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MITOS E SÍMBOLOS EM "IDANRE" DE WOLE SOYINKA

MYTH AND SYMBOLS IN WOLE SOYINKA'S "IDANRE"

Adriano Moraes Migliavacca¹

RESUMO: Poesia e mitologia estão intimamente relacionadas. Nas diversas civilizações humanas, a poesia surge a partir da mitologia em forma oral, adquirindo sua primeira realização escrita no poema narrativo ou épico. Embora tenha se distanciado de suas origens narrativas, muitos escritores do século XX reafirmaram a importância do mito e da narrativa na poesia. Entre eles, destaca-se o poeta e dramaturgo Wole Soyinka, cujas obras, quer no teatro quer na poesia, são em grande parte inspiradas na mitologia iorubá. Um exemplo é o poema narrativo "Idanre", que fornece um relato do mito da criação de Ogum, deus iorubá do ferro, da cultura e da criatividade, encenado nos tempos modernos. Este estudo é uma investigação e discussão da presença do mito e dos símbolos no poema e a forma que tomam especificamente na mitologia iorubá.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE: Wole Soyinka; Poesia e mitologia; Mitologia iorubá.

ABSTRACT: Poetry and mythology are narrowly associated. In the various civilizations poetry originates in oral form from mythology, acquiring its first written realization in the narrative or epic poem. Although it has distanced itself from its narrative origins, many writers in the Twentieth Century have reaffirmed myth and narrative in poetry. Among them, the Nigerian poet and playwright Wole Soyinka stands out, whose works both in drama and poetry are largely inspired by Yoruba mythology. An example of this is the narrative poem "Idanre," which provides an account of the creation myth of Ogun, Yoruba god of iron, culture and creativity, set in modern times. This study is an investigation and discussion of the presence of myth and symbols in the poem and their specific realization in Yoruba mythology.

KEYWORDS: Wole Soyinka; Poetry and mythology; Yoruba mythology.

1. Introduction

The Romanian scholar Mircea Eliade (1999) believed that the "discovery of myth" would one day be greeted as one of the most useful achievements of the 20th century. In a century teeming with scientific discoveries, Eliade's claim may seem risky or even exaggerated; yet, considering the real importance of myth in the origin and structuring of human culture, it is difficult not to agree with him. Humans, these symbol-making creatures, are originally surrounded by a world that exceeds and overwhelms them and to which they must adapt. Whereas climatic, geographical conditions and the material resources make an environment inhabitable by human organisms, myths and symbols make this same environment inhabitable by human consciousness.

In so called modern civilization, many areas of cultural achievement appear to have distanced themselves from their ancient mythical origins. That seems to be the case of science and philosophy. In literature and the arts in general, however, myth

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remains present and relevant as a stock of themes and symbols, although in some cases the impact of this evasion from myth as a cultural matrix has been felt and expressed. In poetry, for example, what is seen as the absence of a common mythology to modern man in the West was perceived as a discomfort by the North-American poet Hart Crane (1899-1932), as early as 1925:

It is a terrific problem that faces the poet today—a world that is so in transition from a decayed culture toward a reorganization of human evaluations that there are few common terms, general denominators of speech that are solid enough or that ring with any vibration or spiritual conviction. The great mythologies of the past (including the Church) are deprived of enough façade to even launch good raillery against. (CRANE, 2006, p.160-161)

This discomfort has led Crane, primarily a lyrical poet, to poeticize the foundation and history of his country in the long narrative poem *The Bridge* with mythic tones. Crane was not the only poet in the English language to experiment in the terrains of myth and narrative within poetry, as the efforts of T. S. Eliot in *The Waste Land* and Ezra Pound in *The Cantos* can attest. Eliade's claim presented in the beginning can take the same discussion to another direction and show a different dimension of the relationship between myth and poetry. When Eliade talks about the "discovery of myth," he is referring to the recently established systematic contact of Westerners with mythologies previously unfamiliar to them, such as those found in African, Australian, Polynesian and other peoples. Differently from what occurs in Western civilization, the mythologies of these peoples and their symbols are still celebrated in religious rites and provide the foundation for institutions and the different areas of cultural achievements in the societies to which they belong. In other words, they provide, within their societies, the common terms and general denominators whose absence in Western culture was perceived by Crane. This notion can be substantiated by the observations made by the Nigerian critic Abiola Irele in his essay "Tradition and the Yoruba Writer," in which he discusses the exploration of traditional myths and symbols by modern African writers. At a certain point in the article, Irele compares the condition of the French symbolist poets and the modern school of poetry that emerged in their wake (which includes the aforementioned Hart Crane) to that of modern African writers:

Baudelaire strove to take French poetry beyond the rhetorical limits within which it was confined when he began to write, to make it a means of knowledge. Neither he nor those poets who followed his lead—from Rimbaud right up to the Surrealists—were able to find coherent cultural references for their visionary aspirations. The collapse of Christianity as the great myth of Western culture has forced these poets to create an individual mythology, each one for himself. [...] The great fortune of African writers is that the world-views which shape the experience of the individual in traditional society are still very much alive and continue to provide a comprehensive frame of reference for communal life. The African gods continue to function within the realm of inner consciousness of the majority of our societies, and the symbols attached to them continue to inform in an active way the communal sensibility. (IRELE, 1990, p. 195-196)

