

DEMYSTIFYING “MYSTERIES” AND “MIRACLES” OF EXOTIC TECHNOLOGY: A STYLO-DISOURSE AND CULTURAL EXAMINATION OF ASPECTS OF WOLE SOYINKA’S WRITINGS

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Abstract

Although Wole Soyinka, the Nobel Laureate, has been studied extensively across disciplines, the stylistic, linguistic, literary and cultural values of his works continue to engage scholarly attention. His indebtedness to the Yoruba² cultural background has been much discussed and analyzed in the literature. Analyzing aspects of Soyinka’s *The lion and the jewel* (1962), *Kongi’s harvest* (1962), *Ake* (1981) and *Isara* (1989), this paper examines the Yoruba ways of responding to exotic technological phenomena such as the railway, the radio and television, electricity, and the postal system. The people employ songs, jokes, humorous proverbs and circumlocutory euphemisms as ways of “demystifying” the “miracles” and “mysteries” associated with these novelties. The “mysteries” are also related to their spiritual and ritual practices. Once the exotic materials are reduced to songs and jokes, the Yoruba seem to have completed the rite of initiation into their culture. Relying on the principles of stylistics combined with those of Discourse Analysis, the paper analyzes the texts, revealing those Yoruba cultural habits, including their attitude to the spoken word.

Keywords: Yoruba language, culture, songs, proverbs, demystify

1. Introduction

The Yoruba people characteristically invent words, use proverbs, songs, jokes, and circumlocutory euphemisms to attempt to “demystify” the “mystery” associated with exotic technological items. These lexical and semantic inventions are employed in probing and explaining the “mystery” and “miracle” of Western technology. Once the exotic materials are reduced to songs and jokes, the Yoruba seem to have completed the rites that will enable them to live without any sense of danger with those technological items. The paper examines how Wole Soyinka, speaking for the Yoruba, handles the “mysteries” and “miracles” of the train, electricity, the radio, the newspapers and the magazines, using the medium of the English language.

Born on July 13, 1934 in Abeokuta, Nigeria, Wole Soyinka, a literature Nobel Laureate, is one of the most important writers on the African continent today. A political, social, and cultural activist, he has demonstrated prodigious creative energy that has sustained his amazing productivity in more than five decades. Writes Jeyifo (2004, p. xi):

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² The Yoruba are one of the ethnic and cultural groups of West Africa. They constitute one of the three dominant population groups in Nigeria.

our author has produced a quantitative and, more importantly, qualitative body of works³ which, for a long time to come, is sure to generate diverse revisionary studies and totally fresh works of interpretation and evaluation.

So much has been written on this world-acclaimed writer that it would be a herculean task to even attempt a review. The subject of technology, aspects of which are the focus of this paper, has been addressed by some critics. Invariably, critics have seen Ogun, one of the prominent Yoruba deities, as Soyinka's means of presenting the Yoruba people's concept of technology. Ogun is the patron god of hunters, warriors, blacksmiths, drivers, and all those who work with metals and iron. (See, for example, Izevbaye, 1976, 2006; Jeyifo, 1988; Ogunba, 1975; Ojaide, 1994). The primary texts for the present effort, however, are *Kongi's harvest* (1963), *The lion and the jewel* (1963), *Ake* (1981), and *Isara* (1989). Each of the texts contains at least one item of modern technology that commands the attention of the Yoruba characters there. The texts, some fictional and some non-fictional, are united by the presence of the relevant technological items. This feature illustrates the stylistic and thematic consistency that characterizes aspects of Soyinka's writings. Soyinka won the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1986 and has become, to some extent, the official interpreter of the Yoruba culture. All his works – novels, plays, and poetry – demonstrate creative adaptations of the Yoruba culture and world view.

2. Theoretical and Methodological Issues

This section presents the theoretical and methodological issues relevant to the discussion. First, the interrelationship among language, thought and culture is discussed briefly. This is followed by a brief discussion of stylistics which offers the underpinning for the analysis.

2.1 Language, Thought and Culture

Language, thought and culture are intimately interrelated. Language habits are essentially thought habits and since language is a socio-cultural institution, it is not difficult to see that thought habits are largely inseparable from a cultural ambience. At the individual level, thoughts, ideas and concepts are almost inconceivable without the instrumentality of language. There are experiences we would describe, justifiably, as ineffable, but, generally speaking, ideas and concepts that cannot be expressed in words do not qualify to be so called. The ability to name items in our environment, describe our experiences and verbalize our thoughts gives us a sense of authority over, and superiority to our physical, cultural and social milieu.

Quirk (1962, p. 61) describes an experiment reported by Ullmann

³ Wole Soyinka's works include, among others: *The lion and the jewel* (1963); *A dance of the forests* (1963); *The interpreters* (1965); *The road* (1965); *Idanre & other poems* (1967); *Madmen and specialists* (1971); *The Bacchae of Euripides, Season of anomy* (1973); *Death and the king's horseman* (1975); *Ogun Abibiman* (1976); *Ake* (1981); *Isara* (1989); and *The beatification of area boy* (1999), just to mention a few.

(1964, p. 89) in which a patient who had completely forgotten the names of colours could not make distinctions among them (colours). According to Ullman, the inability of the patient to identify colours is traceable to his failed linguistic ability. Similarly, a person's ability to count without the use of words – numerals – is severely restricted. Quirk is of the opinion that counting is extremely facilitated by the employment of speech (Quirk, 1962, p. 61). An examination of especially the vocabulary items and their meanings in the language of a community would have a lot to reveal about their values, fears, social stratification, beliefs and at least aspects of their ethical code. Kottak (2004, p. 94) observes:

The ways in which people divide up the world – the lexical contrasts they perceive as meaningful or significant – reflect their experiences. Anthropologists have discovered that certain sets of vocabulary items evolve in a determined order.

