" that will lead to self-destruction (*The Birth of Tragedy* 61).Wole Soyinka participates in this debate about Oedipus's significance, and I will suggest that he comes

down firmly on the Nietzschean side, implying that the mythic hero Freud saw as a universal symbol of human desire is in fact a symptom of our inability to understand or accept ourselves as we are, without some divine presence as both an intellectual reference point and as a redemptive force in our lives .

The most straightforward evidence for Soyinka's affinities with the Oedipus story may be found in his early radio play Camwood on the Leaves, which depicts a bitter father-son conflict that ends in parricide. In the play Erinjobi, a Christian pastor, objects strenuously to his son Isola's participation in what he calls "pagan" dances and ceremonies. Like Nwoye (later Isaac) in Achebe's Things Fall Apart, Erinjobi has rebelled against African cultural traditions and is dismayed to find his son continuing the family trend of filial disobedience. Isola defies his father by mimicking the chanting of the egungun (sacred tribal spirits much like Achebe's egwugwu), reinforcing the idea that part of the son's challenge to paternal authority is a rejection of the univocal culture in which he was brought up; just as Okonkwo's son converts to Christianity, so Isola moves in the opposite direction.

When Isola is ostracized for having impregnated his childhood friend Morounke out of wedlock, Erinjobi refuses to forgive his son and allows him to be driven nearly insane by a throng of angry pursuers. Once Erinjobi finds out about Isola's sexual misadventures he, like Oedipus's father Laius when his son is born, is determined to "leave" his child "to his fate" (8). Indeed, Erinjobi decides that Isola was "damned from the start" and that he is capable of any "bestiality" whatsoever (Camwood 31). As this description implies, Isola is deemed to have forfeited his humanity by committing the near-incestuous crime of having had premarital sex with a girl who was so close to his family that she and he "grew up like children of the same mother" (17). Thus when Mohi protests against the "human dogs" who are out for her son's blood, she reproaches Morounke's spiteful parents for setting them on him and "turning him into an animal" (39). Predictably enough, Mrs Olumorin, Morounke's mother, responds: "He was born an animal. No one is turning him into one" (39), thus retroactively denying all human qualities to Isola. Soyinka is no doubt making the point that to be human is simply to be treated as a human being rather than hounded and demonized; thus Isola's parricide is almost demanded by

the extra-human position in which Isola (whose name reflects his absolute isolation) is placed. Nevertheless, the fatal encounter between father and son is a bizarre one: Isola has fled to the woods to avoid his father's wrath, and there he has found a snake and a tortoise whom he names after his father and mother respectively. The snake is a boa constrictor, fittingly enough, and Isola well nigh admits his parricidal longings when he tells Morounke that he will "have to kill it" one day (18). This symbolic parricide turns into a real one when Erinjobi himself comes into the woods and is somehow mistaken for the snake by a (now thoroughly deranged) Isola, who shoots him. Isola's confusion remains after his father's death; he tries to console Morounke by saying "Hush, girl, hush...why it is only Erinjobi" (41).

Naturally, Isola's persistent identification of his father with the snake makes this fatal confusion seem like the result of an ill-concealed parricidal wish, but his inability to distinguish between a human being and an animal is arguably meant to appear to be the result of Isola's own dehumanization in the eyes of both his father and the villagers. Thus in a sense, Isola's parricide is prompted by Erinjobi's own aggressive denunciation; like Oedipus defending himself against Laius on the road to Thebes, Isola returns the violence that his father threatens him with. Derek Wright agrees, claiming that in Camwood on the Leaves, "the father's hatred and rejection of his son bring an... unnatural fate down on his own head" (43). Moreover, Wright points out that as a Christian Erinjobi "has himself initiated the Westernizing process that issues in the un-Yoruba-like total rebellion of his son" (43). Wright goes on to make the provocative argument that the play documents , the neurotic effects of an alien puritanical religion on the minds of the new African middle class—a class fearful for its exemplary position, obsessed with respectability, and brainwashed by colonial Christianity into despising the customs of its own people.... It is thus a national as well as a childhood rite of passage: with the killing of the father and all that he represents, the nation comes of age. (44) Wright also contends that "Much of Soyinka's mature work is foreshadowed in this...piece—Isola, as pathfinder and hounded rebel, is an embryonic...scapegoat figure" (44), and if we examine some of Soyinka's other, better-known plays, we find many of the same Oedipal themes at work, as well as still more evident symptoms of the dissolution of the idea of a

universal human nature.

Before we look at Soyinka's work in more detail, however, we should pause to acknowledge that it would of course be classic Eurocentrism to presume that the only source for Oedipal themes in Nigerian writing is the Western tradition. Yoruba myth, in which Soyinka is steeped (and which is indispensable for an understanding of his work) tells the story of the god-king Shango (or Sango), who has been widely regarded as an autochthonous African figure roughly analogous to Oedipus (with many differences, of course). Allen Johnson and Douglass Price-Williams list the Yoruba story of Shango "the Usurper" among many African folk tales that have strong affinities with the Oedipus myth. According to this story, the god Shango changed himself into a small boy and demanded that the Oyo king step down because he, Shango was the rightful ruler. After the king tries to have him drowned, Shango performs a few miracles and hangs himself, only to come back to life and take the king's place on the throne, calling himself Oba Koso (Johnson and Price-Williams 178-9). Ulli Beier's rendition of Shango's family life runs as follows: Shango's father Oranmiyan instructed him to hang himself after Oranmiyan's death, and Shango, who was being persecuted by his warlike brothers, follows this advice. He does not die, however, when he hangs himself; instead, the branch breaks and Shango finds his father's hidden wealth. Another suicide attempt (once again prompted by brotherly aggression) fails and Shango becomes a deity who is able to strike down his enemies at will (Beier 23-4).

