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Abstract

The tendency to invest characters with ritual identities in the work of a minority of West African poet-novelists has led at least one critic to mistake the ritualistic for the real, the figurative for the factual. Richard Priebe writes of Armah's first novel: "That we never see how regeneration is effected is not important to the integrity of the work, for the tacit assumption of society, and by extension the artist, is that the ritual process enacted by the hero is the only way society can be rejuvenated." Ritual, by virtue of its very existence, is assumed to have magical power and efficacy: in the absence of any visible sign of regeneration, it is deemed to have been accomplished invisibly by ritual. 'Can't you bastards ever tell the difference between ritual and reality?' protests Tiresias when the merely 'symbolic flogging' goes too far in the perverted carrier-rite of Soyinka's *Bacchae*. Clearly, the overseers of the rite are not alone in their confusion. All three of the writers dealt with here make use of the particular figure of the carrier as ritual metaphor or motif and the precise relationship between ritual and reality is different in each case.

Ritual and Reality in the Novels of Wole Soyinka, Gabriel Okara and Kofi Awoonor

The tendency to invest characters with ritual identities in the work of a minority of West African poet-novelists has led at least one critic to mistake the ritualistic for the real, the figurative for the factual. Richard Priebe writes of Armah's first novel: 'That we never see how regeneration is effected is not important to the integrity of the work, for the tacit assumption of society, and by extension the artist, is that the ritual process enacted by the hero is the only way society can be rejuvenated.'¹ Ritual, by virtue of its very existence, is assumed to have magical power and efficacy: in the absence of any visible sign of regeneration, it is deemed to have been accomplished invisibly by ritual. 'Can't you bastards ever tell the difference between ritual and reality?' protests Tiresias when the merely 'symbolic flogging' goes too far in the perverted carrier-rite of Soyinka's *Bacchae*.² Clearly, the overseers of the rite are not alone in their confusion. All three of the writers dealt with here make use of the particular figure of the carrier as ritual metaphor or motif and the precise relationship between ritual and reality is different in each case.

Kofi Awoonor has referred to the 'theme of the priest, the carrier, the man who bears his burden of the terrible truth' in his novel *This Earth, My Brother...*³ His city lawyer is 'like a priest, in the traditional African sense, taking upon himself all the burdens of his people'.⁴ Awoonor thus appears to conflate the year-carrier, who purifies the community by carrying out into the wilderness or to water the burden of the dying year's sins and subsequent misfortunes in the form of a miniature wooden boat,⁵ and the priestly shrine-carriers of religious festivals such as the Apo and Afhaye.⁶ In Soyinka's work this ritual figure, who introjects the social consciousness and suffers on its behalf, and whose power to heal society's sicknesses depends paradoxically upon his estrangement from it, emboldens the idea of selfless individual sacrifice by outsiders.

Communal salvation is placed with a solitary sacrificial heroism. Soyinka, who is much given to anticipating himself in his work,⁷ wrestles in his prison-diary *The Man Died* with the facile temptation to cast himself in the role of artist-carrier and feed himself the false consolations of the fated sacrificial victim. Against this idea, a remorseless pragmatism reminds him that his death will not be socially beneficial or otherwise morally meaningful but futile because it will not challenge but only further the interests of the corrupt military regime. The 'poetic snare of tragic loftiness' diverts constructive energies into martyred egoism: 'history is too full of failed prometheans bathing their wounded spirits in the tragic stream.' Tragedy is seen as merely retrieving human unhappiness, subsuming and 'justifying it in the form of necessity, wisdom or purification'.⁸ Watching the corpses float past the Shage Dam in *Season of Anomy*, Ofeyi battles with less success against the consoling fiction that the slaughtered men of Aiyero are really carriers of the nation's conscience, scapegoats for its guilt, or regenerative sacrificial offerings whose destruction will 'tear up earth and throw it back in stronger, fructifying forms'. Ofeyi unearths 'repose' from wreck:

There was the marvel, although the bodies were swelled and the faces decomposed there hung about the scene a feeling of great repose. Perhaps the shroud of miasma dulled all sense of horror, or the abnormal stillness of giant machinery made it all a dream, a waxwork display of shapes, inflated rubber forms on rafts in motionless water, perhaps it all seemed part of the churned up earth, part of the clay and humus matrix from which steel hands would later mould new living forms.

