

ASSAILING "AS": A STUDY OF WOLE SOYINKA'S DRAMA

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ABSTRACT

I must be honest and admit that I was only introduced to the name of Wole Soyinka in November 1986, in connection with his controversial Nobel acceptance speech at the Swedish Academy. For this reason, I have chosen to accurately represent my developing awareness with respect to this man and his writing, by viewing his work through the magnifying glass of that very political address, delivered three years ago. Since the germination of this study, I have discovered that I would not want to approach Soyinka's work from any other perspective than one that primarily considers the playwright's political analysis, his sense of social responsibility, and his commitment to human liberty and justice, as the foundations for an investigation of his plays.

The title of this thesis refers to a fictional philosophy of tyranny developed and attacked in Soyinka's powerful post-Civil War play, Madmen and Specialists, but is relevant to the major themes explored in nearly everything the Nigerian has written, and is particularly central to the four plays examined here. Madmen and Specialists is considered, in this thesis,

in the second chapter, along with the later political farce, A Play of Giants, while the other two plays in the study, The Strong Breed and Death and the King's Horseman, are analysed in the first chapter, and linked by their tragic treatments of similar issues. Illuminated by the content of Soyinka's Nobel address which is discussed briefly in the opening chapter, this study aims to examine these plays which place the playwright in his appropriate context as an African writer committed to the liberation of his people, his continent and the rest of humanity.

INTRODUCTION

Standing on the stage in Stockholm, the eighth of December, 1986, fulfilling the role of the first African to receive the Nobel Prize for literature, Wole Soyinka significantly waived consideration of his poems, novels and plays being honoured to pessimistically focus his audience's attention on the deplorable human condition. Consistent with virtually all the writings he had published in the preceding three decades, the spirit of Soyinka's lengthy Nobel lecture, "This Past Must Address its Present," converts his apparently prevailing literary, metaphysical and philosophical themes into messages of an overriding political importance. Following the speech's opening dedication to Nelson Mandela, Soyinka underlines his thirty years of continuing commitment to the type of individual action capable of improving the nature of human existence, and establishes the foundations for an approach to his difficult works which utilises this relentless political commitment as its starting point.

Although Soyinka opens the lecture with an anecdote describing a theatrical performance at London's Royal Court

Theatre, early in his career, the evening of "living theatre" jointly created and acted by its writers, is recalled at this opportune moment for its political relevance, rather than its literary or dramatic significance. Soyinka recalls an "unscripted," "curious scene" in 1958, when the action on that London stage was suspended by his own stubborn refusal to complete the presentation of the anti-colonialist, anti-tyrannical play, "Eleven Men Dead at Hoya," "before an audience whom he considered collectively responsible for that dehumanizing reality" (Soyinka, "This Past" 429-430). The improvisation dramatised the murder of eleven nonviolent protestors at the hands of some brutal British colonialist guards during Kenya's Mau-Mau rebellion, and Soyinka recalls how he found himself unable to meet complacently the demands of his calling which condoned such an inappropriate mode of presentation: "[thrusting] the deformed arm of a leper...at the healthy to provoke a charitable sentiment." As the curtain rose in 1958, Soyinka attempted to dissociate himself from the unjust spectacle, and initiated a scuffle before the Royal Court Theatre audience as his fellow actors strove to coerce this "delinquent actor" into rejoining the cast. Although Soyinka refused to participate in that performance, the embarrassing affair evidently made a serious impact on his questioning mind and he found the occasion pertinent to the issues examined in his Nobel address.

Twenty-eight years later, Soyinka recreated this incident

for his Swedish audience, to stress the precedence of political issues in his personal philosophy; a precedence for which the dramatist was willing to risk the failure of such a pivotal evening, early in his dramatic career. In the process of recalling the events of that disrupted performance, Soyinka wrestles with the questions, "When is playacting rebuked by reality? When is fictionalizing presumptuous," and suggests that a writer placed in such an ideological quandary "either freezes up completely or abandons the pen for far more direct means of contesting unacceptable reality" ("This Past" 431-432). Characteristically, in the years that have passed since his dramatic disobedience in 1958, Soyinka has embraced neither of these two extreme alternatives in his life, but has opted to merge his literary and dramatic aspirations with his political ambitions and concerns, transforming his pen into his most "direct" weapon of social protest.

Soyinka develops the implications of that climactic performance, and uses his platform to tackle racism and its most appalling manifestation, South Africa's system of apartheid. Citing the recent deaths of the resolute opponents to racist inequality, Olof Palme and Samora Machel, Soyinka argues that the white supremacists are reluctantly redefining the severity of their racism, and their outdated estimations of the humanity and capability of their "chosen enemy" ("This Past" 432-433). Soyinka chronicles the decreasing barbarity of the racists' treatment of African resistance fighters, and

suggests that the changing complexion of the struggle exposes the disintegration of entrenched notions of racial inferiority. Recalling his recreation of the crime at Hola Camp, Soyinka laments the attitude of the white supervisors who never

experience[d] the human 'otherness' of their victims. They clearly did not experience the reality of the victims as human beings. Animals perhaps, a noxious form of vegetable life maybe, but certainly not human. ("This Past" 434)

The Nobel laureate has faith that few continue to cling to such narrow-minded and antiquated beliefs, and suggests that no "mind that pretends to the slightest claim to rationality" would align itself with archaic, myopic justifications for racism, in 1986 (unfortunately, in 1989, Phillippe Rushton has provided the world with convincing evidence to the contrary). The playwright suggests that white South Africa is populated by an "ahistoric" breed of human beings who occupy an "arrest in time," negating the fantastic progress that has been witnessed this century, and inhabiting a "suicidal, anachronistic present" that blindly adheres to those "unabashed theorists of racial superiority and denigrators of African history and being" long since discarded as the icons of Western civilisation: Gobineau, Hegel, Locke, Hume, and Voltaire ("This Past" 437). Soyinka describes the South African regime as "a stubborn, self-destructive" "child of those centuries of lies, distortion and opportunism," and chastises the rest of the world for

the stigma of being the wilful parent of a monstrosity, especially as that monstrous child still draws material

nourishment, breath, and human recognition from the strengths and devises of that world, with an umbilical cord that stretches across oceans, even across the cosmos via so-called programs of technological co-operation. We are saying very simply but urgently: Sever that cord. By any name, be it total sanction, boycott, disinvestment, or whatever, sever this umbilical cord and leave this monster of a birth to atrophy and die or to rebuild itself on long-denied humane foundations. Let it collapse, shorn of its external sustenance; let it collapse of its own social disequilibrium, its economic lopsidedness, its war of attrition on its most productive labor. Let it wither like an aborted fetus of the human family if it persists in smothering the minds and sinews that constitute its authentic being. ("This Past" 438)

As he hurls this heartfelt political challenge at the rest of the globe, Soyinka removes any doubts about his chief incentive and design, for this lecture and for all his writing, and inscribes the significance of his presence in Stockholm with one undeniable import: political justice.

The Nobel laureate then enlarges his gaze and expands the defence of his race from discrimination, into the defence of his continent from colonialism. Soyinka mockingly voices the aging colonialist approach to Africa, which the regime in Pretoria boldly maintains and his presence at the Swedish Academy actively refutes:

This is a continent that only destroys, it proclaims, a continent peopled by a race that has never contributed anything positive to the world's pool of knowledge. A vacuum that will suck into its insatiable maw the entire fruits of centuries of European civilization, then spew out the resulting mush with contempt. ("This Past" 439)

The persistence of colonialist priggishness is due almost entirely to unquestioning acceptance of "traditional attitudes of the time" engendered in the literary foundations of Western

civilisation, particularly Soyinka's two favourite examples in the Old Testament and the works of Hegel. In defending his continent and his people, Soyinka argues that the black race has never attempted to "subjugate or forcibly convert others with any holier-than-thou evangelizing zeal"; only in the eras of Euro-Christian and Arab-Islamic colonisation of Africa, have wars been motivated by religious rather than economic or political differences. The bloody histories of the crusades and jihads are reserved for the world's major religions, and reject any association with African myths and indigenous religions ("This Past" 440). He attacks Europe for repeatedly using Africa to redefine itself, especially in the visual arts, and accuses Europeans of continuing to deny this indebtedness, as they perpetuate the paternalism. Soyinka concludes his denigration of racist and colonialist attitudes with testimony to the African "largeness of spirit," the "black race's capacity to forgive," the "consciousness of a fully confident people," recovering from decades of subjugation by recently departed oppressors without riotously demanding vengeful purges, but surprisingly coexisting alongside the monuments of colonialism, and demonstrating their remarkable "accomodation" and "spirit of human partnership." In his closing sentiments, Soyinka uses this rare opportunity of global attentiveness, unparalleled in his career, to invite the international community to drag apartheid South Africa into the modern world, or else "bring it abjectly to its knees by ejecting it, in

every aspect, from humane recognition, so that it caves in internally, through the strategies of its embattled majority." These sentiments emphatically punctuate Soyinka's thirty-year pleas for "the end of racism, the eradication of human inequality...the dismantling of all its structures...[and] the consequent enthronement of its complement: universal suffrage and peace" ("This Past" 446).

The overt political content of Soyinka's Nobel address constitutes no anomaly in the career of this prolific Nigerian poet, playwright, novelist, autobiographer and literary critic. On the contrary, Soyinka's preoccupation with political issues in Stockholm is quite typical. While his eclectic art acknowledges the influences of Christianity, Pan-Africanism, Marxism, traditionalism, metaphysics, and especially Yoruba mythology and ritual, political concerns inspire his central motivation, as "This Past Must Address its Present" confirms. The lecture contains less than half a dozen statements that would conventionally be viewed as providing direct commentary on Soyinka's career as a writer, but every idea and every word included in "This Past Must Address its Present" is inextricably bound to his literary career. In the speech, Soyinka describes the dilemma he faced as a young dramatist battling with the political implications of his art, and mentions the writer only in the capacities of "contesting unacceptable reality," protecting "his humanity against such egregious assaults" as the identification of Mandela's "crimes"

with those of Rudolf Hess, and promoting the development of his society's culture. Soyinka belongs to a tradition which recognises the "third-world writer as a promoter of explicit social, political, and moral values crucial to the survival of his or her society and a champion of freedom, dignity, and justice for the majority of his people," and yet, Soyinka has reanimated this tradition by resolutely marrying his political activism to the aspirations of his literary craft.

Throughout the majority of African states, this generalisation regarding "third-world writers" holds true, and "literature is generally perceived as a cultural institution whose production and reception are held to be deeply implicated in the destiny of the continent and its peoples" (Maduakor ix). Thus, Soyinka's Nobel lecture is not only consistent with the tone of most of his writings, but represents the general spirit of African literature, where political concerns and "issues of a fundamentally political nature have always occupied a central position" (Amuta 56). As he received the prize, Soyinka was clearly at pains to qualify his acceptance, not only as an honourable writer, but more importantly as an African writer and as a committed African writer.

Nearly two decades before his landmark Nobel address, Soyinka published an essay titled "The Writer in a Modern African State" which, likewise, sparked considerable controversy through its daring political commentary, and hinted at the key employed in this thesis to the interpretation of his

works and his theory of literature. On the eve of his own three-year prison sentence, Soyinka opened this essay by complaining of "the lack of vital relevancy between the literary concerns of writers and the pattern of reality that has overwhelmed even the writers themselves in the majority of modern African states"; he concluded the essay with these condemning and revealing words:

When the writer in his own society can no longer function as conscience, he must recognize that his choice lies between denying himself totally or withdrawing to the position of chronicler and post-mortem surgeon....The artist has always functioned in African society as the record of the mores and experience of his society and as the voice of vision in his own time. It is time for him to respond to this essence of himself. (Soyinka, Art 15&20)

With this statement, and so many others like it, Soyinka permanently disassociates himself from any camp that creates art that lacks direct relevance to contemporary social realities.

To elaborate further on the playwright's theory regarding the function of literature, one can turn to the "Introduction" to the recent volume of Soyinka's critical essays. The book's editor summarises the Nigerian's literary approach, which is defined by his refusal to view the act of creative production as divorced, in any way, from an artist's social concerns:

For Soyinka in his creative works has been as much concerned with the themes and subject matter of the negations of and resistance to tyranny, brutalisation and alienation as with finding the idioms, the forms, and the rhetorical tropes to consummate the quest for disalienation, dignity and freedom. (Art xxiv)

This statement defines Soyinka's literary motivation as being largely political, but before dealing with the plays this thesis must define the criteria with which it is applying this rather elusive and complicated term 'political.'

When this word is enlisted to describe the playwright, his convictions or his works, the word is in no way referring to any partisan allegiances, which Soyinka has consistently shunned, nor does it refer to any explicit connection with Nigerian policy-making. On the contrary, I am using 'political' in a very broad sense to describe the motivations of men and women struggling to alter or improve the social relationships in their cultural surroundings; contesting the entrenchment of the status quo and asserting the need for appropriate and progressive change. Although most of Soyinka's plays are not as directly polemical as his Nobel lecture, they do contain metaphorical treatments and discussions of the interactions between people fighting for radical change and those attempting to preserve the existing systems; between a society's general public and those citizens wielding authority or power; between the silenced and disenfranchised majority and the manipulators who oppress these servitors because of their class, beliefs, gender, nationality, religion, or race. This word 'political' is taken to describe the range of issues of social relevance in which Soyinka is chiefly interested, as defined by his Nobel lecture and a cursory examination of his canon, which would therefore include

his developing interest in sexual politics. I am using 'political' in this broad application to create an introductory examination of a selection of his plays from a perspective which acknowledges the significance of his uncompromising commitment to redressing social injustice. Unfortunately, in the quarter century before Soyinka's Nobel address, the critical evaluations of his work have often neglected to credit such 'political' motivations as the playwright's informing principle.

The corpus of criticism on the works of Soyinka has been growing rapidly since the early nineteen-sixties, but Soyinka's leading critics can generally be divided into two groups: those whom Chinua Achebe identifies as "colonialist" critics, unable to escape their condescending ethnocentrism when evaluating African literature; and the new breed of younger, and decidedly more Marxist, African critics who view Soyinka as belonging to an essentially liberal, ethnic-based tradition, too elitist for their tastes, and preoccupied with the metaphysical and the supernatural. The former category unfortunately transposes to the field of literature, the same superiority complex implied by the hierarchical labels of "First World" and "Third World," and relentlessly persists in using the questionable criteria of "universality" to appraise works of African literature. As Achebe advises, "universality" for the "third-world" writer is

a distant bend in the road which you may take if you travel out far enough in the direction of Europe and

America, if you put adequate distance between you and your home....[It is] a synonym for the narrow self-serving parochialism of Europe. (Achebe 9)

Soyinka's works have been particularly notorious in their attraction of this label, and fine literary scholars such as Lindfors, Moore, Gibbs and Jones, who have demonstrated great sensitivity and perception in their analyses of Soyinka's works, have at times uncritically accepted the norms of colonialist criticism and used the dogma of "universality" to evaluate them. According to Achebe, such critics praise Soyinka "for not writing about an African problem but a universal one;...[and] not writing for a local but a universal audience." Before writing about a perceived dissatisfaction in his/her society, the African writer must verify that the problem is likewise experienced in New York, London and Paris (Achebe 52-53). Soyinka himself, has publicly "regretted that European critics interested in African works...[are] characterised by a certain condescension" (Ethenne 12).

The latter category of Marxist critics, Jeyifo, Chinweizu, Amuta, Hunt, Osofisan, Madubuike et al, argue that

the responsibility for the critical evaluation of African writing and the establishment of reputations for African authors belongs to Africans themselves, for they are the primary audience. (Chinweizu 48)

Unfortunately, these Marxist critics unconsciously share with their colonialist counterparts variants of the latter's shortcomings. Marxism itself is a foreign theory imported to the African continent and boasts of similar pretensions to

"universality." These critics "have persistently accused Soyinka of obscurantism and of being too much immersed in private myth-making, an arcane metaphysics, at the expense of communicating with a popular audience about issues which directly concern it" (Crow 61). They claim that Soyinka's pessimistic outlook fails to incite the masses to initiate a revolution, and portray

Soyinka as a brilliant but ultimately reactionary romantic...[whose] plays have been unfavourably compared with the 'committed' art of...Sembene Ousmane,...Ngugi wa Thiongo,...Femi Osofisan and Kole Omotoso. (Crow 65)

Soyinka has openly admitted that he considers Socialism to be the "most humane form of government for a society like Nigeria," (Katrak 9) but has also clearly identified his position in relation to these Marxists:

Since I am not a Marxist, I do not spout Marxist rhetoric. And when I say I am not a Marxist, I mean that I dispute any form of thinking which insists on conceptualizing the entirety of existence through a Marxist framework. I find it childish. I have, however, had a long, questioning relationship with Marxism--in theory and practice. (Art 114)

Soyinka has more recently clarified his personal ideology:

But I have at the same time equally and even more fervently declared my stance as a socialist, allied to the most left-leaning political parties of my own society, as I was during the last elections, and believe passionately in a socialist philosophy. I am almost obsessively against capitalism and all its various affects and controls of human labor. A society like America frankly appals me...I have nothing but admiration for generally socialist societies, and this is a goal for which I have worked in my own way and with groups of people at different times in my own country. (Borraeca 35)

What these younger Marxist critics chiefly object to is Soyinka's ambivalence, a characteristic of his outlook which infects many of his theories; Soyinka, in turn, objects to their stern, unquestioning alignment with a Eurocentric and "universal" political philosophy. I hope it will be possible to steer a middle path in this thesis, and examine Soyinka's plays without the encumbrances of either group's prejudices, although I will be unable to fully shed the prejudices of my heritage or my outlook, much like many of the critics I have just mentioned. However, remaining constantly aware of the possible flaws of my approach, I hope to produce a clear and honest evaluation of this playwright's exploratory writing which invites the label of 'obscure' mainly from its attempt to penetrate the unknown. Of course some of Soyinka's critics have produced estimable evaluations, and I should gladly acknowledge my appreciation of the fine scholarship of Ketu Katrak, Wole Ogundele, Chris Johnson, K.R.Srinivasa Iyengar, and D.A. Isevbaye. These critics deserve to be associated with neither of the categories mentioned above, and provide the models for my own work.

