

Soyinka's *Season of Anomy*: Ofeyi's Quest

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Wole Soyinka's *Season of Anomy* (1973) is an intensely religious book, both in its preoccupation with moral issues and the strong impact of its ritual undertone. The imagination that conceived it is nurtured by the same moral outrage that occasioned the October poems of *Idanre and Other Poems* (1967) and most of the elegies in *A Shuttle in the Crypt* (1972).

One does not have to venture far into *Season of Anomy* to encounter passages with a note of pathos and moral indignation similar to what we find in the two verse collections mentioned above.¹ Soyinka's moral imagination became even more sensitive, more outraged after his experiences in prison. The declaration in *The Man Died* (1972) that "For me, justice is the first condition of humanity"² sounds like an ethical manifesto.

One of the consequences of his increasing dedication to the cause of justice is that the world of his postwar imaginative writings is frequently dominated by visionary seekers. We encounter these pilgrims early in the poems of *A Shuttle in the Crypt*.

The quest trend that has been building in *A Shuttle* attains a climactic dimension in *Season of Anomy*. There are of course earlier reminders of the image of the seeker in Soyinka's own works, such as Sekoni and his obsessions with the universal dome of existence in *The Interpreters* (1965), and the Professor with his quasi-mystical and quasi-magical groping for the Word in *The Road* (1965). But neither in *The Interpreters* nor in *The Road* is the quest theme developed on as grand a scale or explored with so complex an interplay of allegory and myth as we find it in *Season of Anomy*.

The quest theme in the later work runs on at least two levels; one is social and the other is personal. The two dimensions are interrelated for each reinforces the other. Ofeyi, the social reformer, is also the archetype of all eternal voyagers and all lone seekers. If allegory is the language of the social dimension of the quest, myth is the idiom of its personal dimension.

On the social level, the quest is related to what might be described as a moral alternative for a nation in a state of anomy. It is suggested in *The Man Died*³ that the Nigeria of the era of civil war might have been spared much bitterness and much suffering if it had given chance to the mediatory initiative of a revolutionary movement whose inspiration was ethical. The ethical qualification is crucial, for it is on such a moral absolute, Soyinka implies, that a new national solidarity which transcends ethnic and religious loyalties could be founded. Victor Banjo was for Soyinka a one-time hero of such a movement. He is remembered in *A Shuttle* in the poem entitled "And What of it if Thus He Died?"

¹See the poems "Massacre, October '66" in *Idanre and Other Poems* (London: Methuen, 1967), pp. 51-52, and "Conversation at Night with a Cockroach" in *A Shuttle in the Crypt* (New York: Hill and Wang), pp. 5-13.

²Wole Soyinka, *The Man Died* (London: Rex Collings, 1972), p. 95.

³See chapters Two, Twelve, and Twenty-Three.

Victor Banjo's Third Force was short-lived, but the idea behind the movement persists in Soyinka and in his character Ofeyi. Explaining the Shage project to Zaccheus who is possessed of beauty of soul though utterly lacking in heroic aspirations, Ofeyi says: "New projects like the Shage Dam meant that we could start with newly created working communities. New affinities, working-class kinships as opposed to the tribal. We killed the atavistic instinct once for all in new ventures like Shage."⁴ The method advocated in *Season of Anomy* for the transformation of society differs from what Victor Banjo had contemplated. Banjo was to have relied on military operations by virtue of the nature of the emergency that existed in Nigeria at the time he emerged on the national scene. Ofeyi, on the other hand, desires to carry out a quiet revolution, relying essentially on the "trick of conversion," on a subtle incursion into the territories of the human heart.

The example of the agricultural community of Aiyéro appealed to Ofeyi as a social solidarity founded upon values that were humane and spiritual. In Aiyéro rituals still function as a symbolic affirmation of man's indebtedness to the forces of nature; ceremonies of renewal are frequently enacted; familiar images of rebirth in Soyinka's iconography such as camwood, chalk, and oil feature in the invocations to the dead, and dawn remains the hour of communion with the divine. Aiyéro is typical of the moral order that Ofeyi is in search of. But he has first to master its heartbeat, to thoroughly understand its essence before he may transmit its values to his own society. One way by which he may understand the Aiyéro idea is to come to terms with those nonsexual values which Iriyise embodies, for Iriyise is earth, the symbolic mother earth that had appeared in the personality of Oya in the long poem "Idanre." In one moment of insight Ofeyi recognizes Iriyise's identity with the soil of Aiyéro. "She took to Aiyéro," he notices, "as a new organism in search of its true element" (p. 3). Iriyise's function as an embodiment of the creative potency of earth is not lost on the people of Aiyéro. The women readily identify her personality with forces that encourage growth and vegetation. "Her fingers spliced wounded saplings with the ease of a natural healer. Her presence . . . inspired the rains" (p. 20).