Irele's article is focused on three modern Nigerian writers who belong to the Yoruba linguistic and cultural group—Daniel Fagunwa, Amos Tutuola and Wole Soyinka—and the way symbols, themes and worldviews associated with their people are articulated within their works. Despite their differences in genre, style and even language—Fagunwa wrote in Yoruba, Tutuola in a local variation of English, and

Soyinka in more standard English—, Irele is able to trace a continuity in the relationship of each writer to Yoruba traditional myths and symbols. He states that Soyinka's work is particularly marked by an intense individuality, wherein one can find the rediscovery of Yoruba traditional values and symbols and the integration of a communal view within a personal experience. Indeed, the centrality of myth in Soyinka's work has been observed by another critic, Stanley Macebuh, who remarks that Soyinka is "first and foremost, a mythopoiest; his imagination is, in quite a fundamental sense, a mythic imagination" (MACEBUH, 2001, p. 29). Macebuh also sees as one of Soyinka's main concerns the manner in which ancestral memory molds human mind and action. Based on the observations mentioned above, this essay provides an analysis of the articulation of Yoruba traditional myths and symbols in "Idanre," a long narrative poem written by Wole Soyinka and inspired on creation myths associated to a specific Yoruba deity—Ogun, the god of iron, war, and civilization. Taking into consideration Irele's observations, the myths and symbols related to Ogun and ideas pertaining to the Yoruba worldview, which are summarized and discussed in the first section of this article, will be studied as appearing in the poem.

2. The mythic imagination in the Yoruba experience

As an early manifestation of human culture, myth has an informing role to many of the institutions and areas of knowledge and cultural achievement within human society. Eliade (1963) reminds us that myths provide a people with the origins both of their culture and of the physical surroundings they live in as originated by gods and supernatural ancestors. In a society whose institutions are based on myths, the gods are neither conceptual entities nor distant beings, but actual presences that guide both individual and communal life in its myriad aspects and activities. As the Brazilian philosopher Vicente Ferreira da Silva (1964, p. 303) states, "for this kind of consciousness, no duality exists between the human and the divine, the numinous forces embracing all ambits of phenomenal manifestations."² In response to the perception of this godly world, human arts and crafts progressively appear and differentiate themselves.

This mythic reaction to the environment and the consequent formation of culture as happening in Yoruba society and mythology is examined by Wole Soyinka in the essays pertaining to the book *Myth, Literature and the African World*. In "Morality and Aesthetics in the Ritual Archetype," Soyinka traces this process within the cultural institution of ritual drama, wherein the deeds and stories of the gods are celebrated and enacted to provide moral and aesthetic paradigms for society. Paramount to the establishment of this process as studied by Soyinka is the role of the physical environment where the society is established. The "passage-rites of hero-gods," which are presented in drama, according to Soyinka, actually testify to "man's conflict with forces which challenge his efforts to harmonise with his environment, physical, social and psychic" (SOYINKA, 2005, p. 1).

The cosmic context, says Soyinka, is the very stage whereon the drama of the gods is set, as well as the metaphysical drama of man in its being and becoming. The

² "Para essa espécie de consciência não existe uma dualidade entre o humano e o divino, abrangendo as forças numinosas todo o âmbito das manifestações fenomênicas" (my translation).

vastness of the physical world as perceived by the inhabitants of this society is what leads to a “rapport with the realm of infinity” (SOYINKA, 2005, p. 2). Therefore, the notions of being and becoming and their relations will arise from this confrontation. In the case of Yoruba culture as analyzed by Soyinka, the relations between being, non-being and becoming occur within an ongoing cycle that encloses three different, but intertwining, stages of existence—the world of the living, the world of the ancestors and that of the unborn—a metaphysical rendering of the perception of the cycle of human life and death. These realms are not, however, linear phases that succeed each other, but cyclical moments that are mutually imbricated, providing the eternal yet immediate condition of human beings both as individuals and as a community, since the ancestors and the gods are an ever-present and continuously actualizing origin of human being, while the unborn are the destiny of their becoming.

It would be a mistake, however, to posit that this cyclical notion of time implies an idea of automatic repetition that is passively experienced by the community. On the contrary, humans have a very active role in the continuity of this cycle and in maintaining a sound relationship with the ancestors and, therefore, preserving and improving the society of the living, which will be inhabited by those yet to be born. The maintenance of this cycle is made through social institutions, festivals, rituals and sacrificial actions.

Here Soyinka brings forth an important construct, which, he says, is implied in the Yoruba worldview. As well as these three realms are intertwined, there is a separation between them, and this separation evidences the existence of a “fourth stage,” which Soyinka, in his properly titled essay “The Fourth Stage” (2005), describes as a transitional gulf or abyss, and which he characterizes as an inchoate matrix of human existence. Soyinka remarks that “[t]his gulf is what must be constantly diminished by the sacrifices, the rituals, the ceremonies of appeasement to the cosmic powers which lie guardian to the gulf” (SOYINKA, 2005, p. 144). Ritual action, which includes song, poetry, drama, dance, and music, is what connects human beings to the essence of the ancestors and the gods.