For example, Berlin and Kay (1969/1992) have suggested that people's orientation and response to colour are closely related to their cultural background and thought habits. They see the Papua New Guinea cultivators' and Australian hunters' and gathers' reduction of ten colour items to just black and white as a measure of their socio-cultural experience and orientation. The point has been made impressively by Whorf (1939 as quoted by Quirk 1962, p. 59):

We dissect nature along lines laid down by our native language. The categories and types that we isolate from the world of phenomena we do not find there because they stare every observer in the face; on the contrary, the world is presented in a kaleidoscopic flux of impression which has to be organized by our minds and this means largely by the linguistic system in our minds. We cut nature up, organize it into concepts, and ascribe significance as we do, largely because we are parties to an agreement to organize it in this way – an agreement that holds throughout our speech community and is codified in the pattern of our language.

It is pertinent to observe that language is the chief means by which world views are structured and represented in discourse. Language itself is a socio-cultural institution. Words are inseparable from the concepts and value they convey and since language, or rather, the use of it is 'subjective', it is inconceivable to expect any form of objectivity in any representational discourse. Language is a repository and, therefore, conveyor of world vision, culture, and ideology of the people that use it. Language, thought, experience and the environment – physical, social, cultural and political – are intimately interrelated. Halliday (1970, p. 142) once made this crucial observation:

The nature of language is closely related to the demands that we make on it, the function it has to serve. In the most concrete terms, these functions are specific to a culture ... The particular form taken by the grammatical system of language

is closely related to the social and personal needs that language is required to serve.

Studies have shown that language and culture are intricately woven together such that any attempt to separate them along parallel lines will only be an exercise in futility. Culture is the totality of the socially acquired knowledge about the way of life of a people and this obviously includes their language. This view enjoys the support of Lyons (1968, p. 432) when he states that:

The language of a particular society is an integral part of its culture, and the lexical distinctions drawn by each language will tend to reflect the culturally important features of objects, institutions and activities in the society in which the language operates.

One of the most classical definitions of culture is that of Tylor (1891), as cited by Tschumi (1978, p. 236), which regards culture as "... that complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, law, morals, customs, and all other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society". To Oyeneye and Shoremi (1985), Tylor's definition of culture distinguishes between the acquired qualities of people and their instinctive qualities. Culture not only refers to artifacts but also ideas, technical knowledge, habits, values, modes of behaviour and socialization. Andah (1982, p. 4) submits that "culture embraces all the material and non-material expressions of a people as well as the process with which the expressions are communicated. Indeed, man is a culture-creating and culture-bearing being".

Like culture, language has been defined variously by linguistic scholars. Sapir (1963, p. 8) defines language as 'a purely human and non-instinctive method of communicating ideas, emotions, and desires by means of a system of voluntarily produced symbols. It is clear from this definition that language is an exclusively a human possession. As noted earlier, language cannot be discussed to the exclusion of culture. In Sapir's (1963, p. 207) view, language has a dual relationship with culture; it is part of culture as well as a major vehicle for the expression of culture. Language is therefore central to culture, and as Adetugbo (1992, p. 5) puts it, "the centrality of language to culture is recognized everywhere". Jessel (1978) also cites Fishman (1972) as saying that language is the medium of culture, both intrinsic and extraneous. Hayakawa (1964) posits that man's cultivated ways of behaving and the internal patterns behind them constitute his culture and are made manifest in his language.

As a consequence of the inter-relatedness of language and culture, bilingualism and multilingualism necessarily imply biculturalism and multiculturalism. Acquiring a language means more than understanding the lexis and structure of the language. It has to do with the knowledge of the cultural patterns of life of the speakers of the language. Our culture influences the way we use language to express reality. Culture is the totality of the way we think and behave, which in turn influences our language and the way we use it.

Having identified language as a social system, and established a nexus between language and socio-cultural context, Halliday (*ibid*) goes on to classify language functions into three major types. For him, the functions are ideational (the use of language to represent the physical and social ‘worlds’ as well as the ‘world’ “within” the user), interpersonal (the use of language in establishing and maintaining relationship between people) and textual (the use of language in which connectedness in discourse is achieved through linguistic items). Of interest to this discussion is the ideational function which involves representation of reality. How does a language user represent reality? The answer to this question will inevitably lead us to a consideration of the concerns of Discourse Analysis (or DA). DA sees all forms of discourse as conveying ideological values, overtly or covertly presented. Ideology is about the values, beliefs, ideas, and views held consciously or unconsciously by a group of people. In discourse presentation, these ideas find their way into the discourse even when the writer does not consciously intend them to do so. This view of discourse is so important that Jeffries (2010, p. 6) declares that “all texts are ideological”. In the same vein, Fairclough (1989, p. 64) observes:

Conventions routinely drawn upon in discourse embody ideological assumptions which come to be taken as mere ‘common sense,’ and which contribute to sustaining existing power relations.

The idea is that discourse practice is nothing but social practice and a representation of power relation and ideological perspectives in society.

Both Fairclough (1989) and Jeffries (2010) argue that discourse is one of the chief means by which social inequalities and dominant ideologies are perpetuated. Ideologies of the dominant groups are reproduced in texts, particularly in media discourse, and after a long time of repeated presentations they become so familiar or naturalized that readers come to see them as ‘normal’ and ‘sensible’. Fairclough draws attention to the difference between power in discourse which is about how power relations are enacted in the communication process and power behind discourse referring to the institutions behind the participants involved in the acts of communication and the impact of these on the ensuing communication. It is a fact that:

All text producers have the potential to produce hidden ideologies in an attempt to persuade or manipulate, and that the techniques of embedding of ideology.... are common across the whole range of communicative situations in which we find ourselves on a daily basis. (Jeffries, 2010, p. 7)

Of prime importance in DA is the phenomenon of context. Since discourses occur in real contexts, it is the duty of the analyst to unravel the contexts in which communication takes place. The multiplicity of contexts - social, cultural, political, economic, spatio-temporal, etc. – requires the analyst to be sensitive to contextual factors. Furthermore, DA often employs

interdisciplinary approaches as a way of unraveling social identities, social relationship and political ideologies. A robust and fruitful analysis calls for the employment of a combination of the linguistic analytical ‘tools’ with the real knowledge of the world. To unravel the power relations believed to be at play within and behind the text, the analyst must be sensitive to the interaction among the various elements of the text – formal structures, formal features, verbal interaction and other forms of communicative events.

