

Revolutionary Dionysus: Ritual, Liberation, and the Postcolonial *Bacchae* of Wole Soyinka

‘...the presence of eradication had better begin. It doesn’t matter what form it takes.’¹

— Wole Soyinka

When Wole Soyinka demanded an ‘eradication’ of Eurocentric dramatic frameworks, he was not merely calling for a shift in literary taste, but a reconstruction of tragedy’s meaning and origin. For centuries, Western discourse has assumed that drama’s history begins solely in Greece. Soyinka exposed this limited conception by recalling his shock upon reading that drama ‘originated in Greece’² – a claim he counters by placing it against the Yoruba tradition that shapes his own understanding of theatre. To Soyinka, tragedy’s authority does not derive from a single Western origin, but emerges through cross-cultural adaptation. His advocacy for artistic revolution – ‘it doesn’t matter what form it takes’ – becomes a rejection of literary ‘form’ as a tool of Western control over the dramatic tradition. Soyinka enacts this ‘eradication’ through his reconfiguration of Greek tragedy in *The Bacchae of Euripides: A Communion Rite*. Written in 1973 – a decade after Nigerian independence – and staged for a British audience at the National Theatre, the play engages with the tensions between colonial and postcolonial address that it goes on to dramatise.

This tension is evident within the title’s dual role as ‘both a revision of an antecedent text and a unique work of art’³, adhering to Euripides’ original while departing from the pre-text

¹ Anthony Appiah, “An Evening with Wole Soyinka,” *Black American Literature Forum* 22, no. 4 (1988): 777, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2904052>.

² Appiah, *An Evening with Wole Soyinka*, 777.

³ Astrid Van Weyenberg, “Ritual and Revolution: Wole Soyinka’s *Bacchae*, a Yoruba Tragedy,” *The Politics of Adaptation*, January 1, 2013, 43–90, https://doi.org/10.1163/9789401209571_003.

through its subtitle – *A Communion Rite* – marking its cultural modification. Soyinka imitates the structure of Euripides’ play, yet grounds the tragedy in Nigerian politics, merging Greek and Yoruba tradition. Soyinka’s most significant alterations – introducing an enslaved population absent from Euripides, the fusion of Dionysus with the Yoruba god Ogun, and the transformation of Pentheus’ death into a ‘communion rite’ rather than a scene of unmitigated horror – radically reframe the dramatic purpose of Euripides’ *Bacchae* through a Yoruba lens.

The structural mimicry that comprises Soyinka’s play occupies an ambiguous position of both difference and similarity to the original – it simultaneously *is*, and *is not*, Euripides’ *Bacchae*. It is within this tension that Homi Bhabha’s theory of colonial mimicry emerges. Bhabha defines mimicry as a subversive tool, a ‘menace’, turning a ‘displacing gaze’ onto the coloniser in the appropriation of their culture.⁴ Soyinka imitates Euripidean tragedy only to infuse it with Yoruba sentiments, dismantling Eurocentrism within the form that sustains its authority. The *sparagmos* that lies at the centre of the drama becomes a potent metaphor for the deconstruction, the dismemberment, of Western narratives;⁵ while Euripides’ structure remains legible throughout, Soyinka adopts a decolonising mindset that seeks to rip apart the genre’s presumed Greek origin.

Dionysus and Ogun

Within this liberating mindset, Soyinka does not seek to completely divide each dramatic sphere, but rather expresses the unity of tragic expression throughout cultures and time – arguing that tragedy grasps the ‘key to the human paradox’, the truth of man’s existence as

⁴ Homi Bhabha, “Of Mimicry and Man: The Ambivalence of Colonial Discourse,” *October* 28, no. 1 (1984): 125–33.

⁵ Justine McConnell, “Postcolonial *Sparagmos*: Toni Morrison’s *Sula* and Wole Soyinka’s *The Bacchae of Euripides: A Communion Rite*,” *Classical Receptions Journal* 8, no. 2 (May 7, 2015): 133–54, <https://doi.org/10.1093/crj/clv002>.