It should be perceived that this transitional abyss, or inchoate matrix, suggests the existence of an original unity that has been broken. Here, a drama is set between three mythological figures—Obatala, Atunda and Ogun. Obatala is the serene primordial deity who, from the knowledge of the essence entertained by Olorun (the supreme godhead), molds the physical shape of human being. Myth tells us that, in the beginning of existence, he was the only existing deity on earth and enclosed within himself the unity of life. Burdened with the hard work of his productive lands, Obatala acquired a slave called Atunda, who, envious and vengeful, rolled a stone down a hill directly over Obatala, shredding the first deity into numerous pieces; these pieces eventually became the different deities. Among these, Ogun has a particular importance. Still according to Soyinka, reunification was primarily a wish of the gods, who descended from Heaven to reunite with men. However, a huge rock was set in their way. Ogun alone was able to destroy the rock and open the path to the deities, since he alone possessed the secret of iron.

Ogun is generally considered to be the deity of iron and war; Soyinka extends his tutelage to “the world of craft, song and poetry” (SOYINKA, 2005, p. 28), which are crucial parts of ritual action. It is through craft—the realm of Ogun—that the transitional abyss can be transposed and the three realms of existence can be united. Ogun, as the god of craft and the arts, and ultimately of creativity, provides humans

with the instruments to actualize their link with essence, and then build their society, which accounts for what Soyinka considers Ogun's Promethean character. The drama of Ogun's relationship with humanity, however, is not only collaborative and friendly. Soyinka again tells us that, due to his craftsmanship and ability to unite deities and mortals, Ogun was first chosen by the gods to be their king, an honor that he refused, isolating himself in a house over the hills. Then, it was the turn of the elders of the town of Ire, afterwards consecrated to Ogun, to ask the god of iron to be their king, which he initially refused as well, but men's insistency ended up convincing him. Once during a war involving Ire, Ogun descended from the hill to defend his people. Inebriate with palm wine, he killed both the enemies and his own men. Grieving on what he had done, the god stuck his sword into the ground, which opened up a hole to receive him in the core of the earth. Soyinka's poem "Idanre" is woven around this myth, including important references to that of Atunda.

It should be noticed, however, that the relevance of the mythological figure of Ogun to Soyinka's work far exceeds this particular poem, constituting itself as the central paradigm to his imaginative as well as his theoretical texts. In the book *Introduction to Nigerian Literature*, edited by Bruce King, the critic Eldred Durosimi Jones, in the chapter dedicated to the Nigerian playwright, cites "*homo sapiens*, in his constant struggle of adjustment to this changing environment" as Soyinka's essential subject, the "changing environment" being "the Nigerian landscape—mountain, stream and forest—as well as its steel bridges, power stations, night clubs and tenement houses" (JONES, 1972, p. 113). Jones's commentary is in line with the importance attributed by Soyinka himself to the physical environment and man's conflict with it in the shaping of human culture and mentality, as mentioned above. Within this view, Ogun's central place as an articulating figure becomes more concrete and evident. In one of the myths reported above, Ogun is the god who is able to overcome the obstacles posed by the environment to the other gods, becoming an archetype of the explorer, representing man's ability to transform the surrounding environment.

From this point on, Ogun's symbolic scope extends to the social and the political. According to Eliana Lourenço da Lima Reis, in her work *Pós-Colonialismo, Identidade e Mestiçagem Cultural: A Literatura de Wole Soyinka*, reading "The Fourth Stage" exclusively as a theory of African theatre would be an oversimplification; the observations on drama actually bring forth a theory of cultural contacts. Within the context of political struggle found in Africa, it acquires the sense of a fight for liberation against colonialism and the search for an African identity (REIS, 1999, p. 153). Reis observes that Soyinka finds in Ogun a cultural and behavioral paradigm for the African. The seemingly insoluble contradictions between creation and destruction present in the deity are articulated through an affirmative notion toward life and multiplicity, rendering Ogun, in the condition of a cultural paradigm, as an archetype of revolution, struggle and transformation. Reis's observations are substantiated in another narrative poem, posterior to "Idanre," wherein Soyinka focuses more directly on the political possibilities of the symbolism of Ogun: *Ogun Abibiman*, which will not be discussed here. In an analysis of "Idanre," these different dimensions of the myth of Ogun have to be taken into consideration and studied in their relationships.

3. Idanre

“Idanre” was first published in 1967 as the title and closing text of Soyinka’s first poetry collection *Idanre and Other Poems*. The book comprises thirty-seven poems divided within seven sections, with the long narrative poem standing as a section of its own. According to Robert Fraser, in *West African Poetry: A Critical History*, since the publication of the collection, discovering unity or a progression among the pieces became the focus of many critical investigations (FRASER, 2001, p. 232). Indeed, it is noticeable how the poems in the first section refer to dawn and events taking place during this time of the day whereas “Idanre,” the closing piece, narrates an event beginning at night and ending at a new dawn, suggesting that the whole book describes the arch of a day and a night. Another consistency is the cyclical relationship between life and death, in which one springs from the other, as seen in poems such as “Dedication” and “Abiku.” The road and its dangers are also a recurring theme, in poems such as “Death in the Dawn” and “In Memory of Segun Awolowo.” Finally, war and conflict are present in pieces as “Ikeja, Friday, Four o’Clock” and “Massacre October ’66.” As the summative moment of the book, all these themes are included and developed in “Idanre.”