A Girardian reading of Shango's story might suggest that Shango's powers all originate in his willingness to accept his role as the sacrificial victim who can placate his brothers' anger by killing himself. His failures to do so are really just expressions of the cultural renewal his people experience because of his gesture, and their deification of him after his death is a mark of their appreciation for his sacrifice. The threat of contagious violence Girard emphasizes (and which, in his view, is the reason that Oedipus must be ostracized) would be symbolized, in this reading, by the fire that emanates from Shango's mouth, which destroys his enemies. This fire may be the equivalent to the blood-red wine that flows from Dionysus's mouth. In the Yoruba myth, this fire was produced by a medicine prepared for Shango by a magician; the medicine, however, was eaten first by

Shango's wife and by his brothers, who all became affected by the cure that was meant only for Shango. The spread of this fire-breath seems a plausible correlative for the infectious violence Girard describes; the fact that the brothers are already aggressive makes this reading seem almost inevitable. Moreover, Shango's wife gave some of the same medicine to a man named Huisa, who attacked Shango once he had eaten it. Naturally, his wife's wife's habit of giving this strange substance to others made Shango "furious" (Beier 28) and the cycle of violence continued.

We may find further support for a Girardian reading of Sango's story (which would place Sango next to Oedipus as heroes first blamed for collective violence and then deified for having sacrificed themselves to end it) in Duro Ladipo's Oba Koso. In this play Sango's subjects plead with him to end the internecine war between factions led by Timi and Gbonka, two of Sango's nobles. At first Sango refuses to help, implying that he, like Oedipus, is the hidden cause of his people's suffering: I am Timi, I am Gbonka! —How then do you expectm

Understand that, my people. If a man wants to be blind, let him be blind completely. If a man wants to be a

10) After Sango has pitted them against each other, Gbonka kills Timi in combat, then demands the throne; Sango panics when some of his subjects turn against him and he murders them. As Soyinka points out, Sango is guilty of "the blind ignorant destruction of his own flesh and blood" (Myth, Literature and the African World 151). In this respect, Sango is like Oedipus, and like Oedipus his remorse causes him to end his reign. He laments his rashness, saying "In anger, I have killed my people— / Now I am left alone" (Ladipo 27), and he hangs himself. The Magbas, who are Sango's friends, elegize him as if he were a kind of vegetation god whose death will bring new growth "Sango is the banana near the river— / When you cut it down, / It will sprout again to bear another fruit" (Ladipo 29).

With typical insight, Soyinka sees the machinations of a "self-entrenching priesthood" at work in the immediate deification that follows Sango's death: "Duro Ladipo's play Oba Koso indicates quite clearly that Sango did commit suicide, that it was the priests who got quickly together, hushed the wailing of the women and rebuked them

for revealing that Sango took his own life. The body conveniently disappears and his elevation is attested: The king is dead; long live the god!" (Soyinka, Myth 12). Thus Soyinka writes of Sango as a deity who is "anthropomorphic in origin" and insists that Sango's "tragic rites" are "a deadly conflict on the human and historic plane" (Myth 8). According to Soyinka, Sango falls because he is "hubristic" and (perhaps because he tries to quell tribal violence among his subjects) comes into conflict with what Soyinka calls "the racial fount of his own being" (Myth 11). Soyinka cites the Yoruba proverb that says: "if humanity were not, the gods would not be" (Myth 10), and claims that the history of all Yoruba gods "is always marked by some act of excess, hubris or other human weakness" (Myth 13).

Mpalive-Hangson Msiska tries to sum up Soyinka's views as follows: Yoruba gods are terrestrial and not removed from the site of human drama, just as human are themselves capable of experiencing divine being, especially in the masquerades where they can even dress and assume the role of a given god. Thus, for Soyinka, it is in tragedy that the duality of human ontology is most supremely re-enacted, offering an exploration of the divinity of the human (71). We may suspect tha

rather pat oxymoron "the divinity of the human" as eagerly as Msiska would have us believe. After all, Soyinka also insists that the "rites" associated with Sango are "charged...with the passion and terror of superhuman, uncontrollable forces" (Myth 8). Moreover, Soyinka recounts the actions of a play called Oxala by a Brazilian writer named Zora Zeljan in which Sango enters into conflict with Olodumare, the "Supreme Deity" who, like Dionysus in The Bacchae, disguises himself as a mortal to trap Sango (as Dionysus traps Pentheus) into taking responsibility for a transgression against a divinity. Sango's "terrible and blasphemous" but also heroic and admirable reaction to Olodumare's deception "raises him to truly superhuman, superdaemoic levels" in Soyinka's mind (Myth 9). Such a description seems to bespeak a more complex attitude towards the "superhuman" on Soyinka's than could be attributed to a simple faith in the idea that humanity is the model for divinity and that in worshipping gods we simply worship ourselves in a modified, hybridized form; indeed without this modification by contact with the superhuman, human beings are monstrous and self-destructive. A human

being is either a hybrid of divine and mortal or nothing at all.

