



# Religious metaphors and the crisis of faith in Wole Soyinka's poetry

Kayode Niyi Afolayan

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Most commentaries on Wole Soyinka's works across genres engage with his constant invocation of cultural tropes, most of which revolve around Ogun, his self-proclaimed muse. In this article, I highlight the centrality of religious myths and metaphors in a selection of Soyinka's poems, namely, "Idanre" in *Idanre and Other Poems* (1967), *Ogun Abibman* (1976), "Joseph", one of the "Four Archetypes" poems in *A Shuttle in the Crypt* (1972), "Mandela's Earth" in *Mandela's Earth and Other Poems* (1989), and selected poems under the sections "The Sign of the Zealot" and "Elegies" in *Samarkand and Other Markets I Have Known* (2002). While identifying the limitations of the poet's Ogun trope, I dissect the centrality of faith issues in Soyinka's poetry into two slants. The first, which is seen as encompassing his widely explored Ogun trope, is his use of religious metaphors to intervene on the dystopias in his postcolonial space. The second is his concern with the crisis of faith, a menace that has continued to threaten global peace. After drawing copious examples of religious tropes from Soyinka's selected poems, I focus on the attention given by the poet to crisis in faith relationships. The copious examples of Soyinka's use of religious metaphors lead to the conclusion, at the end of the paper, that access to Soyinka's poetry is best achieved by paying attention to his religious metaphors. I also identify Soyinka's antidote for the crisis of faith which lies in his prescription of tolerance and respect for humanist ideals. **Keywords:** Wole Soyinka, metaphors, faith crisis, interventions, humanity.


## Introduction

A cursory review of the major commentaries on Wole Soyinka's works reveals three basic attitudes towards his poetry. Firstly, Onwuchekwa Jamie Chinweizu and Ihechukwu Madubuike, in *Toward the Decolonisation of African Literature* (1980) see Soyinka's poetry as inaccessible. Secondly, the volume *Wole Soyinka at 70: Festschrift* (2006), edited by D. Adelugba, D. Izevbaye, and E. J. Ifie, shows complete disregard for his poetry (as opposed to his acclaimed novels and plays). A third category of criticism has given partial or robust attention to Soyinka's poetry. Examples of the endeavours that have given partial attention to Soyinka's poetry appear in collected essays and books that engage Soyinka's oeuvre but prioritise his plays. These include Eldred Durosinmi Jones's *The Writings of Wole Soyinka* (1973), Gerald Moore's *Wole Soyinka* (1978), Obi Maduakor's *Wole Soyinka: An Introduction to His Writing* (1987), Adewale Maja-Pearce's *Wole Soyinka: An Appraisal* (1994), Mpalive-Hangson Msiska's *Wole Soyinka* (1998), and Biodun Jeyifo's edited works *Perspectives on Wole Soyinka: Freedom and Complexity* (2001) and *Wole Soyinka: Politics, Poetics and Postcolonialism* (2004). The latter categorization that gives sole attention to Soyinka's poetry appears in monographs such as Tanure Ojaide's *The Poetry of Wole Soyinka* (1994) and book-length studies such as Segun Adekoya's *The Inner Eye: An Oriel on Wole Soyinka's Poetry* (2006).

Even though critical resources available on Soyinka's plays far outnumber those on his poetry and prose, it was, in fact, engagement with his poetry that sounded one of the tersest tones. The debate was between Chinweizu, who labeled Soyinka's poetry as obscure, and others such as Omolara Ogundipe-Leslie and Maduakor who countered that it was only one poem, "Idanre", which is included in Soyinka's first anthology, *Idanre and Other Poems*, that can be described as obscure. Soyinka defended himself against such criticism of his poetry, but it only deepened the veracity of the alleged obscurity. Jeyifo records John Agetua's interview with Soyinka where, in response to the question, "Some critics say your works are difficult. Is there any conscious effort to blur meaning?", Soyinka said:

Kayode Niyi Afolayan is senior lecturer in the Department of English, Faculty of Arts, University of Ilorin, Ilorin, Nigeria.

Email: kay4layan@yahoo.com

 <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-3807-0640>

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No. I have to concede, since I do consider myself a critic, I tend toward what's called the elliptical style of writing. That's not deliberate, it's just a quirk about which I can't do much. But I deny absolutely an attempt to mystify or create obscurities. Certainly, if I thought that the first sentence of any work I wrote is going to put anybody off I'd change it immediately [...] Take any single writer, there are works of his which are a little bit more difficult than, more obscure than others. No single writer writes evenly from start to finish [...] But complex subjects sometimes elicit from the writer complex treatments. (Jeyifo, *Perspectives on Wole Soyinka: Freedom and Complexity* xvi)

Explorations of his perceived obscurity have been a major preoccupation of criticism of Soyinka's poetry. But these have by no means equalled interest in the social intervention of his plays. For instance, his articulation of indigenous African worldviews in *The Road* (1963) and *A Dance of the Forests* (1965) is also reflected in "Idanre". So also is his condemnation of oppression, injustice, and crises of leadership in Africa in *A Play of Giants* (1984), *The Beatification of Area Boy: A Lagosian Kaleidoscope* (1995), and *King Baabu* (2002). Similar themes are found in "Four Archetypes", one of the poems in *A Shuttle in the Crypt*, in *Ogun Abibiman*, the "Mandela Poems", and "The Apotheosis of Master Sergeant Doe" in *Mandela's Earth and Other Poems*.