Due to its prominence within the volume, Soyinka provided a preface and explanatory notes to the narrative poem. In the preface, he explains that “Idanre” originated from two temporally and spatially separated events that were mingled into one experience: a walk through the rocky hills in the city of Idanre, in the Nigerian state of Ondo, and a thunderstorm in Molete, a district of the city of Ibadan, in the state of Oyo. Robert Fraser observes that the thunderstorm and its effect on the land was able to approximate the densely vegetated landscape of Molete to the rocky mountains of Idanre—which is the actual scenery of the poem—within the poet’s imagination (FRASER, 2001, p. 240-241).

In historical terms, Adebajji Akintoye informs us that Idanre was a very ancient kingdom, which, due to its isolation, has preserved many of its more ancient traits in religion and culture (AKINTOYE, 2010, p. 108). The same historian ascertains that the hill where the narrative poem is set was, from very olden times, a place of rituals, and its rocks, objects of worship (AKINTOYE, 2010, p. 13). These historical features are important in establishing a sense of ancientness and inchoation that is found in the poem. Soyinka himself described the hill as “a god-suffused grazing of primal giants and mastodons, petrified through some strange history” (SOYINKA, 1987, p. 57) in his preface. Indeed, geographical features, social and historical conditions and subjective impressions all become associated in the narrative poem with the myths of Ogun articulating all these dimensions. Structurally, the poem is divided into seven sections of different extension and varied verse patterns.

Section I, “*deluge...*,” presents a violent thunderstorm during the night. The enigmatic first stanza shows an unusual syntactic pattern:

Gone, and except for horsemen briefly
Thawed, lit in deep cloud mirrors, lost
The Skymen of Void’s regenerate Wastes
Striding vast across
My still inchoate earth. (p. 61)

The “void” referred to in this stanza can be associated with the transitional space between the three realms of existence, called “the fourth stage” by Soyinka, which provides a primal matrix for human existence. The “recesses” or the products of this

void are precipitated down to a “still inchoate earth.” The inchoation and absence of linear time is present in the very structure of the stanza, since none of the verbs provide any clear idea of the placement of the action in the past, present or future. Likewise, the objects referred to offer no concrete idea of time and space. We are in the realm of non-linear time, of inchoation and inception.

Ogun, the patron god of the poem, appears engaged in a violent combat with another important Yoruba deity, Sango, the god of thunder and, therefore, of electricity. The gods’ quarrel results in Sango’s electricity being channeled into the technological devices provided by Ogun. The reference to modern electric technology now situates the poem in present times. In addition, in stanza five, we find the poet, safely shielded in his home at night:

He catches Sango in his three-fingered hand
And runs him down to earth. Safe shields my eaves
This night, I have set the Iron One against
All wayward bolts. Rumours rise on grey corrugations,
The hearth is damped (p. 61)

After the storm subsides, the poet decides to take a walk in the rocky hills of Idanre. The result of the storm, in addition to feeding Ogun’s technology with electricity, is the drenched earth that will enable the future harvest:

And no one speaks of secrets in this land
Only, that the skin be bared to welcome rain
And earth prepare, that seeds may swell
And roots take flesh within her, and men
Wake naked into harvest-tide. (p. 62)

Biodun Jeyifo (2009), reads the first section as a description of the historic beginnings of culture and civilization, mainly agriculture, “and the Neolithic revolution to the inception of the Iron Age” (JEYIFO, 2009, p. 236). It should be reminded that, as the patron god of iron and all objects made of iron, Ogun is also associated to the origin of agriculture. Being set in present time, the poet’s perception of Ogun in this section can be seen as a condensation of the prehistoric past within the present. Ogun’s creative action, whether in ancient practices of agriculture or in modern technology, follows the same recurrent mythic pattern.

In the beginning of section II, , “... *and after*,” Ogun’s agricultural dimension is stressed in the opening iambic pentameter—“He comes who scrapes no earthdung from his feet” (p. 62)—, whose imagery and predicative structure is reminiscent of the Ijala poetry, a poetic genre practiced by Yoruba hunters with the aim of praising Ogun, according to Babalola (1966, 1997), who provides two interesting examples of Ijala verses that resonate with Soyinka’s opening line: “A bellicose man who scrapes his teeth with a sword ” and “Rugged and rough divinity who eats two hundred earthworms without feeling sick at all” (Babalola, 1997, p. 152).