There have been several book-length studies of Soyinka's writing, but these have too often attempted to evaluate the entire Soyinkan canon, and have lapsed into paraphrase. A recent book by Ketu Katrak has been more successful by using Soyinka's early essay, "The Fourth Stage," on Yoruba tragedy, as its starting point for examining a selection of plays. In

the process of examining her specific focus, Katrak questions her emphasis on Soyinka's Yoruba mythology over the playwright's political concerns and admits that

One discovers an essential continuity in Soyinka's deepest concerns over the last twenty-six years since 1959--a preoccupation with social justice, a belief in the ability of the individual to direct the community's future. The central purpose of tragic drama--communal benefit--has been missed by critics who fail to look beyond the animist themes to the social concerns. (Katrak 9&12)

Using the lecture Soyinka presented on Stockholm's global platform as an indication of his most deeply held convictions, his opposition to tyrannical political power and dedication to revolutionary humanist socialism, this thesis proposes to look back over Soyinka's dramatic career and examine two pairs of plays--The Strong Breed (1964) and Death and the King's Horseman (1975), and Madmen and Specialists (1970) and A Play of Giants (1984)--so as to trace Soyinka's political commitment as it developed up to the Nobel lecture in 1986. While there are no overtly political messages of the calibre of Soyinka's vehement scolding of the globe for its "umbilical cord" of support attached to the unjust governing body in Pretoria, there is much in the plays in the form of hidden political commentary. I in no way intend to suggest that this writer warrants attention as a consequence of his having received the Nobel Prize, and hope to confirm the opposite--that his works have deserved closer attention for many years, and that his decision to utilise the opportunity of his Nobel address to attack Western hegemony says something about this man that his

published writings have been saying about him for three decades. I have tried to select plays which are fairly evenly spaced over Soyinka's publishing career to follow any chronological trends, while stressing the prominence of his political concerns in all of Soyinka's writing, not simply the works produced during the Nigerian Civil War, or in response to the emergence of "more committed" African writing in the late nineteen-seventies. Unavoidably, my comments on Soyinka's plays as drama must be seen as largely conjecture because I have relied exclusively on his published pages, having never attended performances of any of these plays. Thus, my study is based on abstract considerations since drama depends on the theatrical performance rather than the written scripts. To entertain the comparisons of the two chapters, the chronological order of these scripts has been slightly disrupted since I analyse Death and the King's Horseman before looking at the earlier play, Madmen and Specialists. The two tragedies published just over a decade apart are closely linked by their very similar themes and content, as are the two overtly political farces, separated by fourteen years, which comprise the second pair. In each case, the later play can be said to constitute a virtual reworking of the themes in the earlier play. Certainly, there are other plays such as A Dance of the Forests, The Road, Kongi's Harvest, Opera Wonyosi, and Requiem for a Futurologist, which beg to be included in this study, but as this is only an introductory examination,

the four fine plays I have chosen provide ample material for the discussion of Soyinka's commitment to political justice and human liberty, in both his life and art.

CHAPTER ONE: THE TRAGEDIES

The predicament in which African peoples currently find themselves can perhaps be defined generally as a desperate struggle in the morass between traditionalism and modernity. Colonialism has robbed the African continent of its indigenous past and rewritten its heritage from the settler community's perspective. In their dubious present position of post-colonialism, Africans are trying to regain control of their own destinies and direct their continent's future, while simultaneously recovering their pre-colonial past without denying or ignoring their evolution during the years under colonial rule. It seems as if the African has uniquely recognised that there is much to value and much to reject in both the pre-colonial and the colonial eras, as his/her newly independent nations redefine their goals and identities. This political situation generates much discussion of the issues at stake. For example, examinations of the influence of outsiders on unsuspecting cultures, the detriment or benefit of such confrontations of alien values, and the exigency of the ethnic exclusiveness of tribalism are all placed under scrutiny

by such a condition. On another level, analysts are interested in the various concerns associated with the meaning of a society's situation in time as they explore the sphere of influence on and ultimate relevance of past events to present and of present events to future, the worth of traditional rituals for the retention of identities and the enrichment of culture, the efficacy of rituals carried out routinely and sentimentally, and the ultimate truth or fiction of believing in the existence of unsullied pasts and corrupted presents. Finally, this predicament spawns reevaluations of the requirement of self-sacrifice for the survival of society, and the dominance of predetermined fate in the face of the individual will striving to challenge and influence the direction of history. The two tragedies, The Strong Breed and Death and the King's Horseman, constitute two of Soyinka's greatest forums for the examination of this long list of complex issues.

The relationship between past, present and future constitutes a dominant theme in many of Soyinka's works as the playwright tries to imagine "a blending of old and new that would be better than a total rejection of one in favour of the other" (Dasenbrock 327). At the time when Soyinka began writing there was a tendency in African literature, of which the dramatist was very critical, to use history to present idealised portraits of the African past. In his essay "The Writer in a Modern African State," the playwright describes

this unhealthy habit of the colonialist African writer

to turn his eye backwards in time and prospect in archaic fields for forgotten gems which would dazzle and distract the present. But never inwards, never truly into the present, never into the obvious symptoms of the niggling, warning, predictable present, from which alone lay the salvation of ideals. (Art 18)

In this same essay, Soyinka declares that the

African writer needs an urgent release from the fascination of the past....the past exists now, this moment, it is coexistent in present awareness. It clarifies the present and explains the future, but it is not a fleshpot for escapist indulgence. (Art 19)

Soyinka is certainly wrestling with his understanding of this temporal interaction in The Strong Breed and Death and the King's Horseman, as he was in his Nobel lecture, "This Past Must Address its Present," when he suggested that his "purpose" in delivering such a politically charged acceptance speech was "not really to indict the past but to summon it to the attention of a suicidal, anachronistic present." The Nobel laureate claimed that "The past enacts its presence" and reiterated his thirty-year insistence on the interconnectedness of past, present and future ("This Past" 437,432). From this vantage point, one can look back eleven years, and a further eleven years, to Soyinka's treatment of this message and the above-mentioned related issues in these two tragedies.

The remarkably concentrated and compact play The Strong Breed, dramatises the tale of Eman, a stranger in an anonymous African village, who offers himself as the traditional "carrier" of the year's ills and sins, and unexpectedly becomes

the villagers' sacrificial scapegoat, a situation depicted through a maze of theatrical foreshadowing and flashbacks. The play is very complex in its relaying of this simple plot as the playwright explores the many issues hidden by the basic narrative. Eman is a member of the mysterious "strong breed" who have inherited the responsibility of carrying the evil of their communities to the sea in a symbolic annual ritual. Having refused to perform this obligation in his own town, the protagonist's destiny is partially fulfilled in the new village. In fact, Soyinka skillfully directs the action so that the two purification rituals are interlocked throughout the play and are simultaneously ratified. Unwilling to inherit the duty from his father, Eman flees from his home town searching for truth, and, in contrast, naively volunteers for the role in the new village when he offers to substitute himself for the chosen but indisposed Ifada. Despite his frantic lover's attempts to dissuade him from his looming denouement, Eman welcomes the responsibility, unaware of the differences between the custom for which he has been trained and that for which he has volunteered. This stranger's ignorance not only leads to Eman's death, but also to the exposure of the ritual for the travesty that it is. Although Eman's two friends, Sunma and Ifada, do find consolation in their unlikely bond which is born of their shared loss, most of the community remain only alienated by the sacrifice. The play asks whether the transitional period in Africa can afford

to lose a man like Eman, or whether it needs his sacrifice to prick up the ears and consciences of its citizens.

The Strong Breed is structured upon a scrambled chronology which brings past events to bear on the present action, and focuses the audience's attention on the prospective future, through Soyinka's skilled use of the flashback on four occasions. The protagonist arrives at an understanding of his own past, by way of the retrospective episodes which flow through his mind and are acted out on stage. Each flashback recalls situations where Eman was unable to come to terms with reality, and fled. Shocked by the brutality of Jaguna's carrier ritual, Eman initially chooses flight again, and this decision initiates the memories that will prompt him to accept the responsibility willingly. Early in the play, Oroge warns Eman that

you ought to know that no carrier may return to the village. If he does, the people will stone him to death. It has happened before. (Soyinka, Plays 1 129)

Thus, Eman consciously breaks the traditional taboo, as he did many years earlier at the initiation camp. Surprisingly, the two villagers who insist that Eman must die for this infraction, Jaguna and Oroge, also disregard a taboo in their contrivance to have Eman replace Ifada as carrier. Those who insist that the traditions must be respected make exceptions in the following exchange:

Jaguna: Now teacher...

Oroge[restrains him]: You see Mr. Eman, it is like this. Right now, nobody knows that Ifada has taken refuge here. No one except us and our men--and they know

how to keep their mouths shut. We don't want to have to burn down the house you see, but if word gets around, we would have no choice.

Jaguna: In fact, it may be too late already. A carrier should end up in the bush, not in a house. Anyone who doesn't guard his door when the carrier goes by has himself to blame. A contaminated house should be burnt down.

Oroge: But we are willing to let it pass. (Plays 1 128)

Public pressure is all that forces the traditionalists to conform to the custom, and the audience is impelled to question the sincerity of the village leaders. The opposing sides of the debate on the efficacy of unaltered traditions are established, and the subsequent completion of the annual social event leads the community to reevaluate their veneration of such spiritual leaders, its own future conduct, and the redemptive value of such a practice.

The play is set at the juncture of the worlds of the past, present and future--the New Year's Eve festival--and leads the audience in a suspicious questioning of the utility of clinging to tradition in the modern world. While Eman ultimately seems to embrace his destiny without hesitation, and Sunma finds charity and companionship with Ifada, Soyinka's judgement of the final scene remains ambivalent as he seems to condemn Jaguna, Oroge, and the Girl for wasting the life of a worthwhile individual, a member of the "strong breed." At the same time, the playwright seems to be lamenting the devaluation and corruption of the traditions he so often embraces in his writing. Despite the playwright's ambiguous position regarding the need for such traditions, he consistently

portrays the characters upholding the traditions in a more questionable light than the skeptics, and at the end of the play, even the idiot-boy is more worthy of our respect than the traditionalists. Soyinka's authorial position becomes endlessly complicated as the playwright refuses to didactically control his audience's response. He addresses directly a theme of considerable significance to the African political scene, but refuses to condemn either argument, recognising the merits of both.

Predictably, Jaguna and Oroge are a little more complex than they initially appear. Both men are in favour of the carrier practice out of no maliciousness toward either Eman or Ifada, but out of a sense of social responsibility, Soyinka's prized impulse. They push the ritual through to its fruition because of their sense of duty to the community, not any evil vindictiveness. One critic evaluates the enigmatic closing message as follows:

The play's ending looks both ways [into the past and into the future] suggesting simultaneously a short-sighted repetition and a long-term revaluation of the past. Jaguna's unappreciative response to Eman's death indicates that a grim formality has taken its mechanical course, emptied of its moral potency and, in a society incapable of redemption, without redemptive benefit to anyone. The perverted rite seems to be locked into a vicious and futile repetition, meaninglessly expiating evil by an act which amasses more: the last expiation of the old year is also the first blood-guilt of the new one, so the rite undermines itself even before it can purchase a temporary efficacy. (Wright 55-56)

Thus, the essentially positive impulses of Jaguna and Oroge have been expressed through a practice in which the villagers

no longer have any faith. As Wright correctly concludes, the ritual has decayed to the point of producing social disharmony rather than social renewal. However, Wright stumbles when he argues that Eman is simply a coerced victim on the same level of importance as Ifada. Eman is serving his own purposes when he calls

Wait father. I am coming with you...wait...wait for me
father...(Plays 1 145)

Eman triumphs over the self, by overcoming his own reluctance to fulfill his duty, and psychologically transforms the meaning of his sacrifice such that it answers the call of his blood, and actually consummates his home town's ritual rather than the purification of his adopted village (Hepburn 580). Ifada's death would have induced no questioning of tradition, would have performed no such exercise of uniting the past, present and future, and would not have attained the self-awareness and insight which Eman's sacrifice brings into the living community. In fact, the failure of Eman's violent death to raise the cathartic curses of the villagers produces a more significant and lasting benefit for the community than the predicted outcome of the carrier ritual. The villagers reject blind acceptance and recognise the need for modifications to the ritual, which would again instill its practice with meaning. Ultimately, Eman's self-sacrifice is necessary for his own personal development, for his home community's benefit, and for the health and survival of his adopted society.

The Girl is the only character portrayed by Soyinka with very little ambivalence, and this treatment clarifies Soyinka's stance. She is described as "unsmiling," "unsettling," "unwell," "impassive," possessing "a kind of inscrutability," and "surprising venom" (Plays 1 118-120). She typifies the brutal callousness hanging over the play, she is isolated from the community by her strange illness, and she selfishly displays no compassion, as she alone adheres blindly and ruthlessly to the traditional scapegoating. The Girl is the play's evil character. Through her, Soyinka levels his criticism of traditions on those who refuse to compromise, those who will not adapt to the changing mores of every society. In this play, Soyinka is dramatising the African effort to reconcile past with present situations, and exploring the varying perspectives of those who endorse and those who deprecate the retention of traditions.

As part of this questioning of tradition, it is also worthwhile to examine the development of Soyinka's views of sexual politics, as they grow and change during the course of his writing career. Between The Strong Breed and A Play of Giants, there is a considerable distance with respect to the authorial stance on the position of women. Besides the Girl, the other two female characters in this early drama receive rather questionable treatment at the hands of both the play's other characters, as well as the playwright's. Sunma and Omae are ambivalently portayed as both positive and negative

influences in their communities. They are connected in some way with the continuation of culture-enhancing traditions and yet these two women are also guilty of breaking taboos and disrupting the dynamics of their societies. Omae provides Eman's father with an anchor and a symbol of hope, but she also disrespectfully interrupts Eman's coming-of-age ritual. Sunma, as the daughter of Jaguna, and protector of Eman's best interests, occupies a fairly sympathetic position in the play, but her strange harshness towards Ifada and her father, along with her cold self-alienation from her community, taint her healthy portrait. Both women are victims of serious sexist oppression as Eman, Jaguna, and the Tutor viciously mistreat these women, and perpetuate the patriarchal stereotypes. These men do not hesitate to subordinate and objectify Sunma and Omae, and willingly exploit the power accorded to males in their society. Without the slight exaggeration of the male dominance in the play, the gender of Soyinka's satirical target would be difficult to determine, since he seems only provisionally interested in the rights of women here, especially when The Strong Breed is compared with the later works. The seeds of Soyinka's emerging awareness that the place of women in an oppressive society is closely related to his concerns with power and politics, are present in this early play in a rather clouded and ambiguous form, but this brief questioning develops into a central issue during the nineteen-seventies.

The Strong Breed also examines the position of the outsider in a society, the presence of the other. The purification ritual in Jaguna's village requires that a stranger or an idiot be subjected to the curses and abuse of the villagers as they purge themselves of the evils of the old year. The village would not reasonably ask one of its own people to undergo the ritual humiliation and personal defilement associated with the carrier, and must annually find an appropriate victim. In the play's tense opening, the dubious and fearful position of the stranger in this unlocalised village is emphasised in the stage direction which follows the first line of dialogue.

[...Two villagers, obvious travellers, pass hurriedly in front of the house, the man has a small raffia sack, the woman a cloth-covered basket, the man enters first, turns and urges the woman who is just emerging to hurry.] (Plays 1 115)

Eman's role as a teacher familiar with Western medicine, and hence a stranger to this rural village of "mud house[s]," is evidenced in the opening stage direction:

[Eman, in light buba and trousers stands at the window, looking out. Inside, Sunma is clearing the table of what looks like a modest clinic, putting the things away in the cupboard. Another rough table in the room is piled with exercise books, two or three worn text-books, etc.] (Plays 1 115)

In the exchange between Eman and his lover which follows this opening tableau, Eman's position as an outsider is confirmed, as is the villagers' xenophobia:

Sunma: ...Why do you continue to stay where nobody wants you?