Indeed, as Msiska himself later acknowledges, "the acceptance of the human condition without an accompanying desire for its transformation is shown to lead to misanthropy and cannibalism in Soyinka's Madmen and Specialists" (39). This play, perhaps Soyinka's most political and disturbing work to date, revolves around the confrontation of Bero and his father, known simply as "Old Man" (as in Yeats's Purgatory, the father figure is reduced to his generic characteristics). Bero is a Western-style doctor who has been corrupted by his association with the government, which is conducting some macabre and Nazi-like experiments as it wages a bloody civil war. Bero's father disapproves of these medical atrocities, and his "Swiftian logic" (as Obi Maduakor has called it, in his book Wole Soyinka: An Introduction To His Writing) leads him to recommend legalizing cannibalism as a complement to the reckless destruction of human life in wartime. The Old Man, however, seems to bear an important responsibility for his son's evil deeds, and he even boasts that he once fed Bero human flesh without his son's knowledge, but relents and admits that he was just trying to make the point that "it could happen...it will happen" (Soyinka, Six Plays 265) if the brutality of the war continues. Old Man recalls his prank fondly, reminding Bero: "you rushed out and vomited... But afterwards you said I had done you a favour" (267). Bero's father seems to represent the humanistic legacy bequeathed by colonialism to an independent Nigeria: this legacy is full of contradiction and ambiguities, but it nevertheless still pays lip service to the ideal of human equality and decency. He espouses a self-serving humanism, telling Bero: "A part of me identifies with every human being" (279), declares "I am the last proof of the human in you. The last shadow.... How does one prove he was never born of man?" (265). The old man's philosophy, which he has nicknamed "As," assumes that human nature is unchanging (its name comes from the pseudo-Biblical phrase "As Was the Beginning, As is, Now, As Ever shall be...world without end" [252]). "As" also implies a certain equivalence between human beings; one is the same "as" everyone else, one does "as" others do and so forth.

Bero, for his part, has rejected his father's enigmatic ideal and has abandoned all pretense of civility, embracing naked aggression and denying the idea of human identity

altogether. He tells his father: "To me you are simply another organism, another mould or strain under the lens. Sometimes a strain proves malignant.... In such a case there is only one thing to do" (276). As Msiska points out, "Bero has reduced the complex signification of the human body to the singularity of biological discourse... In this respect, biological taxonomy... becomes the means by which human value itself is diminished" (45). The civil war and general disregard for human life that underlie the conflict between Bero and his father (and provides its historical context) remind us of the deep divisions in Nigerian culture. The category of the human seems in danger of dissolving altogether under the threat posed by the ruthless and sadistic Bero, whose endorsement of cannibalism seems symptomatic of his general disbelief in the integrity of human nature, laws and values.

In essence, the scientist in Bero seems to be trying to find a more palatable form of homo sapiens, a new kind of edible man. Derek Wright has put it thus: "the breaking of the ultimate taboo [against cannibalism] liberates Bero, personally from all civilized inhibition, carrying him into an amoral terrain beyond good and evil where everything is permissible" (98). Though his experiments continue apace, Bero stubbornly asserts that human flesh is "delicious"; he gives the Priest his "personal word" as a "scientist" that he has practiced cannibalism and finds "the balls" especially tasty (Six Plays 251). Though he pretends to see no difference between human flesh and that of other animals ("What is one flesh from another?" [252]), he soon confides that he ate it "in the name of As.... It was the first step to power you understand... The end of inhibitions. The conquest of the weakness of your too human flesh with all its sentiment" (252). "As" was once meant to stand for some vague principle of humanistic continuity between father and son, but in Bero’s hands its internal contradictions are exposed. In the end, we are told that "Humanity" is "the Ultimate Sacrifice to As" (268), though the Old Man who first invented this philosophy intended it to be an affirmation of his own humanistic principles.

Dismayed by his son’s perversion of "As," the Old Man tries to awaken some sort of empathic reaction by attempting to perform a murderous "operation" on the Cripple (one of the "mendicants" who follow the characters around and imitate their actions), but Bero

shoots him dead before he can get started. Critics have been puzzled by the significance of Bero's parricide, and many interpretations of it have been attempted. For instance, Wright argues that "by shooting the mad, humane man who fathered him, Bero severs his last link with humanity, expelling its remaining vestiges in himself.... Old Man dies not to redeem humanity but to allow his irredeemable son to sever all bonds with it" (99). Such a reading hints in the play that suggest that Bero has not transcended or escaped his humanity at all; he has simply taken its monstrous potentialities to the same destructive extreme as did Oedipus. Thus a character named Aafaa, one of the "Mendicants" who follow the protagonists about ridiculing and parodying their words, scornfully calls Bero "Monsieur l'homo sapiens" and accuses him of being the "usurper of the ancient rights and privileges of the priesthood" by asserting (paradoxically) his autonomy from the rest of humanity (Six Plays 289). Aafaa deplores Bero's loss of respect for anything beyond himself: "The loyalty of homosapiens regressed into himself, himself his little tick-tock self" (289), and we see that in Aafaa's eyes Bero still has the all-too-human flaws of hubris and self-importance. Playing on the "god/dog" chiasmus, which we shall encounter in Samuel Beckett's fiction as well, Afaa calls humanity "the dog in dogma raising his hindquarters to cast the scent of his individuality on the lamp-post of Destiny" (289). Such a play on words inevitably suggests that humanity is nothing more than a degraded mixture of divinity and animal nature, unable to transcend its corporeal self except by some miracle.

It is nevertheless possible to argue that in killing his father to save the life of a beggar, Bero unwittingly takes a stand on behalf of humanity at large by shooting his guilty and deliberately provocative father, showing that he is unwilling to watch wanton cruelty and waste of human life happen in front of him. As if unwittingly justifying such a reading of Soyinka's play, Girard claims that Greek tragedy repeatedly implies that one can "kill a man to save a man" (10), and accuses what he calls "the humanistic tradition" of trying to "minimize and at times suppress the more horrific aspects of archaic and classical Greek culture" (293n). Certainly no one could accuse Soyinka of minimizing the horrors of the political situation in Nigeria which he brings to light, albeit allegorically, in Madmen and Specialists. Yet this metaphysical, often bewildering play is perhaps not

Soyinka's most eloquent commentary on Nigerian politics and their mixture of Oedipal and sacrificial qualities. Ralph-Bowman argues that the play entitled Death and the King's Horseman was "Soyinka's judgement on the decade or so of Nigerian history up to the time of its composition [it was published in 1975]" (88). Ralph-Bowman's view is debatable, but it is justified insofar as Soyinka's play (like Rotimi's) downplays the role of foreign colonial powers in Nigerian life; in his note to Death and the King's Horseman, Soyinka maintains that "The Colonial Factor is an accident, a catalytic incident merely" and that "the confrontation in the play is largely metaphysical, contained in the human vehicle which is Elesin and the universe of the Yoruba mind—the world of the living, the dead and the unborn, and the numinous passage which links all: transition" (Six Plays 145).