Scholars have long recognized the value of interdisciplinary and multi-methodological approach to discourse analysis (e.g., Wodak & Reisigl, 2003; Fairclough, 1992, 1995; van Dijk, 1988). This approach is helpful in that it takes the analysis beyond pure formal linguistic discussion, involving “more systematically, the historical, political, sociological, and/or psychological dimension in the analysis and interpretation of a specific discursive occasion” (Wodak & Reisigl, 2003, p. 83). It is the view of Lakoff (2003, p. 200) that “the analyst must have recourse to the findings and methods of other (sub) disciplines, there is no discourse analysis’ otherwise.” As Wodak and Reisigl (2003) tell us, “discourses cross between fields, overlap, refer to each other, or are in some other way socio-functionally linked with each other; hence the use of terms such as ‘intertextuality’, ‘interdiscursivity’ or ‘hybridity’” (p. 385). Describing the multi-methodological approach as triangular or three-dimensional, Wodak and Reisigl (p. 38ff) draw attention to the following points:

- (1) Language-internal features which include lexical solidarities, collocational peculiarities and connotations, implications and presuppositions, syntactic coherence, local interactive processes of negotiation, etc.
- (2) Inter-textual and inter-discursive relationships between utterances, texts, genres, and discourses (discourse representation, allusions/evocations, etc. and
- (3) Language-external: social/sociological variables and institutional frames of a specific context of situation (the formality of a situation, the place, the time, the occasion of the communicative event, the groups) of recipients, the interactive/political roles of the participants, their political and ideological orientation, their sex, age, profession and level of education as well as their ethnic, regional, socio - political and historical context.

Although the three points highlighted by Wodak and Reisigl above are not mutually exclusive, it is expedient to relate each of them to the analytical procedure guiding analysis in this paper. The first point, ‘language internal features’, enables the analysis to account for lexical choices peculiar not only to Soyinka but conveying Yoruba people’s peculiar habits of thought. The ‘local interactive process of negotiation’ as well as ‘collocational peculiarities and connotations’ is adaptable to the exploration of the Yoruba thought

processes via the examination of their lexical choices mediated in English by Wole Soyinka. The second point has to do with ‘inter-textual and inter-discursive relationships between utterances, texts and genres’. The issues of intertextuality and interdiscursivity (see above) are quite pertinent in a discussion which relates the collective traditional ‘text’ of the Yoruba people (such as songs, proverbs, observation of physical and social phenomena) to the written texts by Soyinka. In addition, four texts are being analysed and the question of intertextuality is obviously an important one. The third point prepares the analyst to handle personal, social and institutional interactions.

2.2 *More on Stylistics and Discourse Analysis*

It becomes necessary at this point to strengthen the theoretical background to the analysis by making some statements about Stylistics and Discourse Analysis, the two major theoretical frameworks for the analysis.

2.2.1 Stylistics

Grounded in linguistics, stylistics is a discipline devoted to the study of style. It may be defined *as the* systematic, methodical or ‘scientific’ study of style (Dare, 1991, p. 63). The word ‘style’ from which the term ‘stylistics’ derives lacks a uniform application (McMenamin, 2002, p. 126), and the former owes its origin to the Latin word ‘stylus’, denoting a stick used in those days for writing on clay tablets (Chapman, 1974). A multidimensional concept, style, the object studied by stylistics, is “the selection and arrangement of linguistic features which are open to choice” (Babajide, 2000, p. 510). It is also a “consistent occurrence in the text of certain items and structures, or types of items and structure among those offered by the language as a whole” (Malmkjar & Carter, 2002, p. 510). In the opinion of Olujide (2002, p. 344) style refers to “the peculiar way language is used by an individual writer in a particular context”.

What most definitions of style emphasise is the idiosyncratic use of language and choices made by individual writers in certain situations or contexts. Every language user possesses a linguistic peculiarity, that is, a linguistic thumbprint (Olujide, 2002). Therefore, style can be regarded as a set of individual characteristics. In line with this, Spencer (1964, p. xi) says “... a writer’s style may be regarded as an individual and creative utilization of resources of language which his period, his chosen dialect, his genre and his purpose within it offer him”. McIntyre and Busse (2010) define stylistics as the study of style in language and how this results from the intra-linguistic features of a text in relation to non-linguistic factors such as author, genre, historical period and so on. Also, Crystal and Davy (1969, p. 9) suggest that “stylistics is the study of certain aspects of language variation and style”. According to Simpson (2004, p. 3), it is “a method of textual interpretation in which primacy of place is assigned to language”.

The definitions above have two things in common. One is that stylistics studies language variation. This implies that language is made up of multiple components, which are processed through grammar, semantics

and phonology to achieve form and meaning. Stylistics is, therefore, the sum total of linguistic choices which the language offers to the individual writer. Another fact common to the definitions is the use of such terms as ‘description’ and ‘interpretation’ which establish the perspective of the definitions in terms of what Fish (1980) regards as the problem of clarifying the relationship between linguistic description and literary interpretation. As a result, Enkvist (1973, p. 27) views stylistics from three perspectives: first, as a “sub-department of literary study when it draws only occasionally on linguistic methods”; secondly, as a “sub-department of linguistics when dealing with peculiarities of literary texts”; and, finally, as an “autonomous discipline when it draws freely, and eclectically, on methods from both linguistic and literary study”.

Stylisticians rely on linguistic models, theories, and frameworks in the analysis of texts so as to enable them to explain *how* and *why* a text appears the way it does and *how* and *why* it yields itself to certain or different dimensions of meaning. The analysis in this work follows this tendency.

