

# Unto These Hills: Soyinka's Spiritual Journey in Idanre

by

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## Abstract

Wole Soyinka's epyllion "Idanre" is an early poem that articulates his African and more specifically his Yoruba Weltanschauung. The poem is a multilayered narrative, which I analyze from three perspectives, metaphysical, metaphorical, and feminist. The political context in which Soyinka has struggled often overshadows his spiritual message, but when the focus has been on the spiritual elements, they have been linked to Christianity. "Idanre" plainly derives from the Yoruba pantheon. Religious, political, and cultural freedom while at the core of Soyinka's social consciousness, a feminist reading of his works leads to and leaves the question of whether or not he supports patriarchy.

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In a 1966 interview with *Spear*, Wole Soyinka confessed that he was no longer a practicing Christian. Nevertheless, critics continue to point to the Christian influence in his works. In this essay, I suggest that Soyinka's use of biblical references and allusions is not indicative of Christian influence because the Bible itself is not Christian but a compilation of writings that people who identify as Christian have adopted as their holy book. Soyinka as a cosmopolitan writer of many genres, (being African, Nigerian, and Yoruba does not inhibit his sophistication) makes use of various spiritual references and allusions. In this an age of disbelief unlike any spiritual crisis of the past, well-read and educated seekers are eclectic in their quest for truth. Therefore, Soyinka's poetry contains Yoruba symbology, biblical references, Greek mythology, and other so-called pagan references. This essay examines Soyinka's first volume of poetry and focuses on its title poem, "Idanre." The poet's pilgrimage into the hills of Idanre is a search for truth—a foray into eternal mysteries of the human condition.

### **A Metaphysical and Metaphorical Reading**

In the beginning of part one the poetic voice bears witness, sees the horsemen reflected in the mirror of clouds, and perceives how something evolves out of nothing and a world is born physically/metaphysically, how Spirit takes form. On another level, he witnesses the creation of his poem. Among poets there is a term, *got used*, which means the poet is an open channel through which the muse, in this case Ogun, moves to create from the void. Sometimes a writer labors over a work, a void, as it were, a blank page, but at other times, the gift comes fully formed. For Soyinka, *Idandre* is the latter. He recalls that after his night visit to the hills of Idandre, he returned to his dwelling place and completed the poem in one sitting. He writes in the preface to the long poem the following scenario: "*Idandre* was born of two separate halves of the same experience. The first was a visit to the rockhills (sic) of that name, a god-suffused grazing of primal giants and mastodons, petrified through some strange history, suckled by mist and cloud" (57). The second part of his experience takes place three years later, but African time is not linear making the idea of circling back to an earlier or past event plausible. Apparently, a rainstorm is catalyst for the chronokinesis that transports the poet back in time to resolve the "unresolved sensations" (57) of his first sojourn into the hills. He abruptly leaves his work in the middle of a stormy night and walks "through wet woods on the outskirts of Molete, a pilgrimage to Idanre in company of presences such as dilate the head and erase known worlds" (57).

Soyinka has clearly stated that the Yoruba deity Ogun, the god of iron, creativity, metallurgy, war, is his muse and the one to whom he pays homage. In his Nobel Prize Banquet Speech (10 December 1986), Soyinka declared that he was the recipient of the prize because "Ogun, the god of creativity and destruction . . . anticipated . . . Alfred Nobel at the very beginning of time by clearing a path through primordial chaos" to make this event in the life of the poet a reality. In this same address Soyinka refers to his poem *Idandre*, and suggests the Swedes should read it if they have not already done so. Soyinka's praise to the Yoruba god Ogun reflects a Black spiritual tradition, but not necessarily a Euro-American tradition.

Many African Americans from star athletes to hip hop musicians accept prizes with the preface, *first giving honor to God*. Perhaps I am just unaware, however I believe it would be unusual to hear a non-black artist make the same proclamation, except perhaps from a country music star. Nevertheless, it is or appears to be a black spiritual impetus to honor something higher than oneself orally. For a Yoruba man to honor a Yoruba god seems logical, and yet some critics (see: Willfried F. Feuser) remind that Soyinka was raised a Christian, grew up in a parsonage and that his mother was “wild Christian,” Soyinka’s term.