These verses (both the traditional ones and Soyinka’s) present Ogun as a crude divinity associated to the earth and, therefore, to agriculture, which is reinforced by the second verse—“He comes again in harvest, the first of reapers” (p. 62). The poet starts his pilgrimage in unnamed company when he ascertains that “Night is our tryst when sounds are clear” (p. 62). An important character of the poem is introduced in the second stanza—the wine-girl:

At pilgrims' rest beneath Idanre Hill
 The wine-girl, dazed from divine dallying
 Felt wine-skeins race in fire-patterns within her
 Her eyes queried, what then are you? At such hour
 Why seek what on the hills? (p. 62)

In the explanatory notes to the poem, Soyinka reveals that this character encloses the figures of a young woman who had been killed in a car accident and that of Oya, the mythical Yoruba goddess of the river Niger who was the wife of Ogun, from whom she fled due to his violent nature, and then of Sango. The wine provided by her is the substance that will bring out the sense of community to unite the group of pilgrims and allow them to participate in Ogun's godly essence, as can be seen in the following lines:

Calm, beyond interpreting, she sat and in her grace
 Shared wine with us. The quiet of the night
 Shawled us together, secure she was in knowledge
 Of that night's benediction. Ogun smiled his peace
 Upon her, and we rose (p. 63)

The calm of the wine-girl seems to be transmitted to the other participants and, in response, Ogun shows his peaceful side. From the patron of agriculture, however, Ogun turns to be perceived as the god of the road, an innovation that, as much as it allows travelling and communication, is responsible for many deaths:

The weeds grow sinuous through gaunt corrosions
 Skeletons of speed, earth mounds raised towards
 Their seeming exhumation; growth is greener where
 Rich blood has spilt, brain and marrow make
 Fat manure with sheep's excrement (p. 65)

Here, the relationships between life and death are presented, as the bodily rests of those dead on the road become manure to propitiate new life. This cycle wherein life arises out of death is rendered in the fifteenth stanza in the symbolic circular images of "the First Boulder," "the errant wheel of the death chariot" and "the creation snake spawned tail in mouth" and, in the sixteenth stanza, in the conceptual claim that "I heard the silence yield to substance" (p. 65). This passage marks a transformation of the poet's state of mind in relation to his environment in which both of them are identified among themselves and with the god—the perception of present time as an imbricated part of mythic time starts to take place in an italicized stanza:

*And to the one whose feet were wreathed
 In dark vapours from earth's cooling pitch
 I earth my being, (p. 66).*

Images flash in the poet's mind:

Easters in convulsion, urged by energies
 Of light millenniums, crusades, empress and revolution
 Damnations and savage salvations (p. 67)

From the ecstasy provided by the wine, Idanre—the physical surroundings of the poet—becomes the stage whereon myriad events in human history are reenacted and re-experienced within his consciousness, in seeming chaos. Ogun—Promethean character

who led humans into the production of cultural goods, the god whose path is deemed “a loop of time” (p. 68)—assumes a cohering and restorative action when “his fingers / Drew warring elements to a union of being” (p. 68) and, as a result, “Earth’s broken rings were healed” (p. 68).

Earth’s rings fixed, Ogun’s myth of origin is ready to be reenacted. Both the god and the poet know it, and the third section, “*pilgrimage*,” foretells this reenactment in feelings and “accusing forms” (p. 68). Ogun, “the Iron One,” falls to “grieving” (p. 68). The poet reflects on the splitting of the gods by Atunda’s action, as referred before, which inaugurated human existence as it is known:

Union they had known until the Boulder
Rolling down the hill of the Beginning
Shred the kernel to a million lights.
A traitor’s heart rejoiced, the god’s own slave
Dirt-covered from the deed (p. 68)

In an italicized stanza we hear the deity’s voice, combined with that of the poet, both of them knowing that the bitter deeds will occur again:

*This road have I trodden in a time beyond
Memory of fallen leaves, beyond
Thread of fossil on the slate, yet I must
This way again.* (p. 69)

The poet knows how Ogun’s path, and Atunda’s path, is his own path and that of humanity as a whole—a path that cannot be avoided. This path and its reenactment are received by the god and the poet with grievance and sadness. The splitting of the gods that enabled the diversity of life is, firstly, a traumatic fact.

The fourth section, “*the beginning*,” is perhaps the most straightforwardly narrative in the poem—it is the one in which the myths wherein Ogun opens the way for the other gods, gives the secret of iron to humankind and, after much insistence, is crowned king. The transfiguration of the landscape of Idanre, begun in the end of section II, is now effected:

Low beneath rockshields, home of the Iron One
The sun had built a fire within
Earth’s heartstone. Flames in fever fits
Ran in rock fissures, and hill surfaces
Were all aglow with earth’s transparency
Orisa-nla, Orunmila, Esu, Ifa were all assembled
Defeated in the quest to fraternise with man (p. 70)

Now Idanre is the very place where the journey of the gods in their quest to reunite with men found a seemingly unsurmountable obstacle as a rock was set in their way. It is there that Ogun fashioned the first iron tool that enabled him to split the rock and lead the gods on: “Ogun the lone one saw it all, the secret / Veins of matter, and the circling lodes” (p. 70). The concrete landscape has become the mythic landscape and present time has become mythical time, something that had been prefigured not only in section II, but also in section III, when Idanre hill becomes “the hill of the beginning.” From this rocky landscape, Ogun “made a mesh of elements, from stone / Of fire and earthfruit” (p. 71).