2.2.2 Discourse analysis

The linguist Harris (1952) was the first to use the term, ‘discourse analysis’ describing it as the analysis of connected speech or writing, for continuing descriptive linguistics beyond the limit of a single sentence at a time. Meanwhile, scholars have attested to the difficulty of a comprehensive and acceptable definition of discourse analysis. But a way to get at the simplified meaning of the term is, perhaps, to break the words into its components. This takes us into the definition of ‘discourse’ on one hand, and on the other, the definition of ‘discourse analysis.’

Discourse can be seen as ‘language in use’ (Brown & Yule, 1983). By language in use, we mean the set of norms, preferences and expectations which relate language to context. It, therefore, follows that discourse analysis is the analysis of language in use. The idea is that language analysis should not be restricted to the phonological, syntactic and semantic properties. Beyond formal features, social and cultural contexts of use should be an important consideration.

Discourse analysis therefore studies the relationship between language (written, spoken – conversation, institutionalized forms of talk) and the contexts in which it is used. As Slembrouch (1998) points out, discourse is the inter-relationship between language and society, with the interactive or dialogue properties of everyday communication. For Cook (1989, pp. 6-7) discourse does not have to be grammatically correct; it can be anything from a grunt or simple expletive, through short conversations and scribbled notes, a novel or largely a lengthy legal case. What matters is not its conformity to rules, but the fact that it communicates and is recognized by its receivers as coherent. This corroborates Stubbs (1983, p. 1) which says that Discourse analysis is “a conglomeration of attempts to study the organization of language and therefore to study larger linguistic units, such as conversational

exchanges or written text”.

Stylistics and discourse analysis overlap in that the two terms are used to study the actual use of language as well as determine their stylistic and discourse peculiarity. Schmitt (2002, p. 49) submits that:

the central focus of discourse and stylistics is that discourse is made up of units whose structures need to be identified and analysed to effectively interpret the essence of the communicative act. Consequently, words, phrases and sentences which appear in the textual record are subject to analysis.

It can be inferred from the above that discourse and stylistics are broad-based disciplines which deal with functional aspects of language.

The analytical approach, as noted earlier, is basically stylistic. However, we allow the analysis to benefit from the principles of DA which enrich discussion by incorporating ideological and sociological features of the context. Besides, the analysis also incorporates insights from literary criticism, which may explain why the analysis seems “unscientific”.

3. Analysis

The discussion comes under two headings: The Train/Railway and The Media. We begin with The Train/Railway.

3.1 *The Train/Railway*

The analysis and discussion in this section, which centre on the Yoruba people’s typical response to the “miracle” of the train are based exclusively on the evidence that comes from *Isara* (1989). Representing the Yoruba people in this regard is Akinyode, Wole Soyinka’s father. His perceptions, thoughts and his verbal and non-verbal reactions are so typically and deeply Yoruba that a clear understanding and appreciation of his sentiments are likely to afford us an insight into the people’s psycho-cultural world.

Akinyode, the typical young Yoruba man, had been extremely fascinated, even mesmerized by “the exotic world of a railway carriage” (p. 11). So impressed by the train was the young mind that he needed to interpret and relate to it in terms of his own cultural and linguistic background. Given the intimate connection (already noted) between language and culture, processing the experience in his language means also attempting to culturally “domesticate” and digest it.

Akinyode refers to it consistently as a “monster” or as “monstrous” (pp. 12, 13, 16), an epithet probably thrown up by the idea of “*iwin*” or “*oro*” – the goblins, the like of which people Fagunwa’s novels.⁴ Yode’s⁵ mind at this time

⁴ Fagunwa’s novels illustrating this include: *Ogboju ode ninu Igbo Irunmole* (1938); *Igbo Olodumare* (1949); *Irinkerindo ninu Igbo Elegbeje* (1940); *Ireke Onibudo* (1949)

⁵ Yode, the short form of Akinyode, is Soyinka’s father whose biographical information features prominently in the book.

could only work in terms of the rural background of Isara.⁶ He thinks of the “train’s curved spine, a monstrous millipede it seemed at such moments” (p. 16). Furthermore, “Yode had long decided that if there was a horned species of the snake, like the horned beetle for instance, the railway train was surely modeled on it” (p. 16) The “snake” and the “millipede” are symbols derived from the bucolic background of the child, one that the train would call up in the mind of any typical Yoruba child. Of course, the reference here is to its enormous length and the numerous coaches. Like a snake, “the monster steadily belched out its entrails and was in turn swallowed up by them” (p. 3). The awe, the terror, the marvel and mystery inspired by the train and the circumstances of the journey by train are perspicuously presented by Soyinka:

Excerpt 1

Diana’s account had fallen short of this railway world of iron and steel and fat wooded slippers, nothing could match the flag in the hand of the station guard, his censorious eye sweeping up and down the platform, flag upraised, smartly dropped, followed by a nod of acknowledgment from the grimy, sweat-soaked engine driver who learnt so casually, so confidently, so fully “in control” of this monster ... Nothing of Damian’s description ever prepared him for the wooden benches with comfortable space between them and a wide passage the length and breadth of the carriages ... Nothing prepared him for the rumble of the iron girders as the rolling wheels took on their timber and augmented it, wrapping around his head filling up the carriage in sounds just short of prolonged thunder; and Damian had said nothing at all of the tunnel into which the train suddenly disappeared, a mere culvert over which a motor road did pass but which filled Yode with instant terror until in the dim light he saw Damian’s mouth again open in mocking laughter, so he half-shut his eyes, the train clung to its sooty shroud even after it had emerged.....But nothing at all about tunnels, however short (pp.12-13).

Though Damian⁷ has obviously prepared Yode for the “miracle” and “mystery” of this monster called the train, there are abundant indications that Damian’s descriptions have fallen short of the major surprises experienced by this young mind. The verb phrase, “had fallen short,” is indeed one of such linguistic indications in the sentence, “Damian’s account had fallen short of this railway world of iron and steel and fat wooden slippers.” This is a world that is far from anything that Yode has ever imagined, “the railway world of iron and steel and fat wooden slippers.” It is obvious that Yode has never seen anything that can compare with the massive steel and iron of the railway

⁶ *Isara*, the title of Soyinka’s book, is the name of Yode’s hometown.