In an interview with Ulli Beier, Soyinka admits that church attendance was mandatory, but attendance did not impress upon him any of the religious dogma of denominational creed. He enjoyed the festivals of Christmas and Easter and also enjoyed the Muslim festivals as well. Thus, early he formed an electric worldview. When his grandfather introduced him to the Yoruba Pantheon, these traditional gods, goddess and the mythopoetic view they represent resonated with the poet in a way that Christianity had not. The god Ogun became the perfect muse enabling the creativity of the young writer in search of his voice.

The poem “Idanre” pays respect to the creative energies inherited from Ogun. Soyinka retells the creation story and it is multilayered. On the one hand, the poem narrates his own creative impulse, his journey into the hills, the rain, and the inspiration of the stone configurations of the hills of Idanre. On a metaphysical level, the narrative is a creation myth of the earth’s beginnings. Arranged into seven parts, the divisions mirror the seven phases of human existence: conception, birth, infancy, childhood, adulthood, old age, and death. The seven parts also relate to Soyinka’s *The Seven Signposts of Existence*. Clearly, Soyinka describes a spiritual journey, particularly with his use of the word pilgrimage, which indicates a journey to a sacred place or shrine.

Beginning with the flood, the deluge and the poet’s or the narrative persona’s observation of the vast void and chaos of the earth as in “The skymen of Void’s regenerate Wastes / Striding vast across / My still inchoate earth” (61), the stage is set for the unfolding of fact and metafact. The flood metaphysically connects to the human body, which is composed of more than half water. As the waters of earth evaporate and surround the poet with clouds, so do the waters of life surround the human body. As the electrical forces move upon the earthly mist (Sango), so the mental forces, flood the body/mind with thoughts. Metaphysically, the lesson of the flood is in the free will that leads to excesses when human beings transgress divine laws.

Metaphorically, the flood suggests conception; the spermatozoa must reach the ovum for creation to begin. Spiritually the stride or leap of faith must occur before growth commences. The “axe-handed one” known as Ogun violently hurls Sango, god of thunder and lightning, down to earth. As the storm subsides the, “lip of sky is sealed” (62), its secrets left unrevealed. Metaphorically, thunder and lightning can symbolize human emotions. Awe-inspiring and electrifying, bolts of lightning can ignite a spiritual awakening. Lightning that brings rain also is connected with fertility. The poet/witness to the electrical storm and flood receives inspiration. His mind/spirit is fertilized. He writes, “And no one speaks of secrets in this land . . . and men / Wake naked into harvest-tide” (62).

To wake naked into spiritual awareness requires one to be fully open to the divine quickening unencumbered by the clothing of religious dogma. Whereas harvest normally suggests the gathering of crops, for the artist it is the mystical reaping of inspiration. In the Beier interview, Soyinka explains that the entire creative process has to do with “gestation, something that takes place on different levels of consciousness or subconsciousness.” This creative process is spiritual and the Yoruba religion enables Soyinka to comprehend it.

Willfried Feuser insists that Soyinka is “*anima naturaliter Christiana*” (570) meaning naturally Christian, and exposes the cultural hegemony, which Soyinka denounces. In an interview with Henry Louis Gates, Jr., Soyinka responds to a question that Gates poses regarding “The motif of self-sacrifice” (53) in Soyinka’s works. Gates wonders if the Judeo-Christian tradition might be the influence on this motif. Soyinka’s response corrects both Feuser and Gates. It bears quoting in full:

This, again, I believe is part of the pattern of acceptance of European thought and ideas—this idea of attributing the concept of self-sacrifice to the Christian, to the Euro-Christian or Judeo-Christian world, simply because a single figure emerged from that particular culture to espouse, in very beautiful mythological terms, the cause of the self-sacrificing individual as a kind of, as the surrogate for world suffering, social unhappiness . . . It is often forgotten that the idea of individual sacrifice—the principle of the surrogate individual—is, in fact, a ‘pagan’ one. Those who attribute this concept to Europe forget that Christianity itself is not a European religion. And that Christ, the central figure of Christianity, is really a glamorization of very ‘paganistic’ ideas: the idea of personalizing the dying old year, the dying season; to insure the sprouting and fertility, the idea of the emergence, in fact the very resurrection, of nature. All this is ‘pagan’—‘pagan’ as an expression used by the Christian world to describe the fundamentally natural, Nature religions. I see Christianity merely as another expression of nature religion (54).

He concludes by declaring that the idea of the scapegoat is deeply embedded in African religious belief. At the age of eleven, Soyinka thought because he did not believe in the Christian god he was an atheist, but even today, many Christians would agree with him (Interview with Beier). Neither atheist nor Christian, Soyinka is profoundly spiritual.

Section two of “Idanre” after the flood, titled “*and after*” suggests afterbirth. The line that says “The wine-girl, dazed from divine dallying” (62) has sexual connotations, as does the use of the word *tryst* in the preceding stanza. Within this section of birth, there is also death. A dead girl on the highway—a fusion of life and death like the image of the ouroborus. In this section the poet experiences “apocalyptic visions” (86) his skin “Grew light with eyes” (65) as he perceives visions from childhood. In childhood innocence, one is much closer to the veil that separates the living from the dead. Seeing also relates to Soyinka’s second signpost that queries, “Is knowledge not within and around us? . . .” (7).

Just as the signposts point to the wisdom waiting to be understood, so the wine-girl symbolizes vitality and the link that connects body with soul. The wine of life often acknowledged as the water or blood of life, continually recycles.

The violence contained in part two of the poem appears at first to represent a pessimistic view of human existence. The walk with the god Ogun reveals both creation and destruction, and the material creations of man—the roads that claim lives, “Fated lives ride on the wheels of death when, / The road waits, famished” (64). What prevents a nihilistic conclusion that both Ogun as creator and destroyer, and man both created and destroyed, are meaningless is that human beings are more than their bodies and there is creation in destruction—there is reconstruction. The poet sees this reconstruction of the dead as in “I watched them drift away / To join the gathering presences” (65). The concept of the living-dead within African philosophy supports the idea of eternal creation. John S. Mbiti reveals that the living-dead stand in the ontological position between spirit and humanity (69). While the violence in part two of the poem is apocalyptic, as the following lines reveal, “Where sprang armoured beasts, unidentifiable, / Nozzles of flames, tails of restive gristles / Banners of saints, cavalcades of awesome hosts / Festival of firevales, crush of starlode / And exploding planets / A *certain* knowledge named it the apocalypse, it stayed / Portents in unquiet nights” (66). The word *certain* (emphasis in original) knowledge draws attention to the signposts pointing to catastrophe, but the section ends with “Earth’s broken rings healed” (68). Therefore, it seems the certain knowledge is of an endless cycle, one that improves through understanding the wisdom of the *Orisa*.

The third section of the poem begins the true pilgrimage, title of this section. The narrative in *pilgrimage* relates the story of how one finds diversity in unity. It relates how Atunda, the god’s slave, rolled a boulder down a hill and crushed the deity into a “million lights,” (68). Metaphorically, the lights represent the various aspects of the god. In the third section of Soyinka’s *Signposts*, he writes “Virtue wears the strangest garb”—meaning things are not always what they seem to be—there is “comradeship in strife” (*Signposts* 13). The introduction of opposites posits the beginning of free will, for the poet writes that Atunda’s act caused the god to grieve—“Set flanges to a god, control had slipped / Immortal grasp” (69). The slippage results in the human creation of evil. Metaphysically, it may be that humans have become separate from their god-self. Elsewhere Soyinka writes, “Tragedy, . . . is the anguish of this severance, the fragmentation of essence from self” (*Myth, Literature and the Modern World* 145). Alienation of the self from the self is not a postmodern malady but an ancient motif in the mythology of many cultures.