The action of the play is essentially Elesin's prolonged, indeed, almost Hamletlike hesitation before killing himself as tradition demands. He is the designated scapegoat for the king's recent death, and everyone expects him to purge the collective guilt that seems to linger in the people's mind (even though the king died naturally) by accompanying the king into the afterlife. Elesin is treated as a living inhabitant of death's kingdom, a bridge between gods and mortals, and he is allowed to sleep with a young woman to create a new sacred life. His own wife tells Elesin "It is good that your loins be drained into the earth we know, that your last strength be ploughed back into the womb that gave you being" (Six Plays 161). This last incestuous image recalls Girard's contention that every African king (or in this case, every ceremonial victim who must accompany a dead king on his journey to the afterlife) is another Oedipus, who must repeat his crimes in a ritual fashion to justify his death. Elesin allows himself to be arrested by the English police chief, Pilkings, before he can go through with his action, and his continued and ineffectual survival quickly becomes a public disgrace as well as a cause of social because it threatens to dissolve the very idea that dead and living can be united in a single person.

At first, Elesin blames Pilkings for interrupting the death-ceremony, citing the foreigner's "plan to push our world from its course and sever the cord that links us to the great origin" (205), yet, as many critics have noted, Elesin's own will to die is very much

in doubt even before Pilkings intervenes. Moreover, a sign of Soyinka's belief that the colonial side of Nigerian life is merely "incidental" to the action of the play is given when Elesin finally takes responsibility for his own failure: as he says, "First I blamed the white man, then I blamed my gods for deserting me" (207), but in the end, he has only himself to blame for "the unspeakable blasphemy of seeing the hand of the gods in this alien rupture" in his world, a "blasphemy" which he sees had "turned me into an infant in the hands of unnamable strangers" (212). Elesin's delay earns him the scorn of his peers, and his son Olunde is especially grieved by his father's temporizations. Olunde, like Obi in No Longer At Ease, has just returned from England, where he has been going to school, to be faced with a dilemma. Olunde feels that his father has corrupted the tradition of the Elesins by failing to die and accompany the dead king into the afterlife, just as Obi finds that Nigerian life has been corrupted by bribery and patronage. Olunde decides to take a stand against his father's weakness, and kills himself before any further disgrace befalls his family. Some have argued that in committing suicide before his father is able to kill himself as precedent demands, Olunde seems to be importing a gratuitous altruism where it doesn't belong. As Ibitokun notes, Olunde is "alienated from his roots; his character smacks of chic traditionalism" (49), and his death is an uncomfortable echo of the selfless suicide of an English captain who has recently blown himself up with his ship in the local harbor, a gesture Olunde admires.

Regardless of its motives, Olunde's death has an immediate effect. Pointing to the apparently unnatural sight of a son dead before his father, Iyaloja asks Elesin "Whose trunk withers to give sap to the other? The parent shoot or the younger?" and accuses him of being among those who "choose to reverse the cycle of our being" (Six Plays 212). To be a father is, by definition, to be willing to die, in Iyaloja's mind; as she asks Elesin: "Who are you to open a new life when you dared not open the door to a new existence?" (210). When Olunde's dead body is brought in, Iyaloja tells Elesin "The son has proved the father Elesin, and there is nothing left in your mouth to gnash but infant gums" (218). As this insulting image suggests, even adulthood is denied those who cannot face the reality of their death (Pilkings, who is called a "child" by Iyaloja, is also put into this category). Overcome by guilt at the sight of his dead son, Elesin swiftly strangles himself

with his own chains. This double death seems to herald a new birth, however, and Iyaloja asks Elesin's bride to think only of the "unborn" child within her. This impending birth recalls the one which is prophesied in Yeats's The Second Coming, a coming of some sort of messiah who will end the Christian era (and, in Yeats's theory, reinstate the age of Oedipus, Christ's counterpart). This hopeful note has prompted some readers to see hope in Elesin's refusal to carry out his family's traditional self-sacrificial role. Ibitokun has praised Elesin for being "bold enough to challenge the age-old ethic of the (Messianic) carrier in the society in which he is born and bred" and thus "the tragic revolutionary hero of our times" (49). Both Death and the King's Horsemen and Soyinka's adaptation of The Bacchae of Euripides enact "the end of him who embodies the Promethean and rationalist energies of man" (Ibitokun 26); thus "In Elesin's forced suicide, the dawn of a new historical reality for the community is overwhelmingly set" (Ibitokun 50). This picture of Elesin seems flawed, not because he cannot be a positive figure, but because it is unlikely that Soyinka would have made his redemptive hero a rationalist of the sort imagined by Ibitokun (indeed, the evil Bero of Madmen and Specialists is possibly the closest thing to a rationalist in Soyinka's work).