Eman: That is not true.

Sunma: It is. You are wasting your life on people who really want you out of their way.

Eman: You don't know what you are saying.

Sunma: You think they love you? Do you think they care at all for what you--or I--do for them?

Eman: THEM? These are your own people. Sometimes you talk as if you were a stranger too.

Sunma: By yourself you can do nothing here. Have you not noticed how tightly we shut out strangers? Even if you lived here for a lifetime, you would remain a stranger.

Eman: Perhaps that is what I like. There is peace in being a stranger.

Sunma: For a while perhaps. But they would reject you in the end. (Plays 1 120,123)

Although Eman is clearly an African and not a Westerner, the ethnic protectiveness of tribalism, which is suspicious of all alien influence, applies equally to him. This rejection of strangers is tied to the rejection of all outside ideas and innovations which pose a threat to existing orders and a people's cultural identity. The attitudes of Jaguna, Oroge, and particularly the Girl fuel the bigotry. Eman displays similar sentiments when he contemptuously disrupts the scapegoat ritual to replace Ifada as the victim, and demonstrates his lack of respect and sensitivity to the villagers' customs. He makes no effort to understand their practices and ethnocentrically volunteers to be carrier based on his own customs. The realisation that his knowledge of his village traditions does not guarantee familiarity with all carrier rituals leads Eman to flee in terror from the drastic cultural difference. Raised in a different tradition which enlists a strong willing carrier rather than the likes of

Ifada, Eman attempts to abandon his assumed role once his participation in Jaguna's method of healing society has begun. This confrontation of alien values fails to blossom into any healthy integrative co-existent dream, and Soyinka finds himself struggling in the on-going debate between assimilation and 'apartheid.' Should cultures be preserved by separate and hence different development, or possibly enhanced or risked in a converging interaction where only the fittest survive? These topical political questions are woven into the fabric of Soyinka's tragedy, as the playwright carefully directs his audience to question its faith and its mistrust of the various partisan polemics.

Tragedy, most often, deals with the conflict between its two most important components: individual will and tragic destiny (Katrak 108). The Strong Breed deals squarely with this conventional theme. The play's opening sentence posits a choice for Eman:

Sunma[hesitant]: You will have to make up your mind soon
Eman. (Plays 1 115)

The suggestion that Eman has any option implies quite strongly that Soyinka is endorsing the argument that the individual has the ability to direct the course of events. In the play's early dialogue between Sunma and Eman, fate seems to have no hold on the action as Eman stubbornly insists on controlling his own life. Sunma, wary of the likely outcome of her village's New Year's Eve festival, urges Eman to leave on the

departing lorry, but he is too determined to make his own decisions:

Sunma[desperately]: Two days Eman. Only two days.

Eman[distressed]: But I tell you I have no wish to go.

Sunma[suddenly angry]: Are you so afraid then?

Eman: Me? Afraid of what?

Sunma: You think you will not want to come back.

Eman[pitying]: You cannot dare me that way.

Sunma: Then why won't you leave here, even for an hour?

If you are so sure that your life is settled here, why are you afraid to do this thing for me? What is so wrong that you will not go into the next town for a day or two?

Eman: I don't want to. I do not have to persuade you, or myself about anything. I simply have no desire to go away.

Sunma: Some day you will wish that you went away when I tried to make you. (Plays 1 121,123)

Eman's individualism, and his headstrong attitude regarding any decisions about his life, seem to embrace wholeheartedly Soyinka's political faith in the ability of every person to influence social changes. But Soyinka's stance is never so naive or one-sided, and Eman also utters the claim "I am very much my father's son" (Plays 1 126). During the first flashback this debate is examined further as the Old Man tries to convince his son that he cannot escape the "urge" of his blood, that Eman's "own blood will betray" him, "because..[he] cannot hold it back" (Plays 1 134). The spectre of Eman's father predicts that destiny will overrun the boy, and the tragic conflict becomes less easily resolved.

The two flashbacks which follow involve Eman's wife Omae, and while the first recollection involving his defiant desertion from his initiation camp bears witness to Eman's

strong individual will, the second recollection which dramatises Omae's predicted death giving birth to a "strong one," attests to the awesome power of fate. The play's final flashback, which results in Eman's violent death, characteristically remains ambivalent, and Soyinka refuses to conclude whether or not Eman is allowed any degree of choice as he fulfills the destiny of belonging to the "strong breed." All this discussion of fate up against one's will is central to the playwright's ideas about political action, because persons who complacently accept dissatisfying conditions as the dividends of determinism, have no inspiration to try to effect change. Soyinka's message seems to be more clearly associated with the futility of any effort to renounce one's family, home or vocation. This seems to be the precise message of Soyinka's traditionalism: an individual cannot cut him-/herself off from his/her roots and escape his/her heritage. Ironically, Eman demonstrates this knowledge early in the play, prior to his growth in self-awareness, in the following dialogue when the agitated Sunma fears the implications of her family's loyalty to tradition, and boasts:

Sunma: I have renounced it; I am Jaguna's daughter only
in name.

Eman: Renouncing one's self is not so easy--surely you
know that. (Plays 1 123)

Extrapolating from Soyinka's pronounced belief in the strength of individual action and personal courage to redress social injustice, one would expect him to come down decidedly in

favour of the ability of the individual to overpower fate, but as is always the case, the playwright resists the simplicity of embracing any one side of a particular issue, exploring instead the various viewpoints without drawing an irrevocable conclusion, but also without leaving the issues where they were.

Comparisons have been made between Christ and the thirsty, crucified Eman (Laurence 74; Jones 72-79; Egberike 297), but the more accurate counterpart for the actively defiant rather than passively suffering member of the "strong breed," is found in Soyinka's idealised portrait of the African writer. The inability of members of the "strong breed" to effectively escape their predestined social duties to self-sacrifice and to the preservation and health of their communities, is too rhetorically similar to Soyinka's own insistence that artists must act as the conscience of their societies. One perceptive critic's description of the qualifications for the play's spiritually elect sounds remarkably close to Soyinka's advocacy for writers:

The strong breed stride across human history, not just a straight descent from Old Man to Eman. They are a chain of pivotal persons who ride on the crest of the wave, make the human problems theirs and from age to age sacrifice themselves voluntarily for the common good. Eman is in this great tradition and it is only those who are within it that know the intensity and pain of the devotion to the human cause. The rest of humanity is either too sensible, like Sunma, to think the sacrifice is worth it or too naive, like Ifada, to appreciate its significance. It is only the elect that have both the will and the temerity to make the plunge and consent to be the sacrificial victim. (Ogumba 16)

Soyinka even makes the comparison more glaring by including a few autobiographical details in his portrait of Eman. It surely cannot be coincidental that Eman is a healer and teacher who left home for several years, wandering alone in pursuit of some sort of higher truth and fulfillment, before returning to demonstrate a renewed appreciation of his heritage and traditions. This description could very easily be applied directly to the attitude of the young playwright in the years before 1960.

Soyinka's refusal to wholeheartedly embrace Marxism is also evidenced in the play's lack of faith in the masses to effect social change, and his preference for the benevolent interference of an exceptional, enlightened individual, committed to the communal good. Closely tied to his conception of the role of the African artist is Soyinka's belief in the social responsibility of the members of the "strong breed." While it is obvious that the playwright is far from suggesting that every individual belongs to this select group in The Strong Breed, it is also clear that when he calls on his fellow artists to take up the cause, he exempts none, and the play dramatises the consequences that befall shirkers. My interpretation of Soyinka's approach to social action refuses to recognise his political commitment as an elitist hierarchical resistance where only the elect can struggle. It is the responsibility of the intellectual and the artist to use their knowledge and skills to inform and

motivate the rest of society, but the demand for change is in no way restricted to their able and trained hands. It is my belief that Soyinka is not advocating elitism, but a more effective commitment to radical change. His refusal simply to give power to the masses, empowers each individual with an ability to effect change, and a social responsibility divorced from any complacent apathy that relies on others to carry the struggle which every individual must take up. Soyinka has faith in the strength of a collective group, but in a more unified mass comprised not of anonymous sheep but of committed, responsible agents of communal good. He uses the motif of the "strong breed," since he speaks only for himself and his fellow artists, not for all people, and writes only about what he knows.

Likewise, the Old Man's comments regarding his performance of the obligations of his blood, the carrier ritual, are equally relevant for the political activist, or the committed African writer:

Old Man: I have never met the carrying of the boat with such a heavy heart.....A Man should be at his strongest when he takes the boat, my friend. To be weighed down inside and out is not a wise thing. I hope when the moment comes I shall have found my strength. (Plays 1 132-133)

Grief is the one thing that can weigh down the "strong breed," and both the Old Man and Eman fulfill their final journeys with the elation of having saved society. Becoming overwhelmed or despondent with the enormity of the challenge is the greatest

threat to effecting change, both within the play and in any society. Soyinka sees himself and all African writers, in fact all artists, as members of a "strong breed" whose vocation includes the predestined responsibility of using one's art to fight for the survival and liberation of his/her society, and this responsibility is abdicated either through neglect or paralysing grief. While Soyinka is at pains to allow each artist a choice of whether or not to take up his/her social responsibility, he is, at the same time, trying to support the idea of some inner compulsion that drives the artist to wear his/her mantle and discard any alternative course of action as purely unthinkable. Eman is allowed to make up his own mind, but he realistically has no choice but to accept the destiny of the "strong breed" and lead the community in the beneficial re-examination of their past, present and future.

While The Strong Breed may appear to be a rather simple and apolitical play, Soyinka has included a great deal of philosophical discourse dealing with several of the crucial social issues facing his country and his continent. Eman is a striking example of an essentially beneficial individual will restrained and eliminated by political oppression. He is a creature relevant to both Nigeria's colonial and post-colonial eras. Simultaneously, Eman operates as a symbolic message to the newly-independent Nigerians affirming the need for social responsibility and an end to selfishness. The play addresses the exact political moment in Soyinka's homeland, when his

fellow Nigerians needed nation-building guidance, with respect not only to the preservation of rituals, but also to individual duty, communalism, tribalism, national identity, state tolerance and leniency, and sexual politics. Written over two decades before "This Past Must Address its Present," The Strong Breed possesses much in common with the didactic Nobel lecture, and effectively initiates this study of Soyinka's political commitment as expressed through his drama.

II

In the public announcement that Soyinka would be the recipient of the 1986 Nobel Prize for literature, the Swedish Academy was careful to stress that it had been particularly impressed by Soyinka's rich and complicated play, Death and the King's Horseman. This enigmatic and "tightly woven" masterpiece has puzzled and challenged audiences and critics to come to an understanding of the playwright's fresh interpretation of modern tragedy, his linguistic skill and agility, his expectations for the dramatic performance, his world view, and his Yoruba identity. The play has attracted a great deal of lively critical debate on several aspects of its dramaturgy, as many have wrestled with its complexities and retired awestruck by its powerful language, which has been labeled "the richest and deepest dramatic language he has ever written" (Moore 158) and "as poetically rich and symbolic as any found in Shakespeare" (Ready 711).

Soyinka wrote the play during his self-imposed exile from Nigeria, immediately after the Civil War, while he was simultaneously delivering the formative Cambridge essays which

comprise his volume Myth, Literature and the African World. This book of African literary theory is closely linked to Death and the King's Horseman, since both are steeped in the explanation and the affirmation of Soyinka's identity as a Yoruba, and hence have been frequently paired by critics, such as Katrak, Isevbaye, Ready, and Maduakor. The fact that Soyinka composed Death and the King's Horseman while influenced by the odd setting of Cambridge's Churchill College seems to account for his choice of a classical five-act tragic structure for this strongly Yoruba play, as well as his decision to stress and satirise the prejudiced attitudes of the British, with whom he had again been placed in close proximity. The playwright also deviates from his established form by choosing to construct the play around an historical incident, that of the interrupted ritual suicide of the master of the King's horse in Oyo, in 1945. It is also quite significant that Soyinka wrote the play to commemorate the recent death of his father. All of these factors have contributed to the final shape and meaning of the play.

Much like that of the earlier play The Strong Breed, the plot of Death and the King's Horseman is based on a ritual of purification which is eventually inherited and embraced by the son of the village "carrier." According to the Yoruba custom, the Elesin Oba must commit suicide a month after the Alafin's death to accompany his king on the passage between this world and the world of the ancestors. During his preparations on

the eve of the ritual, Elesin, who has failed to disinterest himself in the pleasures of this world, hesitates and the colonialist authorities are able to intervene and prevent his suicide. The disruption of the event has cataclysmic consequences for the community, and thus, Elesin's son Olunde, returning from his studies in England with a fresh commitment to the Yoruba world view, assumes his father's abdicated public responsibility and tries to fulfill the traditional role of the King's horseman. Devastated by Olunde's premature death, Elesin kills himself purposelessly, too late to fulfill his destiny.

Soyinka prefaced this play with a rather curious and troublesome "Author's Note" which makes some disturbing assertions that demand to be dealt with, in their entirety, before proceeding with an examination of the play. Besides declaring the historical source for his material, the playwright raises several issues which are integral to an understanding of the play. He admits that he has made some

changes...in matters of detail, sequence and of course characterisation [and that the] action has also been set back two or three years to while the war was still on, for minor reasons of dramaturgy. (Soyinka, Horseman 6)

This poetic license has sparked much controversy--see Jeyifo's essay in Marxism and African Literature--but the playwright is most anxious in his "Author's Note" to warn those readers with a particular "kind of perverse mentality" to avoid the "sadly familiar reductionist tendency" of attaching to this play the

"facile tag of 'clash of cultures'...[the] prejudicial label" of ethnocentric misinterpretation (Horseman 6). In the prefatory note, Soyinka is at pains to stress the play's "threnodic essence" and plainly emphasises that

The Colonial factor is an incident, a catalytic incident merely. The confrontation in the play is largely metaphysical, contained in the human vehicle which is Elesin and the universe of the Yoruba mind. (Horseman 7)

While this "Author's Note" insists that the play's political themes related to colonialism are of little significance, Soyinka stated clearly in an interview conducted just two years ago that "Of course there's politics in Death and the King's Horseman," thus laying to rest any suspicions that this play has no place in this thesis (Appiah 781).

To resolve this apparent contradiction a critic must understand that Soyinka is desperately trying to discourage any simplistic reading of this extremely complicated play. Any conclusion that the British District Officer is the sole hindrance to the completion of the ritual suicide, is based on precisely this type of superficial interpretation of Death and the King's Horseman, and has missed the gist of at least half of the drama. The "threnodic" or "metaphysical" purport of the play concerns the dramatisation of Elesin's natural human tendency to confront death while looking longingly over his shoulder at the pleasures of this world, and certainly is intended to occupy a very central position in a play dedicated to the recent death of the playwright's father. The play has

been designed to lead the audience through the ritual celebration of the recent death of a Yoruba "king," Soyinka's father. Therefore, the playwright added his "Author's Note" to insure that readers could not overlook the play's concern with death, by only recognising the much more simple discussion of colonial intervention. In fact, Soyinka stresses this issue in the body of the text by dramatising Elesin's dalliance and reluctance to surrender his earthly existence throughout two acts, while the less significant colonialist interference takes place off stage. The prefatory note draws attention to this obvious beacon: "it is not by chance that I have avoided dialogue or situation which would encourage [this erroneous interpretation]" (Horseman 6). The "Author's Note" strives not to subordinate the play's political content, as much as to alert lazy readers to the convenient trap that would fail to give the credit due to a work and a writer utterly dissociated from simplicity.

Also at work in this "Author's Note" is the playwright's affirmation that modern African literature no longer has the capacity to de-politicise itself. For the sake of this commemorative volume, Soyinka proclaims that he will concern himself with a "metaphysical" discussion of death, and will de-emphasise the political content to the status of "a catalytic incident merely." But as the play itself testifies, Soyinka, along with other African writers, discovers that this popular challenge remains an impossibility as these inescapable

concerns characteristically seek prominence in all of his writing. Literature from Africa strongly resists dissociation from the political commitment and ideological concerns of its writers, and Soyinka's "Author's Note" identifies Death and the King's Horseman as bearing testimony to that fact. Soyinka seems to feel that a Nigerian writer cannot even honour his father's death without making some sort of political comment.

Death and the King's Horseman explores the temporal interaction of past, present and future from the same perspective adopted by Soyinka in The Strong Breed. This later play concentrates on an event which took place thirty years before the play's publication, specifically reworking the historical details to invest them with contemporary relevance and turn the audience's questioning eyes onto the future. The play echoes The Strong Breed by affirming that those who betray the present, selfishly and irredeemably shatter their community. The axis of the Yoruba world is founded upon the contiguity of the worlds of the past, present and future, and the transitional gulf, the numinous passage, the "fourth stage" which links all. The unborn, the living and the dead all coexist simultaneously; the dead are resurrected through ritual to offer commentary and criticism on the social order of the living, and the unborn carry the uncertainty of the community's future hopes as they inherit all that has gone before them. Combined in the character of Elesin is "the remembrance of the past, the honour of the

present, and the promise of the future" (Last 39). The Yoruba world view is revealed as the source for Soyinka's theory of simultaneity which is so prevalent in both his life and work, and motivates his commitment to improving the present.

