

# Wole Soyinka's 'Idanre' : A Study in the Archetypal Image of the Woman and God

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In view of the recondite nature of Soyinka's 'Idanre', it will be necessary, before examining the subject at issue, to first of all take a bird's eye view of what this long, uninterrupted poem, written in free verse, is all about. In a word, 'Idanre' is a myth concerning traditional Africa tampered with by modern culture. This major and title poem of the seven groups of poems contained in the collection, consists of seven sections: 'deluge...', '...and after', 'pilgrimage', 'the beginning', 'the battle', 'recessional', and 'harvest'. For the sake of convenience, the seven parts of the poem can be divided into two distinct phases.

In the first phase which begins with the 'deluge...' and ends with the 'pilgrimage', the poet, like a coryphaeus, kind of sings the praises of the Yoruba god, Ogun who, according to the 'Notes On Idanre' given at the end of the poem, is "God of Iron and metallurgy, Explorer, Artisan, Hunter, God of War, Guardian of the Road, the Creative Essence".<sup>1</sup> Here, the relationship between the people and Ogun is quite cordial. A peaceful biological or earthly life is created, as a result of the celestial conflict between Ogun and Sango, "god of lightning and electricity".<sup>2</sup> The conflict arises from their brawl over the wine-girl, Oya who was formerly Ogun's wife, but later abandoned the wine-girl. Oya who was formerly Ogun's wife, but later abandoned him because of his "fearsome nature" for Sango.<sup>3</sup> The biological life created on earth is signaled by the down pour of rain. As indicated in the last stanza of the 'deluge...' and in the eleventh stanza of '...and after', the people salute this event by cultivating the earth and extracting clay and rare minerals from the land. The people however pay for these benefits by losing their lives in road accidents and by offering sacrifices, to appease "Ogun, ... a demanding god".<sup>4</sup> In 'pilgrimage', the third poem of this first phase, Ogun returns to Idanre, his heavenly abode, only to discover, to his dismay, that during his absence, the shrines were desecrated by men. Ogun grieves that man is increasingly losing faith in god. The present desecration Ogun's abode and shrine is reminiscent of the rebellious act of Atóoda who rolled a rock – "the Boulder" – down onto the first or master-god, "smashing him to bits and creating the multiplicity of god-head".<sup>5</sup> Ogun regrets the fact that man is becoming increasingly uncontrollable as demonstrated by his re-enactment of the slave's rebellion against the father-god: "On the hills of Idanre memories/Grieved him, my master god, Vital/Flint of matter, total essence split again/On recurrent boulders".<sup>6</sup> At this point, the poet comes in with the comment that all things change, time dissolves the past – this truism is shown in the fact that the tribe's deities, now outcasts, exist only "in clay texts/And fossil textures".<sup>7</sup>

The note on which the first phase ends, takes us naturally to the second phase of the poem which is covered by 'the beginning', 'the battle' and 'recessional'. In this phase, we have another side of the cycle, we experience the effect of the "plague of finite chaos [that]/ creative, but the destructive side of Ogun. Here, we have the beginning of the vicious cycle, the tragic conflict of errors in which Ogun turns against his men. Like Hephaestus Vulcan who forged weapons for his people, but instead of leading them in their war against the enemy, this god of war gets drunk and slaughters his own men. At this point, we come across a number of statements relating to the need for man to be "earthed", to have his roots in the earth, to believe in his own inner force, rather than have faith in a god who turns round and destroys his own men. This event marks the completion of the vicious cycle-creation ends in destruction: a whole period of history has now elapsed. The last poem, 'harvest', is, in fact, a repetition of the cycle which begins with the good or productive side of Ogun who, in spite of the carnage, is still worshipped and sacrificed to by the people as the last two stanzas of the poem indicate. In fact, the "first fruits" of the harvest are offered to Ogun - "domes of [corn], of eggs and flesh/Of palm fruit, red, oil black".<sup>9</sup> During the sacrifices, Ogun once more communes and lives in harmony with his people. The events in 'Idanre', therefore, indicate that Soyinka subscribes to the cyclic theory of history, an age-old idea which holds that the world is periodic, the universe repeats itself *ad infinitum* in cycles of time. W.B. Yeats, in memorable terms, immortalizes this idea in his justly famous poems, 'The Second Coming' and 'The Magi', as well as in *A Vision*, "which deals with various types of human personality, with the 'gyres' of historical change and with the supernatural".<sup>10</sup> The reference to this universal notion of history serves as a fitting introduction to the central concern of this study, namely, the archetypal image of the woman and God in Soyinka's 'Idanre'. The paper's claim to uniqueness, indeed, lies in the wide-ranging comparison it makes between Soyinka's vision of the woman and God and that of other writers.

