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## TWO CULTURES AT PLAY IN WOLE SOYINKA'S *THE LION AND THE JEWEL*

Roberta Orlandini

In the early play "*The Lion and the Jewel*" (1963), Nigerian playwright and novelist Wole Soyinka<sup>1</sup> dramatizes the rivalry between Lakunle and Baroka, both engaged in pursuing Sidi, the most beautiful maiden in the village. In the seemingly polarized cultural discourse of the play these two characters stand at opposite ends: as a young teacher, enthusiastic about the Western world, Lakunle is eager to modernize the customs of the tiny village of Ilujinle, in the heart of Yorubaland. Conversely, mature Baroka, the village Bale, firmly stands against change and progress. As to Sidi, although she is attracted to Lakunle, at the end of the play is seduced by Baroka and decides to marry him.

In a 1987 interview, Mr. Soyinka explained that "there is no clash of culture in the play" because Lakunle is not representative of Western civilization and he complained that Western critics simplify the play by defining it in those terms.<sup>2</sup>

I have to question his statement even after recognizing that he does emphasize a Yoruba context in most of his work. It is true that only apparently the play enacts the conflict between modern and traditional. Nonetheless, the encroachment of Western technology and ideas in the village life is here more than a leading theme. It is essential to the play which would simply not exist without this confrontation. That the playwright twists the two concepts of modern and traditional to make them serve his purpose, and distorts them so that they acquire a very peculiar and complex meaning as they apply to the characters, is, then, another story.

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<sup>1</sup> Wole Soyinka is a Yoruba and was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1986.

<sup>2</sup> The line from the interview is quoted by Derek Wright, *Wole Soyinka Revisited* (New York: Twayne Publishers, 1993), p. 52.

Soyinka develops this theme through several motives, such as the photographer with his magazine pictures of Sidi and the related themes of image making and appearance versus reality, the theme of women's social role, and that of the dangers brought on by technological progress. In this paper I will look at a further aspect of cultural contrast that has not received much critical attention: the four main characters' language, that is, the particular use of metaphor as vehicle of cultural clash especially as it enhances the contrast between Lakunle and the other characters. If he does not represent the whole of Western culture (what character could do that after all?), Lakunle does stand for a portion of it, even though a marginal and most superficial one (such as cosmetics, ballroom dancing, and breakable plates). But, more importantly, he embodies cultural confusion and ambiguity, while Sidi and Baroka more firmly support the native ways. Lakunle's ambivalence clearly emerges in his behavior, his looks, and, more distinctly, in his language as it relates to Sidi's and Baroka's in particular.

The fact that he is a comic character does not mean that we cannot take him seriously. He is a character suspended between two cultures which doubles his dramatic function: on the one hand, he is a vehicle for playing down certain aspects of Western civilization; on the other, his purpose is the affirmation of Yoruba beliefs. In spite of his admiration for things Western, Lakunle cannot, in fact, completely repress his Yoruba upbringing which emerges unconsciously. According to Jones, "he is engaged in doing violence to his 'true' nature," (47). The influence of Western culture makes him ridiculous and superficial, while his Yoruba component allows him to have at least a glimpse into a fulfilling life. For example, his desire to follow European customs, such as monogamy, does not keep him from envying Bale Baroka his many wives:

Voluptuous beast! He loves this life too well/ To bear to part from it. And motor roads And railways would do just that, forcing/ Civilization at his door. He foresaw it/ And he barred the gates, securing fast/ His dogs and horses, his wives and his/ Concubines ... ah, yes ... all those concubines Baroka has such a selective eye, none suits him/ But the best ...

[His eyes truly light up.] ... Yes, one must grant him that. Ah, I sometimes wish I led his kind of life./ Such luscious bosoms make his nightly pillow./ I am sure he keeps a time-table just as/ I do at school. Only way to ensure fair play. He must be healthy to keep going the way he does. (24-25)

However, as the school teacher, Lakunle is a carrier of outside influence in the small village. Since the image he wants to project on to the villagers is that of a reformer according to supposedly superior Western ways, Lakunle dresses with a suit, refuses to abide by traditional customs, such as paying the bride-price for Sidi, and uses

what he thinks is a sophisticated language. Proclaiming he is against polygamy, which is a part of the village life, he seems to have a progressive view on women and promises Sidi he will treat her according to Western values:

Together we shall seat at table/ -Not on the floor-and eat./ Not with fingers,  
but with knives/ And forks, and breakable plates/ Like civilized beings. (9)

He would also like to transform the village into a modern town, with “a park for lovers,” a ballroom dancing school, and such other amenities.