I am lying to myself again he said, seeking barren consolation.

...It was becoming a habit, running lines in his head to stop the negative flow of implications from stark reality.⁹

Constructive anger threatens constantly to dissolve into self-deluding fatalism or indolent justification. It is perhaps one of the novel's weaknesses that, after Aiyero's defiance of the Cartel has caused the massacre of its sons, the political campaign is abandoned for the symbolic quest and rescue of Iriyise, who is finally carried from the nerve-centre of the regime's infected system. Ritual forms, which in *The Bacchae* are re-fashioned to root out the source of the rot, become obscure diversions which let the Cartel go free. Pa Ahime negatively ritualises the trek back to Aiyero as a form of purification: 'For me this is a cleansing act. It will purify our present polluted humanity and cure our survivors of the dangers of self-pity' (p. 218). Even the Dentist is, unconvincingly, made to agree on the point of Iriyise's superior value as symbolic figure-head and standard-bearer and on the ascendancy of the ritual 'meaning of the

event' (p. 218) over the event itself. Political action is dissipated into ritual action and the novel effectively sides with Ofeyi's lone sacrificial quietism against Demakin's committed activism, thus upholding the value of the special individual's merely intellectual assumption and moral absorption of the burden of suffering. In *Season of Anomy* and *The Man Died* the carrier-consciousness is joined to the scapegoat-syndrome: the 'terrible truth' borne is the ultimately futile genocidal sacrifice of ethnic groups by military despots at fake altars of national unity, in which the carrier-hero's own death may be involved. In *The Bacchae* Tiresias informs Dionysos that his death at the cleansing-rites would be no great matter because he would 'pass into the universal energy of renewal ... like some heroes or gods I could name'.¹⁰ Behind the prophet's arch glibness lies a precariously held, desperately embattled faith which Soyinka infuses into many of the ritual properties in his work: a continuing faith in sacrificial death and rebirth.

Soyinka had earlier employed the artist-carrier motif in a capacity more active than contemplative, marginally in the carver Demoke in *A Dance of the Forests* and more centrally in Sekoni, the sculptor-engineer of *The Interpreters* whose personal symbols, fitting for the carrier who straddles the old and new years, are the 'dome of continuity' and the bridge which 'also faces backwards'.¹¹ Sekoni, the only one of the returning 'interpreters' who does not take refuge from contemporary Nigerian corruption in satiric egoism, is another of Soyinka's strong breed, one of the spiritually elect who is idealistically dedicated to the service of his society. Sekoni takes on single-handed the whole corrupt structure of State industry, foreign adviser and local Chiefs and is finally weighed down and mentally broken by the burden of its injustice and fraudulent wastage of talent. Already a religious and social outcast, Sekoni, like his ritual prototype, is banished to the wilderness (of Ijioha) where, in the course of his psychological derangement, the regenerative and innovative energies of the power-station engineer which the corrupt authorities refuse to unleash upon a thirsting community pass into the artist's powers of cathartic release: the 'balance of strangulation before release'¹² in Sekoni's sculpture catches faithfully the liberation of his stuttering inarticulate energy. Sekoni dies soon afterwards in a car crash, a victim of the technological incompetence he has tried to remedy, and his death, during the cleansing period of flood rains and high tides, is presented unmistakably as a sacrificial offering. But his own redemptive and purificatory release through art is not extended, through the medium of his death, to his unchanging society and fellow-interpreters.