To understand the ways in which Elesin's peculiar heroism and somewhat ambiguous crimes may be understood, it is helpful to recall Girard's remark that some African peoples insisted that their king "commit an act of incest, either real or symbolic, on certain solemn occasions— notably, at his enthronement or in the course of the periodic rites of renewal" (104). This desire that a king (who is to be blamed for bad harvests or other disasters) should "show himself 'worthy' of his punishment" (Girard 107) is part of what Girard sees at work in the crimes attributed to Oedipus, and it is also behind the rites of the Incwala, in Swaziland, for instance, which demand that a king drink "various noxious potions" and commit "incest with a tribal sister" (Girard 110). As Girard points out, these actions "are intended to augment the king's silwane, a term whose literal translation is 'to be like a savage beast'" (110), and suggest that the king must, by virtue of being a ruler, exceed human boundaries both on the side of divinity and on the side of bestiality (as defined by the traditions in which he rules). Elesin fulfils this condition by committing a sexual crime against his community; he takes a bride just

before he is supposed to die, when, as Ibitokun notes, "it is a taboo in Yoruba ethics for the celebrant to go close to the second sex" (45). An incestuous subtext to this crime is suggested by Elesin's address to his young bride: he calls her "little mother" as well as "daughter" and plainly views her as the portal to another existence, a kind of anti-womb through which he must pass into death: "I needed you as the abyss across which my body must be drawn... You were the final gift of the living to their emissary to the land of the ancestors" (207). His violation of the taboo earns Elesin some violent condemnation and scatological abuse, but this verbal attack may well have a redemptive undercurrent much like the one in an investiture hymn sung by the Ouagadogous and cited by Girard as a "a dynamic formula for salvation":

You are a turd,
You are a heap of refuse,
You have come to kill us,
You have come to save us. (107)

Such a view of Death and the King's Horseman gains a greater measure of credibility if we compare it with Soyinka's play The Strong Breed, in which another sacrificial "carrier" refuses to fulfil his role and ends up dying anyway.

Like Elesin Oba, Eman (the hero of The Strong Breed) has abandoned the sacrificial role passed down to him by his father as a member of the "strong breed," a line of "carriers" who symbolically rid their community of evil by dumping objects into the sea. Eman has taken his refusal a step further by leaving his native village to live with another tribe. Because he is an outsider, Eman clearly feels an affinity with Ifada, the crippled so-called "madman" of the village (Collected Plays I, 116) and he ends up participating in a much more brutal and violent ritual expiation, choosing to serve as a carrier instead of Ifada, who is not able to understand the ritual or his role in it (though Eman arguably misunderstands both as well). Eman's father has warned him that such an ironic twist of fate is likely: "Your own blood will betray you son, because you cannot hold it back" (134), and as Derek Wright has argued, "there is a sense in which Eman keeps faith with his father by reinfusing into the debased rite some of the communally oriented morality of the original. His flight in midstream is not a choice of death but a decision to interrupt

and halt the ritual process, because its supervision by corrupt authorities and the neophyte's unwillingness deprive it of its moral efficacy and so render it valueless" (61). Part of what Eman achieves in dying is implied in the fact that the villagers are not pleased to hear of Eman's death; in Msiska's words, they recognize that their "demonization of foreigners" has made them guilty of a "collective inhumanity" (74).

This is a meaningful realization, in Eman's own terms, since from the beginning of the play Eman seems determined to assert the principle of extra-tribal human community; as he says, "I find consummation only when I have spent myself for a total stranger" (125). Paradoxically, Eman's lover Sunma sees this attitude as "inhuman" (126), not realizing that in clinging to his role as the outsider Eman is simply carrying on the tradition of his family, the "strong breed" of the play's title. It is only by being an outsider who tests a community's willingness to accept other human beings for the sake of their humanity (as Eman accepts Ifada, for instance) that Eman can still be "my father's son" as he says (126).

Part of the curse

one's wife must always die in giving birth to one's male child. This strange certainty is perhaps a sign that Soyinka believes that the close familial and tribal ties that Sunma, being a woman, must value above all else (as she herself admits) vanish at the appearance of a more universal, other-directed, multicultural conception of human identity embodied by the "strong breed," who define themselves as outsiders much like the osu in Achebe's fiction. Nevertheless, Sunma's love for Eman is strong enough that she has overcome her ties to her own tribe and has tried to to get Eman to leave the village with her before the fatal ritual. She warns him about the xenophobia of her tribesfolk and asks him "Have you not noticed how tightly we shut out strangers? Even if you lived here for a lifetime, you would remain a stranger" (123). Eman responds "Perhaps that is what I like. There is peace in being a stranger (123). The irony here is twofold; first we note that being a "stranger" only reinforces Eman's status as a "carrier" of misfortune in his new village, a status which he thought he had rejected. The second irony is that Eman, the champion of universal human dignity, dies in a manner that seems to rob him of his humanity, killed by an animal trap set for him by his pursuers.

This second paradox is also that of Oedipus, in that the character who asserts the

dignity of the human most vigorously is the one who seems to lose his or her human dignity the most egregiously. It is also central to the last of Soyinka's plays that we will examine here: his version of Euripides's The Bacchae. After all, the play's human protagonist Pentheus, who condemns the rituals of Dionysus and the bestial abandon they seem to represent, ends up dying in the middle of just such an orgiastic scene, dressed up as a woman to boot. Like Oedipus, Pentheus is a descendent of Kadmos, founder of Thebes, and as Segal points out that Pentheus's name, like Oedipus's, is a kind of prophecy about his tragic fate (penthos means grief). Just as Oedipus is confronted by the Sphinx and offered a chance to name the many-legged monster he stands for, Pentheus has a chance to acknowledge the animal in himself, and refuses to do so; a disguised Dionysus gives Pentheus a mirror and tells him: "Look well in the mirror / Pentheus. What beast is it? Do you recognize it?… In all your wanderings have your eyes ever been affronted by a creature so gross, so unnatural, so obscene?" (Six Plays 284). Soyinka's Tiresias has roughly the same relationship to Pentheus as Sophocles's Tiresias does to Oedipus in Oedipus Tyrannus; in The Bacchae he tells Dionysus that "As priest and sage and prophet and I know not how else I am regarded in Thebes, I must see for the blind young man who is king and even sometimes—act for him" (243). From Tiresias's words we infer that Pentheus's metaphorical blindness to the sacred element of Dionysus's cult is reminiscent of Oedipus's blindness (soon literalized) to his own guilt and the superhuman forces at work in his life.