Section four, “*the beginning*” details Ogun’s heroism in clearing the path to humanity. The other gods unsuccessful in their efforts to reach humans, prompt Ogun to make way. What stood between the human and the divine was just “a mere plague of finite chaos” (70). However, while Ogun opens the way, men fail to heed the wisdom in their own proverbs. They use the divine to take care of the mundane. The men of Ire make Ogun their king: “He descended and they crowned him king” (71). In doing so, they have unleashed a power they cannot control, not unlike the splitting of the atom.

Interestingly, Soyinka's choice for the name of the town means intense anger, rage, and fury. Ire Ekiti, a state in Nigeria might well be the source for the name, but in the context of Soyinka's poem anger helps to explain why the elders of the town disregard their proverbs that say "We do not burn the woods to trap / A squirrel; we do not ask the mountain's / Aid to crack a walnut" (73).

In the next section, Ogun wages war. Titled *the battle*, anger is unleashed in fierce "lust-blind" (75) destruction. The god slaughters his own men. This wild destruction the poet describes as "sweet lather of death" (74) in which Ogun washes his hands. The god has been deaf to the men's cries and blind to his carnage. The experience of violence produced by the god can be read metaphysically as principle. Ogun as principle, iron, war-god, is like the thunder and lightning of Sango. A principle does not care what it does, it simply does. Electricity as principle can light one's home or set one's home ablaze, depending on how it is used. The men of Ire used the principle incorrectly and paid heavily for doing so. Still another way of reading this section of the poem is that by going to war, the men of Ire unleash violence that always is a boomerang. The poet writes what all too often is a truism for humanity. "Truth, a late dawn," comes for many at the hour of death.

Section six chronicles the poet's journey down from the hills, "*recessional*" (81). Atunda, the rebel slave, the "stray electron" (83) becomes a saint. In the poet's view, Atunda is the first revolutionary. He is praiseworthy because even though he produces the first alienation of the self with itself, he introduces free will, without which human beings would be automatons.

The poet clearly honors, as Eldred Jones cogently argues, the "justification for individuality" (191). In his praise for Atunda, he includes all mythical individual self-sacrificers for humanity, as the following stanza demonstrates:

All hail Saint Atunda, First revolutionary / Grand iconoclast at genesis—and the rest  
in logic / Zeus, Osiris, Jaweh, Christ in trifoliolate / Pact with creation, and the  
wisdom of Orunmila, Ifa / Divining eyes, multiform (83).

To claim the individual's prerogative to exist within a communal society is an important position for Soyinka to take. Many people do not understand African communalism. In the Gate's interview, the question of individual freedom of the artist is couched in the rhetoric of the Black Arts Movement that dominated the late 1960s in the United States. The question was, "Do you think it is an African notion that the individual will of the artist must be subjugated to the will of the community . . . ?" (55). Gates does not name Ron Karenga, but it is likely Karenga's statement insisting that black art must expose the enemy, praise the people, and support the revolution that prompts his comments. Soyinka rejects totality but acknowledges the artist is obviously part of the community.

Nevertheless, he recognizes “the peculiar isolation of creativity—the peculiar isolation of the artist as an expression of certain principles, including the principle of self-sacrifice” and the isolation of the artist from the community (54). Abiola Irele posits that Soyinka sees the artist as mediator “of inner truths that sustain collective life” (34). *Idanre* exemplifies the solitary journey the poet takes and his return to collective life.

Soyinka introduces a unique diversity into Yoruba communalism, the Mobius Strip. The evolving snake becomes a new symbol, “banked loop of the Mobius Strip / And interlock of re-creative rings, one surface / Yet full comb of angles, uni-plane, yet sensuous with / Complexities of mind and motion” (83). The mathematical property that cannot be oriented represents the quirk or the stray electron that permits the slightly disoriented artist to remain part of the community. It also enables the idea of evolution through time, expanding the image of the ouroboros, which represents infinity but suggests no possibility for change.