‘being and non-being’, ‘uniqueness and Oneness’.⁶ Nietzsche defines this division through the Apollonian and Dionysian elements that he believes to constitute tragedy.⁷ Conversely, Soyinka synthesises these elements – Dionysus’ ecstatic communal force and Apollo’s ordered individuation – into the single figure of Ogun, the Yoruba god of iron, war and creativity. Ascribing a third Promethean virtue,⁸ an unconquerable will, to Ogun, Soyinka channels a rebellious spirit within the deity, a revolutionary role that exceeds Nietzsche’s dual vision. This Promethean will is embodied through Ogun’s reunion of man and god within Yoruba myth; he plunged into the Fourth Stage, the transitional abyss dividing the cosmic spheres of being: the living, the dead and the unborn. As the ‘first actor’, the creator of ‘tragic art’,⁹ Ogun’s will possesses Yoruba tragedy, re-enacting his journey into the abyss and unifying each ‘stage’ of being. This departs from the Aristotelian model that underlies Attic tragedy, revolving around the fall of a single hero from ‘good fortune to bad fortune’.¹⁰ Triggered by *hamartia* (tragic flaw), Aristotle’s conception of tragedy focuses on the figure’s resulting *anagnorisis* (realisation) and *peripeteia* (reversal). Yoruba tragedy instead centres on restoring cosmic balance within a community, embodying Ogun’s ritualistic pilgrimage. As a Yoruba writer, Soyinka must diverge from Euripides’ *Bacchae*, transforming the tragedy’s purpose to unite rather than destroy Thebes. Despite their differing narrative purposes, Greek and African tragedy still hold cross-cultural similarities within physical staging. Both cultures rely upon an active chorus and audience immersion, incorporating ritualistic music and masks.¹¹ This alignment allows Dionysus to become the revolutionary

⁶ Wole Soyinka, “Appendix: The Fourth Stage,” *Myth, Literature, and the African World* (Cambridge England; New York: Cambridge University Press, 1976), 140-60.

⁷ Friedrich Wilhelm Nietzsche, and Michael Tanner. *The Birth of Tragedy out of the Spirit of Music*. 1872. Reprint, London; New York: Penguin, 1993.

⁸ Soyinka, *The Fourth Stage*, 141.

⁹ Soyinka, *The Fourth Stage*, 145.

¹⁰ Aristotle, *Poetics*, trans. Malcolm Heath (London: Penguin Books, 1996), 21.

¹¹ John Djisenu, “Cross-Cultural Bonds Between Ancient Greece and Africa: Implications for Contemporary Staging Practices,” *Classics in Post-Colonial Worlds* (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 2009), 72-85.

Ogun of Yoruba tragedy – unifying rather than splintering man and god through communal ritual.

Soyinka himself defines the relationship between Dionysus and Ogun as a ‘twinhood’¹² – the patron of Greek tragedy is transformed into his African counterpart, redefining the cultural implications of the genre. This is evident within the first appearance of Dionysus, transformed into Ogun; as a ‘being of a calm rugged strength, a rugged beauty’ rather than an ‘effeminate prettiness’,¹³ he holds the Promethean will of Ogun, diverging from the androgynous god of Euripides.¹⁴ While the deities are divided through their cultural evolution, Dionysus’ presence simultaneously evokes Ogun’s through their resemblances. Dionysus’ dismemberment by the Titans recalls the tearing of a dog carcass in Ogunian sacrifice, transposed into the ritualistic *sparagmos* of Pentheus. The symbol of wine unites each deity, as a recurring image of communal liberation within Soyinka’s play – transformed from the freeing yet maddening force of Euripides.¹⁵ These dual theological symbols converge in the climactic ‘communion rite’, merging Euripidean and Soyinkan dramatic purposes. While the tragedy may superficially represent the liberation performed by Dionysus, wielding his sacred tools and symbols, Soyinka imbues this with his Ogunian resonance.

Soyinka extends this cosmological doubling through the replication of traditional praise chants surrounding Ogun within the choral worship of Dionysus, altering the poetic texture of Euripides to Yoruba tradition. Dionysus is named ‘god / Of seven paths’,¹⁶ echoing Ogun’s *oriki* (Yoruba praise poetry), revolving around his seven manifestations. This Dionysus is

¹² Wole Soyinka, *The Bacchae of Euripides : A Communion Rite* (New York: Norton, 1974), v.

¹³ Soyinka, *The Bacchae of Euripides*, 1.

¹⁴ Van Weyenberg, *Ritual and Revolution*, 59.

¹⁵ Soyinka, *The Fourth Stage*, 158-59.