Ogun, the skillful god, promised he would “clear a path to man” (p. 71)—his Promethean pledge which he fulfilled with mastery, gaining the admiration of both gods and men. Both wanted him for their king; both offers were refused. But man, less prudent, did not accept the refusal—“Ire laid skilled siege to divine withdrawal” (p. 71). He was crowned king, “Lead us king, and warlord” (p. 72), asked his devotees. Ogun could not resist:

Gods drowse in boredom, and their pity
Is easy roused with lush obsequious rites
Because the rodent nibbled somewhat at his yam,
The farmer hired a hunter, filled him with wine
And thrust a firebrand in his hand (p. 72)

An unwise choice of man, since

We do not burn the woods to trap
A squirrel; we do not ask the mountain's
Aid, to crack a walnut. (p. 73)

The fifth session, properly titled “*the battle*,” shows the consequences of this exaggerated decision by the sages of Ire. Biodun Jeyifo appropriately calls our attention to the fact that the battle alluded to in the title is not “a battle between two armies,” but actually “a sustained slaughter of his own men by Ogun, who had first wiped out the enemy forces” (JEYIFO, 2009, p. 237). This section stands out for its variance in stanzaic forms. Verses tend to be shorter, and the images show a special physicality and sense of movement. The slaughter appears in metaphors of consumption and destruction:

Overtaking fugitives
A rust-red swarm of locusts
Dine off grains
Quick proboscis
Find the coolers
Soon the wells are dry (p. 73)

Nothing stops Ogun's violent action, since “never to him comes the cry of men,” who warn him: “Your men Ogun! Your men!”, “Monster deity, you destroy your men!” (p. 75). Images of light and air recur, although they seem not to bring clarity and refreshment, but actually confusion and despair, as seen in two very similar stanzas:

There are air-paths unknown to human sight
Arabesques of light, a keen maze where all
Who seek strategic outlets find
O Iron One
The shortest cut (p. 74)

and

There are air-beams unfelt by human breath
Unseen by sight, intangible. Whose throat
Draws breath in a god's preserve
Breathes the heart of fire (p. 76)

These air paths and arabesques of light are inaccessible to men, who, trying to find “strategic outlets” end up finding only their destruction, since “a god is still a god to men” (p. 78). The awareness which fatally did not seem accessible to Ogun’s men at Ire in the past is obtained by the poet, who accompanies Ogun in his own awareness of what had taken place, being reminded of his human condition:

Light filled me then, intruder though
I watched a god’s excorsis; clearly
The blasphemy of my humanity rose accusatory
In my ears, and understanding came
Of a fatal condemnation (p. 79)

This condemnation was brought forth by Atunda’s rebellious act, the very act responsible for the destruction of the primal unity. Ogun is aware of that, too, since “he recognized the pattern of the spinning rock / and passion slowly yielded to remorse” (p.80). The awareness of his condition as a human being, as a mortal being are deepened in the sixth section, “*recessional*,” wherein the poet, after witnessing and actually experiencing Ogun’s act and linking it to Atunda, reflects on the nature of his mortality:

It will be time enough and space, when we are dead
To be a spoonful of the protoplasmic broth
Cold in wind-tunnels, lava flow of nether worlds
Deaf to thunder blind to light, comatose
In one omni-sentient cauldron (p. 81)

Death, then, appears as the regaining of the unity that existed before Atunda’s act, but this state of unity now does not appear to be celebrated and valued; it is actually perceived by the poet as an amorphous homogeneity, as unity seen as destruction, as “the superior annihilation of the poet’s diversity” (p. 82). The poet here is Atunda, the one who made the one godhead into many, who brought diversity into existence and is thus celebrated as “the stray electron,” who defies patterns, as a saint and revolutionary, the forerunner of Zeus, Osiris, Jahweh and Christ. All the godheads came from his act:

All hail Saint Atunda, First revolutionary
Grand iconoclast at genesis – and the rest in logic
Zeus, Osiris, Jahweh, Christ in trifoliate (p. 83)

This inner mental movement that is described throughout the sixth section, a form of internal elaboration of the myth of Ogun, and the fate of humanity, as a reflection of Atunda’s original rebellion, a celebration of diversity, ends with a surprisingly optimistic transformation in symbolic patterns:

Evolution of the self-devouring snake to spatial
New in symbol, banked loop of the ‘Mobius Strip’ (p. 83)

The Mobius-Strip, as observed by Soyinka in his notes to the poem, by having a “kink” in the middle allows the illusion of an escape from endless repetition and is, in his opinion, “the freest conceivable symbol of human and divine relationships” (p. 87).

The seventh and final movement, “*harvest*,” is characterized by myriads of metamorphoses. Dawn comes, and the landscape, earth and sky, are suffused with images of fertility; the now sprouting skies “ebb to full navel in progressive arcs” (p. 83) and are compared to an “ocean of a million roe,” while the poet rides “on ovary

silences.” The air, destructive in the fifth section, now withdraws to “scything motions,” friendly to man and imparting the rhythm of harvest. Continuous quantities are fragmented into discrete ones, as in “mists fell to mote infinities” or when the hours of the night are compared to gourds of wine, now dissipated, and the sun is parsimoniously sifted into fiber walls, echoing the fragmentation of the godhead, which has been celebrated in the previous movement.