⁷ Damian is the companion of Yode on his trip on the train.

world. The verb phrase “had fallen short” is followed by clauses each of which is introduced by the pronoun “nothing” or its variant and each of which helps to convey the overwhelming surprises that his eyes have encountered:

Excerpt 2

Nothing could match...

Nothing of Damian’s description ever prepared him...

Nothing prepared him for the stamped reels of tickets...

Nothing prepared him for the rumble of the iron girders...

Damian had said nothing at all of the tunnel...

But nothing at all about tunnels...

(italics mine)

Note the repetition of the verb “prepared,” a verb that suggests that Yode was in fact not adequately prepared. The first hint that we have of Yode’s (and therefore Soyinka’s) attempt to locate the phenomenon of the railway within the Yoruba sacred cosmology is found in the participial phrase “filling up the carriage in sounds just short of prolonged thunder” in which the noun phrase “prolonged thunder” reminds any Yoruba reader of Sango, the fiery god of thunder. Sango, believed to be capable of causing sudden gruesome death, is associated with deafening thunderbolt. No Yoruba person takes lightly the idea of swearing on Sango, for Sango is known to have struck the dishonest and unjust with grisly death. Sango is described as “*Iku tii jagbe mo ni koto pa ni*” (The death that first shouts at its victim before it kills him). “*Igbe*” (or shouts) is a metaphor for thunder. The awesomeness and the terror – inspiring “railway world of iron and steel” (p. 12) could only be contemplated in terms of the manifestations of one of the feared Yoruba deities – Sango.

There is another very slight but highly significant hint that we have of the attempt by Yode to negotiate his experience of “this railway world of iron and steel” in terms of the Yoruba ritual experience. We are told that “the train suddenly disappeared” into the tunnel, clinging as it did, “to its sooty shroud after it had emerged.” The words “disappeared” and “emerged” are of great stylistic and psychological moment, but the phrase that requires our immediate attention is “sooty shroud”. The noun “shroud” is a metonym for death; and death is a form of transformation. The disappearance into and emergence from the tunnel are a symbolic transformation which serves to increase the awe and mystery Yode’s mind associates with this monster of iron and steel. Perhaps one of the greatest mysteries of life is death, a phenomenon accounted for by the egungun cult among the Yoruba. The egungun or masquerades are believed to be spirits of the ancestors.

Death, for the Yoruba, leads not to spiritual or physical annihilation or purgatory, but to a higher level of existence venerated by the people. The dead transit to this level of existence. Idowu (1973, p. 184) and Mbiti (1969, p. 150) have made the point that the people have such a strong sense of the reality and presence of the ancestors (or living-dead) that they pour libation to them during festive occasions and make sacrifices to them in

times of emergency. According to these scholars, the living-dead preside over the affairs of the living. The abiku phenomenon⁸, the egungun cult and the elaborate burial rites, in the opinion of Idowu and Mbiti, point to the people's belief in posthumous existence.

Perhaps this phenomenon of the connection between the world of the living, the dead and the unborn cannot be described better than it has by Wole Soyinka himself in the 'Author's Note' on *Death and the king's horseman* (1975), a play that is undoubtedly a classic on very crucial aspects of the Yoruba culture. Soyinka informs us that there exists in "the universe of the Yoruba" (p. 9) "the world of the living, the dead and the unborn, and the numinous passage which links all transition." (p. 9) Taken with the verbs "disappeared" and "emerged", the noun 'shroud' is not just about death in the sense of decay, annihilation or hopelessness, but about transformation into a higher plane of existence and into the community of the ancestors, who protect, guide and guard the living. Everything about the railway and the train is "monstrous", "mysterious" awesome and extremely incomprehensible to Yode's mind. The mental and psychological crises and processes represent an attempt by Yode to adapt the new experience of the rail system to the traditional mode of thinking. However, it would be absurd to suggest that Yode so venerates "this railway world of iron and steel" (p. 12) that he elevates it to the level of the ancestors' spirit.

Not only is Yode attempting a mental, verbal, psychological and cultural analysis, evaluation and reconstruction of the "railway world of iron and steel", he is using the experience to review his understanding of traditional thoughts and rituals. Writes Soyinka:

Excerpt 3

His mind went back to the sounds and sensations of the passage through the tunnel and across the bridges. It seems no different from igbale into which real humans disappeared, to re-merge (sic, re-emerge) as alagemo ... The thought of agemo had merely aroused his urge to ask THE QUESTION (pp. 13-14).

Here Soyinka (speaking through Yode) attempts to construct a "bridge" between the train and the spirit world. As the "sounds and sensations of the passage through the tunnel, and across the bridges" reverberate through his mind, he finds it difficult to dissociate the experience from the Yoruba ritual practice. To him, it is "no different from Igbale..." (p. 14). Igbale is the sacred forest into which the egungun and the priests enter and where certain rituals are performed before the egungun comes back for public performance. As we have pointed out, the egungun represents the spirit of the ancestors and its presence in the human community is symbolic of the active connection between the world of the living, the dead, and, as Soyinka points out (in

⁸ Abiku literally meaning 'born to die' is a spirit-human child who repeats the cycle of birth and death in infancy just to torment his/her mother.

‘Author’s Note’ in *Death and the king’s horseman* (p. 7), the unborn. It seems clear now that the association between the “sounds and sensations of the passage through the tunnel” and the Yoruba ritual practices is not just about the freakish and exotic nature of the train. More broadly, it speaks of the relationship between the traditional African society and the modern one under the heavy influence of the white man. We shall return to this shortly.