¹⁶ Soyinka, *The Bacchae of Euripides*, 81.

translated into Ogun through direct echoes from Soyinka's praise poem, *Idanre*.¹⁷ However, he is still presented as and named Dionysus, ostensibly adhering to Euripides' original structure, as Soyinka's god resembles both figures simultaneously.

Conversely, Euripides illuminates the foreign worship of Dionysus as an unsettling force through the Bacchantes. They come 'from Asia's lands',¹⁸ positioning Dionysus within the realms of 'Phrygia' and 'Lydia'.¹⁹ While reflecting the duality of the deity as both Greek and barbarian, Euripides simultaneously channels Athenian anxieties surrounding Dionysus' Oriental origin.²⁰ Euripides expresses this through the contrast between Theban order and Bacchic ecstasy, culminating in Pentheus' *sparagmos* by his possessed mother. The Bacchantes destroy Western rationality, enacting subjugation rather than syncretism. Soyinka's Bacchantes are similarly Oriental, coming from the 'Lydia' and 'Phrygia' of Euripides' play, yet they are extended to the African sphere through Soyinka's addition of 'Ethiopia'.²¹ By immersing Dionysian worship within Afro-Asiatic origins, Soyinka portrays the syncretic devotion to the deity, expanded across cultures. This fusion of faith is seen as a symbol of divine legitimacy, as the Slave Leader declares 'A god goes by many names'.²² Soyinka resists categorising Dionysus, or any deity, expressing divine existence as a single force transitioning between names and faiths. Mirroring his own reconstruction of Dionysus, used interchangeably with Ogun, Soyinka subverts and weaponises Euripides' Othering perception of Dionysian worship, performing syncretism rather than cultural opposition.

¹⁷ Wole Soyinka, *Idanre & Other Poems* (New York: Hill And Wang, 1967), 83; Soyinka, *The Bacchae of Euripides*, 81: 'dirge of shadows', 'dark-shod feet', 'seven-ply crossroads', 'hands of camwood', 'breath of indigo'.

¹⁸ Euripides, *The Bacchae and Other Plays*, trans. John Davie (Penguin UK, 2006), 130.

¹⁹ Euripides, *The Bacchae and Other Plays*, 131.

²⁰ Edward W. Said, *Orientalism* (1978; New Delhi: Penguin Books, 1978), 56-57.

²¹ Soyinka, *The Bacchae of Euripides*, 14.

²² Soyinka, *The Bacchae of Euripides*, 15.

Soyinka's syncretic fusion of deities does not stop with Ogun, but extends to absorb Christ into this paradigm. While Christ lacks the ecstatic quality shared in these deities, their shared symbol of wine and sacrificial rebirth proves potent in the play's progression. The blurred distinction between the deities is most evident in Pentheus' hallucination under Dionysus' power, witnessing a 'traditional Christ-figure', yet his 'halo is an ambiguous thorn-ivy crown of Dionysus'.²³ By framing this 'ambiguous' image through Pentheus' eyes, the figure of Western rationality, Soyinka performs a psychological *sparagmos* that precedes and enables his literal dismemberment. The symbol resists the clean categorisation that Pentheus' Western perception relies on; Soyinka creates states of altered doubling across cultures, producing a theological version of the difference and similarity that imbues his tragic recreation. The interwoven 'thorn' and 'ivy' replace the expected 'halo' of a 'Christ-figure', relocating Western narratives through syncretism.

While Soyinka adheres to Euripides' structure, he almost completely transfigures his choral odes to reflect shifting, cross-cultural faiths. Soyinka diverges from Euripides' singular praise of Dionysus, interweaving Christian elements within these chants. The Slave Leader becomes a 'black hot gospeller'²⁴ separated from the cultic, foreign chants of Euripides' Bacchants, echoing the Beatitudes in his anaphoric 'Blessed'.²⁵ Yet this Christian 'prayer'²⁶ worships Dionysus' 'holy dance' and 'thyrsus'²⁷ alongside Ogun's 'iron',²⁸ intermingling faiths and cultures. By appropriating a traditionally colonial, Westernised faith, Soyinka channels his reconstruction of the Eurocentric narrative tradition within the play's dynamics. Soyinka

²³ Soyinka, *The Bacchae of Euripides*, 68.

²⁴ Soyinka, *The Bacchae of Euripides*, 18.

²⁵ Soyinka, *The Bacchae of Euripides*, 16-17.