The aim of this study, in other words, is to show that despite the typical African background against which the poem is written, it draws, as it were, on all human history or recurrent patterns of human experiences throughout the ages. Clearly, Oya, Ogun and the rockhills of Idanre belong to the specific experiences of the Yoruba tribe, yet, they also symbolize archaic or archetypal situations; they relate to certain prototypes, to general universal aspects of human experience, occurring in various forms from age to age, from country to country, from race to race. In 'Idanre' we notice, for example, echoes of the Jewish conjectures which associate the cosmic creative process with a "feminine principle in the deity". Oya, the wine-girl, symbolizes this feminine element in the gods. This is shown in the fact that the conflict between Ogun and Sango, arising from their rivalry over Oya, leads to the creation of biological life. Soyinka is ostensibly saying that the conflict occasioned by Oya between the gods is healthy in that it results in a creative act, and a synthesis of essences that would not otherwise have occurred. This ties up with the Jewish claim contained in the Zohar - an abstract of non-orthodox Hebrew traditions of the thirteenth century - that the world is a product of the intercourse between God and Woman. According

to Professor Saurat.

In the *Zohar* 'the world is the outcome,  
the child, of sex-life within the divinity'.  
Woman on earth, 'small in her exile but powerful',  
is represented as an 'expression of the Matrona' –  
the feminine principle in the deity.<sup>11</sup>

This notion of "the Matrona" is clearly interwoven with the symbol of the Muse, the poet's companion on whom he depends for power, protection and inspiration. In '... and after' we notice that Ogun retires to his mountain abode after creation. Here again the feminine presence is felt. Oya mystically appears to Ogun and the poet "At pilgrims' rest beneath Idanre Hill "at night, a time" when sounds are clear/And silences ring pure tones as the pause/Of iron bells".<sup>12</sup> When Oya, the "bride Night"<sup>13</sup> appears, she produces palm-wine by some magical means and shares it among them :

...She swam an eel into the shadows felt her limbs  
Grow live, the torrents ran within and flooded us  
A gourd rose and danced between – without  
The night awaited celebration of the crops –  
She took and held it to her womb.  
Calm, beyond interpreting, she sat and in her grace  
Shared wine with us....<sup>14</sup>

Two importance facts connected with the image of the woman can be discerned in the above quotation – Oya's mysterious appearance on the hills at night and her magical production of wine. In other words, the passage associates Oya with night and wine. Being the creative element or, to use a Jungian terminology, the anima or soul-image in Ogun and Soyinka, both connected with creativity, Oya appears to the god and the poet at night.

Night here is a propitious moment for creativity because at this time supernatural or "sublimating essences" are at work. A solemn and quite moment of "silences" when all is at rest, night is thus a conducive time for recollection, a holy or visionary moment when the creative spirit is at its best. In 'harvest', Soyinka describes night as the time when the poet's imagination is liberated, thus enabling him to communicate with presences: "Night sets me free: .../ I ride on Ovary silences/In the wake of ghosts".<sup>15</sup> In the 'Preface' to the poem, Soyinka claims that 'Idanre' is, in fact, a record of his night-walk up the rockhills "in company of presences such as dilate the head and erase known worlds".<sup>16</sup> The poet and the presences "returned at dawn".<sup>17</sup> Oya, of course, was an integral part of the "presences" – in Soyinka's own words, "she was an eternal presence who charity had earthed me from the sublimating essence of the night".<sup>18</sup> In the nineteenth stanza of '...and after' the poet again talks of earthing his "being" at night "to the one [Oya] whose feet were wreathed/In dark vapours from earth's cooling pitch/...priestess at fresh shrines".<sup>19</sup>

The image of Oya as a priestess, as one who officiates or performs the rites of sacrifice, is given concrete realization towards the closing stanzas of the same poem, where she is pictured as a "caryatid at the door of sanctuary", "a strength/Among sweet reeds and

lemon bushes, palm/And fragrances of rain".<sup>20</sup> In the light of the references made to the palm-wine girl, a strength in Nature, the "bride of Night", a priestess and an "eternal presence" who charitably "earthed" the poet, we deduce that, for Soyinka, Oya is, in fact, the symbol of the Muse, a guardian, a divine mother who directs and protects the poet's creative powers. By constantly using the first person plural form, "we" and "us", Soyinka time and again reminds the reader of the inter-dependence that exists between the poet Ogun and Oya. They are inter-dependent or one in the sense that their spirits synthesize, as it were, and freely flow into one another: "Calm, beyond interpreting, she sat and in her grace/shared wine with us. The quiet of the night/Shawled us together...."<sup>21</sup> These lines obviously suggest that the poet, Ogun and Oya are enclosed, enveloped in the quietness of the night; they are controlled, that is, by the presence of the woman who is the "bride of Night".

Reference was also made to the fact that Oya is as well associated with wine. Soyinka considers wine here as a life force, an ingredient that enlivens the spirit and stimulates, actuates the imagination into creativity. Oya therefore symbolizes abundance or the fertility of the creative imagination. We have already referred to the scene where she "shared wine" with Ogun and the poet "beneath Idanre Hill". Oya, in fact, produced the wine by transforming into a palm tree from which "torrents" of wine flowed and "flooded" the trio. Instantly, "a gourd rose and danced" in the flood. Oya took it "and held it to her womb" from where the wine flowed.<sup>22</sup> The emphasis here, as suggested by the words "torrents" and "flooded", is on the creative, productive and overwhelming power of Oya.