*Harvest* concludes the poem and the poet pilgrimage into the hills. The granite hills of *Idanre* stand for the difficult spiritual issues of duality, of good and evil that appear on the path of the human condition. The Yoruba myth of the shattering of the god is parable for the existence of the multifarious aspects of the one god. In metaphysical terms, one is both the lone individual and the collective body. The western idea or more precisely the North American idea of the rugged individual is part of the human narrative, but only one part, one side of the elephant. The African collective view that knows there is no individual salvation is another aspect, perhaps the front of the same elephant. The metaphysical harvest is far more than the production of corn, which is what the wine-girl anticipates. For the poet the harvest yields a cornucopia of spiritual insights. He has walked with god. Ironically, what is learned is already known and contained in proverbs and the Orisa. The final signpost reads, “Orisa reveals Destiny as Self-destination” (34).

Knowledge, as the poet is well aware, expands into infinity. In his poem titled “Journey” he says, “I never feel I have arrived, though I come / To journey’s end” (*Early Poems* 175). Soyinka’s quarrel with organized religion comes in part from the failure of Christianity, Islam, and Judaism to admit their explanations of the inexplicable are no better guesses than anyone else’s, including the Yoruba or any African belief system. Everybody is whistling in the dark, which makes religious intolerance extremely irrational.

The hegemonic and often violent evangelizing perpetrated on black people by Islamic and Christian enslavers leads Soyinka to the conclusion that religious fanatics must be insecure in their beliefs. In the Beier interview he states “The Yoruba had no hostility to the piety of other people” and adds, “the truly liberated mind is never aggressive about his or her system of beliefs. Because it is founded on such total self-confidence (sic), such acceptance of others, that there is no need to march out and propagate one’s causes. That is why Yoruba religion has never waged a religious war, like the Jihad or the Crusades.” While the Yoruba never proselytizes, their belief system has resisted the onslaught of Islam, and both Catholicism and Protestantism. As a result of the enslavement of Africans from Yorubaland, the religion is practiced throughout the Diaspora, in Brazil, Argentina, Uruguay, and variants including Candomblé and Umbanda, Santería in Cuba, Puerto Rico, and the Dominican Republic, Orisha in Trinidad and Tobago and in the United States (Brown).

The fact that many displaced Africans retained their religious beliefs and often syncretized African gods to fit the imposed Catholic saints indicates for Soyinka the authenticity of the African worldview. Ogun, Soyinka's patron, becomes St. Peter in the Catholic pantheon. Soyinka's spiritual orientation revealed in his earliest poems from *Idanre and Other Poems to Mandela's Earth* where he declares, "Water is God" (30) is clearly liberating but also obviously supra masculine. A feminist critique may bring balance to his phallogocentric worldview.

## **A Feminist Reading**

While it can be rewarding and even enlightening to attempt to read a writer/poet within the context of her or his works and from the perspective of the creator, often times it is a difficult task, not unlike learning a foreign language. Some years ago while on a Fulbright to Egypt, a group of Americans and I experienced a most difficult time in our daily language class trying to speak Arabic. None of us had experienced the same trouble with French, Spanish, and I had even studied Yoruba with ease. Finally, sensing our collective frustration our wonderfully gracious instructor told us in terms that we could understand, you just have nothing to hang your hat onto. In the other languages that we had studied, there were words in English that were similar and sometimes even the same as the foreign word. Therefore, we could make a comparison and expand our knowledge by hooking on to what we already knew. Arabic and I might add Chinese, Russian and other languages that offer no hooks are difficult.