²⁶ Soyinka, *The Bacchae of Euripides*, 16.

²⁷ Soyinka, *The Bacchae of Euripides*, 16.

²⁸ Soyinka, *The Bacchae of Euripides*, 17.

incorporates Christ into the Dionysus-Ogun paradigm, stripping the colonial religion of its claim to authority, immersing it within cultural and dramatic unity.

The colonised stage

Soyinka assigns Dionysus a revolutionary role within the oppressive state of Thebes. Writing a decade after Nigerian independence, Soyinka transforms Thebes into a politicised environment engaged with the lingering presence of Nigeria's colonised state. However, Soyinka does not build upon a text promoting imperial Greece. Euripides' *Bacchae* is layered with the subversion of Western civic harmony, dismantling the dichotomy between civilised and barbaric through Dionysus' duality and the overpowering force of *physis* (nature) over *nomos* (law). Soyinka maximises Euripides' critique through his sociopolitical focus, making what was once hidden explicit.

Soyinka creates a colonial environment of oppression through his addition of the enslaved population. The audience witnesses the 'crucified slaves' and a procession of 'slaves flailing and treading'²⁹ before Dionysus even appears. Soyinka's necessity for liberation comes before the Dionysian vengeance of Euripides' play, transforming the primary purpose from theological to social. Soyinka creates a site of oppression separated from Euripides' orderly nation; Dionysus is an Ogunian revolutionary before the play has even begun. Soyinka even identified himself with the 'Promethean spark'³⁰ of Ogun during his imprisonment in the Biafran War, attempting to establish a ceasefire within Nigeria's post-independence state. The Ogunian will ascribed to Dionysus comes to represent revolution within political reality. Soyinka merges divine action and social regeneration in a distinctly Yoruba fashion, resisting the cosmic separation of man and god.

²⁹ Soyinka, *The Bacchae of Euripides*, 1.

³⁰ Wole Soyinka, "The Man Died," *Transition*, no. 75/76 (1997): 380, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2935435>.

Soyinka reframes Dionysian wine as a liberating force. Where the wine of Euripides' *Bacchae* disintegrated civic and gendered boundaries in a terrifying, destructive fashion, Soyinka frames this social breakdown as a necessity for freedom. It becomes a tool for the oppressed to grasp the 'scent of freedom',³¹ linking wine with political liberation. Soyinka transforms the maddening wine of Euripides into an emancipating force, intertwining violence and freedom in line with Ogun's creative-destructive impulse.

This demand for freedom becomes Soyinka's primary focus within his choral odes. Through his addition of the Slave Chorus, emancipation is interwoven with Dionysian praise; Soyinka gives voice to the oppressed, articulating the sociopolitical dimension of his *Bacchae*. While this may appear to politically deconstruct Greek tragedy, Soyinka's reception is far more layered than a simple inversion of Western binaries. He engages in a complex counter-discourse with Euripides' *Bacchae* – a concept defined by Burney as a 're-inscription, rewriting and re-presenting in order to reclaim, reaffirm, and retrieve subject peoples' ownership of their own lives'.³² While such counter-discourse can often veer into the absolute deconstruction of the pre-text, Soyinka's *Bacchae* stands apart. He still holds the plot, the characters and the tragic sentiment of Euripides; his tragedy becomes a refracted reflection of the pre-text through his choral alterations and infusion of Yoruba sentiments. He does not completely 're-present' the tragedy, but creates a different form of counter-discourse in maintaining Euripides' structure, synthesising rather than separating the tragic discourse to affirm its universal existence. This dramatic purpose surfaces within the Slave Chorus' identification as 'Fellow aliens'³³ with Euripides' Bacchantes. Blending the outcasts of the

³¹ Soyinka, *The Bacchae of Euripides*, 3.

³² Shehla Burney, "Resistance and Counter-Discourse: Writing Back to the Empire," *Counterpoints* 417 (2012): 105–16, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/42981701>.

³³ Soyinka, *The Bacchae of Euripides*, 15.

indigenous population with Oriental foreigners, Soyinka creates a cult of diasporic identity. This removes the opposition between both cultures, both tragic modes, dissolving political boundaries to fulfil Soyinka's dramatic purpose. Soyinka's most explicit use of counter-discourse, diverging from Euripides' *Bacchae*, merges with it again, reflecting his cross-cultural synthesis of theatre.