Igbale, we have noted, is the sacred forest or grove into which the egungun and his priests retreat to perform the seasonal rites which are meant to renew the relationship between the ancestors and the living. What, then, is the connection between igbale and agemo? Agemo is the Yoruba word for the chameleon. In one of the Yoruba myths of creation, the chameleon was sent by Olodumare, the supreme Deity, to inspect the earth when it had not become solid enough for men to walk on without damaging it. It is not known whether that exercise affected the gait of the chameleon or whether it was its gait that recommended it for the assignment. At any rate Agemo has a strong association with the concept of creation, and the major deity of a group of Yoruba-speaking people, the Ijebu, is known by that name. Using the concept of Igbale (or Igbo igbale), normally associated with the egungun cult, Soyinka seems to be deliberately conflating the egungun and the agemo cults. Unlike the egungun which represents the spirits of the ancestors, the agemo is a deity of great importance among the Ijebu. There is a grove or forest into which the agemo and the alagemo (the priest) enter, and perform necessary rites annually, but the grove is not known by the name Igbale.

The crucial point is that technology, important and indispensable as it is, is useful to the extent that it is situated within the context of spiritual and ritual practice. It is obvious, as Yode contemplates, that the society will be radically affected by the presence of the white man and the technology he introduces. Not only will the society be profoundly altered, Yode should also allow himself to be transformed by the transformations brought about by the white man and his technology. This much is appreciated and anticipated by Yode’s father:

Excerpt 4

Going to St. Simeon’s seminary, leaving home for the first time, and for such a prolonged period was a rite of passage, he would not return the same child as he went. Had his father not called him and told him: you are going into a man’s world? Remember that. You must make your world there, your friends, your future companions. As for the white man, remember he is very powerful, but he is only a man, so be like a man towards him, but a respectful man, because he is your teacher, and he is the one who rules your father’s land (p. 14).

Just as the train has passed through the tunnel, Yode, like the entire society, would have to go through “a rite of passage.” It is not that the whole idea of the transforming process or “rite of passage” is entirely clear to Yode or his father. After counseling his child and offering somewhat profound

philosophical insights and predictions as to what the relationship between Yode and the white man should be, “the farmer became confused, and drove him (Yode) out of the living room”(p. 14). Yode is probably as confused” as “the farmer”. It is significant that Yode’s contemplation of the “mystery” of the rail system is intertwined and occurs simultaneously with his urge to ask THE QUESTION (p. 15). What has come to assume the status of THE QUESTION, “this all-consuming question” (p. 16), involves Yode’s interest in what might have led to Damian’s attempted suicide. Again, the point at issue is the mystery of death, why a young man would prefer death to life.

The point has been made that the Yoruba typically find a way of coming to terms with and negotiating relationships with freakish or exotic objects. Periphrases, euphemisms, songs and humour are the common methods of referring to the “strange” objects. Like Yode, most Yoruba children are so enamoured of and fascinated by the train that they have a song that imitates its sounds, and its translation, that are “just short of prolonged thunder.” Here is one song from *Isara* (p. 15):

Excerpt 5

Mo ti gun ke, moti so
Mo ti gun ke moti so
Oke ti alajapako ole gun
Mo ti gun ke moti so
Fakafiki, fakafii
(I’ve ascended, I’ve descended)
I’ve ascended, I’ve descended
The hill the wayfarer can’t climb
I’ve ascended it, I’ve descended it
Fakafiki, fakafii)

This song is supposed to be a boastful monologue put in the “mouth” of the train: it boasts of its ability to travel fast and extensively through “difficult” terrains, which ability is conferred by its possession of enormous iron and steel. The most difficult terrain that is the focus of the children’s song is the “hill”. The wayfarer’s ability pales into insignificance relative to the feats for which the train is known. My translation and the written form have robbed the song of its musicality and its very interesting attempt at imitating the “sounds and sensations” of the train’s passage. The words “fakafiki, fakafii are not translatable because they are ideophones. They are words which occur only as sounds or stand for sounds. They “capture” the “sounds and sensations” associated with the train.

It should be obvious from this analysis that the Yoruba people have a predilection for making attempts to relate to exotic items of technology by reducing them to songs, proverbially negotiating their relationship with them, and explaining them in terms of the familiar.

3.2 *The Media*

The same habits that we have noticed in the Yoruba people's typical attitude and responses to exotic items of technology are also in evidence in matters of the media. Here, we are considering the print and electronic media with a view to analyzing and understanding the people's verbal and attitudinal responses to them as depicted in Soyinka's narratives. Since the introduction (in 1859) of *Iwe Iroyin*, the first newspaper in Nigeria, the Yoruba people, fascinated and enamoured of the novelty, have received the phenomenon of the newspaper with a joke. Like that of the newspaper, the reception of the radio messages is also described in humorous terms by the listening audience. From the opening scene of *Kongi's Harvest* (1962) christened "Hemlock" come the following lines:

Excerpt 6

Who says there isn't more
 Who says there isn't plenty a word
 In a penny newspaper
 ... oh there's harvest of words
 In a penny newspaper
 ... who but a lunatic
 Will bandy words with boxes
 With government rediffusion sets
 Which talk and talk and never
 Take a word in reply
 I cannot counter words of
 A rediffusion set
 ... I do not bandy words
 With a government loudspeaker (pp. 61-62).

To fully appreciate the sensibilities expressed here, it is necessary to observe that the Yoruba are passionate about words. Their attitude to human utterances is one of near-veneration. Apart from contexts that are conspicuously sacred or specially designated as such, almost every human utterance is, for the Yoruba person, a sacred emission. The sacred nature of the verbal emission is related directly to the fact that all conceivable entities – human beings, the sun, animals, plants, air, fire, water, the earth, household utensils etc – have "ears" or at least have the ability to respond to the spoken word. To "know" the "names" of such entities or to be able to speak to them is to be able to control and manipulate them and possibly harness their resources. This is the basis for much of Yoruba magical practice and incantatory manipulation (cf. Olatunji, 1984).

Really, a thin line separates the sacred and the mundane, so that the attitude to the spoken word does not vary sharply between the two contexts. The Yoruba believe that words are the veritable food for the eardrum (Oro lomoleti je, i.e., the eardrum eats words); inability or failure to verbally explain one's plight, make necessary requests or defend one's position is the

first sign of incipient ill-luck (Ailesoro ni ipilese ori buruku, literally, “inability to talk is the first sign of incipient ill-luck”); torrents of words cannot fill a basket since they are airborne (Opo oro ko kagbon, afefe nigbee lo), implying that it is not the number of words uttered that is important but their weight or force); a matter (oro) cannot be so grave or weighty that it will require a knife to dissect it; it is with the mouth that matters are resolved (Oro ki tobi ka fi obe buu, enu laa fi so). (For more on the Yoruba people’s and Soyinka’s obsession with words, see Izevbaye, 1984).