If The Strong Breed suspiciously questions the efficacy of continuing and embracing traditional customs, Death and the King's Horseman appears to be at the other end of the spectrum, rigorously asserting the tradition and criticising the questioners (Hepburn 577). One critic calls Olunde's sacrificial substitution "a significant and uncompromising affirmation of traditional cosmology" (Ralph-Bowman 88); Katrak, however, confidently insists many have been misled

into believing that the playwright is celebrating the custom. Soyinka is criticizing this tradition, though indirectly as is consonant with his artistic method. This is implied in Soyinka's sympathy to Elesin's basic human instinct for survival rather than for death. It is ironic that Olunde...should plunge blindly into an act required by the community and should sacrifice his life merely for the sake of honor....Soyinka is surely questioning this kind of heavy communal demand...for the sake of some unspecified benefit to the community. (Katrak 89-90)

Although Katrak's argument is more attractive, neither critic has honestly evaluated Soyinka's position, nor has either been sufficiently convincing that Soyinka has adopted such a partial position. Yet another attests that there is "no approval or disapproval in Soyinka's stance, but a mere unfolding of the cultural sensibility" (Jain 257). Since the only suggestion in the play that the ritual should be questioned comes from the mouths of the grossly insensitive colonialists, their misfit

stooges or the tragic figure himself, who has betrayed his community and evaded his public duty, readers are reluctant to argue that any of these voices are being endorsed by Soyinka. Instead, readers are easily tempted into seeing Soyinka as sanctioning Olunde's position as the moral and intellectual figure of promise whose sojourn in the Western world has strengthened his deep understanding of his heritage, his sense of public responsibility and the recognition of the fundamental coincidence of past, present and future. As with Eman, there are certain autobiographical traits in Olunde's character that strongly impel readers to associate him with Soyinka's authorial stance. And yet, is it likely that Soyinka would be so ambivalent as to address the issue of traditional customs from two such contradictory positions, in two plays written only a decade apart? There must certainly be something more to Katrak's argument, which professes to see more consistency in Soyinka's attitude. The playwright's stance in Death and the King's Horseman must share more with The Strong Breed than Hepburn and Ralph-Bowman suggest. A writer as committed as Soyinka would hardly turn such an about-face with respect to this important issue.

Soyinka's "metaphysical" play is lamenting the loss of an inner consistency in the Yoruba culture, while praising and advocating the traditionalism of Olunde to avoid the transformation of the Yoruban population into a mass of Amusas, Josephs, and even Elesins, who have cut themselves off from

their cultural roots through excessive lust for the material world. Soyinka's point in his "Author's Note" is also relevant here: while colonialism deserves some of the blame for the destruction of African cultures, their demise is equally the result of the failure of Africans themselves to adhere to indigenous values. The spiritual unity has collapsed from within and these external influences have never posed much of a threat; as Iyaloja and the Praise-Singer testify, the Yoruba themselves wrench "the world adrift into emptiness":

In their time the great wars came and went, the little wars came and went; the white slavers came and went, they took away the heart of our race, they bore away the mind and muscle of our race. The city fell and was rebuilt; the city fell and our people trudged through mountain and forest to find a new home but....Our world was never wrenched from its true course.

Elesin, we placed the reins of the world in your hands yet you watched it plunge over the edge of the bitter precipice. You sat with folded arms while evil strangers tilted the world from its course and crashed it beyond the edge of emptiness--you muttered, there is little that one man can do, you left us floundering in a blind future....Our world is tumbling in the void of strangers, Elesin. (Horseman 17, 10, 75)

These "strangers" are the colonialist settlers who are seizing the land, but as the Praise-Singer explicitly pronounces, Elesin's failure to act has permitted their domination; he has actively surrendered the control which the "strangers" have inherited. Elesin attempts to accuse these outsiders of being the culprits, and argues that his "will was squelched in the spittle of an alien race" (Horseman 69). As he confesses to his young bride, Elesin is fully aware of the real source of

his community's destruction:

my weakness came not merely from the abomination of the white man who came violently into my fading presence, there was also a weight of longing on my earth-held limbs. (Horseman 65)

The play asserts that the Yoruba world, and by extension the African world, was not toppled merely by the meddling colonialists, but also by its own people's selfish desires.

The extreme contrasts drawn by Death and the King's Horseman between the language, dance, rituals, beliefs, and attitudes of the spheres of the marketplace and the British residency are extensions of the theme of the stranger which was so important in The Strong Breed. The outsider Eman has bred several counterparts in the later play. Olunde most closely resembles the character of Eman, but has returned to his original community and is treated with much less suspicion. Amusa and Joseph are both outcasts who have renounced their indigenous values in favour of those of the colonialists, but as a result become aliens in both domains and are the victims of contempt from all sides. Elesin, in his metamorphosis from redeemer to betrayer, permanently alienates himself from his community and is banished to "step in the vomit of cats and the droppings of mice...[and] fight them for the left-overs of the world" (Horseman 68). The most unequivocal and complete inheritor of Eman's role as stranger is surely the District Officer, Simon Pilkings. This man and his wife embody the perpetual European prejudices against Africa, and are treated

accordingly by the playwright--lampooned constantly for their false sense of superiority. These strangers justify and necessitate the ethnic exclusiveness of tribalism by way of their relentless disdain and disrespect for the "sly, devious bastards" of "the colonies" and their indigenous "nonsense," "rubbish," and "mumbo-jumbo" (Horseman 29, 24). Joseph's Islamic beliefs and Amusa's Christianity, his "holy water nonsense," are also equal targets for the intolerant foreigners (Horseman 30). In extreme caricature, the Pilkingses trivialise all that they do not understand, thus constituting stereotypes of the insensitive stranger. The playwright twists the theme of the stranger from its treatment in The Strong Breed to a fresh evaluation in the later play which is also not as straight-forward as it seems.

Reed suggests that "rather than polarizing [these alien] cultures,...Soyinka gently draws parallels between them," but I would argue that the comparisons are drawn abrasively rather than gently (707). The Yoruba characters' mastery of proverbial and figurative language contrasts brilliantly with the colonialists' trite, flat, and cliched speech. The Yoruba dancing is "graceful," "purposeful," and most importantly "anchored to a worldview," while the ostentatious ballroom antics of the colonialists contain only enjoyment value, and the Pilkings' Egungun dance exists as no more than a hollow and meaningless imitation (Maduakor 270). Soyinka's satirical stage directions expose the travesty of the Prince's ritual

procession juxtaposed with Elesin's far more regal rites of passage in the previous scene. Yet, the most striking contrasts are drawn during Olunde's conversation with Jane Pilkings in the fourth scene. Through Olunde, Soyinka subtly compares the African and European pandects, and silently affirms the African world view. The nearly eight page exchange is too long to quote, but the moral and sophisticated Olunde is unconditionally elevated above the arrogant, irrational and inconsistent Jane, as, among other things, the true nature of European mass suicide and sacrifice in two world wars is contrasted with the controlled ritual suicides in Yorubaland. Soyinka invites the audience to decide whose behaviour is primitive, "blasphem[ous]," "barbaric," "feudal," "callous," "unfeeling," "nonsens[ical]," "savage," and "unnatural" (Horseman 50-57). Olunde delivers the heaviest blow when he concludes from his Western experience that

I had plenty of time to study your people. I saw nothing, finally, that gave you the right to pass judgement on other peoples and their ways. Nothing at all. (Horseman 54)

The play also points to these alien cultures' differing definitions of "honour" and "duty," and offers a very different perspective to that of The Strong Breed on the issue of the stranger, as Death and the King's Horseman articulates a confident denunciation of colonial meddling, and a characteristically ambivalent pronouncement on cultural interaction.

Extending from his brief concern with sexual politics in The Strong Breed, Soyinka casts the roles for women in this later play with a clever complexity and a seeming ambivalence as some female characters purport values which others wholly disregard. Iyaloja and the Bride represent the two extremes of the female spectrum in this play. The former embodies Soyinka's sympathetic and flattering portrait of a woman, which attributes to her gender the last vestiges of human communion with nature, unwavering loyalty to the community and the traditions, and the maternalism that gives the race hope and promise. She is a powerful matriarch in the community, demanding and deserving respect from men and women alike. This character, and the marketwomen she leads, differs substantially from the marginalised and disparaged women in The Strong Breed as the playwright moves forward in his view of women and turns to the pre-colonial Nigerian woman's "exalted institutional positions in traditional politics" for his dramatic creations. Among the country's three largest ethnic groups, the Hausa, the Yoruba, and the Igbo, "women held very high political posts in the traditional community organisations" and "the depressed status of women in politics developed [only] after the imposition of British colonial rule" (Okonjo 211-216). For his mother of the marketplace, Soyinka is drawing on an historical tradition that women functioned as "protective progenitors, healers,...and guardians of morality, social order, and the just apportionment of power, wealth, and

prestige" and were largely addressed as "our mothers" to emphasise the community's consciousness of their role as the source of life (Drewal 8-9). However, Iyaloja is not the first female character tied to these traditions, as Madmen and Specialists will demonstrate.

The Bride in Death and the King's Horseman stands at the other spectral extreme, and her conduct at the hands of the Elesin Oba bears more than a hint of comparison with the Tutor's callous, sexual exploitation of Omae at the initiation camp in The Strong Breed. One of Elesin's last wishes is to unburden himself of "Seed that will not serve the stomach/ On the way" by emptying it into the "beautiful young girl" he has spied in the marketplace (Horseman 21, 18). Elesin's over-enthusiastic attraction to the material manifestations of the Earthly realm, which is present in his request for rich new clothing, is typified in his urgent demand for sex with the Bride. Clearly the Bride is unwilling since she has already been pledged to another, but the poor "girl" is handed to Elesin in a gesture which can hardly be dissociated from the market-women's presentation of all the other 'merchandise' to their redeemer. Even though the Bride is betrothed to Iyaloja's son, there is no real hesitancy in the 'transaction.' The objectification of the Bride and subordination of all the market women to Elesin's wishes are far more exaggerated instances of sexist oppression than any which are present in the female portraits in The Strong Breed. The satire which

is aimed at the patriarchal structures and conventions is far less ambiguous in this later play, as Soyinka's call for human liberty recognises the tyranny of male dominance as equally deserving of his attention.

Despite her association with European prejudices and colonialist narrow-mindedness, Jane Pilkings may represent an attempt to reconcile the two stereotypical extremes symbolised by Iyaloja and the Bride, in Soyinka's portrayal of women. The colonialist wife offers a form of compromise since she repeatedly demonstrates her awareness of sexual politics by pointing mockingly at her subservience, and continually disobeying her husband and involving herself in the action (Horseman 30-34, 64-74). The playwright directly mocks Simon Pilkings' male chauvanism and arrogance through Jane's satirical asides, and rallies the audience's support and sympathy for the European woman's incessant opposition to her husband's indifferent pronouncements, as she reveals her more sensitive interest in Yoruba culture which contrasts his entrenched attitude of colonialist racism. With Jane Pilkings, the playwright has created a fresh role for a female character which is not based on a traditional matriarch, and dramatises the possibility of women overcoming sexist oppression and moving towards empowerment. Soyinka offers a spectrum of female roles in Death and the King's Horseman, which attests to his emerging consciousness with respect to feminism.

Soyinka's tragedy is remarkably innovative. An audience at a presentation of Death and the King's Horseman would most likely find themselves in the fifth act uncomfortably lamenting the fact that the protagonist failed to die. The dramatic force of such a conglomeration of ritual, song, storytelling, masque, mimicry, and dance must certainly produce an uncommon spectacle and a unique theatrical experience. The play also has more to reveal to Nigerians than Olunde's ability to return uncorrupted from his education in the West. Iyaloja's condemnation of Elesin in the fifth scene extends to a generation of political leaders throughout Africa's newly independent nations who are addicted to left-overs (Horseman 68). Soyinka voluntarily went into exile over his dissatisfaction with the leadership in "Gowon's Nigeria" and Death and the King's Horseman is really a play about such leaders who are in desperate need of instruction. The play says a great deal to Soyinka's fellow Nigerians on the issues of traditionalism, honour, responsibility, self-sacrifice and political leadership, and there can be little doubt regarding the implications of the play's setting in an "erstwhile sacred society" which has been poisoned by corruption and crime (Maduakor 276). The action is undoubtedly taking place in Yorubaland, and the play is intended to deliver topical political messages to those involved in the struggle there. Olunde provides Soyinka's model for the path to the recovery of the Nigerian past and the forging of a better future, by

affirming that sensitive cultures can come together without destroying one another, and benefit from such reciprocity. The survivalist tendencies which plunged Nigeria into its Civil War as the main tribes tried to ensure the preservation of their individual cultural identities, and the xenophobia of mistrusting and purposely alienating the unfamiliar to protect oneself, must become obsolete and archaic impulses if the African continent is to survive as a unified and multicultural whole.

The ending of Death and the King's Horseman is ambivalent. Are the deaths of Olunde and the Elesin Oba tragic or wasteful? Does Olunde's sacrifice come in time to save the Yoruba world from being "set adrift and its inhabitants...lost" or has the son also missed that "moment of the night" (Horseman 62-63)? The playwright stresses the premise that Elesin's death comes too late, but refuses to announce whether Olunde's comes in time. The death of Olunde appears to be tragic because it is premature, and his father's subsequent suicide is tragic due to the lost potential: shrouded in shame the Elesin's death is a weak duplicate of his intended fate. Soyinka avoids clarifying the closing tableau, but this mournful prison cell is a conspicuously long way from the celebration of the marketplace; the predicted festival of rebirth has become the hopeless elegy for the death of the community. Iyaloja venerates Olunde, but gives no indication that his act has accomplished more than shaming Elesin:

There lies the honour of your household and of our race. Because he could not bear to let honour fly out of doors, he stopped it with his life. The son has proved the father Elesin, and there is nothing left in your mouth to gnash but infant gums. (Horseman 75)

As the Praise-Singer proclaims, "What the end will be, we are not gods to tell," and the audience is left, alongside the Yoruba, anxiously uninformed of the fate of the Earth:

Now forget the dead, forget even the living. Turn your mind only to the unborn. (Horseman 75-76)

The playwright's ambivalence serves the purpose of retaining a glimmer of hope for the audience, a dramatic requirement that becomes increasingly important as this study progresses. If the ending is purely tragic, few will be motivated to emulate the actions of the brave and committed Olunde. If the ending is too optimistic, again few will be distressed sufficiently to answer the call of social responsibility in these dark times. To accomplish his moralising objective, Soyinka rests on the fence of ambivalence and focuses his readers' attention on the uncertain future to spurn their apathy and solicit their sense of public duty.

These two tragedies are steeped in themes of a fundamentally political nature, and as one critic lucidly concludes, their overall impact on their readers is startlingly revolutionary:

[In The Strong Breed] the more radical effect of the sight of the crucified Eman on the villagers and their desertion of their leaders imply that, within the local context, an established order has been disturbed by a world-changing act and will never be the same again: an effect achieved by the parallel substitution and adoption of sacred burdens by Olunde in the later play Death and the King's

Horseman...the violent alteration of the ritual pattern immediately impoverishes the future to which it admits passage by eating up an important dimension of that future: the healing figure himself, whose free mind anticipates and belongs to a progressive hereafter but who is ironically forced to become the sacrifice which allows it to take place. In both plays, what should be the end is used up as fuel for the means, and the future arrives empty. (Wright 56)

These two plays dramatise Soyinka's driving motivation to force the acceptance of just, humane and libertarian interests by the "monsters" wielding self-serving and corrupt power. In the fifteen years of Nigerian independence and Soyinka's writing career to which these two plays respond, the playwright has remained dissatisfied with the structures of modern reality which he finds unacceptable. He feels compelled as an artist, as a Nigerian, as an African, and as a man to enjoin his listeners to act out their roles in fashioning the shape of a new society. In the two powerful tragedies The Strong Breed and Death and the King's Horseman, Soyinka invites his readers to think, to doubt, to question, to respond, to revise, and to redesign their societies according to stronger humanitarian impulses.

CHAPTER TWO: THE POLITICAL FARCES

The polemics of Soyinka's tragedies are significantly amplified in the two overtly political plays Madmen and Specialists and A Play of Giants. In these two political farces, the playwright attempts to raise the engagement of his audience to a new height, unprecedented in his career. As events in his country, and on his continent, began to provoke fresh artistic responses which sacrificed aesthetics for unhindered communication, Soyinka altered his creative approach to meet the new demands of committed drama, and substantially subordinated his plays' tragic plots and veils of fiction to stress his political themes, these plays' most important dynamic. While both Madmen and Specialists and A Play of Giants contain the technical requirements of tragedy, these two dramas function principally as fierce satires, and provide evidence of Soyinka's modifications. Both plays are atypical of Soyinka's standard form of Yoruba tragedy, as defined in his essay "The Fourth Stage," in which the "tragic experience is undergone by...one protagonist" who sacrifices himself for the communal good of his people. There is no "sense of anguish

[which] originates from the severance of gods from people and of people from their true essences." The common development in Soyinka's tragic drama from "self-ignorance to self-knowledge" is conspicuously absent from these plays (Katrak 154). While Madmen and Specialists, and its veritable sequel A Play of Giants, published just over a dozen years later, are 'irregularities' in the playwright's career if one interprets Soyinka only through the magnifier of Myth, Literature and the African World, these works can only be described as exemplary in the context of this study. Both plays continue the playwright's efforts to bring "corrupt power into collision with humane interests," which Soyinka initiated with The Strong Breed and Kongi's Harvest, and notably sustained in "This Past Must Address its Present" (Gibbs 99).