A common pattern can be recognized between Soyinka's conception of Oya and the conception of the woman in literary tradition. In other words, Soyinka's practice of associating the woman with inspiration, the moment when the poet's mind is open to the overwhelming power of the Muse or "eternal wisdom", is a recurrent tendency among poets throughout the ages. In the opening lines of the seventh book of *Paradise Lost*, for example, Milton invites the "heavenly-born" Urania, one of the nine daughters of Zeus and Mnemosyne, to inspire his song. In the passage that follows Milton seems to suggest that Urania, like Oya, is a creative principle in both god and poet:

Descend from heav'n, Urania, by that name  
 If rightly thou art called, whose voice divine  
 Following, above th' Olympian hill I soar,  
 Above the flight of Pegasean wing,  
 Thou with eternal wisdom didst converse,  
 Wisdom thy sister, and with her didst play  
 In presence of th' Almighty Father, pleased  
 With thy celestial song,  
 On evil days though fall'n, and evil tongues;  
 In darkness, and with dangers compassed round,  
 And solitude: yet not alone while thou  
 Visit'st my slumbers nightly, or when morn  
 Purples the east. Still govern thou my song.

Urania. and fit audience find, though few.<sup>23</sup>

From this passage concerning Milton's prayer to Urania, we move to Coleridge's Kubla Khan which, according to Bodkin to whom I owe the inspiration for writing this paper, is essentially concerned with:

...a Power that inspires his song,  
or kindles his vision, figured as a  
maid who sings to him, o as the  
Muse who visits his nightly solitude.<sup>24</sup>

In the poem, the poet has a vision of "an Abyssinian madid" singing of Mount Abora as the played on her dulcimer. The poet expresses his wish to recreate her song in his imagination – if this happens, he too would build a magic pleasure-dome, Kubla Khan had done, with gardens watered by the river Alph, the river of the Muses:

Could I revive within me  
Her symphony and song,  
To such a deep delight 'twould win me,  
That with music loud and long,  
I would build that dome in air,  
That sunny dome ! those caves of ice !<sup>25</sup>

Coleridge, like Soyinka and Milton, looks up to the woman to awaken or sharpen his poetic imagination, his creative powers, now threatened with conflict and extinction. In this connection, we may also want to refer to the tremendous influence Maud Gonne has on Yeats' creative activity. Yeats' description of her recalls Soyinka's image of Oya as a "priestess at fresh shrines"/ "caryatid at the door of sanctuary" :

I had never thought to see in a living woman so great a beauty. It belonged to famous pictures, to poetry, to some legendary past. A complexion like the bloom of apples and yet face and body had the beauty of lineaments which Blake calls the highest beauty because it changes least from youth to old age, and statue so great that she seemed of a divine race.<sup>26</sup>

This passage brings to mind poems such as "When You Are Old", 'He Wishes for the Cloths of Heaven' and 'He Wishes his Beloved were Dead' in which Maud Gonne is associated with archetypal images: the stars, "the mountains overhead", the heavens, the moon and the sun. In general terms, Yeats gives us to understand, as Petrarch does in relation to Laura, that Maud Gonne is a mythical figure, a goddess, the symbol of the Muse. Her refusal to reciprocate Yeats' love is, in fact, a blessing in disguise considering the fact that she constantly haunts Yeats' dreams and conscious thought, kindling the creative impulse in him. In other words, Maud Gonne is one of the driving forces behind Yeats' poetry. In 'Words', for example, Yeats states that now he has "come to [his] strength/And words obey [his] call", thus, had Maud Gonne returned his proposals, he "might have thrown poor words away/And been content to live".<sup>28</sup>

The sort of divine sway Maud Gonne has on Yeats recalls the quickening influence

Beatrice has on Dante. In the poet's own words, she is "a god stronger than I that is come to bear rule over me".<sup>28</sup> Through Beatrice, Dante comes into contact with Grace, Heaven, God. In other words, in *The Divine Comedy*, Beatrice is conceived as the "God-bearing image": she represents, that is, the immanence of God in the creature. In Canto XXXI, Dante offers the following thanks giving prayer to Beatrice, the divine force behind his salvation and creative impulse:

"O thou in whom my hopes securely dwell,  
And who, to bring my soul to Paradise,  
Didst leave the imprint of thy steps in Hell,  
Of all that I have looked on with these eyes  
Thy goodness and thy power have fitted me  
The holiness and grace to recognize.  
Thou hast led me, a slave to liberty,  
By every path, and using every means  
which to fulfil this task were granted thee.  
Keep turned towards me thy munificence,  
So that my soul which thou hast remedied  
May please thee when it quits the bonds of sense".<sup>29</sup>

Coifateral to the universal image of the woman as the creative element in God and poet, is the collective or tradition infantile image of the woman as mother, the source of hope on whom the child depends, in time of need, for solace and tender care. Oya, for instance, "earthed", shelters Soyinka from "the sublimating essence of the night". In this vein, Thetis pleads with Zeus for his son, Achilles, and in tears secures for him an armour from Hephaestus. This is also true of Aeneas' mother, Venus, who pleads for his son with Jupiter. Again, on her request, Vulcan her husband fashions an armour for Aeneas.