Soyinka transforms King Pentheus into an autocrat analogous to Nigeria's post-independence regime. Rather than the somewhat sympathetic and ambiguous figure of Euripides,³⁴ Soyinka's Pentheus becomes a cruel leader perpetuating injustice. Soyinka reconfigures the blinding *hamartia* of Euripides' Pentheus into a vessel for contemporary political struggles – Pentheus becomes a necessary sacrifice, his *sparagmos* a political revolution. From the outset, Pentheus is 'straight, militaristic in bearing and speech',³⁵ gaining resonance with the military dictators of Nigeria – most directly, General Yakubu Gowon, under whose regime Soyinka was incarcerated. However, his physical abuse towards the slaves³⁶ resembles the colonial maltreatment of the native population, extended to the internal tension of Nigerian tribes. The 'chains'³⁷ and 'manacles'³⁸ of Pentheus' oppressive order echo the 'heavy manacles and chains'³⁹ of Soyinka's imprisonment, simultaneously associated with that of the 'slave trade'.⁴⁰ Soyinka's *Bacchae* is both colonial and postcolonial, collapsing the boundaries between the external occupier and internal autocrat within the rigid order and abusive power of Pentheus. Soyinka uses postcolonial allegory to expose how the African military dictator inherits, internalises and deploys the same repressive mechanisms as the

³⁴ Blaiklock E M, "The Natural Man," *Greece & Rome* 16, no. 47 (1947): 49–66, <https://doi.org/10.2307/641780>.

³⁵ Soyinka, *The Bacchae of Euripides*, 26.

³⁶ Soyinka, *The Bacchae of Euripides*, 36.

³⁷ Soyinka, *The Bacchae of Euripides*, 35.

³⁸ Soyinka, *The Bacchae of Euripides*, 65.

³⁹ Soyinka, *The Man Died*, 3.

⁴⁰ Soyinka, *The Man Died*, 3.

European coloniser. Soyinka transfers this to the literary sphere, severing the hold of Western narratives on the tragic genre.

Soyinka transforms the rationality of Euripides' Pentheus, obsessed with repressing ecstatic ritual, into a false, oppressive 'order'⁴¹ that carries colonial and dictatorial overtones. Soyinka expresses this through Pentheus' opening line: 'I shall have order!'⁴² Pentheus reiterates his wish for 'order' upon the 'chaos'⁴³ of Dionysian worship, framing an immediate contrast between the civilised and the barbaric. This polarising mindset echoes the imaginative geography of Said's *Orientalism*,⁴⁴ where the West constructs the East by projecting its opposite onto an external Other. Pentheus enacts this logic, deeming any society apart from his untamed. Despite Dionysus' identity as a native Theban, Pentheus projects an Orientalist framework onto him, labelling him an 'alien',⁴⁵ a 'stranger',⁴⁶ reducing his sacred thyrsus to a 'conjurer's wand'.⁴⁷ His repeated invocation of 'order' is defined by what it excludes, sustained only through its opposition to Dionysian worship. Pentheus attempts to maintain his rationalism by identifying the unfamiliar through an 'exotic sensuousness'⁴⁸ that distances the state from ecstatic, irrational worship. While these qualities permeate Pentheus' treatment of Dionysus in Euripides' *Bacchae*, Soyinka transfers Said's Orientalist theory to his Thebes, reframing Western rationality as a tool of totalitarian control. Pentheus' one-dimensional order represents the Western neglect of a multi-faceted literary reality. As Pentheus separates order and chaos, native and barbarian, the Western canon creates an incomplete narrative of the Other that is only defined by exclusion.

⁴¹ Soyinka, *The Bacchae of Euripides*, 27.

⁴² Soyinka, *The Bacchae of Euripides*, 27.

⁴³ Soyinka, *The Bacchae of Euripides*, 27.

⁴⁴ Said, *Orientalism*, 54.

⁴⁵ Soyinka, *The Bacchae of Euripides*, 1.

⁴⁶ Soyinka, *The Bacchae of Euripides*, 27, 43, 84; Euripides, *The Bacchae and Other Plays*, 133, 136, 138, 144, 148, 156.

⁴⁷ Soyinka, *The Bacchae of Euripides*, 45.

⁴⁸ Said, *Orientalism*, 72.