This is the situation into which *Iwe Irohin* and subsequent newspapers, magazines, radio and television arrived. The Yoruba’s characteristic obsession with words and their habitual efforts at understanding, appreciating and negotiating novelties by the means of humour, deliberate circumlocution, and trivialization are clearly evident in the passage from *Kongi’s harvest*. Under focus are the two major media of mass dissemination of information through whose instrumentality our sprawling world has been shrunk into a global village. We note the poetry and the song-like presentation of the popular humorous sayings. First, the shortened forms “isn’t (occurring twice) and “there’s”, and the choice of the verbs “bandy” (varied with “counter”) and “talk” remind us that these sayings occur chiefly in speech, that for the Yoruba people, words are primarily spoken, are utterances, emissions, and that the written word is an adaptation of the spoken.

Related to the idea of speech is the lyrical-rhetorical presentation which makes the saying memorable, a point underscored by the repeated rhetorical questions, each introduced by the wh-word (“who”) and followed by the verb “says.” The rhetorical question forms belong to Soyinka, for the common saying among the Yoruba is usually a declarative from: “Oro po ninu iwe e kobo” (There are many words in a penny newspaper). Two noun phrases bring out the humour picturesquely: “a penny newspaper” (occurring twice) is juxtaposed with “a harvest of words” (whose variant is “plenty a word”). The pre-modifier, “a penny”, in “a penny newspaper” underscores the cheapness of the medium. In view of the near-sacredness with which the people regard the spoken word, they find it pleasantly unbelievable that sheets of paper conveying so many words can cost so little. The noun phrase, “a harvest”, in “a harvest of words”, is Soyinka’s imaginative modification of the original saying (Oro po ninu iwe kobo). The value that “harvest” conveys, for a largely rural and agrarian society which understandably places a premium on abundance of harvest, makes the word a happy choice in the context.

When we turn to the electronic medium, we observe the same obsession with words noted in our analysis of the “penny newspaper”. The Yoruba characterize the radio (in those days identified as “rediffusion”) as “a machine that talks and talks without bothering to take a reply”. This characterization is a function of the near-mystery that the people, especially the young ones, associate with the radio. The radio excels in ‘mystery’ in view of the anonymity of the speakers and the ‘unknown’ origin of the sound. To appreciate fully the degree of importance attached to the medium, we need

to quote fairly extensively from AKE:

Excerpt 7

A large wooden box was brought into the house and installed at the top of the tall boy, displacing the old gramophone which now had to be content with one of the lower shelves on the same furniture. The face of the box appeared to be made of thick plaited silk ... there was no need to put on the black disc, no need to crank a handle or change a needle, it only required that the knob be turned for sounds to come on. Unlike the gramophone, however, the box could not be made to speak or sing at any time of the day. It began its monologue early in the morning, first playing 'God save the King'. The box went silent some time in the afternoon, resumed late afternoon, then around ten or eleven in the evening, sang 'God Save The King' once more and went to sleep. Because the box spoke incessantly and appeared to have no interest in a response, it soon earned the name As'oromagbe'si (pp. 107-108).

When we compare the passage from *Kongi's Harvest* with that from *AKE*, we find a striking linguistic and ideational consistency in the way Soyinka represents the Yoruba's response and attitude to the radio. In the passage from *Kongi Harvest*, the radio set is referred to in the following noun phrases: "boxes", "government rediffusion sets", "a rediffusion set" and "government loudspeaker." The descriptive phrases, as we have noted, represent an attempt to come to terms with the exotic garrulous machine. The word "boxes" is interesting in that it suggests that the radio set is conceived of in terms of the object with which the people are familiar.

More interesting, however, are the noun phrases "government rediffusion sets" and "a government loudspeaker" in which the modifying noun connects the novelty to government. Here is another characteristic mode of thinking of the Yoruba when they encounter novelties: the belief that it is only the government that can be behind all such entities. Thus electricity is "government's" light, pipe borne water is "government's" water, hospitals are "government's" own properties etc. This accounts for why the less educated Yoruba people have a fixation with government. The noun "loudspeaker" may be taken literally or figuratively in the sense in which we speak of government's spokesperson. Whatever interpretation is favoured, the marvelous machine is regarded as the "voice" or agency of government. At any rate, in those days, private ownership of the radio was unthinkable even among the highly educated persons or even in government circles.

In excerpt 7, the word "box" describing the radio appears five times, the same number of times it occurs in *Kongi harvest*. Furthermore, in consonance with the passage from *Kongi harvest*, the excerpt describes the utterances from the radio as a 'monologue', a description that harmonizes with the Yoruba word "as'oromagbe'si" translated in the footnote as "one who speaks without expecting a reply" (p.108). We are told that "now voices

sang, unasked, from the new box” (p.108). The synecdoche in “voices sang” serves to accentuate the impersonal nature of the singers (or speakers) and the inscrutable origin of the voices. Taken together with the prepositional phrase “from the new box”, we note that the “voices” are issuing from a near-magical object. The participle “unasked” further emphasizes the idea of “monologue” or “asoromagbesi”.

The idea of “asoromagbesi” runs contrary to the notion of feedback, a key concept in communication which accounts for the reaction or response generated in the receiver by a piece of communication. Theorists insist that the media never lack feedback though in certain cases reactions from the audience or readership may be delayed in proportion to the limitation imposed by the medium on the immediacy and directness of interaction between the sender and the receiver (See Bittner, 2005; Mc Qail, 1994; Onabanjo, 2003; Sambe, 2008). Interestingly, a new system whereby immediate and direct responses are received from the audience is now in place through phone-in arrangements on radio and television. The interactive sessions achieved through the phone-in system have substantially modified the idea of “asoromagbesi”. It is interesting that the sobriquet “as’oromagbe’si” is fast losing its currency in popular usage in favour of “redio”, the corrupt form of “radio”. It is possible that this loss of popularity of the word may not be unconnected with the changing view regarding the feedback system of the electronic media. But Soyinka writes of the earlier days of the radio in Nigeria.