Our discussion, so far, reveals that 'Idanre' is essentially concerned with the satisfying, radiant and exalting image of the woman. The other universal aspect of the image of the woman as the eternal Eve, man's temptress that we find in the stories of Adam and Eve, Aeneas and Dido, Chaucer's Alison and her husbands, is not described in Soyinka's poem and cannot therefore be discussed in this paper.

We have considered Soyinka's vision of the woman in 'Idanre' as having a collective or universal touch. In the present discussion, we shall examine his vision of Ogun in relation to the vision of God in human history. In other words, the character of the god as revealed in his interaction with men invites comparison with the image of God in literary tradition. The image of Ogun, like that of Oya, is a dynamic one; like Oya, Ogun represents a reality that has its place in a sequence of communicated experience. In the summary of 'Idanre' given at the beginning of this paper, reference was made to the double image of Ogun, the Yorub god: he is a father-servant who 'fulfills the needs of his people, yet he is also a mysterious power, the controller of destiny, tyrannous and destructive. "The nature of God," Vellacott claims, "comprises two elements or principles, one harsh, the other gentle".<sup>30</sup> This double nature of God is also suggested in the conversation between Asia, Panthea and

Demogorgon in Shelley's *Prometheus Unbound*. God is an embodiment of opposing passions: He creates and destroys. He "made the living world" and "all that is contains", "terror, madness, crime, remorse," "love that turns to hate".<sup>31</sup> In 'The Tyger', Blake conceives God's nature in terms of both the fierce, destructive tiger and the tender, humble lamb. The opposed natures of the tiger and the lamb reflect, as it were, the split mind or dual nature of God.

As already indicated, the first phase of 'Idanre' takes up the "gentle", lamb-like aspect of Ogun's nature. In the 'deluge...', Ogun fulfills the needs of his people by creating biological life and by causing rain to fall. The rainfall signals the end of rumours, secret fears and speculations about their future well-being. The joy and satisfaction of the people is expressed in the triumphant, joyful note of the last stanza of the poem:

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.<sup>32</sup>

The images of land cultivation and harvest contained in the above verses, are followed in '...and after' by the images of honeycomb and mining. Aside from cultivating the earth, the people also extract honey and minerals from the land: "And we/Have honeycombed beneath his hills, worked red earth/Of energies, quarrying rare and urgent ores..."<sup>33</sup>

Ogun's loving care is shown as well in his silent night-walk "across a haze of corn": Ogun/feased his ears with tassels, his foot-prints/futur turries of the giant root... His head was lost among palm towers".<sup>34</sup> These lines suggest that the god is satisfied with his creation and the good use into which his men are putting it. We are reminded here of the Hebrew God's satisfaction with His creation in Genesis:

And [God] said, Let the earth bring forth the green herb, and such as may seed, and the fruit tree yielding fruit after its kind, which may have seed in itself upon the earth. And it was so done.  
And the earth brought forth the green herb, and such as yieldeth seed according to its kind, and the tree that beareth fruit, having seed each one according to its kind. And God saw that it was good.<sup>35</sup>

Ogun's night-walk also impresses on the reader's mind, the idea of an immanent being who not only occasions the world, but continues to consolidate and affect his creation. He is, indeed, the principle of unity pervading the universe, imperceptibly reconciling, as it were, opposing forces:

earth was a surreal bowl  
Of sounds and mystic timbers, his fingers  
Drew warring elements to a union of being  
And taught the veins to dance, of earth, of rock  
Of tree, sky, of fire and rain, of flesh of man  
And woman....

Earth's broken rings were healed.<sup>36</sup>

Here, we have an echo of the passage in 'Tintern Abbey' where Wordsworth describes the "sense sublime", "A motion and a spirit, that impels/All thinking things, all objects of all thought./And rolls through all things".<sup>37</sup> According to the passage from Soyinka's poem, Ogun, "the Creative Essence" would be this "sense sublime" that "rolls" in all natural elements, causing them to partake in a joyful dance of harmony.

The joyful harmony that Ogun is capable of generating appears to be the nucleus of the sacrifices to the gods during the harvest season, a time when "Even the gods remember dues". As suggested earlier, during the sacrifices, the gods and the ancestors, that is, "The dead whom fruit and oil await",<sup>38</sup> enjoy a state of communion and fellowship:

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 'Modius' orbit, kernel  
And electrons, wine to alchemy.<sup>39</sup>

In all this, Ogun is seen as a graceful, just and charitable being who fuses indiscriminately with all aspects of his creation, filling them with equal bliss. He is a friend, a loving father who generously responds to the needs of his creatures, who, in the words of Wordsworth in 'Hart-leap Well', "Maintains a deep and reverential care/For the unoffending creatures whom he loves".<sup>40</sup> The New Testament story of the vicarious sufferings of Christ (God) comes to mind here. According to the Gospel Story, Christ, out of love and compassion for man, gave up His kingly crown and took the human form. While on earth, he identified with and catered for the needs of all men, including the outcasts of society: he fed the hungry and the poor; he comforted and healed the sick. Finally, he shed his blood to save man from eternal damnation. In the opening lines of book one of *Paradise Lost*, Milton refers to Christ as the "one greater Man/[who] Restore us and regain the blissful seat".<sup>41</sup> Here, as in Soyinka's poem, we again have the image of God as a life-giving force that animates the world and shows concern for man's salvation and happiness.