Psychoanalytic critics have also tried to draw links between Pentheus and Oedipus; André Green has suggested that "behind each of the Bacchantes, [Pentheus] seeks [his mother] Agave as the object of his desires" (208, my trans), and Charles Segal explicitly argues that Pentheus is an Oedipal figure whose accession to the Theban throne is "a fantasy solution to the problem of his Oedipal rivalry with his father" (186). Segal points out that Pentheus has an Oedipus-like moment of belated but psychologically significant recognition (before he is torn to pieces): "Pentheus' end represents the impossibility of the infantile fantasies which he is living out. He has only a moment of awakening when he recognizes himself in his filial relation to both Agave and the absent Echion just before the brutal murder." ("Pentheus and Hippolytus" 141). To complete the scholarly

chorus, George Devereux claims that "Pentheus could not care less about the sexual misconduct of the majority of the Theban Bakchantes. What obsesses and upsets him is the probability of his own mother's (and aunts') sexual dissipation…he wishes primarily to punish his own womenfolk" (40). As Devereux implies, Pentheus is concerned with "precisely the kind of misconduct that would obsessively preoccupy the still oedipally fixed son of what appears to be a widow" (40).

More interesting in this context than the consensus about Pentheus's conventional Freudian-Oedipal urges, however, is Girard's argument that in both The Bacchae and Oedipus Tyrannus what he terms "mythological and ritual values" are threatened by "reciprocal violence" (between Dionysus and Pentheus in Euripides's play, and between Oedipus and Tiresias in Sophocles's) which must be displaced onto a single human being so that traditional values can be restored (129). In both plays "the difference between man and god" is dissolved, and divinity itself is seen as "nothing more than a prize in the struggle between two rivals" (Girard 129). This reading of these plays is especially relevant to admirers of Soyinka's work, since Soyinka is so clearly preoccupied with the transitions between life and death, between the human and the divine. Some critics have emphasized the anti-theistic nature of Soyinka's philosophy, citing his Nietzschean faith that "offences even against nature may be part of the exaction by deeper nature from humanity of acts which alone can open up the deeper springs of man and bring about a constant rejuvenation of the human spirit" (Myth 156). Yet Soyinka also clearly admires those who, like the Slave Leader in his Baccchae, "melt as wax the wilful barriers of the human mind" (Six Plays265) to allow the divine and the demonic to inhabit and transform humanity. His description of the Dionysian ritual makes this side of his views clear: Ripped in pieces at the hands of the titans for the (by him) unwilled acts or hubris, Dionysos-Zagreus commences divine existence by this experience of the destruction of the self, the transitional horror... We approach, it seems, the ultimate pessimism of existence as pronounced by Nietzsche's sage Silenus: it is an act of hubris to be born... The answer of the Yoruba is just as clear: it is no less an act of hubris to die. (Myth 158) In keeping with the Yoruba tradition he cites here, Soyinka stresses the need for such acts of fatal yet regenerative hubris, asking "how else many the inhibiting bonds of

man be dissolved when he goes to meet his god...how else partake in the psychic revelry of the world when it celebrates a crossing of the abyss of non-being?" (160).

Soyinka recognizes that Oedipus belongs among heroes like Sango and King Lear, because he embodies the "self-annihilating perceptiveness" that transforms human existence into something beyond itself (Myth 154). If Soyinka sees Sango's offence against the laws of kinship as a "desecration of nature," as a "karmic act of hubris... into which the demonic will within man compels him" (Myth 156-7), it is not necessarily because he accepts Nietzsche's doctrine of the "superman" (though there are hints that he does). Soyinka may simply be acknowledging that Sango, like Oedipus (whom Nietzsche termed "the last man" in an unpublished work), undergoes a crucial transition beyond which humanity is unrecognizable, and closer to divinity than to itself as we know it here. We must recognize that this extreme stance (and the tragic actions it inspires in Bero, Isola and Old Man as well as others among Soyinka's creations) is partly a result of the same conflicts within Nigerian politics and culture that appear in Achebe's work. Yet it is impossible to ignore the often destructive anti-humanistic Western legacy which poses a serious threat to what Soyinka has called the "human and unique validation" (Myth 155) of Yoruba culture.

The Oedipus myth may seem to be a legacy of cultural imperialism, but as we have seen, its representation of Oedipus's heroism (with all its contradictions and tensions) enables the Nigerian writers to deal with the colonial situations in which they find themselves. It has also allowed them to answer the dehumanizing gaze of Western writers in the same mythic language that was once used to imply their unreachable otherness, and the generational conflict it seems almost to institutionalize has helped them to make sense (albeit sense of a frequently painful and disillusioning kind) of the rapid pace of change in their cultures and the inevitable differences that arise from it. As Soyinka's example shows with particular power, the racist assumptions about African barbarism (witness Bero's endorsement of cannibalism, as we have discussed it above) may be reappropriated with a vengeance when they resurface in the context of the Oedipus myth, even in its most reductive Freudian form. Yet Soyinka is never reducible to Freudian terms. In his insistence on the importance and validity of Yoruba myths of human

identity and self-transcendence, Soyinka overturns Freudian humanism and its therapeutic agenda. He also manages to use African traditions to balance his self-declared Nietzschean pessimism about the fate of human identity and to reflect, albeit in a necessarily embattled way, what he sees as the "optimistic" nature of Yoruba culture even in times of internal and external crisis (Myth 155). Although it is unclear whether Soyinka expects that this optimism should be deemed a potentially universal human attitude, it is sufficiently tempered with nightmarish tragedy and self-sacrifice to seem adequate to the most extreme human situations.