In order to understand the first of these two plays, Madmen and Specialists, it is helpful to familiarise oneself with the developments in Nigeria during the decade which preceded its publication. When Nigeria attained independence in 1960, and the colonial administration finally left, it became apparent that a consequence of its long presence was the paralysis of any developing indigenous socioeconomic and political structures. For the first six years of its autonomy, the new Nigerian administration struggled to unify the nation through a series of failed democratic experiments that ended with the collapse of Balewa's constitutional government and the installation of military rule in 1966. The

population was divided by their support of the three regional based political parties fighting for federal control: the Northern Peoples' Congress, the Action Group, and the National Council of Nigerian Citizens. The third group's frustrated attempts to secure equal representation for the Igbo of Eastern Nigeria eventually led to the planned secession of their region, Biafra, which hatched the tragic Civil War that lasted from June, 1967 until January, 1970. Although he had been very critical of the abuses of power and privilege under the civilian administration, Soyinka became a spokesman for the people as he tried to expose the far more severe violations during the military era. Just prior to the escalation of tensions, Soyinka responded to the critical events which were ushering in the Civil War, by attempting to organise a Third Movement, which proposed peace negotiations between the rebel group and the federal government. To strike up a dialogue between the warring factions, Soyinka met with Ojukwu, the rebel leader, and discussed the possibility of an alternative to war. In August, 1967, soon after this meeting, the playwright was detained by the federal government, accused of treason and of allegedly purchasing weapons for the seceding Biafrans. Imprisoned for twenty-seven months--twenty-four of which were spent in solitary confinement--Soyinka was never taken to trial or formally charged with anything. For Soyinka, these years of sadistic military dictatorship and civil war represent "Nigeria's darkest moment" (Maduakor 220).

The germination of his anti-war play Madmen and Specialists likely occurred during his incarceration at Kaduna, as both a response to his country's debasement and a personal catharsis of the rancour and despair of his imprisonment.

It is quite appropriate to make the transition between chapters with Madmen and Specialists since it has much in common with the later play, already considered, Death and the King's Horseman. The two plays share an impressive facility with figurative and allusive language, although the earlier play about the Civil War is characterised by more obscure and esoteric diction. Likewise, in keeping with both of the plays previously discussed, Madmen and Specialists dramatises the difficult relationship between a son and his father, and has puzzled and challenged critics to comprehend its rather elusive, expressionistic meaning. The plot follows the return of Doctor Bero, his father and four wounded men from the war zone to the doctor's village surgery. Bero's sister, Si Bero, has been left in charge of the house and the clinic, and has managed to look after things with the aid of two old herbalists, Iya Agba and Iya Mate, who have directed her to restructure the surgery based on tribal remedies, and fill the house to overflowing with medicinal plants, herbs and roots. Both Bero and his father, Old Man, have undergone drastic transformations as a result of their war experiences; indeed, so have the Mendicants. Bero has abandoned his medical vocation for a high ranking position with Military

Intelligence, and Old Man has been prosecuted for his subversive acts against the status quo. The four disabled men, Aafaa, Blindman, Cripple and Goyi, have been dispatched to bring the incarcerated father to the surgery, as Bero bends the rules to postpone his father's execution. All this activity has already taken place when the drama opens, and quick-paced action gets underway as Si Bero, supported by the old women, tries to interfere with Old Man's captivity. Bero interrogates his father with respect to his crimes, particularly his mysterious doctrine of "As," and the Mendicants, in their collective role as demented chorus, comment on and participate in the activity in the clinic until Bero is driven to patricide at the same instant as the Earth mothers, the old herbalists, set fire to their healthy collection of naturopathic correctives to prevent them falling into Bero's evil hands. The lights fade on this maddened apocalyptic scene as the Mendicants frantically chant their song of "As."

Madmen and Specialists has been variously described as "a fearful study of the corruption of mankind" (Banham 125), "a first hand document of the degrading and vicious effects of war" (Gowda 167), "the bleakest perspective on tyranny that one finds in Soyinka's work of this period" (Dameron Jr. 65), and one critic directly praises the play's "brilliance and bite and sheer virtuosity" (Iyengar 13). Many critics discuss the mesmerising, infective nature of Madmen and Specialists and

refer to the way that

the play literally forces itself on one's consciousness, urging one to grasp it, to experience it in its entirety, to find the key to a chest one feels must be overflowing with treasure. (Ogundele 43)

Another critic discusses

[the] coils of teasing suggestion,...[the] spirals of sinister significance,...[and the] frightening vistas of future possibility that both intrigue and fascinate. (Iyengar 14)

The play provides no answers to these curious queries through its direct exposition, so readers are left to struggle with the play's overwhelming matrix of different levels of reality and meaning. On the surface the play is a hilarious farce, but this acerbic humour merely constitutes and disguises a "nihilistic view in which humour preserves sanity but edges aside despair" (Gibbs 101). This type of absurd but biting black comedy is present in both of the plays already examined: specifically in the scenes with the Pilkingses, and generally in the absurdity of transplanting British pomp to Nigeria in Death and the King's Horseman; and in the following exchange from The Strong Breed:

[A Girl comes in view, dragging an effigy by a rope attached to one of its legs. She stands for a while gazing at Eman. Ifada, who has crept back shyly to his accustomed position, becomes somewhat excited when he sees the effigy. The Girl is unsmiling. She possesses in fact, a kind of inscrutability which does not make her hard but is unsettling.]

Girl: Is the teacher in?

Eman[smiling]: No.

Girl: Where is he gone?

Eman: I don't really know. Shall I ask?

Girl: Yes, do.

Eman[turning slightly]: Sunma, a girl outside wants to know...[Sunma turns away, goes into the inside room]

Eman: Oh [Returns to the Girl, but his slight gaiety is lost] There is no one at home who can tell me.

Girl: Why are you not in?

Eman: I don't really know. Maybe I went somewhere.

Girl: All right. I will wait until you get back. (Plays
1 118)

Despite this link through absurdism and black humour, Madmen and Specialists initially seems foreign to the Soyinkan canon, but the play's development can clearly be traced as having evolved from the continuum of Soyinka's ever-darkening skeptical vision.

The topic of Madmen and Specialists is war, "the macabre human comedy" (Iyengar 8); its direct targets, the Nigerian Civil War and Yakubu Gowon's enduring military dictatorship of the post-war era. This corrupt administration symbolises our incontrovertible human degeneracy and the recurring phenomenon of war epitomises humanity's tragic history. Exploring the spiritual, psychic and physical effects on those exposed to the war, Soyinka pessimistically points to the ultimate dehumanisation, and sacrifice of essential values that wars bring about. Drawing on his own personal and emotional experience, he examines "the meaning of war, or the meaning of the non-meaning of war," and compels his audience to reformulate its perspectives, based on the content of his play (Johnson 27).

The full force of Soyinka's personal trauma is dramatised through the six male characters--of the seven in the play--who have been to the battlefield, "the seventh outpost of hell,"

and returned seriously deranged. A priest has become a selfish epileptic parrot; a frugal and "noble," old gentleman, "the very best" of men, has turned into an obsessed, cynical, misanthropic, brutally logical, Socratic "madman"; and worst of all, a "handsome and courageous" humanitarian, a medical practitioner, has degenerated into his diametric opposite, an indifferent, power-hungry and delinquent, scientific persecutor, the "Specialist" (Madmen 32-33). The fitful demonic forces which Old Man identifies as the controlling forces in the world, have been finally placed in a position of permanent tyranny by the war. One of the war-torn Mendicants, the ex-pastor Aafaa, who suffers from St. Vitus' spasms, describes his traumatising experience "out there" at the moment of "the blast":

They told me up there when it began, that it was something psy-cho-lo-gi-cal. Something to do with all the things happening around me, and the narrow escape I had. It's not so bad now. I still remember the first time. I was standing there just like this, blessing a group of six just about to go off. They were kneeling before me. Then--well, I can't say I heard the noise at all, because I was deaf for the next hour. So, this thing happened, no signal, no nothing. Six men kneeling in front of me, the next moment they were gone. Disappeared, just like that. That was when I began to shake. (Madmen 54)

Soyinka brings to this play the anti-war convictions that occasioned his imprisonment, and exposes war at its most senseless and irrational, its most destructive and dehumanising.

In response to the enormous massacre and waste of human life, Old Man reverts to his Swiftian logic and reinvents the

philosophy of "As," the real focus which motivates Soyinka's assault on war. "As" is a new name for an old monstrosity with which Soyinka has long been familiar. Maduakor argues that in The Strong Breed Eman, "himself a burnt offering on the altar of custom, is a victim of As" (229). Born of the religious metaphor, and parodying the diction of the Christian liturgy, Soyinka creates this new fitting label for the justification of oppression, exploitation, totalitarianism, social injustice, and opportunistic expediency. One critic carries the religious significance much farther, aptly describing the elusive essence of "As":

Let us stop worshipping God as Jehovah, as Christ (in his various schismatic transformations), as Allah, as Siva, and so on; and let us start acknowledging the transformation process itself: As. As is older than any of the religions and their priesthoods, and is each one's inner dynamic...As today is all the other parts of the system: political and economic orthodoxy, science, the law, the judiciary, the arts. As is, in fact, hegemony: the development of the institutions of the state specifically to keep the elite in power, to perpetuate the power base of the ruling class. (Etherton 256)

Although this religious significance is strongly supported by the play's action, Gates identifies a very different source for "As," in one of Wallace Stevens' theoretical poems, written in the late nineteen-forties (Black 2). The cryptic and complicated poem "An Ordinary Evening in New Haven," deals with the nature of poetry and the artist's role in society, and plays with the elusive meanings of language. Stevens also reveals some concern with the images of power and authority, and the tensions between illusion and disillusion, appearance

and reality, in the poem. The explicit link between Stevens' poem and Soyinka's play comes from their shared transformation of the term of equivalence, "as," into a noun. We find an example in the following excerpt:

A more severe,
 More harassing master would extemporize
 Subtler, more urgent proof that the theory
 Of poetry is the theory of life,
 As it is, in the intricate evasions of as,
 In things seen and unseen, created from nothingness
 The heavens, the hells, the worlds, the longed-for lands
 (Stevens 349)

While these writers undoubtedly share many similar interests, the meanings of the term "as" in the two works have little in common, but Gates may be correct in identifying this source for Soyinka's linguistic trick.

As one reads Madmen and Specialists and searches for the exact meaning of "As," it becomes increasingly apparent that on the stage in Stockholm, Soyinka was again assailing the doctrines of "As," and that this entire thesis is specifically an examination of the playwright's lifelong dedication to dismantling the existing systems of "As." Gowon's Nigeria and apartheid South Africa are systems constructed on the foundations of "As." In the play, the philosophy's creeds have yet to be devised by Bero, but the features of "As" are "already manifest: impersonal brutality, barrenness, intolerance of dissent, and deification of the self consequent upon a total disbelief in any superior power, immanent or transcendent" (Ogundele 51). Without too much difficulty,

readers should be able to recognise that the cult of "As" refers to no fictional philosophy, but the 'real-life' practices of tyrants all over the globe. The inhuman Dr. Bero, the man who has become a monster, represents the counterpart of such dictators and the reality of "As" personified; to protect the group interests of the military cartel, this man is willing to renounce all filial bonds and murder his father. This thoroughly mechanical system is devoid of any of the human weaknesses associated with social beings, and this is the specific characteristic or flaw that Soyinka wishes to reform. The playwright identifies his political ideology as that of a revolutionary humanist socialist, which can only be at odds with the self-perpetuating systems of "As."

Old Man rediscovers "As" upon realising the extent of Bero's metamorphosis caused by his contamination at the front. In an effort to save his boy, Old Man desires to shock the warmongers who have indoctrinated his son with the true nature of their inhuman deeds. Old Man abandons his daughter at the surgery, and secures a position with the military

help[ing] the wounded readjust to the pieces and remnants of their bodies. Physically. Teach[ing] them to make baskets if they still had fingers. To use their mouths to ply needles if they had none, or use it to sing if their vocal chords had not been shot away. Teach[ing] them to amuse themselves, make something of themselves. (Madmen 37)

Old Man uses this position to carry out his subversion of Bero's regime, and instead teaches the casualties that they

have been the victims of a senseless war, prompting them to turn their troubled minds away from their individual calamities to the elites' undoing of the entire society. To these disenfranchised, Old Man exposes the philosophy of "As" that insists that "All creeds and dogmas that enslave the mind of man are born of As...[along with] all excuses for man's violation of moral codes" (Maduakor 231). With their newly acquired prudence, his gang will be ready for a circus tour that will lampoon and expose the amorality of the higher-ups to the whole world. The most powerful thrust of Old Man's attempt to topple the status quo comes from his insistence that cannibalism be legalised. According to Old Man's logic, since war brutalises the human soul and the opportunists in Bero's system succeed by feeding off and drawing power from their fellow human beings, then those in power should recognise the carnage caused by their tenets and counter the waste of human flesh in the only way they can--by eating it. Managing to infiltrate their headquarters, Old Man substitutes human flesh for one of the leaders' meals and forces them to face the reality of war by revealing to them their philosophy of "As." Bero reports:

It was no brain-child of mine. We thought it was a joke. I'll bless the meat, he said. And then--As Was the Beginning, As is, Now, As Ever shall be...world without...We said Amen with a straight face and sat down to eat. Then, afterwards...(Madmen 36)

Parodying the Christian Communion where the celebrant symbolically ingests Christ's body and blood, Old Man invites

the sadistic militarists to devour human flesh and truly enter their subhuman realm of bestiality. Unfortunately, the leaders recognise cannibalism as a means of securing their power over the rest of the society, and take up the habit without hesitation, but also without acknowledging their barbarity and malevolence.

Soyinka's entire play mocks the tendency of these mere mortals to fancy themselves gods and reign over the rest of their societies, deciding who lives and who dies. In Madmen and Specialists, Soyinka satirises the practices of the keepers of "As," by having his Mendicants act out torture sessions, sham trials, blackmail, whimsical executions, and legislatures populated by indifferent and absentee members (Madmen 11, 14-15, 26, 60, 65-66). The playwright permits the motley have-nots to parody the corruption and dishonesty of military juntas who insincerely claim:

In a way you may call us vultures. We clean up the mess made by others. The populace should be grateful for our presence. [He turns slowly round.] If there is anyone here who does not approve us, just say so and we quit. [His hand makes the motion of half-drawing out a gun.] I mean, we are not here because we like it. We stay at immense sacrifice to ourselves, our leisure, our desires, vocation, specialization, etcetera, etcetera. The moment you say, Go, we...[He gives another inspection all round, smiles broadly and turns to the others.] They insist we stay. (Madmen 11)

Soyinka has Old Man persistently withhold the meaning of the cult of "As" despite Bero's aggressive insistence on knowing, in order to induce serious consideration of the questioning by both Bero and the audience. Soyinka dramatises the particular

types of subterfuge that dictators employ to manipulate their populations: providing to anyone willing, who is a particular menace, the means necessary to escape an unbearable life:

Bero. ...Just now I came through that room of herbs, I saw something I recognized.

Old Man. Something to sap the mind? Or destroy it altogether?

Bero. It depends on the dose. I brought you some.
[He brings some berries from his pockets and drops them gently over the Old Man's head.] If you ever get tired and you feel you need a nightcap like a certain ancient Greek you were so fond of quoting, just soak a handful of them in water. (Madmen 61)

The adherents of "As" are best characterised by the following testimony to their inhumanity, delivered by the Specialist Bero to his father, shorn of any human sentiment (note Soyinka's adept diction which could be associated with either of Bero's vocations):

To me you are simply another organism, another mould or strain under the lens. Sometimes a strain proves malignant and it becomes dangerous to continue with it. In such a case there is only one thing to do...Even I have no control over accidents. (Madmen 61)

Ironically, the diabolical Specialist's childish and pitiless prying for the explanation of "As," Old Man's supposedly subversive threat, is ultimately foiled because Bero fails ever to recognise that the doctrine embodies his own credo.

