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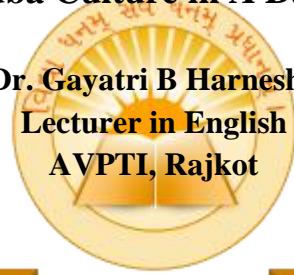
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Depiction of Yoruba Culture in A Dance of the Forests

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Abstract: Wole Soyinka is a well known Nigerian dramatist, who was awarded Nobel Prize in 1986, for his achievement in the arena of African literature. He is a prolific writer and versatile genius of African continent. His works are based on Yoruba society, culture, tradition and politics of Africa. The dramatic environment that Soyinka creates has been enriched with variegated realistic scene portraying African life very exactly and fashions and characters holding a mirror up to nature and presenting life as it is. His literary corpus reveals his unmistakable creative and critical mooring in African traditions, myths and history. He observed inherent theatrical qualities in many rituals, beliefs, festivals and ceremonies of West Africa which might be stretched in the direction of theatre. This study focuses on Soyinka's use of Yoruba cultural tradition as a way of life in Africa. His plays reflect Yoruba songs, dance, myths etc. Thus, the playwright attempts Yoruba culture as Western dramatic form in his plays, A Dance of the Forests.

Keywords: Yoruba Culture, African Tradition, Myth, History.

Wole Soyinka is a prolific writer in African literature. He won the Nobel Prize in Literature in 1986, the first African to be so honored. His reputation rests firmly on his work for the theatre. Wole Soyinka is a traditional African dramatist to the extent that he employed the Yoruba culture as way of life. Soyinka, in an Interview with Appiah explains the Yoruba philosophy of life and he justifies the rituals:

We believe that there are various areas of existence, all of which interact, interlock in a pattern of continuity: the world of the ancestor, the world of the living, and the world of the unborn. The process of transition among these various worlds is a continuing one and one which is totally ameliorated. For instance, the function of ritual, of sacrifice – whether it's a ram or a chicken – the function of seasonal ceremonies, is in fact allied to the ease of transition among these various worlds.

He has united the past and the present as the western dramatic techniques which influenced him during his formative years in England. Soyinka has drawn on the past of Africa to highlight the contemporary social, political and economic affairs of Nigeria after attaining independence. Although Soyinka combines different African customs and beliefs; his main source of inspiration is Yoruba cultural tradition. Soyinka's plays are delivered with Yoruba mythological figures, myths, ritual and festivals. Soyinka's dramatic theory is based on Ogun myth. He sketched the origin of Yoruba tragedy in Yoruba ritual or in the “Mysteries of Ogun”. According to Yoruba metaphysics, the entire Yoruba pantheon and humans were born due to the fragmentation of Orisa-nla, the primal deity of all God. The transitional gulf isolated the deities from the mortals. Man is constantly haunted by the consciousness of the loss of the everlasting essence of his being and attempts to recover the whole of his being.



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The Yoruba people occupy the south-Western part of Nigeria, they account for about 20% of the population of country. They are believed historically to have migrated from the Middle- Eastern part of the world during the medieval periods. They are a spiritual group of people including Christians, Muslims or of traditional beliefs. The Yoruba people are mainly involved in the commercial media and educational zones of the country. The Yoruba people have different stories about their origin, they are all associated to the same ancestor "Oduduwa", one story is that he migrated from what is known as Mecca because of his belief in deities, which caused him to be expelled from his abode and then came to settle in Ile-Ife and start a dynasty, which was further expanded by his seven sons. Another school of thought expresses that he was an ordinary Yoruba man who originated to influence by defeating the existing governing class. The additional story is that Oduduwa (father of the Yoruba) was sent by God from heaven to create the earth and human race. He descended from heaven accomplished by his lieutenants and landed at Ile-Ife, where he proceeded with his mission. The chain with which he landed on to earth is still said to exist in the monument, though it is said to be hidden from wicked eyes. According to this account, Ile-Ife is not only the support of the Yoruba people but also of human being. He swayed with a little of sand and a cock in his hands, he extended the sand over the earth, which was concealed with water and the cock extended the sand all over the earth that shaped land. These traditional of Yoruba's faith they had been conquering their fatherland since the time of formation. The Yoruba people had their individual form of religion earlier the coming of Christianity and Islam, they believed in their individual deities, which transformed with each topographical location. There are many deities such as Sango (God of thunder), Ogun (God of Iron), Sopoona (God of smallpox), Yemoja and so many other Gods. These are believed to be mediators between God (Olodumare) and man.