When critics outside the culture offer analysis of works it is much easier to take a Eurocentric perspective than to try to take an Afrocentric approach for an African literary work. Ignorance and arrogance combine to make the work of the critic, in Soyinka's words an "overture of racism" (Jones 788). Lest my critique appear as an overture of sexism, let me clearly state my awareness that Soyinka as a Yoruba man has every right and maybe even the responsibility to write from a masculinist perspective. In an interview with Mary David, he so much as said so. When critiqued about the women characters in his plays he said that in his mind, women become fused with nature and he went further to claim that as a man he could not produce an authentic portrayal of woman. Only women writers can write truthfully about women. Not only is his response disappointing, it is untrue. In the same interview, he points out that not all of his women characters are stereotypes.

Carol Boyce Davies' essay on the characterization and stereotypical portrayal of women in Soyinka's plays applies equally well to his poetry. She writes, "a feminist reading of Soyinka reveals enough female stereotypes to suggest a definite sexist bias against women" (76). Woman as sexual object, appendage or virgin/prostitute as Iriyise in *Season of Anomy*, is shadow figure in *Idanre*. In what clearly is a gendered aesthetic, the masculine mode leaves space only for wine-girl who Soyinka notes is "Also Oya, once the wife of Ogun, latterly of Sango. (Worn out by Ogun's fearsome nature, she deserted him for Sango)" (86).

Furthermore, Soyinka's archetype of the rebel child, Ajantala, obviously stands for an exclusive masculinist tradition. He is "iconoclast, anarchic, anti-clan, anti-matriarch, virile essence in opposition to womb-domination" (87). Niyi Osundare suggests that womb is a veiled reference to the Negritude movement. The connection seems more likely to connect with the anti-matriarchy statement.

Soyinka has stated to Sylvia Bryan that he uses women figures as "symbols and essences" (quoted in Stratton 117). Therefore, we should read Iriyise as a trope for Africa. It remains unclear, then, how Soyinka diminishes the powerful goddess Oya—of fire, wind, river, referring to her as the common wife of the two gods Sango and Ogun. Florence Stratton in "Wole Soyinka: A Writer's Social Vision" poses two questions about his work. Based on his own declarations for freedom against "authoritative concepts" (*Myth, Literature and the African World* 137) in "Ideology and the social vision (2): The secular idea," Stratton argues that either Soyinka sanctions the unjust power of male supremacy or patriarchy or he is oblivious to it. If the ignorance of oppression inherent in patriarchy is the issue, we might be optimistic. If on the contrary, Soyinka believes "male supremacy belongs to the natural order of things" (Stratton 553) then the corrective work is great and the optimism less justified. Regardless of Soyinka's position regarding women, their political roles in society and in his works, the corrective articulated by the late Mariama Bâ is *mots juse*. Bâ said, "The woman in Africa . . . has to present the position of woman in Africa in nil its aspects" (quoted in Stratton 163). Bâ delineates the various injustices in the family, and state and concludes by saying that African men writers in their anxiety have confused the African mother with mother Africa. Eldred Jones reiterates Bâ's statement when he writes about the wine-girl in "Idanre". He says "she is the principle of womanhood; the eternal mother; the human counterpart of Mother Earth, and thus similarly responsive to the elements" (184). Unfortunately, many men who usurp the power of women and use them as symbol and metaphor in their writing do not recognize their creations as problematic. On the contrary, they would believe Jones' description of the Wine-girl as complementary. The problem becomes clear when we contemplate what man has done to Mother Earth.

Without a feminist reading of Soyinka, one could conclude that the Nobel Laureate, playwright, novelist, essayist, poet, former political prisoner, and social activist's call for political, religious, and intellectual freedom is wholly authentic, but from a feminist viewpoint one is left to wonder if he truly believes "justice is the first condition of humanity" (Jeyifo *Conversations* 198). Feminist critics concede that while an artist might well be reflecting a cultural reality, one would hope that the artist might use the power of the pen to envision new paradigms, particularly if that artist is socially conscious and politically aware enough to condemn all hierarchal and oppressive systems, except patriarchy.

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