The same kind of vision of God is taken up by Dante in *The Divine Comedy: Paradise*. As the pilgrim, through the illuminating tenderness of Beatrice, communes with the blessed spirits he encounters in the various circles of heaven, he comes to understand the fullness of God's love and tender care of man. Here, Dante is surrounded by a vast ocean of light and flame: "... I saw a blaze on me so vast a sphere/-fired by the sun, that never rain nor streams/ Formed such a huge illimitable mere".<sup>42</sup> This light, which is God, penetrates all the spirits in heaven. Beatrice, for example, tells Dante that "... Providence... integrates the whole", that is, "All beings great and small/ Are linked in order; and this orderliness/ is form, which stamps God's likeness on the All."<sup>43</sup> The light that penetrates the ten circles of heaven, clearly suggest that God is a just being whose blessings and loving care are equally enjoyed by all the spirits, no matter the circle to which they belong. This conception of God is made lucid by Piccarda dei Donati whose allotted sphere is the moon, the lowest region of heaven. With "such joy", she tells Dante that she and all the spirits who share the lowest or "slowest

sphere" are "blessed too": they are as happy as they can possibly be: "The sole good-pleasure of the Holy Ghost/Kindles [their] hearts, which joyously espouse./ Informed by Him, whate'er delights Him most." After listening to her story, the pilgrim concludes:

Then I saw plain how Heav'n is everywhere  
Paradise, though the grace of the First Good  
Falls differently in different regions there.<sup>44</sup>

We recognize here that, like Soyinka's Ogun, Dante's God is seen in terms of justice, tenderness and fulfillment. He sustains man and his values are universal.

Following closely on our discussion of the gentle aura of God, is the background against which He is described. What I have in mind here is the age-old idea of the mountain or hill as the abode of the deity from whose colossal height He pours forth His blessings upon the world. The psychology behind this tendency to associate God with the mountain is clear. God, the highest essence imaginable, the source of all that there is, the Causeless Cause, the Unmoved Mover of the things, would normally be imagined as inhabiting the heights whose dominating and majestic size, offers inestimable protection. Mountains and hills that are known to have outlived generations are therefore fitting abodes for gods. In *The Divine Comedy*, for example, Dante imagines Purgatory as a lofty mountain on whose seven cornices the souls are purged successively of the seven deadly sins, and so made fit to ascend into the presence of God in Paradise. As the pilgrim ascends the ten Heavens, he experiences an ever-mounting joy and blessedness, and so grows in understanding. Understanding here would be associated with heavenly height, while folly and evil would go along with abysmal depth. Satan and his crew, for example, are:

Hurled headlong flaming from th' ethereal sky  
With hideous ruin and combustion down  
To bottomless perdition, there to dwell  
In adamantine chains and penal fire  
Who durst defy th' Omnipotent to arms.<sup>45</sup>

In the opening lines of *Paradise Lost*, Milton invokes the aid of the "Heav'nly Muse, that on the secret top/of Oreb, or of Sinai, didst inspire" Moses.<sup>46</sup> We have already referred to Milton's association of Urania with the heights of Heaven and to Coleridge's Mount Abora, the haunt of the Muses. Again, in *Exodus XXV*, God, the rescuer and protector of Israel, speaks to Moses from Mount Sinai.<sup>47</sup> Homer also pictures Mount Olympus as:

the reputed seat  
Eternal of the Gods, which never storms  
Disturb, rains drench, or snow invades, but calm  
The expanse and cloudless shines with purest day.<sup>48</sup>

The mountain home of God is pictured by poets in the above discussion as a place of glory, blessedness, changelessness and ease. On the mountain, the poet enjoys tranquility and comes into contact with the clear light of understanding. This conception of the abode of the gods also finds expression in 'Idanre'. It will be recalled that one of the experiences that inspired the writing of the poem, was Soyinka's "visit to the rockhills of that name".<sup>49</sup> the

home of Ogun, described as "terraced hills self-surmounting to the skies".<sup>53</sup> Throughout the poem, Idanre is associated with peace, rest and understanding. After creating biological life, Ogun retires to the heights, where he and the poet are joined by Oya. In view of the consequences of Atooda's rebellion and man's desecration of the shrines, "Wordlessly he rose, sought knowledge in the hills/Ogun the lone one saw it all, the secret/Veins of matter".<sup>54</sup> Having made weapons for men, Ogun "sought retreat in the heights," for "Idanre granite offered peace".<sup>52</sup>

So much for the gentle, fatherly aspect of God's nature as it appears in 'Idanre' and in literary tradition. The other image of Ogun – which again parallels the image of God in human experience – has to do with his harshness. The poet contends that "Ogun's road [is] a 'Möbius' orbit"<sup>55</sup> in the sense that he is many-sided, an embodiment of "contradictions".<sup>54</sup> As seen in an earlier discussion, Ogun does not always act as the "shield of orphans", as an ally and saviour of his people. He is capable of turning against his people and destroying them, thus acting as a threat, an alien, vengeful being, unconcerned with man's plight. Let us look at what happens.