Not unexpectedly, the changes in the environment are entwined to changes in the three participants in the ceremony. The poet is freed by night. Ogun, once the “lust-blind god” and “gore-drunk Hunter,” after having fallen to remorse, bids the forests to swallow him and, decided not to make the same mistake, leaves humanity to harvest, with the knowledge he had provided. The wine-girl, “fused still in her hour of charity” (p. 84), changes her gaze from distant to expectant, which is responded by Harvest:

The first fruits rose from subterranean hoards
First in our vision, corn sheaves rose over hill
Long before the bearers, domes of eggs and flesh
Of palm fruit, red, oil black, froth flew in sun bubbles
Burst over throngs of golden gourds
And they moved towards resorption in His alloy essence
Primed to a fusion, primed to the sun’s dispersion
Containment and communion, seed-time and harvest, palm
And pylon, Ogun’s road a ‘Mobius’ orbit, kernel
And electrons, wine to alchemy. (p. 85)

Curiously, repeating the pattern found in the second section, Ogun’s massacre brings new fertility to the soil. The golden gourds are reabsorbed in “His alloy essence,” seed time and harvest, palm and pylon, kernel and electrons are harmonized. Ogun’s road, once violent and famished, is now a “Mobius orbit” and the night wine, once the trigger of Ogun’s violent act, now yields to alchemy.

4. Discussion

In the first section of this article, a series of theoretical observations on Yoruba mythology and worldview have been sketched, mainly in relation to the significance of Ogun, and how these are developed in the thought of Wole Soyinka. The second section offered a description and analysis of the poem. This section is intended to reflect on the poem taking into considerations what was discussed in the first one.

As we have seen, the cycles of creation and destruction and man’s struggle with the surrounding environment resulting in the transformation of nature into culture are central themes in Soyinka’s work. A discussion of the poem could focus on how these themes are developed and how the myth of Ogun is used to signify them. The observations offered by Eliana Lourenço de Lima Reis about Ogun as a paradigm lead us to the idea that the god’s significance should not be confined to a single interpretive dimension. As much as Soyinka investigates the god’s mythology to develop a theory of African theatre, his reflections, and this is stressed by Reis, project the features of the god into the political, historical, and social planes, mainly when considering the situation of political struggle within Africa. Therefore, the character of Ogun as creator and destroyer should be analyzed in these different planes.

Sandra T. Barnes, in “The Many Faces of Ogun,” observes that, as much as Ogun is narrowly associated to iron and the iron revolution, the ideas that gave origin to the deity are likely to have appeared at an earlier stage in association with hunting and killing (BARNES, 1997, p. 5). The same line of thought is adopted by Adebajji Akintoye, who posits that, before iron was invented among the Yoruba, Ogun “was from earlier times worshipped as a patron god of all working folks” (AKINTOYE, 2010, p. 18). Therefore, the first dimension—or at least the most ancient—in which Ogun’s myth could be analyzed is that of work as a transformation of the environment, in which hunting and agriculture stand out. The other dimensions are the aforementioned artistic and political ones. Ogun’s influence in these different fields will appear in different moments of Soyinka’s works. His patronage over the arts appears, in addition to the essay “The Fourth Stage,” in a play like *A Dance of the Forests*, wherein the god is associated to the artist Demoke; Ogun’s political role as revolutionary and liberating leader are central to the poem *Ogun Abibiman*. In “Idanre,” we see him essentially linked to the prehistoric world and the emergence of agriculture, metalworking and other crafts, and man’s transformative action over the environment—a feature that is reinforced by the historic significance of the kingdom and the hill and rocks of Idanre previously remarked on. However, if the artistic and political dimensions of Ogun are not explicitly articulated in the poem, they can be deduced from it, since the poem offers a sketching of the god’s archetype and overall functioning.

Therefore, in the poem, an inception of the artistic dimension of Ogun can be found primarily in the way he conditions man’s relationship with the natural environment and how this is reflected in the poet’s consciousness. We remember how the ecstasy provided by the wine in section II leads to identification between the narrator-poet and the deity—an identification that will be completed in section III and will result in the poet’s being able to reconstruct the myths of Ogun on the rocky hills of Idanre. Let us remember how Soyinka, in “Morality and Aesthetics in the Ritual Archetype,” observed that the physical environment in its vastness will be the primordial stage on which the drama and deeds of the gods will be enacted in ritual plays. It is in this sense that man’s struggle with the environment and the constraining forces exerted by it will become the archetype of artistic craft. Let us stress again that, in Soyinka’s theory, the ritual play—and its constitutive parts that include poetry, dance, and music—are practical devices destined to ensure the metaphysical order between the realms of existence and not merely objects of aesthetic fruition.

The prefiguration of Ogun’s political and revolutionary character can be discussed in Ogun’s ambiguous and somewhat problematic relationship with another central construct present in the poem—the notion of cyclical time. The chapter in Robert Fraser’s book *West African Poetry* dedicated to the book *Idanre* opens with a most telling note written by Soyinka in 1965 and found by Fraser in Soyinka’s manuscript in the British Library:

For a long time I could not accept why Ogun, the Creator God, should also be the agency of death. Interpretation of his domain, the road, proved particularly depressing and symbolically vexed especially inasmuch as the road is so obviously part of this same cyclic order. I know of nothing more futile, more monotonous or boring than a circle. (SOYINKA, cited by FRASER, 2001, p. 231).