Iriyise is linked, then, with the agricultural world of Aiyéro and, by extension, with the spiritual values of that world. For there is a strong sympathy in the book between land and the moral priorities of the people that inhabit it. Even in Ilosa where Iriyise is pod, the exploitation of the resources of the land by the Cartel is spoken of as the "outrage of the Pod" (p. 48; my italics). But probably more important is Iriyise's role as the personification of what Soyinka would call the spirit of revolutionary dare. She encapsulates the virtues of energy and motion, as well as the positive forces of social change. The Dentist's appraisal of her in this regard is significant. He sees her as a "touch and standard-bearer, super-mistress of universal insurgence. To abandon such political weapon in any struggle is to admit to lack of foresight. Or imagination" (p. 219).

The Dentist himself is also a protagonist of change. But his ethic of indiscriminate assassination is rejected on moral grounds. His obsessions with a sheer concept of violence link him with Chief Batoki or Zaki Amuri, whereas it is the point of the novel that Ofeyi's humane, almost religious approach towards social problems should be distinguished from the brutal means by which the Cartel oligarchy imposes the dictatorship of the privileged few on an unwilling

⁴Wole Soyinka, *Season of Anomy* (London: Rex Collings, 1973), p. 170; subsequent references are to this edition and will appear in the text.

many. "When you eliminate, you have in mind something to follow," Ofeyi tells the Dentist, "something to replace what you eliminate. Otherwise your action is negative and futile" (p. 111).

Iriyise is a more acceptable agent, not only for the fact that her revolutionary impulse is under Ofeyi's control, but also because she operates through a strategy of disguise as is noticeable in her performance in the melodramatic Pandora's Box episode or in the more subtle dance at Shage. Furthermore, she is qualified by her spiritual affinities with Aiyéro to effect changes within Aiyéro itself. For Ofeyi is critical of Aiyéro as an esoteric hinterland. Aiyéro is meaningful only when the values that inform it could be made to replace the ethos of a materialistic society. It is in this respect that the Asian girl Taiila is ultimately rejected as Ofeyi's companion in the quest. Taiila is the personification of the placid will, the serene spirit of conformity. She is imagined as an "insulated oasis of peace," a "still centre" that shies away from tragic encounter with "outer chaos" (pp. 238-40). She lacks the "caged tigress" in Iriyise. She is Aiyéro as Pa Ahime conceives it—her family is described as a microcosm of Aiyéro (p. 238). Iriyise, on the other hand, stands for the reformed image of Aiyéro which Ofeyi is endeavoring to create, that is, a more assertive, more militant and evangelical Aiyéro whose values should be extended beyond its boundaries.

Shage is important as Aiyéro's most crucial contact with that outside world which is represented by the universe of the Cartel. The initial success of Aiyéro's operations at Shage is a personal triumph for Iriyise. Her dance of the young shoot sought to reenact the process of sowing, germination, and budding. The dance soon becomes a mystical experience, transforming her person into a blossoming shoot. Lost in its rhythmic sensation, she sprouts "leaves and fresh buds from neck and fingers, shaking her hair free of dead leaves and earth and absorbing light and air through every pore" (p. 41). As a goddess of earth, she is capable of reactivating the re-creative energies of earth that lay dormant in Shage. The dance combines neatly the double sense of shoot as seed and idea. The Shage earth is favorable for the growth of the vegetational seed as well as the ideological seed. But Shage is also the scene of the Cartel's most deadly assault on forces of renewal in both the human and the natural realms. The success of the Cartel's operations of destruction at Shage plunges Ofeyi into one of his visionary moments. As he contemplates the ruins of Shage, his mind conjures up an immense chasm of nonbeing as a universal grave for desecrated humanity. The underworld has consistently functioned as a mirror image of the actual world inhabited by doomed humanity. Such is the implication of the entombed existence of the church at the Tabernacle of Hope and of the graveyard metaphor of the mortuary episode. At Shage Ofeyi sees "where the rest of mankind had rushed, and now his was the only consciousness observing the dark pulsating chasms of tearing, grasping, clawing, gorging humanity" (p. 176). Ofeyi's role is to heal, to infuse new life onto a flesh where the "blood . . . had caked."⁵ But at Shage he sought in vain to invoke Ahime's scalpel of light and life on the ravines of death and waste, to inundate the chasms of nonbeing with sympathetic bleeding from the bull's elixir.

After the Shage debacle, the Aiyéro idea returns to its source, but the journey back marks the route, according to the Dentist, for a more determined return.

But the quest does not terminate with the search for Iriyise. It will go on, as Ofeyi discloses (p. 242), even after Iriyise has been found. Man's eternal

⁵A Shuttle, p. 9.

restlessness, Soyinka wrote,⁶ is always symbolized in a Search. At this point the quest theme embraces more fundamental and more personal issues. One has in mind such considerations as the artist's quest for self-knowledge, his search for beauty in its relation to art; the search for truth in its ontological context, and, for restless individuals like Ofeyi who are forever plagued by what Taiila called his "eternal discontent" (p. 242), the search for an emotional ballast to steady a mind in turmoil. These other aspects of the quest are summed up by Ofeyi in one important statement: ". . . every man feels the need to seize for himself the enormity of what is happening, of the time in which it is happening. Perhaps deep down I realise that the search would immerse me in the meaning of the event, lead me to a new understanding of history" (p. 218).