The 'dome of continuity' which artificially holds together the composite personality of the interpreter-group shatters at Sekoni's death: instead of bringing the members together in a cleansing solidarity of grief, it isolates them further in fragmented, locked-in egoisms. Sekoni serves as an ironic carrier, a negative catalyst who indexes the character of each as they betray their inadequacies in response to him and his memory. In the second half of the novel his mantle is posthumously taken up by two other stranger-figures. Firstly, there is the albino Lazarus: his crisis of mystical derangement and resurrection appears to grow, along with the strange religious sect of his island community, out of Sekoni's death as if by some mysterious re-incarnative process. Secondly, there is the parallel outcast and eternally running fugitive Noah, whose abuse by each of the interpreters similarly indexes their callous indifference and whose scapegoated death at the altar of their monstrous egoisms (linked with the slaughtered goat at Sekoni's posthumous exhibition) leaves them unredeemed. Interested only in the 'interpretation' which can be put upon them, but ignorant of their own collective guilt borne by the deaths, the interpreters — apart from Bandle — squander both sacrifices and return to a cheap satire that fails to challenge penetratively the surrounding social malaise. The carrier's ironic question-mark remains hanging over Sekoni and his spiritual successors, pondering the lone figure's magical god-like power to release and transform a society which chooses not to avail itself of that power.

For an example of ritual form which is invested with re-charging and revolutionary energies in a manner which does not merely contain and sublimate them in relief-actions, one must turn to Soyinka's version of Euripides' *Bacchae*. Closing the gap entirely between 'ritual' and 'reality', his adaptation asks whether societies benefit from any kind of substitutive individual sacrifice other than that in which the ritual form is strategically redirected at the actual source of infection, the very kernel of pollution, after the fashion of the Dentist's 'selective assassination' policy as outlined in *Season of Anomy*. In *The Bacchae* a rite used solely as an instrument of oppression is in turn mobilised by slaves, who both use and are used by the revolutionary god Dionysos, into an instrument of resurrection. Soyinka's post-internment writings continue to explore what he has referred to, in his interview discussion of carriers and scapegoats, as the area of 'blurred transition between ... the Christ-like figure of self-sacrifice and the successful revolutionary'.¹³ Mistrusting the transposition of terminologies which immediately turns the failed revolutionary into a tragic hero, Soyinka's new political consciousness compresses both into the single unitary concept of the sacrificial revol-

utionary, the messianic carrier: 'inherent in all struggle on behalf of society is always the element of self-sacrifice.'¹⁴

In Gabriel Okara's experimental novel *The Voice* the carrier figures mainly in his temporal function. The heavily-patterned ritualistic language of this work is frequently stiffened by Ijaw formalities of apocalyptic statement — 'the world has turned'¹⁵ — and idioms suggesting the hoarding of time: to live years is to 'kill' them and the past is carried around in 'dead years' (p. 59). But the hero Okolo — literally 'the voice' but also, by association, the priest of Oko, the god who presides over the Ijaw carrier-rite of the Amagba¹⁶ — also introjects the community's spiritual ills in the form of the accumulated accusations and insults which, in the symbolism of the rite, it 'puts on his head' (p. 65). In Izongo's society his dreaded touch, deriving from his ritual taboo status, is hysterically transfigured by a collective neurosis into sexual molestation, and this society's perverted values effectively fashion what is a carrier-rite in reverse. It is a relic of the traditional past, used now to celebrate an escape from that past by a new order given over to a deadening materialism. The tradition survives in a vestigial and mocking form, and exists only to annul tradition. Adrian Roscoe has observed that Okolo, the plain-speaking voice, and Tuere, the compassionate witch, are twin symbols of an idealised traditional past which is now declared an outcast and set afloat on the water.¹⁷ Unlike Awoonor's Amamu, they carry away not a century of accumulated evil but a heritage of wholesome values, and in a rite of passage in which they are the objects, not the agents, of expulsion. In the place of the symbolic canoe borne on the carrier's head and containing the lethal, pollutive burden of past evil, a real canoe is used to carry the bound couple to their doom and the sea, in which life will be regenerated, is replaced by a whirlpool, into which the values of the past are terminally drawn. The novel's last words consign them to total oblivion: 'And the water rolled over the top and the river flowed smoothly over it as if nothing had happened' (p. 127). Ukule's last words to Okolo — 'Your spoken words will not die' — suggest, however, that the days of Izongo's order are numbered and Okolo clings to his revolutionary ardour to the end: 'If the masses haven't got *it*, he will create *it* in their insides. He will plant *it*, make *it* grow in spite of Izongo's destroying words' (p. 90).