Ogun prepares for war by fashioning weapons for his men: "In his hand the Weapon/Gleamed, born of the primal mechanic".<sup>55</sup> After this exercise, he retreats to the hills, declining "the crown of deities" because men are desecrating the shrines, a clear proof that they are losing faith in the deity. However, through the intervention of "the elders of Ire", Ogun, "king and warlord", descends to lead his people in battle. Being a "Lascivious god" who takes two gourdlets of palmwine to war, Ogun gets drunk and blindly slaughters the men he is expected to shield from the sword of the enemy. The monstrosity and thorny anger of the god are vividly captured in the following lines:

He strides sweat encrusted  
 Bristles on risen tendons  
 Porcupine and barbed. Again the turns  
 Into his men, a butcher's axe  
 Rises and sink.<sup>56</sup>

The wailing of frightened women, from whose heads "ripe melons tumble", fall on the "deafened" ears of Ogun: "Lust-blind god, gore-drunk Hunter/Monster deity, you destroy your men!"<sup>57</sup> In fact, he persists in murdering his men till his "wine-logged" eyes cleared. At this point, as his "Passion slowly yielded to remorse", "the Hunter stayed his hand".<sup>58</sup>

This threatening aspect of God's image is also shown in Milton's *Paradise Lost*, Aeschylus' *Prometheus Bound* and Shelley's *Prometheus Unbound* in which God is pictured as a revengeful and tyrannical force that generates tear and pain. Milton, for example, describes the "bottomless perdition", into which God hurled Satan and his crew, as a "fiery gulf".

A dungeon horrible, on all sides round  
 As one great furnace flamed, yet from those flames  
 No light, but rather darkness visible  
 Served only to discover sights of woe.

Regions of sorrow, doleful shades where peace  
And rest can never dwell, hope never comes  
That comes to all; but torture without end  
Still urges, and a fiery deluge, fed  
With ever-burning sulphur unconsumed.<sup>50</sup>

In Aeschylus' play, Chorus describes Zeus as tyrannical and "cruelhearted enough" because the god finds joy in the suffering of Prometheus. Zeus causes Prometheus to be "bound hand and foot...in strong straps" to a "desolate peak" because he championed the cause of the human race. He stole fire from heaven and gave it to men and taught them the basic mental and manual skills. In doing so, he frustrated Zeus' plan to create a more perfect race. Prometheus tells his own story to Chorus in words which lucidly suggest that Zeus is harsh:

Now, for your question, on what charge Zeus tortures me,  
I'll tell you. On succeeding to his father's throne  
At once he appointed various rights to various gods,  
Giving to each his set place and authority.  
Of wretched humans he took no account, resolved  
To annihilate them and create another race.  
This purpose there was no one to oppose but I:  
I dared. I saved the human race from being ground  
To dust, from total death.  
For that I am subjected to these bitter pains –  
Agony to endure, heart-rending to behold.<sup>51</sup>

What is true of Aeschylus' Zeus, is equally true of Shelley's Jupiter who is described by Prometheus as a "fierce", "all-conquering foe", reigning "Superme....with the groans of pining slaves". Earth, associating the god with thunder, echoes Prometheus' remarks by referring to Jove as "our almighty Tyrant with fierce dread".<sup>51</sup> For Thomas Hardy, man's life is "a thwarting purposing": it is characterised by futility, despair and isolation because it is imposed upon by the "immanent Will". William Blake describes the "Abstract God" of the Anglican Prayer Book in the following terms:

"...he is Righteous, he is not a  
Being of Pity & Compassion.  
"He cannot feel Distress, he feeds on  
Sacrifice & Offering,  
"Delighting in cries & tears, & clothed in holiness & solitude."<sup>62</sup>

In the reference we have had so far, we notice that our authors in common conceive their gods in terms of wrath which they manifest when their authority is questioned. Ogun, for example, is angry because of men's desecration of shrines that symbolize the supremacy of the Yoruba gods. Milton's God, Aeschylus' Zeus and Shelley's Jupiter are angry with their victims for challenging their sovereignty. These writers aptly impress the wrathful nature of their gods on the reader's imagination by associating them with such concrete objects and forces of destruction as thorns, axes, spikes, fire, thunder, sulphur and chain.

In view of the hostile, thwarting aspect of Ogun's nature, the respect he once commanded among his people gives way to contempt for the god and doubts in regard to whether he is, indeed, the "shield of orphans". Notice the invective language used in describing the god. He is variously described as a "Murderer", "monster", "lust-blind god", "gore-drunk Hunter", "butcher", "cannibal", "Divine outcast", and so on. This experience seems to give rise to conclusions concerning man's capabilities. Man must concern himself with the earth, with the here's and now's not with the supernatural; he must have his "root in earth", rather than have faith in a transcendental being who turns round in anger and destroys his own people. The poet ridicules men for inviting Ogun to help them fight a cause they can themselves handle with ease.