To return to the analysis, Soyinka deploys some temporal adverbials to emphasize the routine and invariable character of the monologic utterances of the radio. The verbs ‘began’, ‘went (silent)’, ‘resumed’, ‘sang’, and ‘went (to sleep)’ are each preceded or followed by a temporal adverbial: ‘early in the morning’, ‘some time in the afternoon’, ‘later afternoon’ and ‘around ten or eleven in the evening’. The impression of unchangeable and ritualistic pronouncement is unmistakable.

It may be worthwhile to quote a few more lines from *AKE* as a way of enhancing our apprehension of the value that underlies the Yoruba people’s attitude to the radio:

Excerpt 8

At certain set hours, the box delivered THE NEWS. The News soon became an object of worship to Essay⁹ and a number of his friends. When the hour approached, something happened to this club. It did not matter what they were doing, they rushed to our house to hear the Oracle. It was enough to watch Essay’s face to know that the skin would be peeled off the back of any child who spoke when he was listening to The News. When his friends were present, the parlour with its normal gloom resembled a shrine, rapt faces listened intently, hardly breathing. When The Voice fell silent all faces turned

⁹ Essay is the nickname given to Yode, Soyinka’s father, by the author.

instinctively to the priest himself ... (p. 108).

The routine and impersonal nature of the deliveries by the box is strikingly emphasized by the sentence “At certain set hours, the box delivered THE NEWS.” More importantly, we note that the noun phrase THE NEWS is graphologically foregrounded, a fact that underscores the centrality of news to the three main functions of the mass media – information, education and entertainment. Used as a metonym for the radio, THE NEWS is graphologically highlighted consistently, and the graphological highlighting is part of the textual strategy for conveying the near apotheosizing of the radio. The obsessive interest of Essay and the “club” (which he heads) in the THE NEWS approaches veneration. The word “Oracle” confers the authority and mystery belonging inalienably to the all-wise “Ifa”¹⁰ on the “radio” and THE NEWS. Since “the News soon became an object of worship”, it is only appropriate that we have “the priests” in the person of Essay himself and it is no surprise that “the parlour with its normal gloom resembled a shrine”. The vocabulary – “Oracle”, “the shrine”, “the priest”, and “worship” – consistently intimates that the radio and its manifestations can only be thought and spoken of in terms of miracle and mystery.

While the elite represented by Essay and his “club” almost venerate the “radio” and THE NEWS because they appreciate the value of its service, the non-literate others compose songs and invent sobriquets that show their admiration but lack of understanding of its *raison d’être*. Characteristically, they compose a song which attempts to trivialize the exotic items of technology introduced by the white man:

Excerpt 9

Elektrikiinaoba
Umbrella e’leko
As’oromagbesi, eroOyinbo
(Electricity, government light
Umbrella, for the Lagos elite
Rediffusion, white man’s lies)

We rely on Soyinka’s translation of the song (supplied in brackets) for our analysis. The relationship between the pre-modifying noun “government” (post-modifier in Yoruba) and the headword “light” in the phrase “government light” is already too familiar to warrant further comment. However, this is the first time we encounter the phrase “white man’s lies” which refers quite surprisingly to the noun “rediffusion”, another name for the “box” or the “radio”. The idea of “lies” in reference to the “radio” seems to contradict in a rather strange way the phenomenon of near apotheosis we have already noted relative to this exotic medium. This view of the utterances of “the Voice” or “box” as “lies” may have been inspired by the Yoruba proverb, “Oro pupo iro lon mu wa” (Garrulity/too many words breed/induce lies). The incessant

^{10.} Ifa is the oracle of wisdom consulted at the personal, family, town or national level usually at critical junctures

monologue may be the butt of the sarcastic stricture. It would seem that so many words issuing incessantly, without the wholesome and moderating influence or intervention of an interlocutor can only be underlain or inspired by falsehood.

There is, however, an alternative explanation. Struck by an extremely delightful, amazing and astounding revelation, truth or news, the Yoruba sometimes find themselves exclaiming “untruth” or “it’s a lie” or “it’s impossible”, an exclamatory remark not too different in import or sentiment from the English exclamation, “incredible!”. This linguistic behaviour may be suggested as providing the psycho-cultural basis for describing the radio’s monologic verbiage as “white man’s lies”. Utterly unable to understand the seeming inscrutable technology or workings of the “box” and astounded at its inexplicable operations, the Yoruba person responds with the characteristic irony appropriate to such situations. This latter hypothesis would seem to be more attractive than the former which conflicts with the notion of extreme admiration and reverence noted in respect of the Yoruba person’s attitude and response to the magical “box”. Besides, there is nothing in the texts under examination or in the Yoruba long-standing interaction with his “new” environment, created by the presence of the white man, to suggest that the white man is regarded as a liar. On the contrary, there is a widespread notion that the white man is a person of high integrity.

4. Conclusion

Relying on the principles of stylistics combined with those of Discourse Analysis, the paper has discussed the Yoruba people’s characteristic way of “demystifying” the “miracle” and “mysteries” associated with exotic material items. Strange but impressive, the railway, the radio, the television, the newspaper, electricity, the postal system and the camera are objects of songs, proverbial sayings, circumlocutory references and humor among the Yoruba. The more awe-inspiring ones are contemplated in terms of the people’s religious and ritual practice, a systematic but effective method of neutralizing perceived mysteries. Having completed the process of “initiating” the novel technological items into their cultural habits, the Yoruba feel confident enough to live with and utilize the items.

These revelations would serve to enhance readers’ understanding of aspects of Wole Soyinka’s works and help foreigners in understanding the Yoruba people’s mind. With further research, they may help teachers and educators in their efforts to educate learners.

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