Soyinka's Oedipal obsession is hardly unique in Nigerian literature: Oedipal tropes dominate Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* and *No Longer at Ease*, and Ola Rotimi's *The Gods Are Not to Blame* is an explicit adaptation of Sophocles's *Oedipus Tyrannus* into an African context. Rotimi's play has provoked objections from critics such as Akanji Nasiru, who has argued that an "over-riding sense of relentless fate" derived from Sophocles "destroys the political thesis that Rotimi wants the title of the play to imply" (quoted in Galle 29). Rotimi himself has been at pains to explain his play's apparent thesis that, despite Oedipus's fate, humanity, is responsible for its own destiny. In Étienne Galle's reading of the play, Odewale, "the individual who struggles to achieve a life of freedom," represents "a whole society" trying to win its independence from its own divinities (26, my trans.). This reading seems at first to be plausible enough; after all, Odewale suggests the futility of trying to ease the plague that afflicts Kutuje by offering sacrifices to the gods: "To what gods have we not made sacrifice, my chiefs and I?" (11) and he asks his subjects to take responsibility for their own cure: "If you need help, search for it first among yourselves. Do not open your noses at me, I cannot help. Why? Because I, Odewale, son of Ogundele, I am only a person, human: like you" (13). Part of the reason for the debate about whether or not Rotimi's play is a humanistic one lies in an interesting ambiguity in Yoruba religious tradition; for the Yoruba, Rotimi argues, predestination has a special meaning which takes it out of the gods' absolute control:

The Yoruba belie

Eleda, or Aseda. They believe that after Eleda had created a person, He (Eleda) would ask the person one question. He would ask the person to choose what that person wanted

to do. The person would then kneel down. Yoruba call this akunleyan. It means ‘Kneeling down to choose’…the Almighty (Eleda) will then sanction the choice. (3) It is naturally tempting to read the notion of akunleyan in this context as a Yoruban counterpart to the infantile desires that Freud claimed to have uncovered (thanks to the Oedipus story) and which he argued live on in one’s unconscious, often determining our actions without our knowledge. Rotimi himself recognizes that the notion that there is a "tabula rasa of the mind" in which akunleyan takes place might well seem like a "determinist" or "fatalist" notion that encourages "social stasis" (qtd. in Enekwe 39). As Galle puts it, for Rotimi "the gods may have a political significance insofar as they participate in the imago which makes of the other a father to be killed as a prelude to conquering the mother" (29, my trans.).

Odewale does not choose to marry his mother and kill his father, as Rotimi admits, but Rotimi does point out that Odewale does choose to be a pugnacious "defender of his people" and thus left himself open to the disasters that await even a "heroic" and "admired" figure who thrives on tribal violence (Gods 4). It is tribal anger that provokes Odewale to murder his father, for instance: "He called my tribe bush. That I cannot bear" (50). Indeed, the final moral of the play appears to be a condemnation of "the weakness of a man easily moved to the defense of his tribe against others" (71). The irony of Odewale’s tribalist violence is that it creates his later predicament as an inter-tribal hybrid; after all, as he recognizes, he is "a son of the tribe of Ijekun Yemoja" who is made the king of Kutuje after the latter tribe broke tradition" and made a stranger (or so they thought) their king (6-7). His awareness of his anomalous status as an exalted outsider makes him extremely mistrustful of his subjects; when he learns of the manner of King Adetusa’s death, Odewale begins to suspect his subject of regicidal impulses: "It would be me next. Me an Ijekun man, a stranger in the midst of your tribe. When crocodiles eat their own eggs, what will they not do to a frog?" (23). Odewale’s analogy implies that as a member of a different tribe he is not only even more vulnerable to murder than his predecessor, but that, as a stranger, he is also a member of a wholly separate species, as a frog might be to a crocodile. The taboos against killing a kinsman would not apply (just as eating members of another species is usually more acceptable

than eating one's own).

Such a view might seem absurd, but in the context of the play's portrayal of inter-tribal misunderstanding and intolerance, Odewale's fears seem partly justified. Rotimi goes out of his way to show how everyday people project their fears of otherness onto others and attribute "madness" to all those who are not from the same tribe, as we see in a scene from the play in which Odewale's wife Ojuola confronts her husband's bodyguards: FIRST BODYGUARD. A madman wanting to see the King! The world, indeed, is mad. OJUOLA. How do you know h[…] BODYGUARD. He is not a man of our tribe, your highness. OJUOLA. Therefo[…] a madman? (41) As Galle has pointed out, this "madness" has a specific character for Rotimi: "madness means accusing the other of madness, just as tribalism means accusing the other of tribalism" (28, my trans.). Yet Odewale shows the circular logic of this attribution of madness to alterity when he blames his own self-imposed exile on madness: "That was why I fled from home, my brother. Like a madman, I believed that the gods had willed me to kill the man and to marry the very woman who gave me life" (60). Odewale has conveniently internalized the view that strangers are mad and therefore he retroactively discovers a madness in himself that allows him to disavow his own guilt.

Thus while Odewale initially seems to be the bearer of humanistic rationalism, he loses confidence in this attitude when confronted with the possibility that he himself is the murderer of Adetusa and reverts to projecting his own tribal hostility onto those around him. Witness his words to his adopted son Aderopo: "you are a tortoise, a coward, a conniving slippery maggot.... Just because I am an Ikejun man, and do not belong to your tribe, the sight of me as your King gnaws at your liver" (34). Because of his own mistaken sense of tribal rivalry, Odewale accuses his Aderopo of harboring an Oedipal anger against him: "Is Aderopo jealous that I am sharing a bed with his mother? Very well then, let him come and sleep with his mother… And not stopping there, let him bear children by her" (31). Odewale's wife Ojuola tries to reassure him, saying "You have now become one of our tribe" but he refuses to take comfort, musing "mmm.... The monkey and gorilla may claim oneness but the monkey is Monkey and the gorilla,

Gorilla" (51). Odewale’s continued use of animal metaphors shows how thoroughly he has been disabused of his former belief in the unity of humankind. Galle argues that "Parricide, for Odewale, is a tribal act" because "behind each enemy we can see the father, the obstacle to the mother, and the earth she represents" (27-8, my trans.), but Odewale’s Oedipal paranoia goes deeper than tribal identity, striking to the very core of human nature. Like Oedipus at Colonus, his own desperate questioning of his past and his destiny cast doubts on his whole identity; as he asks (also echoing the Old Testament) "Am I not who I am?" (Gods 60).