Indeed, there seems to be a fundamental contradiction between the notion of cyclical time and the possibility of revolutionary and transformative action. If time inevitably repeats itself, any attempt of revolution or transformative action becomes utterly futile. How can Ogun become a revolutionary agent if “the bloody origin of Ogun’s pilgrimage,” as Soyinka says in his prefatory notes to “Idanre,” are “in truly cyclical manner, most bloodily reenacted” (SOYINKA, 1987, p. 58) including his deeds of injustice against his own people?

It is perhaps here that the importance of the figure of Atunda is fully affirmed. We saw how, in section III—wherein the notion of cyclical time is more strongly and explicitly articulated—, Ogun falls to grievance in recognizing the pattern of Atunda’s action. The relationship of the revolutionary god to this other revolutionary mythic figure is a tensed one, then. Section VI is greatly devoted to the celebration of Atunda, wherein he is deemed the “stray electron, defiant of patterns” (p. 82) and his act is seen as inaugurating the multiplicity of gods and, consequently, the affirmation of the multiplicity of life which was remarked on by Eliana Lourenço de Lima Reis as associated to Ogun. This action leads Atunda to be called a “poet”—and it can be guessed that the poetic character of his act lies in its creative dimension. This creative role of Atunda links him to Ogun and can be reinforced by an etymological analysis of the slave’s name provided by Niyi Osundare. According to this scholar and poet, the name “Atunda” could be loosely translated as “re-creator,” whereas the slave’s alternate name “Atooda” defines someone or something that “creates by hand.” The recurrence of cyclical motions in Yoruba mythology is evidenced when we find out that the same “factive impulse” (as Osundare terms it) that has destroyed the original divine unity is what allows human being to re-harmonize with essence (OSUNDARE, 2001, p. 188).

Curiously enough, the same section, after Atunda is hailed as a saint for inaugurating diversity, announces the evolution of the self-devouring snake, a symbol which, according to Soyinka’s explanatory notes, is sometimes used by Ogun around his neck, into the Mobius’s strip. Therefore, in addition to bringing diversity into the world, Atunda’s action appears to be the one element that allows repetition to become revolution. According to this reading, Atunda becomes an overall paradigm of the possibility of change within repetition, the one who allows the monotonous movement of the self-devouring snake to become the more complex loop of the Mobius Strip. This symbolic evolution allows Soyinka to propose a new postulation of time, one that escapes from this futile, monotonous or boring self-repeating cycle without disregarding or rejecting altogether the unavoidable cycles of imbrications between past and present. After all, Isidore Okpewho reminds us that “the relationship between the past and later generations, between antecedence and posterity” is “the principal concern in Soyinka’s creative thought,” a relationship that “is seen far less in terms of harmony than of stress” (OKPEWHO, 2009, p. 197). And we should remember, also with Isidore Okpewho, that, as much as the past can be relevant, Soyinka’s primary concern is always the present.

Therefore, “Idanre” appears as a very broad poem enclosing notions of time and space and how they impact on human condition and agency and their realization in arts, crafts and cultural institutions—once again, the province of Ogun. Biodun Jeyifo has once noticed that the poem could be seen as a prolegomenon to more mature works (JEYIFO, 2009, p. 240), inclosing many features that would be further elaborated throughout Soyinka’s career. Indeed, if Ogun is the informing spirit of Soyinka’s imaginative and theoretical oeuvre, “Idanre,” in its images of inception and inchoation,

provides an important and fertile groundwork for the understanding of this spirit and this oeuvre.

5. Conclusion

This essay started with a discussion on the relationship between poetry and mythology and, based on a convergence found in reflections by such different authors as Mircea Eliade, Hart Crane, and Abiola Irele, a difference was established between the status of myth in Western societies, in which it is part of a cultural past now apparently overcome, and in traditional societies found in Africa, Polynesia and other continents, wherein myth is an actual part of communal life and social institutions. As we have seen, Abiola Irele in particular remarked that this difference had an important impact on the situation of modern African writers, in comparison to their European or American peers, insofar as they could produce their works based on mythologies that are effective parts of their societies and, therefore, provide more lively paradigms for imaginative works.

The analysis and discussion of “Idanre” by Wole Soyinka seem to point to this direction. Ogun was seen as such a strong and contemporary presence that his figure was able to merge past and present in the poem’s imaginative transformation of the physical environment. Whereas it would be risky to make any comparison between the use of myth by Soyinka and that made by poets such as Crane, Eliot and Pound (which would require a thorough reading and discussions of the works of these poets as well), the fact that the Yoruba gods are currently worshipped and participate in the everyday lives of many pertaining to the Yoruba society seems to have an impact on Soyinka’s exploration of the symbolism of Ogun in such practical dimensions of human life as professional activities, artistic creation, social institution and political action and struggle, which reinforce Abiola Irele’s views on the place of mythology in African literature.

Possible lines of investigation suggested by the discussions provided in this essay could be furthered in comparisons between myth and literature in Western and African literature, the role of myth in the works of other African writers and the developments of ideas and symbols that are part of “Idanre” throughout Soyinka’s literary career. Such lines of investigation may not only deepen our understanding of the very important cultural fact of the relationship between literature and mythology, but also contribute to an articulation of literatures, mythologies and, therefore, worldviews associated to different societies and cultures.

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