Soyinka breaks down this perceived opposition within Pentheus' dressing as a Bacchant. Euripides frames this action as an erosion of Pentheus' male psyche; while it is a conscious costuming, he embraces the barbaric femininity that he fearfully condemned. Euripides articulates this in his *Bacchae* as Pentheus declares 'I am completely in your hands'⁴⁹ to Dionysus, submitting to his feminised, wild nature. Interpreted within the colonial setting of Soyinka's *Bacchae*, this reversal of social order inverts the process of colonial mimicry, as the coloniser, Pentheus, emulates the seemingly barbaric Dionysus. Applied to the mimicry that comprises Soyinka's dramatic form, he blurs this boundary between coloniser and colonised through his adaptation of Western narratives. Soyinka creates a scene mirrored from Euripides, but progresses to destroy Pentheus' awareness of his actions. He believes that the Dionysian symbols he wields are his militaristic tools of order, taking a 'thyrsus' as his 'sword'⁵⁰ with 'conscious militaristic preening'.⁵¹ While Euripides' Pentheus is aware that he holds a thyrsus,⁵² consciously performing a Bacchant, Soyinka's Pentheus becomes one, hallucinating Dionysian tools as his ordered reality. In turn, this strengthens Soyinka's articulation of the repressed desires within Pentheus' colonial mindset. As Fanon theorises, 'the Negro represents the sexual instinct'⁵³ for the white man. The coloniser sees their hidden self in the image of the Other. Both Euripides' and Soyinka's Pentheus perceive Dionysian worship as 'orgies'⁵⁴ rather than religious rites, adamant that the Bacchants hold 'Aphrodite above Bacchus'.⁵⁵ Through Fanon's lens, Pentheus' imaginings function as a projection of his sexual desire, forbidden in his kingdom's Western 'order'. Dressing as a Bacchant, Pentheus submits to his desires, becoming the barbaric, sexualised Other. Soyinka magnifies this

⁴⁹ Euripides, *The Bacchae and Other Plays*, 152.

⁵⁰ Soyinka, *The Bacchae of Euripides*, 77.

⁵¹ Soyinka, *The Bacchae of Euripides*, 78.

⁵² Euripides, *The Bacchae and Other Plays*, 152.

⁵³ Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks* (1952; repr., London: Penguin Books, 2021).

⁵⁴ Soyinka, *The Bacchae of Euripides*, 77.

⁵⁵ Euripides, *The Bacchae and Other Plays*, 133.

repressed reflection through the symbolic ‘mirror of longing’.⁵⁶ Held up to Pentheus in his Bacchant dress, he is confronted with his repressed self, witnessing a barbaric ‘beast’⁵⁷ that dismantles his colonial ego. The disintegration of Pentheus’ self-image shatters the polarising divide between the coloniser and the colonised. The costuming, the reflection, becomes a metaphor for Soyinka’s translation of Euripides. Just as Pentheus is decorated with Bacchant garments, Soyinka adorns Euripides’ play with Yoruba sentiments; it is Euripides’ Pentheus that gazes into his reflection, seeing Soyinka’s Pentheus translated back at him. Soyinka produces a fractured mirror image of Euripides’ *Bacchae*. He imbues it with postcolonial ideologies that disrupt the dynamics between the coloniser and the colonised beyond the fictional world, in the realm of dramatic discourse.

Ritual and revolution

The practice of ritual is embedded within Yoruba cosmology, particularly through the tragic union between the divine and mortal. Soyinka identifies ritual as the equation of the ‘divine dimension with the communal will, fusing the social with the spiritual’.⁵⁸ Yoruba tragedy is interwoven with this definition of ritual – it bridges the gulfs between god and man, living and dead, to maintain cosmic balance. The ritual enacted in tragedy acquires an inherently revolutionary role rooted in Ogun’s Promethean creative-destructive capability, in which the ‘old has to die violently for the new’ to ‘take root’.⁵⁹

Soyinka frames his *Bacchae* around two rites – one of oppression, the other of liberation – reconfiguring Euripides’ treatment of ritual from the opening scene. Soyinka opens his *Bacchae* with the Euripidean prologue of Dionysus. Yet, as it ends, the god of Euripides

⁵⁶ Soyinka, *The Bacchae of Euripides*, 24, 66.

⁵⁷ Soyinka, *The Bacchae of Euripides*, 66.