From whatever angle one views the quest, it is, by Ofeyi's understanding of it, a tragic undertaking. "Mire and mud, for some these are the paths to beauty and peace" (pp. 97-98), he tells Taiila. Or consider this other confession of Taiila: "I also seek beauty, but that kind which has been tested and stressed" (p. 99). Ofeyi, the mythic explorer, must pass through a mythic landscape, a landscape of grottos and tunnels, of stunted scrublands and hyenas, cats and vultures, which are symbolic representations of the ordeals of the questing pilgrim. To overcome these obstacles, Ofeyi relies increasingly on the restorative potency of rituals. He frequently evokes Ahime at moments of spiritual crisis, for he has come to associate Ahime's ceremonial scalpel with restorative essences. Thus, after his first major encounter with the agents of the Cartel (Chapters III-V), Ofeyi retreats to Aiyéro's bowered sanctuary for spiritual rehabilitation. He has to retreat thither for Aiyéro is a resting-place for all combatants engaged in the battles of the world. Ahime explains: "After all the battles of the world, one needs a resting-place. And often, in between the battles. Aiyéro was created for such needs" (p. 28). On this occasion, however, the restorative powers within the sanctuary speak to him of failure. The cleansing rite he performs at Labbe Bridge is more rewarding. Nature herself participates in the ritual of cleansing. The egrets "picked him clean of blood-infesting ticks," and the waters "shut his ears to all cacophony, his nostrils to pollution, transmitting only the rhythm of cropping and quiet germination" (p. 195). The water reeds evoke memories of Ahime's healing hands. They whisper healing "incantations over a child in agony" (p. 195). Their healing vibrances stand in sharp contrast with the death exhalations emitted by the Cartel's machinery of destruction.

It is a feature of the novel that Aiyéro should be viewed from a perspective of contrast with the universe inhabited by the agents of the Cartel. The juxtaposition of two worlds with two diversely opposed moral orders tends to resolve the tensions within the novel into an allegorical conflict between good and evil. The allegorical polarization plots the graph of the novel's symbolic structure. The voyager Ofeyi advances from the pastoral enclaves of Aiyéro to the scenes of conflict represented by Cross-river. But the allegorical demarcation has its own limitations; it imposes on the novelist's imagination certain a priori conclusions with regard to his conception of his characters. He cannot expand their human qualities to the full, since their role, and even the face of the landscape, are predetermined by the allegorical logic. Pa Ahime, for instance, is more important as a symbol than as an individual. The reader's contact with him is minimal, and rarely, if ever, is he seen in situations of psychological introspection. But it is the cripple, Aliyu, a native of Cross-river who is the best illustration of the impact on characterization of the author's allegorical imagination. Aliyu is simply an embodiment of the "metaphysic [sic] condition

⁶Wole Soyinka, "From a Common Black Cloth: A Reassessment of the African Literary Image," *The American Scholar*, 32 (1963), p. 392.

called evil" (p. 276). His physical distortions reinforce the absolute deformity of mind among his Cross-river compatriots; but the use of Aliyu as an allegorical medium is ironical since he himself is not evil.

Landscape sustains more successfully the burden imposed on it by the allegorical technique; it operates primarily on a functional basis. As noted before, the condition of the land reflects the moral character of the people who inhabit it. Aiyéro's ceremony of renewal is replaced in Cross-river by a deadly ritual whose libations paint a "testament of damnation on earth" (p. 141). In Cross-river earth is smeared with human brains and with the entrails of female wombs. The enormity of the crime committed on land and life is suggested by an allusion to the biblical apocalypse: ". . . this is the fifth face of the Apocalypse . . . the plague of rabid dogs."

Within such a physical and spiritual wasteland, the Aiyéro idea maintains a precarious existence as a glimmer of light shining in the darkness. The underground church at the Tabernacle of Hope is a refuge for those who live in fear. The priest's "path-finding form" (p. 271) is truly the Way. Religion is the final hope of salvation for those who live in the darkness of terror. It is at the Tabernacle that Taiila fulfills herself as a messenger of love and peace. Her humanity is aroused by the condition of the dead and the dying. Her place is ultimately with situations of suffering, and not with the revolutionary spirit that questions and challenges.

In using myth and allegory as his medium for exploring the quest motif in *Season of Anomy*, Soyinka has extended the scope of the African novel. He has been anticipated in this direction by Amos Tutuola in *The Palm-Wine Drinkard* (1952) and Camara Laye in *The Radiance of the King* (1956), but his technique is more sophisticated and more complicated than Tutuola's and Laye's. Myth enables him to achieve some distance between himself and his subject while it manipulates, in the words of T. S. Eliot, "the parallel between contemporaneity and antiquity."⁷

⁷T. S. Eliot, "Ulysses, Order, and Myth" *The Dial*, 75 (1923), p. 483.