In Kofi Awoonor's *This Earth, My Brother*¹⁸ the ritual ambiguity takes the form of a double time-mode. The prose chapters impel Amamu forward through the vignettes of a representative colonial childhood and youth, during which the colonial legacy is accumulated and stored in what serves in the novel as both personal and collective subconscious,

awaiting a ritual unburdening. But the poetic interludes, in contradistinction to this linear movement, carry Amamu back to a visionary rediscovery of his lost childhood cousin Dede, who, at a deeper level of the unconscious, is identified with a pre-European African mythology still awaiting retrieval. In this incorporation of westernised linear advancement into a pattern of circular return, Gerald Moore has discerned both the general fate of the returning African been-to and the specific ritual one of the carrier figure.¹⁹

This pattern is complicated, however, by other strands running across it. The cycle of return to the 'second self' of the reborn childhood is tied to a parallel eschatological cycle, since the visionary liberation achieved by assuming the 'body' of Dede's death can be purchased only by Amamu's own passage through madness and bodily death: this death is a process through which Amamu is reborn into the spirit world from which he comes into Deme in the first chapter. The two worlds are conceived spatially, as areas of existence rather than phases of time, and Amamu acquires not only the identity of the purgative carrier, who releases the immediate past, but also that of the bridger of transitional gulfs between the worlds of the living, the ancestors and the unborn, and the historical link between the corrupt modern state and the reservoir of lost myths and faiths (the mermaid, Mammy Water). Nevertheless, the links in the novel between the eschatological rebirth and the vision of social regeneration aligned with the carrier-motif are often tenuously theoretical.

A more crucial link is between Amamu's annulment of his personal history in 're-assuming' Dede's death and the bearing away of the community's historical burden upon which the pattern of personal return is super-imposed. Dede's death from malnutrition in 1944 marks the centenary of colonial incursions into Ghana and is seen as the culmination of a century of material theft and pillage which brutally curtailed a pre-colonial African innocence. Independent Ghana struggles to rebirth after a long and violent colonial gestation: 'Woman, behold thy son; son, behold thy mother. She begat thee from her womb after a pregnancy of a hundred and thirteen years' (p. 28). The lawyer Amamu — an unlikely choice, perhaps — is cast in counterposition in the metaphoric role of carrier, appointed to bear away the past century of colonial ills. The expulsion of dying years inevitably invests the carrier-motif with millenarian or Utopian associations, coloured as the ritual is by the New Year's traditional mood of revaluation, its redefinition of roles and its potential for long-term historical retrospection which may be the prologue to permanent change. Thus the motif may imply a return to innocence or some messianic political regeneration. 'Let us return to the

magic hour of our birth for which we mourn,' cries Amamu, who identifies the dead cousin of his childhood with the retrievable world of a beautiful and sinless pre-colonial Africa. The antiquity of Ghana's suffering and the forebodings of impending apocalypse are finely caught in the description of Yaro, the houseboy from the Nima dunghill for whom the lawyer's aid is too little and too late: 'He suddenly looked old; he wore for the first time an indeterminable age, an oldness that was not time's, an agedness of hills and rivers ... a final weariness that defied all description.... It had to do with a doom, a catastrophe, a total collapse of all things' (pp. 175-6). It is Amamu's task to roll back the years on this unpurged misery: 'The centuries and the years of pain of which he was the inheritor, and the woes for which he was singled out to be carrier and sacrifice, were being rolled away' (p. 179).