⁵⁸ Wole Soyinka, *Art, Dialogue, and Outrage* (Pantheon, 1993).

⁵⁹ Van Weyenberg, *Ritual and Revolution*, 64.

vanishes, leaving Soyinka's Dionysus 'stand[ing] still, statuesque'.⁶⁰ He lingers onstage as his wine gains liberating force, juxtaposed with Pentheus' oppressive ritual of 'cleansing'.⁶¹ The air of Thebes is filled with unease as the scent of Dionysian wine wafts in the background, resembling revolution. The opening ritual revolves around a warped, politicised version of the Girardian 'scapegoat'⁶² – the unconscious redirection of a community's aggression onto a marginalised outsider.⁶³ Rather than operating on unconscious unanimity, the victimisation of Soyinka's ritual is no longer arbitrary, or unconscious. Communal sacrifice has become overridden by oppression; ritual becomes politics, as slaves are 'sacrificed to the insatiable altar of nation-building'.⁶⁴ As the Slave Leader questions 'Why always us?',⁶⁵ the scapegoat's guilt is not accepted, but interrogated. Soyinka too provokes this query, gesturing towards change beyond passive exploitation, challenging the dominance of Western authority. He expresses the necessity for a new kind of ritual – one of revolution.

This ritual materialises in the revolutionary 'communion rite', as Soyinka transforms the tragic overtones of Pentheus' sacrifice from Euripides' *Bacchae*. In Euripides, Pentheus ends his life stretching his arms out to his mother, appealing to her 'pity',⁶⁶ as Euripides maximises the suffering potent to the *catharsis* of Attic tragedy.⁶⁷ As Agave, deluded, believes her son's decapitated head is a lion,⁶⁸ her ultimate recognition of Pentheus' death, and her actions, carries only sorrow. While Soyinka imitates these tragic aspects of Pentheus' demise, he reframes Euripides' dramatic form through the cosmic restoration of Yoruba tragedy, creating an element of rebirth within sacrifice. The decapitated head of Pentheus, the destructive

⁶⁰ Soyinka, *The Bacchae of Euripides*, 2.

⁶¹ Soyinka, *The Bacchae of Euripides*, 5.

⁶² Van Weyenberg, *Ritual and Revolution*, 50-53.

⁶³ René Girard, *Violence and the Sacred* (1972; repr., London ; New York: Bloomsbury Academic, An Imprint Of Bloomsbury Publishing Plc, 2013).

⁶⁴ Soyinka, *The Bacchae of Euripides*, 11.

⁶⁵ Soyinka, *The Bacchae of Euripides*, 4.

⁶⁶ Euripides, *The Bacchae and Other Plays*, 157.

⁶⁷ Aristotle, *Poetics*, 23.

⁶⁸ Euripides, *The Bacchae and Other Plays*, 160.

emblem of Euripides' *Bacchae*, begins to spurt 'red jets' 'from every orifice', as the Dionysian music wells up, infiltrating the atmosphere.⁶⁹ The 'stage is bathed'⁷⁰ in this liquid, covering Thebes in what is initially perceived as blood, as the destructive consequences of their ruler's irreverence. Yet, upon tasting this ambiguous liquid, Tiresias realises it as the liberating 'wine'⁷¹ of Dionysus. Within this, Soyinka diverges from the intoxicating force of Euripides. As Euripides portrays Agave's ecstatic possession – her 'foaming' 'mouth' and 'distorted eyes'⁷² – he reveals the destruction that Bacchic ecstasy confers, held in relation to Dionysian wine. While Soyinka's *Bacchae* still includes Agave's possessed slaughter, he gives Dionysian wine a new meaning in the unity it confers. As 'they all move towards the fountain'⁷³ – the royal house of Thebes, Soyinka's slaves, Euripides' Bacchants – Pentheus' death becomes a 'communion rite', dissolving the social boundaries imposed within his autocratic regime. The destructive Dionysus of Euripides' *Bacchae* is not present to prophesy the shattered Theban household.⁷⁴ Rather, Soyinka closes his *Bacchae* on the communal reunion of both Euripidean and Soyinkan dramatic figures. Soyinka unites each tragic mode, engaging with syncretic theatre on a metaliterary level.