However, Soyinka undercuts Lakunle’s enthusiastic support for Western values by making him, one, a comic false prophet and, two, an object of scorn for the other characters. Let us look at the first point.

According to Oyin Ogumba’s study, a cultural or generational conflict is at the heart of many of Soyinka’s plays where he portrays some aspects of communities in a state of transition from tradition to modernity. There is usually one character playing the role of the real or false prophet, some kind of messiah and reformer that is to either criticize or uphold his traditional culture.<sup>3</sup> Lakunle is obviously a false prophet, with his totally uncritical and frivolous way of playing down Yoruba tradition and glorifying the Western way. He is also a vehicle for Soyinka’s social satire directed to those Nigerians that find themselves suffering from the inferiority complex lingering on in the postcolonial phase. Soyinka “examines a situation in which a people have not fully recovered from a systematic indoctrination against their own culture and are still striving slavishly to copy the ways of their former masters in order to be highly esteemed” (Ogumba 35). While the play, with its dramatic irony, emphasizes important issues about progress, such as women’s social role as dramatized by Sadiku’s subversive dance, these find no room in Lakunle’s vision of the village future which is short-sighted, superficial, and irrelevant:

Within a year or two, I swear./ This town shall see a transformation/  
Bride-price will be a thing forgotten/ and wives shall take their place by men./  
A motor road will pass this spot And bring the city ways to us./ We’ll buy  
saucepans for all the women/ Clay pots are crude and unhygienic/ No  
man shall take more wives than one/ That’s why they are impotent too  
soon./ The rulers shall ride cars, not horses/ Or a bicycle at the very least./  
We’ll burn the forest, cut the trees/ Then plant a modern park for lovers/  
We’ll print newspapers everyday/ With pictures of seductive girls./ The  
world will judge our progress by/ The girls that win beauty contests...(34)

Lakunle would be a terribly inadequate leader for the village, even more so than Baroka. He would think of his own personal benefit, as

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<sup>3</sup> This is the central thesis in Oyin Ogumba, *The Movement of Transition* (Ibadan: Ibadan UP, 1975).

his remark about leaders driving cars instead of riding horses shows (34), just as Baroka has done in all his years as the village Bale, but he would not have, for instance, the old Bale's intuition about the dangers of technological progress: where Lakunle dreams of cutting trees and burning the forest, Baroka is the one haunted by forebodings of ecological disaster, as he states in the lines starting "I do not hate progress...."

Through the character of Lakunle, Soyinka is then making fun of a certain vision of the Western world. By undermining Lakunle's view of the alleged superiority of Western values, Soyinka reverses the opposition between the dominant Western culture and the subordinate Yoruba world (although his stand remains quite complex and not at all easily defined).

The second way the playwright employs to make Lakunle comical as an upholder of outside influence on the village is having the other characters look down on him. Sadiku finds him unmanly, unripe and the very Sidi cannot understand his behavior. For example, she finds his attempts at kissing her the Western way a "strange unhealthy mouthing" (10), and she is offended by his refusal to pay the bride-price. But it is Lakunle's language that she strongly objects to. She thinks that his endeavor at poetic expression is a bunch of nonsensical sounds:

L.: Sidi, my love will open your mind/ Like the chaste leaf in the morning,  
when/ The sun first touches it.

S.: If you start that I will run away./ I had enough of that nonsense yesterday.

L.: Nonsense? Nonsense? Do you hear?/ Does anybody listen? Can the  
stones/ Bear to listen to this? Do you call it/ Nonsense that I poured the  
waters of my soul/ To wash your feet?