If the novel leaves an impression of unrealised purposes, it has to do with the handling of the themes of communal deliverance and rejuvenative annulment, in the work of Awoonor and Armah, at the mythical level and as ritual motifs, as distinct from the realistic dramatisation of an actual rite. There is, for example, in Soyinka's play *The Strong Breed*, a fate-like coincidence of the returning prodigal's re-acceptance of a repudiated personal past with the recovery of long-forsaken communal responsibilities and the power to annul the community's time. But this correspondence, smoothly executed by Soyinka, acquires only a mystique of meaning in Awoonor's symbolic, allegorical treatment of the subject. Amamu's completion of a religious cycle through death achieves a personal communion with his lost lover but has little meaning as a communion rite which restores some collective loss: at the realistic level, he does not invest his death in the renewed life of society but seems to waste it. His personal 'assumption' of Dede's death and a parallel substitution of himself as communal carrier are given only the thinnest allegorical connections. The limited estrangement which is one of the conditions of carrier-status is not, in Awoonor's novel, that of the foreigner (like Eman) or that of the ontological outsider (Armah's man). Amamu is more deliberately aware of the ritual aspect of his estrangement than the man, who remains a stranger to the role itself, but his aloofness, unlike that of the classless man, derives largely from his elitist social status. We do see him, carrier-fashion, assuming the anguish of the drudge-barman at the club and the long-standing traffic-policeman, and, as lawyer, carrying on his conscience the unprosecuted crimes and unexpiated guilt of his society, but we also see him profiting from the crime and corruption which 'put a good deal of money in his purse' (p. 23). He is a doubtful saviour: 'A lawyer is next to God. He is the one who gets you out of

trouble; he is the one who puts you into trouble' (p. 159). Amamu's 'magical powers' constitute little more than the corrupt influence — witness the scenes with customs and traffic officers — which it is his task as ritual purifier to purge, and they come too late to save Ibrahim and, by implication, the 'captive people' of Nima. Amamu's moral gestures of ritualistic identification with the poor and downtrodden, much like the paranoid compassion of Armah's man, and his desire for self-sacrifice to expiate his own complicity with the sell-out to neo-colonial values, seem genuine enough. But they are inconsistent with his professional behaviour and his very real and ignorant distance from the people who, at the ritual level, he comes to save.

Awoonor's novel — like Armah's *Fragments*, perhaps — suffers from its miscasting of the alienated intellectual as carrier and its association of the carrier-consciousness with the artistic sensibility. This confusion can be traced to the author's essays and interview statements:

Living outside Africa, removed from first-hand experience, imposes a certain burden of sorrow on my work. I cannot escape it, but I know too, that it sharpens my articulation in many ways.... All artists, all creative people are displaced persons by virtue of the burden of suffering they carry. This burden enables Amamu to stand aside and make a clear statement about his society.²⁰

When I finally decided to use this theme of the priest, the carrier, the man who bears his burden of the terrible truth, I decided it was very easy for me to go into traditional society, to take a person from that society, to be able to do the sort of thing Okara did. But rather I would choose a man who, by his upbringing and by his education, exists almost totally outside this world and its outlook. The lawyer, the sophisticated international man ... is the one who is very much in need of this journey, in terms of the future and what the whole of Africa will become. He is the representative of the future ... and we will all be like the lawyer in some basic general sense.²¹

Following Soyinka's earlier directions, Awoonor has exploited the carrier's limited estrangement to recast him in the role of expatriated and alienated artist, whose absence from the community sharpens his moral awareness and brings a fresh energy and objectivity to his role but whose saving mission stops short at contemplation of its sufferings and is not translated into action. He merely takes over the moral and intellectual burden, the maddening weight of consciousness of the evil legacies left by Africa's past, but fails to fulfil some necessary personal 'journey' that smooths Africa's path into a future which daily becomes more and more like his own.