When the protagonist of Madmen and Specialists finally appears on stage at the beginning of the play's "Part Two," his first utterance refers to a temporal concern: "Did you take my watch" (Madmen 45). Although substantially downplayed in this drama, Soyinka does toy with the same issues of

past, present and future which are central to his Yoruba world view, as expressed in The Strong Breed and Death and the King's Horseman. A reader of Madmen and Specialists has even greater difficulty locating his/her temporal frame of reference than he/she did with The Strong Breed with all its flashbacks. Time in the later play is deliberately undefined; the fluid perspective continually swims back and forth. The dramatic action is contained within a "cruel present" which recalls no past and envisages no future, but fulfills a perpetual present of all times in human history: wartime. Human beings have never succeeded in abating their bestial and barbaric qualities, and specifically preserve these vestiges of predation and aggression in warmongering regimes like Bero's. All the achievements of civilisation are nullified by the continuing practice of war. Despite the power and supremacy which human beings claim from "bending Nature to...[their] will," our history demonstrates iteratively and depressingly that we refuse to learn from our mistakes and will always repeat our errors. The cult of "As" subsumes this timelessness in its application: "As Was the Beginning, As is, Now, As Ever shall be, World Without" (Madmen 73). The permanent presence of the practitioners of such beliefs as "the end...justify[ing] the meanness" is assured by Old Man, when he sentences history to its hopeless cycle, and humanity to its degeneracy in the play's most forlorn statements: "There is but one constant in the life of the system and that constant

is AS"; "As doesn't change" (Madmen 72, 62). There appears to be no hope that people will change and abandon the cruelty that they practise upon one another, because the presence of hope depends upon time to provide the opportunity for reform. Future prospects look so grim that Soyinka refuses to challenge his readers to "Turn...[their] mind[s] only to the unborn"; instead, he drags them to humanity's nadir of despair and abandons them on the eve of Armageddon. While rejecting any bald warning, the play manages to imply that the time for cool selfishness and procrastination has past, the last chance for initiating change and recovery has arrived.

Despite the absence of a closing caution, the language of Madmen and Specialists is used as effectively as the physical activity, to evoke the suffering, chaos and despondency of the Civil War setting. The impact which Soyinka plans for his audience is not one accomplished exclusively by the wasteland setting and the shell-shocked victims. Katrak points to some relevant comments made in regard to The Man Died, Soyinka's prison memoir, where the playwright reveals that his aim in manipulating language

[is] to arrest the ears of the normally complacent people. We must make sure we explode something inside them...[language is to be used] as a weapon...[which will] commence the process of a moral outrage [within people]. (Katrak 157)

This key quotation emphasises the explicitly political nature of Soyinka's goal in writing. Yet, preferring to avoid didacticism, he reveals such motivations subtly in his artistic

works, and during many exchanges in Madmen and Specialists, the sound effects, connotations or even vague suggestions and half-meanings are more powerful for the playwright's purposes, than any precise meanings of words. As one astute critic observes, "the patterns of word association demonstrate both the limitations of words as containers of reality and their power as evokers of reality" (Johnson 30). This skeptical and skillful playfulness is most evident in the terse, cryptic dialect of Old Man and the Mendicants. Passages animate much of the play's action where the speakers cleverly dismantle words and phrases and initiate long streams of seemingly senseless references as in Aafaa's alphabetising (Madmen 41-43) and in Old Man's linguistic masterpiece, as he mocks the doctrinists of "As" and condemns the Mendicants:

Practise, Practise, Practise... on the cyst in the system.....you cyst, you cyst, you splint in the arrow of arrogance, the dog in dogma, tick of a heretic, the tick in politics, the mock of democracy, the mar of marxism, a tic of the fanatic, the boo in Buddhism, the ham in Mohammed, the dash in the criss-cross of Christ, a dot on the i of ego an ass in mass, the ash in ashram, a boot in kibbutz, the pee of priesthood, the peepee of perfect priesthood, oh how dare you raise your hindquarters you dog of dogma and cast the scent of your existence on the lamp-post of Destiny you HOLE IN THE ZERO OF NOTHING! (Madmen 76)

This powerful vilification amusingly exposes the fundamental flaws of so many philosophies, but most importantly satirises the violent superiority of "As" and its agents. Soyinka also employs language as an identification signal by carefully contrasting the peculiar language of Old Man and his disciples,

with the strong, solemn, measured, almost poetic speech of the Earth Mothers, the insensitive, verbose, and meaningless chatter of the Priest, and the harsh, violent, arrogant, staccato of Dr. Bero.

Behind all this dialogue is an intrinsic suspicion of language born of the empty election manifestoes and inane political speeches of the masters of rigmarole and rhetoric: the politicians. Language has been degraded and made meaningless through its perpetual manipulation by the hypocritical "Big Braids." Too often, language has played a vital role in the oppression of humanity and has concealed behind its political rhetoric the "Smoke. Smoke-screen...The pious pronouncements. Manifestoes. Charades. At the bottom of it all humanity choking in silence" (Madmen 31, 64). Meaningful and fulfilling dialogue is not needed in this community, where words like "Duty," "Choice," "Truth," and "historical necessity," have lost all trace of their conventional meanings (Madmen 11, 39, 14, 69). Language and clear communication have both fallen victim to the system of "As," and the dialogue of Madmen and Specialists is a form of protest and lament for the corruption of the medium of Soyinka's art, and the fundamental vehicle of individual political expression.

Soyinka charges the roles of his Mendicants, the chief agents of protest in the play, with heavy political importance. Their operation as a group throughout the play corresponds to

the collective mentality of the oppressed as these four deformed men represent the general population, the disinherited, the wretched of the Earth. Their dissatisfied complaining poses no serious threat to Bero and his power elite, and the unfortunate vagrants are little more than the cannon fodder of "As." As Swift does in Gulliver's Travels, Soyinka portrays, through the Mendicants, no more than "grotesque caricatures of normal forms and behaviour," and invites his readers to recognise their kinship with these tramps. While the references to "loathsome toads" and "broken worms" may falsely reassure the audience that the wounded beggars are subhuman, the playwright ceaselessly tilts his mirror at their human counterparts in front of the stage. As Johnson convincingly argues

The Mendicants... operate as a central metaphor, bringing together two patterns evident in Soyinka's other works: the concept that the physically deprived possess extraordinary powers of perception or expression in compensation (the beggar in The Swamp Dwellers, Sekoni in The Interpreters, Murano in The Road) and the mangle as a personification of a more abstract, wide-spread disease (the lepers in Season of Anomy, the albino in The Interpreters, and Ifada in The Strong Breed). (Johnson 28)

Aafaa, Goyi, Blindman and Cripple are stock Soyinkan characters who expose and ridicule humanity for its weakest traits. In their speech, these "underdogs" confirm their identification with the masses. Aafaa laments: "until the millions start rolling in, we better not neglect the pennies." Blindman mumbles: "When things go wrong it's the lowest people who get it first." Cripple animates the old cliché with renewed

meaning: "Beggars can't be choosers"; and Aafaa refers grudgingly to the "conspiracy of the elite" (Madmen 52, 60, 8, 13, 38, 44). They long for the democracy of "Ancient Athens," and deride patriotism. Even the opening scene of Madmen and Specialists reinforces their metaphorical role by having the wastrels begging and gambling in an attempt to improve their status. Their activity attests to the belief that "lives and even parts of lives can indeed be lost in games of chance," such as war (Johnson 28). The hilarious lyrics to their demented songs contain messages of social relevance and the true absurdity of their characters becomes evident: Why are they so playful and happy? Soyinka places his gangrels in an ambiguous position between "sickness and health, sanity and insanity, past and present, the real and the surreal" in order to accurately represent the various complexions of the disinherited masses (Johnson 28).

Thus, while Aafaa, Goyi, Cripple, and Blindman each have their idiosyncracies, their interest as independent characters pales in comparison to their impact as a group. The latter three Mendicants share a collectivist mentality and are slightly more concerned with protecting each other from attack, protecting Si Bero, and protecting Old Man. These three are virtually anonymous characters in a system that permits them to express no individuality. However, Aafaa constantly tries to separate himself from the motley crew and assert his individualism by aspiring toward the positions held by Bero and

his father. The system allows them no voice and Cripple is nearly executed for his attempt to air his views by insisting "I have a question." Finally, the Mendicants' position in society is corroborated by their situation on stage as they move from the middle level down to the cellar and remain there. These lowlifes appropriately crawl around the depressed area of the stage.

On the other hand, the Earth mothers, Iya Agba and Iya Mate, remain in their hut on the stage's higher level, and only descend to the middle level at the play's climax to dispatch their pot of embers into the herbal store. These two characters occupy positions akin to that of Iyaloja in the later play: they embody the wholesomeness which the other characters in Madmen and Specialists lack. As the following stage directions reveal, the old women will not even risk contaminating their purity through any contact with the contemptible lowlifes:

[The Mendicants look at one another, begin to beat time with them, then join the singing in a raucous, cynical tone. The Women stop, amazed and offended. The Old Women fold their arms, retire deeper into the hut while Si Bero dashes out, furious.] (Madmen 18)

If the masses, symbolized by the Mendicants, pose no threat to Bero's cruel administration, these Earth mothers provide the only serious opposition to its dominance. Theirs is an organic threat, a mysterious cult which is beyond the destructive capacities of Bero (Madmen 57). They assert the arcane truths of traditional African wisdom, less harshly and

more successfully than the extremists Jaguna and Iyaloja in The Strong Breed and Death and the King's Horseman.

Following Eman's membership in the "strong breed," Bero is an exceptional individual capable of directing his community's future, but the link is fairly tenuous since Bero is motivated solely by selfishness and power-lust. The Earth mothers oppose Bero with their evocation of a collectivist deterministic order, and share some characteristics with the fatalistic public duty of Jaguna and Oroge, Eman's opposition in The Strong Breed. However, the old women enlist the support, rather than the questioning doubt, of the authorial stance, and the order represented by Iya Agba and Iya Mate is intrinsically less destructive and dogmatic. They cherish the secrets of the Earth's perpetual renewal, and their final act of revenge constitutes a purification ritual, a conflagration which returns the medicinal herbs and roots to the Earth, beyond Bero's grasp. In the end, Soyinka shrouds their strength and influence in ambivalence as one wonders whether the fire is prophetic of an ultimate triumph of Nature over "As," or whether one should trust their disillusioned words:

Iya Agba. ...I'll not be a tool in their hands, not in this ripe state--No! Too much has fallen in their hands already, it's time to take it back. They spat on my hands when I held them out bearing gifts. Have you ever known it different?

Iya Mate. We hoped this might be.

Iya Agba. Hope is dead, I must defend what is mine. Or let it die also. Let it be destroyed. (Madmen 67)

Can one really endorse the triumph of these old women, in light of such statements and the play's implied assertion that good and evil must coexist: neither Bero nor the Earth mothers have sufficient power to defeat the other? Yet, there can be little doubt regarding the location of the playwright's sympathies. Through Iya Agaba and Iya Mate, Soyinka is affirming his belief that

traditional cultures that observe, celebrate and abide by the rhythms of nature have an organic and recurring potential for defying and overwhelming tyranny. (Dameron, Jr. 65)

The treatment of women in the three plays examined thus far has varied significantly, but arises from a clear line of development. While the old women in Madmen and Specialists represent Soyinka's healthy and positive female stereotype, which involves maternal instincts tied to the playwright's concept of social responsibility, Si Bero is the victim of the same sexist exploitation endured by Sunma, Omae, the Bride and Jane Pilkings. The audience is introduced to Si Bero amid the disrespectful jeers of the Mendicants, and is soon presented with the object of her anticipation, her patronising brother Bero who refuses to take her seriously. The most glaring demonstration of Si Bero's oppression comes in the scene with the priest. This paragon of conservatism openly admits his estimation of the sister as innately less capable than the brother:

Priest. ...I've suffered from my old complaint, you know, my boy, but I can suffer a little longer...
Si Bero. Pastor, you know I offered you...

Priest. Not quite the same thing, young lady, not quite the same thing. The doctor used to make those extracts with his own hand and...

Si Bero. It was the same one he made before he left.

Priest. No no, I could tell the difference. Oh yes, I could tell.

Si Bero. It was the same.

Priest. Good of you to try, but no. You just didn't make it the same. I could tell the difference.
(Madmen 33)

The men in the scene continuously interrupt Si Bero, and reveal their prejudiced appraisal of her opinions as bound to be trivial. The playwright's sympathies are clearly aligned with Si Bero, and his satire bites hard on both Bero and the priest. The association of women with Soyinka's sense of public duty and his opposition to tyranny, has raised the significance of the female roles in his plays.

Madmen and Specialists also shares with the two other plays the odd reference to the dubious position of the stranger. Since all of the characters call the setting of this play home, there are technically, no outsiders and no colonialists in the drama. However, the Mendicants assume this vacated role as the disenfranchised, and are made to feel like strangers in their own land. Blindman's lengthy and parroted speech is the most conspicuous manifestation of this theme in the anti-war play, next to the insulting lyrics of the satirical song "Visit of the First Lady to the Home for the de-balled" (Madmen 56-59). Soyinka manipulates Blindman into a parody of colonialist pretensions, European prejudices, racial hatred, and the habit of dehumanising the other:

What we have, we hold. What though the wind of change

is blowing over this entire continent, our principles and traditions--yes, must be maintained. For we are threatened, yes, we are indeed threatened. Excuse me, please, but we are entitled to match you history for history to the nearest half-million souls. Look at the hordes, I implore you. They stink. They eat garlic. What on earth have we in common with them?...If we don't stop them now, who knows but it may be our turn next moment. I ask you, do you want to wake up murdered in your beds?...oh, well, look, strictly between you and me, all it boils down to is this--would you want your daughter married to one of them?...Rape is more natural to them than marriage... The black menace is no figment of my father's imagination. Look here...have you ever had the experience of watching them--breed? (Madmen 70)

Soyinka's exploration of this theme of the stranger in these three plays irrevocably defines tribalism as not solely an African problem. Every population's feelings of nationalism, racism, class consciousness, and even loyalty are attributable to the fear of the unfamiliar which generates tribalism. The Cold War, the Olympics discrimination, prejudice and the family unit could not survive without tribalism. It is a fundamental tool for self-preservation which protects independent cultures, but it also fuels the selfish opportunism of "As."

Several critics have complained of the absence of Yoruba proverbs and masquerades in Madmen and Specialists, and have identified it as "the most Western and the least African of Soyinka's plays" (McCartney 506). Free from the traditional trappings of The Strong Breed and Death and the King's Horseman, this play has prompted some critics to delight in discussions of its "universality." The point that they are missing is that this community displays the least amount of 'African-ness' and the least affinity to the Yoruba world view,

not because Soyinka is aiming for "universal" appeal, but because the playwright is dramatising a specific type of depraved community, characterised by a deficiency in appreciation for its cultural heritage. This play is only mildly concerned with the interconnectedness of past, present and future because so few in this society care for the Yoruba world view. In fact, there is plenty in the play to anchor it to African soil, but these references are more closely linked to the politics of modern Africa, than to the continental traditions. Dr. Bero's role is fashioned after Nigeria's military dictator, and surely the play could only grow in African relevancy as the tyrants who populate the pages of A Play of Giants appeared in the years following the publication of Madmen and Specialists. Ogundele suggests that Bero's

character represents the new political force in Africa in which power is its own end, masquerading as safety for the state and deriving its legitimacy solely from the gun. (Ogundele 49)

The critics who highlight the play's "universal" setting have simply overlooked the African elements.

One critic argues convincingly that Soyinka's model for the Mendicants was the Yoruba satirical Egungun performance which the Pilkingses exploit (McCartney 506-507). The comic figures parodying the voices and actions of their adversaries have been lifted directly from the traditions of the Yoruba. The play does contain the music and dance so familiar in

Soyinka's plays, but the Mendicants' singing and dancing is related to the African political predicament rather than the traditions so flagrantly displayed in Death and the King's Horseman. The Earth mothers fulfill the same traditional community role as Iyaloja, and have even retained their Yoruba names, but these critics choose to disregard their presence. Madmen and Specialists is as African as any of Soyinka's plays, but it portrays the Africa that the playwright endured for twenty-seven months rather than the gleeful Africa he was able to evoke five years after his confinement, in Death and the King's Horseman.

The chief incentive for these critics to ignore the play's African elements and glorify its "universality," has been the European influence of absurdist theatre on Madmen and Specialists. One can hardly resist recalling the works of Samuel Beckett and Harold Pinter in an opening scene where four beggars pessimistically complain "We'll never go on that tour," "the lane is deserted. Nobody comes and goes any more," and "What are we to do?" (Madmen 8, 9, 12). But the "absurdist key" opens only the "outer shell" of the play; as Ogundele argues, while the "play will certainly bear reading in the absurdist tradition,...it is not an absurdist play" (43). Ogundele comprehensively defines the nature of this influence:

The theatre of the absurd was born out of some dramatists' felt perception that life as it is in contemporary Western civilization is opposed to reason, that it is without any metaphysical or ethical guidance or justification. In the absurdist world view, existence is meaningless and man is alone--a condition exacerbated by an incomprehensibly

mechanical social order. True communication has eluded man because language has become stale and cliché-ridden. Man's consciousness is vain, his actions and endeavours puny, irrelevant and evidently farcical. Based on these premises, the absurdists eliminated rational plot and realistic forms from their plays, replacing them with what they considered to be the true image of modern man's existence--the illogical. The resulting impersonal projections of psychically warped characters and random episodes became favoured devices for articulating the themes of life's precariousness and man's transitoriness in it. (44)

While Soyinka's nihilistic play shares a great deal with the components of absurdism, there are qualities in Madmen and Specialists that deny its membership in this European tradition, and define it as a natural and predictable product of the developing trends in his earlier drama. The presence of the animist spirits, the Earth mothers, more directly links the play with Soyinka's other writings, than with the theatre of the absurd. The approach to their work which Iya Agba and Iya Mate have chosen, is metaphysical, "in that their knowledge of the earth's secrets is related to the primal causes of existence" (Etherton 250). While Soyinka demonstrates the absurdists' suspicion of language in this play, he also refutes the meaninglessness which they inhabit with his determined Earth mothers.