Because the rodent nibbled somewhat at his yam.

The farmer hired a hunter, filled him with wine

And thrust a firebrand in his band

We do not burn the woods to trap

A squirrel ;we do not ask the mountain's

Aid, to crack a walnut.<sup>63</sup>

Why must the people count on a blind god instead of relying on their own abilities? In other words, by sticking neurotically to a deity who is a "Prestiditator", a simple magician, men tend to neglect their own powers. Like Ogun, men are also capable of performing conjuring tricks. Like men, Ogun is lecherous, murderous and gets drunk. Ogun is therefore no better than men. "God", in the words of John Dunne, "is the unknown in a story of man, while man is the unknown in the story of God".<sup>64</sup> For Dunne, God is insight, a realization that man in spirit and flesh. Spirit "consists of a man's relationship to the things of his life: flesh. ... consists of the things themselves."<sup>65</sup> The point here is that, the world has no outside: the people's power is not continuous with an invisible force outside them. Indeed, it is out of fear that men created and continue to preserve the gods. God simply exists in our minds: God is the tempering or inner voice of "Reason or Conscience",<sup>66</sup> that reminds man of what Blake calls "Moral Virtues" and deters him from destructive propensities - "All deities reside in the human breast."<sup>67</sup> God, to use Dunne's terminology, is the "new man" who does not wait idly for Godot to come, but who is creative and possesses a spirit or a will big enough to embrace the world, to move the continent of America to Africa.

In 'harvest' where the people and Ogun reconcile and appear to live in harmony once more after the bloody event, the poet warns men against the dangers of maintaining a pact with Ogun. The carnage will recur if they insist, for "Ogun's road is a 'Mobius' orbit", bloody go-round.

In 'Idanre' then, Soyinka's kind of dispenses with the gods, as Thales of Miletus had done several centuries before him, as sources of explanation of natural or social phenomena. Man must be explained in terms of himself and nature in terms of itself. By questioning the power of the gods to help men and as explanatory devices, Soyinka, like Thales, neutralizes them and undermines their social effectiveness.

What we become tomorrow depends on the choices we make now, not on our

knowledge of ever-lasting life or eternal truths. For Jean-Paul Sartre:

Man is nothing else but what he makes himself... there is nothing in heaven; man will be what he will have planned to be.... man is responsible for what he is.<sup>68</sup>

A recognition of this fact is essential for development. If the people hold fast to the demands of Ogun, their attention and energies will be diverted from secular concerns, from the changes that are necessary for their development and for delivering them from pauperism, poverty and depression. Society is in a permanent state of motion, which motion is indispensable to growth and progress. In other words, society constantly loses a set of new ones. In view of this fact, Atunda, who rebelled against the father-god by rolling "the Boulder" onto him, must be revered and canonized for his "assertive act":

...may we celebrate the stray electron, defiant  
Of patterns, celebrate the splitting of the gods  
Canonisation of the strong hand of a slave who set  
The rock in revolution – and the Boulder cannot  
Up the hill in time's unwind.

...  
All hail Saint Atunda, First revolutionary

Grand iconoclast at genesis – and the rest in logic Zeus, Osiris, Jahweh....<sup>69</sup>

Roscoe rightly observes that Atunda's act creates a "variety of patterns" within a harmonious or unified state of things.<sup>70</sup> To this we may also add that Atunda's "defiant" act, in fact, questions the very extent to which gods respond to man's immediate needs. The fact that he was a "slave to [the] first deity" would bear on the argument that the gods are harsh and cruel.

I have attempted in this paper, to show that, though Wole Soyinka's "Idanre" is a typical Yoruba or African poem, it draws on recurrent patterns of human experience. In other words, the poet anoints his poem with universalist flavouring without becoming alienated from his own immediate society, from the concrete reality of his people and their struggle. Oya and Ogun are, no doubt, specific to the Yoruba experience, yet, their natures and roles, as defined in the poem, are reminiscent of the image-pattern of the woman and god in other literatures, ages and cultures. Soyinka's portrayal of the woman as the creative element in both the god and the poet; as the source of solace and comfort, together with his insight into the double nature of god, reverberates, as it were, man's collective experience.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup>Wole Soyinka, *Idanre And Other Poems*, (London: Methuen, 1969), p.86.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., p.86.

<sup>3</sup>Ibid., p.86.

<sup>4</sup>Ibid., p.64.

<sup>5</sup>Ibid., p.87.

<sup>6</sup>Ibid., p.69.

<sup>7</sup>Ibid., p.69.

<sup>8</sup>Ibid., p.70.

<sup>9</sup>Ibid., p.85.

<sup>10</sup>A. Norman Jeffares, 'Introduction' to *W.B. Yeats: Selected Poetry*, (London: Macmillan, 1969), p.xviii.

<sup>11</sup>Quoted by Maud Bobkin in *Archetypal Patterns in Poetry*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1978), p.155

<sup>12</sup>Soyinka, *op.cit.*, p.62.