Awoonor's various oracular remarks on Amamu imply mystical identifications between personal and communal redemptions and linear

and circular patterns of progress. Amamu is 'liminal yet central' and 'strives towards the ultimate harmonic order'. In death he achieves 'a personal, individual redemption' but his journey takes place on both 'a very realistic level' and 'at the mythical level'. 'It is also a journey into himself, into the society — into the very entrails of his society in order to turn from it, as it were. It may be lonely and anguished, but it is achieved and fulfilled'.²² But Awoonor's priestly conception of the carrier as special and set apart imposes severe limits on this fulfilment: 'He runs himself into a state of trance and then, in the clear-eyed singular moment, the god of sense descends and communion takes place.'²³ What is envisaged here is supernatural communion between individual and deity or ancestral spirit, which Amamu achieves only in death and which refers only marginally to the ritual religious impetus given to the social communion of carrier and community. Soyinka's verdict on Okolo holds good for Awoonor's carrier, as for his own: 'His will to motion can hardly be calculated in terms of his effect on the community ... the catalytic effect of his quest on the external world is more expected than fulfilled.'²⁴ Doubtless, the implicit protest in the harrowing journey through the Nima slums partly divests the novel of the complacent and fatalistic resignation which often attends cyclic structures. The latter episode is sufficiently disturbing to infuse into the narrative a militancy which works against, and not through (as it does in Soyinka) the ritual pattern. Nevertheless, Amamu's death appears more suicidal than sacrificial, more narcissistic than altruistic. It remains a personal, not a public event and one in which ritual mystique has priority over social reality.

NOTES

1. Richard Priebe, 'Demonic Imagery and the Apocalyptic Vision in the Novels of Ayi Kwei Armah', *Yale French Studies* 53 (1976), 115.
2. Wole Soyinka, *Collected Plays* vol. 1 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1973), p. 241.
3. Bernth Lindfors, ed., *Palaver: Interviews with Five African Authors* (Austin: African Research Institute, University of Texas, 1972), p. 62.
4. Kofi Awoonor, interview by John Goldblatt, *Transition* 41 (1972), 44.
5. Robin Horton, 'New Year in the Delta', *Nigeria Magazine* 67 (1960), 256-274.
6. R.S. Rattray, *Ashanti* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1923), p. 211.
7. Wole Soyinka, interview in *African Writers Talking*, eds. D. Duerden & C. Pieterse (London: Heinemann, 1972), p. 173.
8. Wole Soyinka, *The Man Died* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1975), pp. 89-90.
9. Wole Soyinka, *Season of Anomy* (London: Rex Collings, 1973), pp. 173-4. Further references are given in the text of the article.
10. Soyinka, *Plays* 1, p. 243.

11. Wole Soyinka, *The Interpreters* (London: Heinemann, 1970), p. 9.
12. *Ibid.*, p. 99.
13. Wole Soyinka, interview with Louis S. Gates, *Black World* 24, 10 (1975), 37.
14. *Ibid.*, 37.
15. Gabriel Okara, *The Voice* (London: Heinemann, 1970), p. 74. Further references are given in the text of the article.
16. Horton, 260.
17. Adrian Roscoe, *Mother is Gold* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1971), p. 116.
18. Kofi Awoonor, *This Earth, My Brother...* (London: Heinemann, 1972). Page references are given in the text of the article.
19. Gerald Moore, 'Re-integration with the Lost Self', *Revue de Littérature Comparée* 48 (1974), 488-503.
20. Awoonor, Goldblatt interview, 42, 44.
21. Awoonor, *Palaver*, p. 62.
22. Kofi Awoonor, 'Voyager and the Earth', *New Letters* 40, 1 (1973), 92; *Palaver*, pp. 60-61.
23. Awoonor, Goldblatt interview, 44.
24. Wole Soyinka, 'And After the Narcissist?', *African Forum* 1, 4 (1966), 62.

OLATUBOSUN OGUNSANWO

Awoonor's *This Earth, My Brother*: A Personal Memoir

This Earth, My Brother (1971)¹ can be described as a dramatized autobiography. We can also assume from the narrative itself that the world of the novel is, for the author, decadent. Awoonor's indignation at the 'moral decay of the nation' (p. 116)² is unmistakable in the closely-knit, densely allusive method of the novel. But this essay is not concerned with the details of the novel's autobiographical feature or social criticism *per se*. Aesthetically Amamu, for instance, has to be seen, if only for his narrative role as a protagonist-narrator, not as 'homo sapiens' but as