S.: You did what!...(7)

Soyinka uses metaphors as vehicles of cultural contrast. Jones has already pointed to "Soyinka's subtle use of linguistic register" (49) to capture the two sides of Lakunle's personality: this character uses a highly rhetorical and bookish language when he is engaged in upholding foreign customs and a much more natural language when he inadvertently slips into a reverie like the one about having many wives (24-25). Yoruba traditions just seem to be more natural to him. We might add to this, however, that the difference in the language of Lakunle and Baroka is not only a characterization device. It is what actually carries the plot forward: while, on the one hand, Sidi is upset by Lakunle's often abstract verbal expression, on the other she falls for Baroka's subtle rhetoric, rich in imagery she can identify with. Sidi always makes a point of criticizing Lakunle's language, either because

too abstract or because she cannot understand the references to Western civilization:

L.: My Ruth, my Rachel, Esther, Bathsheba/Thou sum of fabled perfections/  
From Genesis to the Revelations/ Listen not to the voice of this infidel...

S.: Now that's your other game;/ Giving me funny names you pick up in  
your wretched books./ My name is Sidi. And now, let me be...

Lakunle's poetic outbursts are devoid of all direct connection with the objects of everyday experience:

(from the previous quote)

... Do you call it/ Nonsense that I poured the waters of my soul/ To wash  
your feet? (7)

Romance is the sweetening of the soul/With fragrance offered by the  
stricken heart. (10)

It is not that Sidi dislikes figurative speech. On the contrary, she loves metaphors and proverbs drawn from village life and the forest: "...Sidi will not make herself/ A cheap bowl for the village spit" (8). Her verbal expression is in keeping with Yoruba traditional rhetoric:

The Yoruba say that "proverbs are the horses of speech" (*owe, l'esin oro*). In other words, proverbs are succinct verbal evocations and embellishments of conversation that support, carry, and elevate speech, and intensify the expressiveness of ideas. Proverbs are verbal art, not simply verbal communication. (Drewal 33)

Sidi calls Baroka "the lion of Ilujinle," "the Fox of the Undergrowth," "The panther of the trees," (12) and, by the end of the play, when she has resolved to marry Baroka, she calls Lakunle "book-nourished shrimp" (57). Her own language is often the stereotypical down-to-earth expression of the "primitive" dealing with unfamiliar objects: so, letter writing is "talking with paper" and the photographer's motorbike is "the devil-horse."

In the seduction scene, she wittily communicates through proverbs ("If the tortoise cannot tumble/It does not mean that he can stand" [38-39]) as well as puns:

B.: Perhaps he is a frugal man./Mindful of years to come,/ Planning for a  
final burst of life, he/ Husbands his strength.

S.: [giggling...] To husband his wives surely ought to be/ A man's first  
duty —at all times.

However, for all her wit, she cannot outdo the Fox of the Undergrowth who wins Sidi by appealing to her vanity already stimulated by the magazine pictures, but also through his poetic expression, a carrier of Yoruba experience and replete with tangible and concrete images: talking about his bad temper, he says that soon his voice "will be/ The sand between two grinding stones" (43); and refers to his favorite wife in the act of "Sulking like a slighted cockroach" (36). But it is in

his famous anti-progress lines that Soyinka puts into Baroka's mouth the best poetry of the play:

I do not hate progress, only its nature/ Which makes all roofs and faces look the same./ And the wish of an old man is/ That here and there,/ Among the bridges and the murderous roads,/ Below *the humming birds* which/ Smoke *the face of Sango*, dispenser of/ *The snake-tongue lightning*; between this moment/ And *the reckless broom that will be wielded*/ In these years to come, we must leave/ Virgin plots of lives, rich decay/ And the tang of vapour rising from/ Forgotten heaps of compost, lying/ Undisturbed ... But the skin of Progress/ Masks, unknown, the spotted wolf of sameness... (47-48).

Probably, Baroka is in this speech a spokesman for the author. He mentions bridges and roads, which are recurring images in Soyinka's work, images of linkage, connection between the two cultures. The fact that Baroka qualifies the road as "murderous" points to the dangers he sees in accepting outside influence, which will kill Yoruba identity making everyone, African and Western, resemble each other. Together with one of the main Yoruba's *orisa*, Sango the god of lightning and electricity, the central cultural motive in this speech is the importance of the uniqueness of the individual. "The Yoruba perform elaborate rituals that reveal both the uniqueness of individuals and their inherent relationship to others" (Drewal 26). Such individualism finds expression, for example, in sculpture with different representations of the head, often enlarged to indicate the site of a person's essential nature and privacy. Here, Baroka is defending this staple of Yoruba culture against the process leading to that "sameness" that an irrational and superficial adoption of a Western way of life would very likely bring about.

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