<sup>13</sup>Ibid., p. 84.

<sup>14</sup>Ibid., p. 63.

<sup>15</sup>Ibid., p.83.

<sup>16</sup>Ibid., p.57.

<sup>17</sup>Ibid., pp.57-58.

<sup>18</sup>Ibid., p.57.

<sup>19</sup>Ibid., p.66.

<sup>20</sup>Ibid., p.67.

<sup>21</sup>Ibid., p.63.

<sup>22</sup>Ibid., p.63.

<sup>23</sup>*Milton: Poetical Works*, ed., Douglas Bush, (London: Oxford University Press, 1979), pp.340-41.

<sup>24</sup>Maun Bodkin, *op.cit.*, p.153.

<sup>25</sup>*Coleridge: Poetical Works*, ed., Ernest Hartley Coleridge, (London: Oxford University Press, 1973), pp 298-99

<sup>26</sup>A. Norman Jeffares. *W.B. Yeats: Man and Poet*. (London: Richard Clay, 1966 ), pp.59-60.

<sup>27</sup>*Op.cit.*, p.44.

<sup>28</sup>Dorothy L. Sayers, 'Introduction' to Dante's *The Divine Comedy: Hell*, trans., (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1978), p.26.

<sup>29</sup>Dante, *The Divine Comedy: Paradise*, trans., Dorothy Sayers and Barbara Reynolds, (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1978) p.329.

<sup>30</sup>Philip Vellacott, 'Introduction' to Aeschylus' *Prometheus Bound, The Suppliants, Seven Against Thebes, The Persians*, trans., (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1978), p.7.

<sup>31</sup>*Shelley's Longer Poems. Plays And Translations*, ed. A. H. Koszul, (London: J.M. Dent, New York: E.P. Dutton, 1953), pp.181-82.

<sup>32</sup>Soyinka, *op.cit.*, p.62.

<sup>33</sup>Ibid., p.64.

<sup>34</sup>Ibid., pp.63-64.

<sup>35</sup>*The Holy Bible*. Revised Standard Version, (London: Catholic Truth Society, 1952), 'Genesis' 1, Vs.11-12, p.1.

<sup>36</sup>Soyinka, *op.cit.*, p.68.

<sup>37</sup>*Wordsworth: Poetical Works*, ed., Thomas Hutchinson. a new edition revised by Ernest de Selincourt, (London, Oxford, Toronto: 1965), p.164.

<sup>38</sup>Soyinka, *op.cit.*, p.65.

<sup>39</sup>Ibid., p.85.

<sup>40</sup>Wordsworth, *op.cit.*, p.161.

<sup>41</sup>Milton, *op.cit.*, p.212.

<sup>42</sup>Dante, *op.cit.*, Canto 1, p.55.

<sup>43</sup>Ibid., p.56,

<sup>44</sup>Ibid., Canto III, pp.73-75.

<sup>45</sup>Milton, *op.cit.*, p.213.

<sup>46</sup>Ibid., p.212.

<sup>47</sup>*The Holy Bible*, *op.cit.*, p.62.

<sup>48</sup>Homer, *The Odyssey*; trans., William Cowper, (London: J.M. Dent, New York: E.P. Utton, 1947), VI, p.85.

<sup>49</sup>Soyinka, *op.cit.* p.57.

<sup>50</sup>Ibid., p.72.

<sup>51</sup>Ibid., p.70.

- <sup>52</sup>Ibid., p. 71.
- <sup>53</sup>Ibid., p. 85.
- <sup>54</sup>Ibid., p. 88.
- <sup>55</sup>Ibid., p. 71.
- <sup>56</sup>Ibid., p. 75.
- <sup>57</sup>Ibid., p. 75.
- <sup>58</sup>Ibid., p. 80.
- <sup>59</sup>Milton, *op.cit* pp.213-14.
- <sup>60</sup>Aeschylus, *op.cit.* pp.25-28.
- <sup>61</sup>Shelley, *op.cit.*, pp. 151-53.
- <sup>62</sup>*Poetry and Prose of William Blake*, ed., Geoffrey Keynes, (London: The Nonesuch Library, 1975), *Jerusalem*, P. I.10, 11. 47-49, p.443.
- <sup>63</sup>Soyinka, *op.cit.*, pp.72-73.
- <sup>64</sup>John S. Dunne, *Time and Myth*, (London: SCM Press, 1979), p.113.
- <sup>65</sup>Ibid., p.89.
- <sup>66</sup>Bodkin, *op.cit.*, p.256.
- <sup>67</sup>Blake, *op.cit.*, 'MHH' p.185.
- <sup>68</sup>Jean-Paul Sartre, 'Existentialism', in *Quartet*, ed., Harold P. Simonson, (New York Evanston London: Harper & Row Publishers, 1970), p.799.
- <sup>69</sup>Soyinka, *op.cit.*, pp.82-83.
- <sup>70</sup>Adrian A. Roscoe, *Mother is God: A Study in West African Literature*. (Cambridge Cambridge University Press, 1971), p.61.

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