Madmen and Specialists takes Soyinka's familiar satire to a new level of the grotesque, but his cynicism never equals that of the absurdists. The Europeans were responding to the general and "universal" malaise ushered in by the Twentieth Century and the events worldwide, but Soyinka strives for no

such appeal. While the Mendicants represent alienated human beings stripped of the achievements of civilisation, they retain what the absurdists deny: a direct link with a specific historical context. Madmen and Specialists is Soyinka's dramatisation of the Nigerian Civil War and Gowon's leadership, which was meant to elicit a purposeful response among its readers. Ionesco's key to absurdism further divorces Soyinka's play from this literary tradition:

Absurd is that which is devoid of purpose....Cut off from his religious, metaphysical, and transcendental roots, man is lost; all his actions become senseless, absurd, useless...(Probyn 38)

These claims have little to do with Soyinka's drama in general, or Madmen and Specialists in particular. Ogundele quotes Soyinka admitting that the composition of the play involved "introspection, metaphysics and mystical thought," and that the play's "expression of pessimism [is]...simply a statement of truth, not acceptance of the situation" (44). Soyinka refuses to surrender in any way to the deplorable human condition, and the play functions not as an accepting observation of the situation but, as with The Man Died, as a tool to "commence the process of moral outrage" among the apathetic masses, as a means to spark action. Ogundele concludes that the absurdist dramatists,

by recording the terror and the decadence, in a sense succumbed to it. But the grotesque [in Madmen] is, on the other hand, an aggressive mechanism for shocking us out of the abyss of decadence and of defeating the terror, partly through the comic. (44)

Despite the similarities between Madmen and Specialists and the theatre of the absurd, and the undeniable fact that Soyinka has been influenced by its tenets, the playwright has produced no artistic mutation, unprecedented in his canon, but has merely teased the fringes of his distinctive style.

There are other links between this drama and those already examined. Just as the characters of Eman and Olunde exhibited traits which could be considered autobiographical, Soyinka has tenuously written himself into Old Man's character. Of the characters in the play, it is Old Man who is the victim of unjustified incarceration, who has been accused of treason, identified as a heretic, and demonstrated a strong commitment to communal benefit. Old Man is the play's artistic figure, using artist's images, and creating and manipulating characters who recite his scripts. He controls the action such that events always reflect unfavourably on Bero and "As," and reveal the true nature of the characters' relationships to one another. Old Man is actively engaged in opposing tyranny and war in an effort to attain some degree of human liberty and justice. Gibbs accurately suggests that both Old Man and Soyinka

are activists with a perception of the failings of their societies, both use songs, sketches and their influence over performers to proclaim their vision and expose evil.
(106)

Johnson posits that both the playwright and his counterpart oppose political control with artistic control. The critic

interprets the machinations of the climactic scene on a metaphorical level and argues that in Old Man's attempted murder of Cripple, which prompts Bero's unnatural response

art reveals hitherto hidden acts of evil by presenting an image of the evil, forcing the civil power to commit an identifiable act of the same moral order. (32)

Soyinka is subtly repeating his advocacy that the artist must act as "the voice of vision" in his society, by including in his play an artist figure who is deserving of admiration, rather than suspicion.

The playwright has remained characteristically ambivalent in his treatment of both the title and the ending of Madmen and Specialists. While few would deny that the play chronicles the activities of both "madmen" and "specialists," few would agree which characters belong to which category. Are the Mendicants the "madmen" while the male Beros are the "specialists," or are the male Beros the "madmen?" Old Man's madness is no more than the "explicit dramatisation of the evil of the specialist, his son" and therefore constitutes the only sane response to his son's insanity (Iyengar 10). The audience must interpret the meaning of the elusive title. Readers must perform the same task in the play's final scene. Soyinka has neglected to clearly indicate whether the apocalyptic fire which incinerates the final tableau should be viewed as a cleansing ritual or the arrival of "Armageddon." Ogundele propounds that the "counter-current of humour signifies a confidence that after the destruction of this one,

a new and better world will arise" (51). Other critics describe an utter hopelessness akin to absurdism which accompanies the final fading light, signifying the dominance of Bero's regime. The audience's attitude must define the nature of the play's conclusion.

Consistent with both The Strong Breed and Death and the King's Horseman, the playwright also refuses to reveal whether Old Man should be seen as a martyr or the victim of a wasteful death. Earlier in the play's action, when Old Man's mocking "chuckle" foreshadows his own death in his boast to Bero--"How does one prove he was never born of man? Of course you could kill me...",--Old Man seems to assure his position as martyr (Madmen 49). Some critics interpret his death as a sacrifice to reveal the truth about his son's inhumanity, while others see it as a necessary distraction to give the old women the opportunity to destroy the store. Regardless of these ambiguities, Soyinka's assaults on war, tyranny and "As" are undeniably clear in this play. He has significantly altered his dramatic presentation in Madmen and Specialists to secure this clarity of expression and remove the likelihood of possible misinterpretations, by choosing, in the words of his Nobel lecture, "to thrust the deformed arm of a leper" at both the tyrants and the apathetic providers of their sustenance, to provoke no "charitable sentiment," but to incite their moral outrage.

II

In Soyinka's early play A Dance of the Forests, written for the Nigerian Independence celebrations of 1960, a warrior is tempted to join the fight in an unjust war by the physician's argument that "Future generations will label you a traitor [for your conscientious objection]." The warrior more accurately and pessimistically predicts that

Unborn generations will be cannibals, most worshipful physician. Unborn generations will, as we have done, eat up one another. (Dance 55)

A decade later, Soyinka wrote his post-Civil War play, Madmen and Specialists, ostensibly populated by this next generation of flesh eating fiends and led by the vicious Bero, who considers this so-called aberration to be

the first step to power....Power in its purest sense. The end of inhibitions. The conquest of the weakness of your too human flesh with all its sentiment. (Madmen 36)

However, when the playwright came to write his most recently published play, A Play of Giants, following the continent's obstreperous 'seventies,' there was no longer any need for fictional creations like Bero, because the inhuman tyrants that Soyinka had created for his fictional drama over a dozen years

before had become horrifying realities in at least four African nations. In this play, President Barra Tuboum sincerely advises his fellow African dictators that they should adopt cannibalism following the lead of his special task force, the "famed striped leopards of Mbangi-Gwela":

In action they eat with their leader, the only being whose orders they understand. They know they are elite, they bathe in the same ambiance of power, terribly invincible. They train in secret, far from the prying eyes of the common herd. Their secrecy is their power, like the hair of Samson; the eyes of any stranger at the mysteries of their self-preparation is a corrosion of that power. They kill such strangers, and they eat them....Eat them-white, black or yellow. Is it not the only way to ensure the re-absorption of that power of yourself which has been sucked away by profaning eyes? (Soyinka, Giants 19)

A Play of Giants, a virtual confirmation of the dominance of the cult of "As," uses historical examples to harangue the complacent audiences who remained unconvinced by Madmen and Specialists.

The "Giants" who animate this last play are Soyinka's unmistakable parodies of the dictatorial leaders Francisco Macias Nguema of Equatorial Guinea, Jean-Bedel Bokassa of the Central African Empire, Sese-Seko Mobutu of Zaire and Idi Amin of Uganda. The playwright's characterisation in A Play of Giants is only an extension of the portraits available from history, and some knowledge of their individual legacies is necessary for an understanding of the play. Nguema ruled Equatorial Guinea from Independence in 1968 until he was ousted and executed in 1979, during which time he murdered one eighth

of his country's people, and drove twice as many into exile. A paranoid and cruel megalomaniac, Nguema boosted the fortunes of his own Fang tribe and terrorised the country's best-educated and wealthiest ethnic group, the Bibis, through a ten-year programme of political assassinations. He prohibited the use of the word "intellectual" in Guinea, and advocated a return to African "authenticity" by announcing, in 1976, that all Guineans should discard their Christian names. This West African "monster" appears in the play as perhaps the most inhuman dictator of the four under the thinly disguised alias, Gunema.

As Nigeria attained Independence in 1960, the second "giant," Bokassa, began his rise from the rank of army sergeant to become the commander of the army. Temporarily satisfied with the glory of his new position, he began honouring himself with countless monuments as his uncle became the first president of the Central African Republic. Bokassa's uncle died in a mysterious plane crash in 1965 and a year later, the ambitious despot seized power from his cousin, David Dacko. He built nine palaces, awarded himself numerous titles, including "President For Life," and ruled with his huge fortune and immense power until 1979, when the French intervened and restored Dacko to power. In 1977, Bokassa spent twenty million dollars on a ceremony to appoint himself the first emperor of the new Central African Empire in emulation of his life-long idol, Napoleon Bonaparte. Bokassa received no

respect and was never taken seriously. Devoid of legitimacy, he claimed that the coronation was an attempt to promote national pride and "African authenticity." Guilty of frequent eccentricities and brutal murders, in 1979 Bokassa ordered the public massacre of one hundred school children for not wearing their uniforms bearing his likeness. Bokassa strides across the stage of A Play of Giants as Amin's clone under the pseudonym of Kasco, and spars with Gunema in an effort to show off.

The year before Bokassa's 1966 rise to power witnessed the ascent of Mobutu to the presidency at the height of an unprecedented economic boom in Zaire. He ruled as half-god, half-chief over the historically unstable nation's two hundred tribes and twenty-six million people. This dictator sought no national development whatsoever and concentrated exclusively on his overseas bank accounts and personal prestige. Also a former army sergeant, Mobutu crippled his country to make himself one of the world's wealthiest men, as he too favoured his own tribe, the Gbande, and built monuments, stadiums and eleven palaces to symbolise his absolute power. He launched the first "African Authenticity Programme" and ordered all Zairians to replace their Christian names with African ones, forbade the wearing of Western attire, cancelled Christmas, hung his portrait in every church, expropriated all foreign businesses and expelled all Asian merchants. His teachings, given the name Mobutism, became the national philosophy and

never failed to attract American aid with its staunch stand against Communism. Mobutu bankrupted his country--despite the fact that half of all the money which Carter allocated to the continent was destined for Zaire--and fuelled his extravagant excesses with three billion dollars of diverted funds. Soyinka, in his play, makes the identification of this megalomaniac particularly easy by dressing his imitation of Mobutu in the trademark attire of this abhorrent "giant" who continues to wield power to this day. Soyinka designates to Mobutu's parody a very appropriate nick-name: Barra Boum Boum Tuboum Gbazo Tse Tse Khoru diDzo.

The latest arrival and most brutal of the African dictators is the infamous Idi Amin. He overthrew the hard-drinking tyrant Milton Obote in 1971 and littered Uganda with corpses throughout his eight-year reign. The prisons were saturated and Amin literally went crazy with power, decimating entire villages full of his rival tribes, the Lango and Acholi. He also expelled the Asian business class early in his rule, and invaded the antagonistic socialist country of Tanzania in 1978. Throughout the nineteen-seventies, well over one hundred Ugandans were dying each day, and by 1979, three hundred thousand people had been killed as a result of Amin's reign of terror. He was always surrounded by a gang of Libyan bodyguards, and constantly adorned with the symbols of his many self-awarded titles. Before allowing Amin to grace his stage in the personage of the evil Kamini, Soyinka utilised his

position as the editor of Transition/Ch'Indaba to wage fierce campaigns against Amin, the "murderous buffoon" and "survivalist killer," and his cohorts. When the Ugandan dictator fled to Libya in 1979, the playwright published a celebration of Amin's downfall, "Happy Riddance," which contained the following statements:

An all-African commission must sit for an entire year if need be, taking evidence and educating the world yet again on the terrible price paid by ordinary human beings for the illusion of power and the conspiracy of silence among the select club of leaders.

We are tired of the lies of the past eight years, lies with which the minds of Africans--and black peoples in America and the Caribbean have bent to accomodate a sadist, mass murderer, an incompetent administrator and political buffoon as a hero for black emulation. (Gibbs 150-151)

A Play of Giants, which was originally conceived soon after Amin's flight, is the final crystallisation of this campaign.

The play is set in Manhattan near the United Nations building, in the Bugaran (Ugandan) embassy. The plot follows the events of one day "a few years before the present" when the four illustrious African leaders commission a group sculpture for display in the delegates' passage at the United Nations building. The four "Giants," who are clearly led by Kamini, deal brusquely with the sculptor, journalist, banking chairman, ambassador, academic and soldiers from Bugara, as well as the Secretary-General of the U.N., the Mayor of Hyacombe (New York), and delegates from both the U.S. and the Soviet Union. All these dealings centre on the difficulties regarding the

installation of the sculpture, and the day ends with the announcement of a successful coup in Bugara, which results in Kamini seizing prisoners and launching a violent assault on the U.N. building in order to force international intervention on his behalf.

Although the situation is fictional, much of the play is based on historical facts so that Soyinka's task includes that of chronicler, in addition to that of creator. These 'real-life' personages who fill Soyinka's stage come as 'ready-made' theatrical characters with all the absurd appeal to delight any audience. These four "Giants" need few dramatic alterations from their 'real-life' originals. The playwright himself has said of his unlikely cast:

these are excellent theatrical personalities....They're all poseurs. Somebody who in the twentieth century tries to revive a non-existent imperial tradition in Africa, with its underdevelopment and poverty, is an actor. Idi Amin was of course the supreme actor. He really knew how to fool the whole world. He fooled his own countrymen for some time. You only have to see him to see how very closely he studies the character he thinks he is or wants to be. Macias Nguema...was also quite a performer. So these victims of power--because they are both abusers of power and victims of power, in a sense--like a prime example, Hitler, were great actors. They acted all the time. (Borreca 34)

Yet, with all this material for a realistic play, Soyinka has chosen to exaggerate the caricatures and the fictional situation into an unreal "Fantasia on [the] Aminian theme" (Giants i). For all Amin's lunacy, he never went so far as to offer a life-size sculpture of himself, with his brother tyrants, to the United Nations. He also never went so far as

to initiate a military battle in Manhattan, in response to the Tanzanian invasion of Kampala, but his absurd antics went nearly this far. By subtitling the play in this way, Soyinka admits that the "Fantasia" is not intended to accurately represent reality, and yet, by choosing to create no Beros or Kongis, but to use Amin and his companions, the playwright is asserting that the play is based upon history. Although Madmen and Specialists contains hints of this trend towards acknowledging that fact has become stranger than fiction, Soyinka's approach to his most recent play marks an important shift in his commitment to his audience's moral instruction. It seems as if conditions have deteriorated so significantly, even since the Nigerian Civil War, that the playwright must revert to bald didacticism to hold his audience's attention. In an interview conducted shortly after the play's premiere, Soyinka identified a list of motivations for the creation of A Play of Giants which offers some justification for the change to historical personages:

I was appalled by the level of ignorance about what was going on in Uganda by many people who should be intelligent enough to know better. I was appalled by the willed deafness of many of my black colleagues here [in America] who went to Uganda and came out and endorsed Idi Amin. I was appalled by what I consider their contempt of the masses, the conspiracy of their partisanship on the side of what you might call the political aristocracy, as opposed to the actual masses who paid the penalty for the afflictions imposed by Amin. I was appalled also by their arrogance, their cheap sadistic way of dismissing all efforts to expose the truth. (Borreca 33)

From this statement it is clear that Soyinka had in mind both

an intended audience, and a desired affect on that audience.