The traditional Yoruba world develops its nourishment from the Yoruba worldview and the associated rituals. Yoruba metaphysics promotes a belief in the four arenas of existence. Yoruba cosmology comprises the world of the living, the world of the dead and the world of the unborn - all of which are connected with the supernatural passage of transition. Yoruba cosmology reveals a belief in the continuity among these three states of being. Thus, a human being can have three positions of existence and in order to transfer from one position of existence to another one needs crossing the transitional gulf. Ancestors are greatly respected by the Yoruba and with physical death in the world of the living; a person joins the ancestors in the world of the dead. "The world of the unborn, in the Yoruba world-view, is as evidently older than the world of the living as the world of the living is older than the ancestor-world".

During egungun rituals, selected people of the community who wear egungun masks bring back the dead



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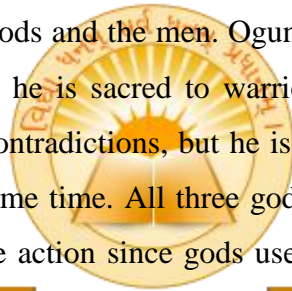
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ancestors physically into the world of the living. Soyinka's dramas like *A Dance of the Forests* have their thematic haven in this metaphysical idea.

A Dance of the Forests presents a complex interplay between the gods, mortals, and the dead in which the ideal goal is the experience of self-discovery within the context of West African spiritualism. Yoruba culture presented in drama, they fall flexibly below two categories: first, the presentation of characters from all realms of existence: gods, mortals, ancestors, and spirits; second, the flexible, non-linear timeline that corresponds to the Yoruba's concept of time. In drama, Soyinka presents as characters three major deities widely worshipped by people for their special powers: Forest Head (Obatala), Ogun, and Eshu (Eshuoru). The choice is significant here because Soyinka shows a conflict of interest between the gods that eventually affects the lives and destinies of humans. Obatala is the supreme creator who created earth and mankind. He is also considered as the god of purity and high moral standards in the Yoruba culture. Eshuoru is the Yoruba trickster god. He is a mischief-maker who represents chance. He has no respect for authority, and therefore, he causes mischief among the gods and the men. Ogun is the god of war in the Yoruba pantheon, but he is also the god of iron; therefore, he is sacred to warriors, hunters, blacksmiths, drivers, railroad workers, and artists. He is a god full of contradictions, but he is most particularly recognized for being the god of creativity and eradication at the same time. All three gods are interested in shaping the destinies of the forest dwellers, which complicates the action since gods use their special powers to defeat each other, and to protect their humans as well.



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In addition to deities, Soyinka also included spirits that control the universe because according to West African concept of Animism; "souls reside in objects and natural phenomena such as trees, hills, streams, oceans, and rocks." The spirits gather at the court of the Forest Father to inform their positions and solve their problems. The inclusion of spirits here is to project an integral cultural order in which all aspects of the universe correspond to a harmonious unity under the power of the supreme deity. The human characters also belong to different realms of existence: the living, the dead and the unborn. In addition to the forest travelers, who exist in the world of the living, Soyinka also promotes ancestors from ancient times rejuvenated through ritual practice of ancestor worship. In addition, the final dance in the play is centered on the battle to possess the unborn child of the dead woman. The play became alive with beings from different realms of existence, and natures, as Osita Okagbue contended in *"Culture and Identity in African and Caribbean Theatre,"* "For African peoples, no point of existence are terminal, finished or permanent. The living dies and become ancestors; the unborn are born to become the living; while the ancestors can revert to



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being the unborn". The play, starts and ends in the temporal time outside the forest, but the larger sum of events take place over one night in the forest, in the metaphysical time of the dream that moves freely between past, present, and future.

It is observed that the characters in play, experience mobility between the world of the living and the dead when they take part in the rituals of forefather worship that involves the resurrection of dead souls. In that particular scene, gods, humans possessed by real spirits, unborn children all co-exist and interact in a fluid concept of time and space that presents the concept of time as a constant change in Yoruba culture. *A Dance of the Forests* became fascinating text not only to the Nigerian audience who saw in it a distinguished performance of their culture, but also to those more familiar with the Europeans traditions and worldview arise to relations with the Yoruba culture, metaphysics, and its rituals. Wole Soyinka uses recurrent symbols of gods and spirits; myth and rituals; song, dance and mime as elements of a feast. He uses Yoruba culture for the songs and tonal rhythms are in tune with the drums and the dancing, and all the three - language, music and action - are inseparable from the performance of ritual. Thus he owes a great debt to traditional culture and framed reputable cultural identity of the nation.



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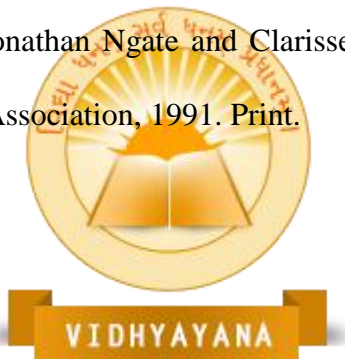
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