Soyinka utilises the symbol of wine to communicate the wider 'communion' of his ritual. The universal force of Dionysus, Ogun and Christ, the emblem of wine ingrained in each religion, culminates here as a revitalising entity that synthesises Greek, Yoruba and Western theology. However, given Christianity's history as a tool of British imperialism in Nigeria, Soyinka's invocation carries cultural tension. Yet, rather than submitting to Western monotheism, Soyinka absorbs it into a Yoruba cosmological framework, decentring the imperial authority

⁶⁹ Soyinka, *The Bacchae of Euripides*, 97.

⁷⁰ Soyinka, *The Bacchae of Euripides*, 97.

⁷¹ Soyinka, *The Bacchae of Euripides*, 97.

⁷² Euripides, *The Bacchae and Other Plays*, 157.

⁷³ Soyinka, *The Bacchae of Euripides*, 97.

⁷⁴ Euripides, *The Bacchae and Other Plays*, 163-164.

embedded in Christian faith. Through this syncretism, the dual meaning of ‘communion’ as both social unity and Catholic Communion allows Soyinka’s theological and political purposes to reach their greatest expression. When viewed through this Yoruba-Catholic perspective, Pentheus embodies a Christ-like figure; he is the martyr that enables progression, his blood consumed in an act of spiritual cleansing. Within this martyrdom, Pentheus becomes a scapegoat necessary to restore the corrupted cosmic balance. His death ends the violent cycle of sacrifice used to suppress rebellion, as the oppressor becomes the oppressed. However, Pentheus is not the only scapegoat in this dynamic. Within Yoruba tragedy, Ogun’s journey into the abyss, ‘reconnect[ing] the divine and human shards of primal Oneness’,⁷⁵ positions him as a sacrificial victim on the cosmic scale. Soyinka’s Dionysus does not adopt the vengeance of Euripides’ god, but sacrifices himself to unite the stages of being, becoming a Christian-Ogunian martyr. No longer a ‘destroyer’,⁷⁶ Dionysus becomes a revolutionary, a liberator.

Within this climactic fusion, the mimicry that comprises Soyinka’s dramatic form finds its hybrid completion. Soyinka imitates only to reunite opposing beliefs; the ‘displacing gaze’ is not turned upon the pre-text he appropriates, but the Western narratives that perpetuate its superiority and separation. Soyinka splits Western belief into multiple manifestations, symbolised by the dismemberment of Pentheus, his rationality scattered by Dionysian madness. The ‘communion rite’ becomes a metaliterary metaphor for tragedy’s Eurocentric *sparagmos*,⁷⁷ the boundary between ‘ritual’ and ‘reality’⁷⁸ dissolved. The wine of Dionysus, Christ and Ogun converges into a single image, as Soyinka creates a new form of syncretic theatre, performing both political and literary revolution.

⁷⁵ Mark Pizzato, “Soyinka’s *Bacchae*, African Gods, and Postmodern Mirrors,” *The Journal of Religion and Theatre* 2, no. 1 (2003).

⁷⁶ Euripides, *The Bacchae*, 162.

⁷⁷ McConnell, *Postcolonial sparagmos*, 133-154.

⁷⁸ Soyinka, *The Bacchae of Euripides*, 9.

Conclusion

Wole Soyinka's *Bacchae* achieves the 'eradication' of Eurocentric hegemony not by abandoning the Western canon, but by occupying and infiltrating it from within. Throughout his reconfiguration, Soyinka negotiates the boundaries between Euripides' *Bacchae* and Yoruba theatre, infusing his adaptation with what is at once difference and similarity to the original. Dionysus and Ogun function as altered mirrors; Thebes is simultaneously ancient Greek and (post)colonial; the final sacrifice is both a troubling execution and a unifying 'communion rite'. The dualism of Soyinka's *Bacchae* strengthens both his connection to and distance from Euripides. His mimicry is imperfect, his *Bacchae* decidedly not Euripides', as it is within this disruptive difference that his revolutionary form arises. Soyinka adopts the role of Dionysus within the dramatic landscape. Much like the deity who arrives in Thebes to rupture Pentheus' rigid order, Soyinka enters the Western canon to shatter its control over tragic form. He unleashes a cross-cultural, syncretic theatre upon Eurocentric dramatic structures, collapsing the divide between Hellenic, Western and African narratives. Soyinka reinterprets and reclaims theatre as a universal mode of artistic expression through his final 'communion rite', liberating the global narrative beyond both his and Euripides' *Bacchae*.

Word count: 3959

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