Like Soyinka's earlier tragedy Death and the King's Horseman, which recorded an historical event, A Play of Giants is prefaced by an explanatory introduction. Within the play itself, the word "power" is uttered on no fewer than fifty-five occasions, and in his "Introduction," Soyinka explains the prominence of this concept in the play's concerns. Motivating the play is an intellectual exploration of the puzzling phenomenon of power itself, and its relationship to responsibility. He identifies his

long held suspicion that power calls to power, that the brutality of power (its most strident self-manifestation) evokes a conspiratorial craving for the phenomenon of 'success' which cuts across all human occupations. (Giants vi)

Elsewhere, Soyinka has complained that

the phenomenon of power has not been studied independently on its own, it's always been obfuscated by ideologies. It seems to be such an unquantifiable phenomenon. It looks too mushy, too vague, and therefore there has been in historical studies a relegation of the phenomenon of power to a mere incidental by-product of historical process. And I think this is a very serious mistake. It's time that historians and philosophers and psychologists devote a lot of attention to the manifestation of power. (Katrak 168)

A Play of Giants is Soyinka's contribution to this neglected field of research, and Emperor Kasco makes a particularly relevant statement on this central theme. Gunema and Kasco continually discuss the definition and acquisition of power throughout the play, but at one point, Kasco proposes that

Power comes only with the death of politics. This is why I choose to become emperor. I place myself beyond politics. At the moment of my coronation, I signal to

the world that I transcend the intrigues and mundaneness of politics. Now I inhabit the pure realm of power. (Giants 21)

Kasco suggests that dictators with absolute power have surpassed the territory of politics because democratic lobbying, elections, legislation, public protests and the people's will can no longer affect change in such a tyrannical government. None of the concepts or beliefs associated with the operation of political systems have any relevance to the policies of selfish tyrants. With the ascent of an individual whose chief aim is the acquisition of power, comes, quite literally, the "death of politics." Soyinka has struggled for years alongside the Guineans, the Ugandans and the people of the Central African Republic to effectuate a political solution, but as the demises of Amin, Nguema, and Bokassa--and the continuing survival of Mobutu--testify, political means alone cannot challenge such tyrants.

Within the context of his work to date, A Play of Giants, Opera Wonyosi, Die still Reverend Dr. Godspcak, and Requiem for a Futurologist constitute unique departures in Soyinka's style from his established form of theatre. These plays are closely linked to the conventions of street theatre: single set, two act structure, and sharp direct dialogue. A Play of Giants differs significantly from the other plays in this study by remaining blatantly political from start to finish. Therefore, this play warrants a fresh treatment which avoids restating the obvious by explaining the play's meaning. Only

the most obtuse reader could possibly misinterpret Soyinka's inferences, and thus A Play of Giants deserves the label of Soyinka's most didactic drama. Because Soyinka deviates so severely from his other tragedies examined in this study, by treating comically the issues which he considers seriously elsewhere, it is helpful to present the important links between this play and The Strong Breed, Death and the King's Horseman, and Madmen and Specialists.

With A Play of Giants, Soyinka has virtually rewritten Madmen and Specialists without the veil of fiction, without the absurdist humour, and without the tragedy. The Mendicants' escapades, as they parody Bero and the cruel, oppressive behaviour of those whose leadership operates according to "As," are recreated in this later play, without the extraneous circumstances of a Civil War, and with a gruesome sincerity. Although it is difficult for an audience to watch Aafaa torturing Goyi with a needle, some consolation is drawn from the knowledge that Goyi undergoes no pain; the Mendicants are only pretending. Not only are the dictatorial adherents of "As" who populate A Play of Giants carrying out the torture which is only mimicked in Madmen and Specialists, but the theatricality of such acts dissolves when an audience realises that Soyinka's play imitates genuine practices meted out by actual "monsters." The sham trials and callous, unjust executions are present in the earlier play only as burlesque, but become invested with a horrifying reality in A Play of

Giants. In fact, everything at which Madmen and Specialists terrifyingly hints, all that the audience fears may be going on behind the scenes, is grimly acted out on stage in A Play of Giants. The more direct satirical inferences in the later play make it a harsher and more frightening evocation of the inhumanity in Madmen and Specialists.

Like the other plays examined in this study, the impact of A Play of Giants comes from its satirical theme, rather than its ever-subordinate plot. However, in this play, there is little need for the concentrated deciphering of enigmas which the other texts demand, as Soyinka launches an assault on tyranny which is only slightly indirect. Soyinka boldly confronts the issues without the difficult metaphors and elusive sense that make his other plays so challenging, because the playwright has realised that his apathetic audience requires simpler communication. For this reason I must admit that this play would probably deliver less satisfaction and enjoyment to a literary audience who delight in the deduction of such meanings. However, there are plenty of mysteries to be solved. The play's title asserts Soyinka's self-consciousness that this is merely drama and has little to do with realism. Likewise, the opening stage directions testify to the theatricality of the play, and candidly expose A Play of Giants for the farce that it is:

[Enter brass band, Ring Master, up platforms, hoops trampolines]... 'Ladies and Gentlemen, we present... a parade of miracle men... [cracks whip]... Giants, Dwarfs, Zombies, the Incredible Anthropophagi, the Original Genus

Survivanticus, (alive and well in defiance of all scientific explanations)...Ladies and Gentlemen...' (Giants x)

Yet, this play is associated with realism, since it more closely relates to 'real-life' events than any of the others. In this way, Soyinka trifles with the distance between the words 'real' and 'realism.' The play deals with 'real' people, but does not try to be 'realistic,' because, as I have said, fact has become more unbelievable and absurd in the modern world than fiction.

Soyinka provides shadows of the three earlier dramas in such pervasive themes as his examination of the temporal interaction of past, present and future, and his contrast of traditional with modern, by mildly recalling such issues in the dictators' empty philosophies. A Play of Giants has little to do with asserting Soyinka's world view, as related to the traditions of the Yoruba, but the tyrants do demonstrate a version of the playwright's appreciation for history. Kasco and Gunema are obsessed with trying to personally revive the past infamy of their historical models: Napoleon, Franco, Hitler, De Gaulle, and Duvalier. Kasco argues ethnocentrically that an appreciation of French history automatically implies an understanding of "the entire history of modern Europe and... North Africa," and Kamini attempts to summon the glorified histories of Hitler and Chaka to substantiate his own reputation. The "overgrown child" also demonstrates his perverted sense of tribal heritage and customs by using the

traditional coming-of-age and initiation rituals to justify his position as a tyrant (Giants 11-12). Later, Kamini vocalises a form of proverbial language which is supposed to approach that of the honourable Yorubans' in Death and the King's Horseman, but is closer to Simon Pilkings' meaningless bastardisations (Giants 35-36). Superficial evocations of Soyinka's appreciation of heritage, and narrow recollections of the interrelatedness of the temporal realms, are all that the amoral clowns in A Play of Giants are capable of appreciating. Such a society can have no pretensions to Soyinka's sensitivity. This play becomes the forum for the most cynical expressions of the themes central to the other three plays.

Linked to the absence of these honourable Yoruban traditions is the missing counterpart in this later play for the worthy Iyaloja, Iya Agba, Iya Mate, Si Bero, Omae and Sunma. Soyinka's ever-present respectful female roles give way to the satirical sexist portraits of women in the earlier plays. The "stout, florid and rather repulsive Nordic type" embodied by the sycophantic journalist Gudrum, and the subservient and apologetic Ambassador are the only female roles in the play. Soyinka is viciously satirising this type of woman who debases herself. Gudrum is narrow-minded and insensitive and the Ambassador retains no sense of dignity. The strongest insults hurled about are based upon the degradation of women, and both the men and the women entrench

patriarchal domination. But Soyinka's satire is biting here, and the keepers of the doctrines of male dominance are fiercely ridiculed. While there is no possibility whatsoever that women will receive their deserved respect in such an environment, the playwright tries to lead the audience toward the horrifying realisation that its own society shares something with Gunema's seizure of ultimate empowerment through the sadistic mistreatment of a begging woman. At this point, when Gunema tastes the "elixir" of power, the play's sexism culminates:

When I make love to her, I taste it at last. It is a strong taste on my tongue, my lips, my face, everywhere. It rush through my spine, soak through my skin, and I recognize it for that elusive, over-whelming taste. Every night I made love to the woman, the same taste is there, nothing to compare with it. Nothing. (Giants 58)

Although Gunema's behaviour resembles that of the Tutor in The Strong Breed, there is no longer any ambivalence regarding the nature and direction of Soyinka's satire.

Soyinka's views on sexual politics have come a long way since The Strong Breed. The women's movement of the nineteen-seventies has certainly influenced the playwright's movement from a traditional treatment of women as matriarchs to contemporary sexual politics. His understanding of the struggle against sexism has developed through the plays such that the relationships between men and women have become a metaphor for the political and power relationships being explored in A Play of Giants. Gunema counters Kasco's plan

to transcend politics and inhabit the realm of power, with a theory that relies exclusively upon sexual exploitation for empowerment. Soyinka has moved forward in his view of women and has truly recognised the importance of assailing tyranny in all its forms.

The demonstrations of the cult of "As" in Madmen and Specialists barely compare with the manifestations of this philosophy in A Play of Giants. Bero's depravity is severely diminished once contrasted with the inhuman debauchery of Kamini, Gunema, Kasco, and Tuboum. From the later play's opening dialogue to the final freeze, the "Giants" consciously exercise, abuse, enjoy and taste their power. Soyinka endows Gunema and Kasco with levels of intelligence which far surpass those credited to either Nguema or Bokassa, to permit these characters to carry out the play's sustained discussion of power. Of course, Kamini is too irrational and asinine to participate in such an abstract inquiry, and can only contribute by offering to change the subject. The examination of power and responsibility reveals the dictators' iniquity and also considers guerilla power, terrorist power, revolutionary power, economic power, tyrannical power, military power, intellectual power, parasitic power, political power, hierarchical power, judicial power, sexual power, democratic power, and the power of the gun (Giants 2-4, 6-7, 10-12, 19-21, 22-25, 31, 37, 58, 69). Kamini and the other dictators, like Bero, are remarkably insecure and must constantly buttress

their positions as they bend humanity to their will, by blackmailing and threatening all into submission. The arch-tyrant subjects both the Chairman of the Bugara Central Bank and the Sculptor to humiliating and painful punishment for inadvertant misjudgements which Kamini interprets as insults (Giants 6-7, 29-34). The Sculptor's bandages and the Chairman's gurgling refrain are constant reminders of the consequences of the abuse of power. Operating simultaneously is Soyinka's clever manipulation of the action so that nearly every character is exposed as a hypocrite. Kamini, Kasco, Gunema, Tuboum, Batey, and the Russian and American delegates all make statements which contradict their apparent beliefs. The announcement of the coup near the end of the play dissipates all the fraternity presented by the dictators in "Part One," and transforms all the characters into selfish opportunists who recognise Kamini's downfall as the indication to switch loyalties. There is no sincerity creditable to any of these characters, and Soyinka openly dramatises for his predominantly capitalist audiences, the selfish opportunism displayed by such individuals narrowly dedicated to their own advancement and empowerment.

Gibbs has called this play "a virtuoso satirical display written in bile and blood" (158) and Soyinka demonstrates his dexterity with satirical comedy through the many hilarious scenes and clever verbal/visual gags in A Play of Giants. Three almighty buffoons, posing as gods and impersonating

royalty, open the play in stark contrast to the opulence which surrounds them as the playwright puzzles and intrigues his audience with this nonsensical tableau. An audience must surely erupt with laughter as Soyinka satirises the extremist caricatures in Kamini's vanity, Tuboum's heroism, the Ambassador's subservience, Gudrum's and Batey's sordid flirtatiousness and the delegates' opportunism, pride and pretended purity. Of course, the play's greatest comic achievement comes during the Russian translations when the barrier of language allows the "1st Russian" to accomplish that for which the Chairman and the Sculptor have undergone torture: the play's only undisguised truthfulness (Giants 44-52). Until this scene, honesty, sincerity and trust have been suspended in this tense environment, and Kamini's foolishness and vanity are exposed at their peaks as he is once again insulated from the truth and allowed to design his own version of reality. I imagine that the entire play elicits peals of laughter from beginning to end as the audience's beliefs clash violently with those of the characters, but as the auditorium empties the events become less funny, and the grim, plain reality sets in.

From the statement quoted earlier regarding Soyinka's motivations, it is clear that the play was directed at a specific audience comprised of the apathetic international community whose response to Amin's rule disgusted Soyinka. For once, Soyinka's primary audience is neither Nigerian, nor

even African. The charge that Madmen and Specialists is Soyinka's least African play is more appropriately levied against A Play of Giants. Since 1960, Soyinka had not set a play outside Africa, and the New York setting of his last play reflects the playwright's specific purpose of bringing the action home to the international community scattered throughout Africa, Europe and America. A Play of Giants contains none of the songs, dances or African religious practices that alienated the audiences of Death and the King's Horseman, nor the absurdist conventions which made Madmen and Specialists difficult for Westerners to understand. Soyinka has oversimplified the issues and the dramatic presentation of A Play of Giants to the level of street theatre for the express purpose of clear communication. A clear indication of his international address is present in the play's introduction:

Mobutu...should have received his coup de grace at least a decade ago but for the resolute interests of the Western powers--Belgium, France and West Germany most directly. Such a seemingly straight forward identification of interests fails to apply however when we come to the figure of Idi Amin. This certified psychopath was sustained in power at various periods by group interests and ideologies as varied as those of Great Britain (which installed him in the first place), the United States, the Soviet Union, the Organisation of African Unity, Cuba, Libya, the PLO and Israel, not to mention the vociferous support accorded him by the cheer-leaders among the intelligentsia of the African continent and the Black Caucuses of the United States. (Giants v-vi)

The detached and dangerous academics Soyinka identifies in this quotation actually appear in the play embodied by Professor Batey. Kamini describes how this selfish power-

hungry intellectual visited Bugara to

see with his own eyes. He travel throughout the country and he not see any single person being killed, not one person being tortured. He return to his country and he write nice things which he has seen with his own eyes. (Giants 23)

Batey proposes the very argument that Soyinka has discredited in his introduction. The professor falls habitually into a verbose attempt to acquit Kamini and the others of any responsibility for the crises, by blaming the "discredited economic system" left behind by the colonialists, and the continued exploitation carried out by a "neo-colonial conspiracy of multinational conglomerates" (Giants 23; v). As he does in Death and the King's Horseman, Soyinka tries to motivate the audience's social responsibility by discarding the idea that societies bear no blame for their own problems which have reputedly arisen exclusively from outside interference. Soyinka refuses to acknowledge this easy answer and demands that people confront their problems by willingly accepting the burden of blame themselves. Later, Batey shows himself to be a selfish opportunist who cares little for the impact of the coup on Bugara, and worries only about the effect of Kamini's demise on his own academic career (Giants 52). The academic immediately lapses into a grossly romanticised recollection of his wasted life, and repeats his claim that "colonial history...must bear full responsibility for all seeming aberrations in African leadership" (Giants 56). The play retains much in common with African literature and is

distinctly Soyinkan in its satirical attack, but if any play deserves the title of "least African," it is this play with its strident, shocking message for a wider audience.

Throughout the play's transformation of the opulent embassy from studio to prison to fortress, Soyinka leads his audience toward the rising tumult of the final tableau, and yet, as in the conclusions of the other plays, some ambivalence lingers in the beams of the fading apocalyptic light. The playwright dissociates Kamini, his hostages, and the erupting battle from the Sculptor through the petrifying freeze, and this victimised and battered "artist" works tirelessly on, in the face of certain ruin, perhaps permitting the audience to enjoy an instant of hope in this hostile and doomed environment, before they realise that his incessancy is motivated entirely by fear. However, unlike Madmen and Specialists and the other plays in this study, A Play of Giants offers no moralising role models for the audience to emulate, only lessons on inhuman behaviour. The playwright blatantly exposes the lack of any coincidence between the tyrants' beliefs and any humane or selfless interests. In this bluntest of Soyinka's dramas, his political commitment consumes the whole play, and his reversion to strong didactic strategies attempts to batter some moral sense into the minds of his readers, and to shock them out of their complacency. Soyinka uses A Play of Giants to scold and revile our dormant social responsibility, and seriously approach the overt polemics of

"This Past Must Address its Present."

CONCLUSION

A Play of Giants completes a circle and draws this study back to its opening examination of Soyinka's denunciation of apartheid South Africa, in his Nobel lecture. Kamini hypocritically claims to fill the privileged position of one of the leaders of the opposition forces struggling to dismantle apartheid, and liberate the South Africans, while shamelessly oppressing the Bugarans (Giants 42, 62). This preoccupation with the institutions of "As," which continue to dominate and oppress Southern Africa, has occupied a prominent position in Soyinka's writing, from his earliest drama, "The Invention," to his most recently published work, Mandela's Earth and other poems. This volume of poems also testifies to the playwright's continuing political and literary devotion to his relentless fight to improve the human condition which is inscribed in The Strong Breed, Madmen and Specialists, Death and the King's Horseman, A Play of Giants and "This Past Must Address its Present." His persistent struggle is summed up quite well in the following quotation:

Right now all the evidence of history shows that there is something really basically stupid, destructive about human beings. I look at all the various causes of conflict in the world and I refuse to accept that any of them are impossible to settle without war...I believe that human

intelligence is such...that human beings can save themselves by taking certain very logical and rational actions in their own societies and avoid war.

It is because I believe that the forces of history can be confronted that I believe in social and political action.
(Katrak 130-133)

This fifty-five year old playwright has given no indication of easing his unwavering commitment to his insistence on social responsibility and individual action and his newly inflated international stature will only increase the audience for his embattled pleas. These four plays have solidified my admiration for Wole Soyinka, and his dedication to the human race, and have resuscitated my enthusiasm and love of literature, particularly the very social and powerful genre of drama, which can accomplish so much more than simply delighting, entertaining and distracting.

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