This questioning is clearly painful and disturbing to Rotimi since his critique of tribalism is undertaken from an explicitly humanistic position; as he has stated, "I am opposed to discrimination of any sort….I take humanity as my tribesmen" (qtd. in Banham 68). Rotimi makes what he calls "the imperative for ameliorating the condition of man" the criterion for any "committed" literature (qtd. in Banham 80), and yet, as many scholars have argued, the Oedipus myth upon which his play is based contains a message which seems to undercut the entire notion of humanity that he relies on for his self-justifications. For instance, in his analysis of Rotimi’s play, Galle argues that the Oedipus story provokes "ambiguous emotions which regenerate humanity while threatening to submerge it" (21, my trans.); others such as Jean-Pierre Vernant have also insisted that "the superhuman and the subhuman meet" in Oedipus, and that given that he is "the model of man", the "boundaries that contained human life and made it possible to establish its status without ambiguity" are "obliterated" (Vernant 139).

Rotimi has anticipated these objections to a certain extent, and in writing of his play’s genesis in 1968, he makes it clear that the "Gods" of his title are not meant to be taken altogether literally: This was the time when the Nigerian Civil War was becoming very grim, very bloody….During the civil war, the Federal Government blamed certain nations for helping Biafra….Biafra, on its own, blamed other foreign nations too, for encouraging Nigeria to kill the people of Biafra….We know that in this world…powerful nations are like ‘gods’ in the way that they are capable of controlling the lives of other nations such as ours, if given the chance….Those foreign nations will continue to do what they life with our lives, so long as we let them….They are like our native gods.

Gods that feed on sacrifice….As persons we don't mean much to them. (Understanding "The Gods Are Not To Blame" 1-2) The rhetorical gamb "gods" and then denying their guilt in Nigerian politics is a complex and problematic one. In a sense, it repeats Oedipus's own reduction of divine alterity to mere human nature (as we see in his answer to the Sphinx), but with a very different aim. Instead of banishing the strangeness of the partly human Sphinx, Rotimi's gesture elides the all-too-human and real international forces at work in Nigeria's civil strife by comparing them to the sacrifice-seeking gods who have been (as we must infer from Rotimi's own implication) gradually losing power over the lives of Nigerians. If we were in an especially perverse frame of mind, we might even argue that, in equating nations like France and the United States with gods (even ironically), Rotimi is denying the humanity of the foreigners who meddle in Nigerian politics, and thus engaging in the same exclusionary tactics that have too often divided Africans and other peoples into warring tribes.

Rotimi clearly understands that human nature is, as he puts it, "forever in crisis" (Understanding 15) and that tribalism is merely one of the symptoms or effects of this crisis. This understanding is even more apparent in the work of another Nigerian writer, the Nobel laureate Wole Soyinka. In a passage that might help us indirectly to understand Rotimi's point about akunleyan, Priebe points to an important paradox in Okonkwo's Oedipal nature which gets to the heart of an interesting and culturally specific ambiguity in Ibo religion: Okonkwo, like his brought down by a fatal flaw that is beyond his control. Without any doubt Oedipus is the victim of Destiny; personal responsibility or guilt has nothing to do with him. We also find that Okonkwo's chi, his personal god, has quite a lot to do with his destiny, but we are stopped at the very beginning of the novel from pursuing a descriptive comparison for we are told that a man can, in part, shape his own destiny. (160) Priebe cites the passage from the novel in which Achebe's narrator says: "the Ibo people have a proverb that when a man says yes his chi says yes also. Okonkwo said yes very strongly; so his chi agreed" (qtd. in Preiebe 160).

In The Gods are Not to Blame madness plays the same role that infantile sexual jealousy (according to some) plays in Freud's theory of subjectivity. As Galle suggests,

both may be seen as imaginary states created by a pre-existing rivalry: "Each projects onto the other the fearful fantasy that makes him into a parricide, and the sexual fantasy what makes him into an incestuous monster. The other is never seen in his true alterity but as a mirror where one sees one's own complex" (28, my trans.). Of course, like Oedipus in Thebes, Odewale is not a stranger to the Kutuje in biological terms; though he was raised by the Ikejun, his real parentage is Kutuje (a fact he doesn't realize until it is too late). Indeed, Rotimi may well have chosen Oedipus Tyrannus precisely because of the confused ancestry of its protagonist, and its anti-tribalist implication that our ancestors may not be who we think they are, and that therefore our membership to any faction or group may be only apparent.

Rotimi's Oedipal text, however, does not so much interrogate the idea of human identity as it enlist humanist ideas to criticize inter-tribal hostility and religious hypocrisy. In this sense, it does not open up and exploit the Nietzschean possibilities of the Oedipus myth as fully as Soyinka does. As a result, Soyinka's work is both a vigorous, challenging reenactment of the Sophoclean moment, where Oedipus's horrible fate presents us with an unforgettable image of humanity's self-destructive energies, and a bitter, terrifying and instantly recognizable commentary on Nigeria's political troubles. He shows us, perhaps better than any author of his generation, contemporary humanity's capacity to dehumanize itself; moreover (and perhaps more provocatively) he suggests that the appropriate response to this is not to revert to some benign, ineffectual, politically-correct or rights-based ideology, but rather to embrace, harness and understand the inhuman Oedipal energies in ourselves.

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