However, on the aggregate of social interventions, the fact remains that the themes of religion and culture are central to Soyinka's oeuvre. After laying the foundations in his earlier plays already cited and his subsequent interventions that border on mediation in the evolving hybridized milieus in *The Lion and the Jewel* (1963) and *Death and the King's Horseman* (1975), Soyinka progressed into criticising the vectors of oppression in religion in *The Trials of Brother Jero* (1973) and *Requiem for a Futurologist* (1985). His latest play, *Alapata Apata* (2011), has sustained this tempo, as well as his most recent poetry, *Samarkand and Other Markets I Have Known*, which showcases his dissection of the realities in the postcolonial space through his use of faith metaphors and a critical perspective that responds to religious crises which, today, has become a global malaise.

### **Religion as major trope and influence in Soyinka's poetry**

Attempts at demystifying Soyinka's poems have thrown up at least two theories which attest to his eclectic style found also in his essays. Soyinka problematizes the issue of influence and confirms the heterogeneity of his poetry when he notes as follows: "I think that I've been influenced by various literatures and cultures, right from classical times to the present day, in English, Latin, Greek, and a little French, a little Spanish, but I think that in fact the question of influence is a very complicated thing" (Duerden and Pieterse 172). Ojaide concurs with this submission, drawing out the aesthetic values of Soyinka's varied forms when he describes his poetry as "a fusion of polar qualities [...] a harmonious configuration of ideas that already existed. However, these influences do not make the poet less original; he is as original in the tonality of his work as any poet can be" (13). On the score of the multiple influences in his verses, Ojaide concedes that "Soyinka may be regarded as a maverick highbrow poet who is difficult and obscure". However, he points out that, through paying attention to his "voice and view point", his [Soyinka's] poetry is quite accessible (3). For Ojaide, the major influences in Soyinka's poetry are his Yoruba cultural tradition, his indoctrination into the Christian religion as a child, and his contact with global cultures through western education. One finds a tacit link between Ojaide's thesis of 'voice and viewpoint' and that of Niyi Osundare, which reads thus:

Wole Soyinka possesses two major voices: first is the primary, professional voice articulated through his creative works as dramatist, poet, novelist, biographer and essayist; the second is the public, political voice which both articulates and is in turn powered by his numerous interventions as public commentator and sharper of public opinion. In relative terms, the first is contextually specific and professionally predictable; while the second is understandably, situational, random, multi-vocal, and intractable. While the first voice is aimed at a relatively known or knowable audience which oftentimes consists of lettered folks whose communicative/interpretative capability connects with the voices specialized and esoteric idiom, the second is typologically chaotic, articulated as it is in a lore and letter of a textual genre whose content is as volatile and variant as its style and whose audience is as seamless as the ocean. ("Wole Soyinka and the Public Space" 81)

The importance of paying careful attention and sifting these intricacies was, however, put forward succinctly by Jeyifo (*Perspectives on Wole Soyinka* xix) who recalls Isaiah Berlin's assertion that: "The hedgehog doesn't perambulate about like the fox and so usually knows one thing and knows it thoroughly and completely. The fox, by contrast, wanders a lot and therefore knows not just one thing, but many things". From the foregoing, it is established that Soyinka's poetry is an admixture of complex sensibilities which Adekoya considers to be "the greatest value of

poetry, its accommodativeness or the expansiveness and inclusiveness of [...] imagination” (557). This means that any serious critic of Soyinka’s poetry needs to be familiar with his array of influences and his essays on subjects of interest. It is therefore safe to suggest that there is a link between Soyinka’s religious influences, his uses of myth (regarding Ogun in particular), and other religious tropes in his works. Furthermore, two of his essays—*Myth, Literature and the African World* (1992) and *A Credo of Being and Nothingness* (1991)—provide adequate basis for understanding the apparently obscure influences of religion in his poetry.

### **Soyinka’s folk beginning and the equalizing of religious icons**

Soyinka’s recourse to Judeo-Christian metaphors and idioms pervades his poetry. This is understandable because, as he attests in his childhood memoir, *Ake: The Years of Childhood* (54), he was thoroughly taught the Bible, which was seen as the final arbiter in the home he grew up. Soyinka is no longer a practicing Christian, but he has continued to use tropes and icons in the Judeo-Christian faith to make outstanding statements. Like he did in *Myth, Literature and the African World*, Soyinka uses “Idanre” to “conducted his own exercises in racial self-retrieval, the rehabilitation of an authentic African worldview, and visionary reconstruction of African past” (Wright 4). His mythical representation of Ogun to anchor diverse issues include his perception of the African worldview in terms of his thesis of cyclical existences in the worlds of the unborn, the living, and the dead (*Myth Literature and the African World* 10); the didactics and dialectics of rituals as seen in Ogun’s creator-destroyer attribute; the revolutionary essence in Ogun; and Atunda’s promethean adventures. There is also the burden and crises of leadership in the Iree people making Ogun King, his Dionysian act, philistinism, and fatal error which saw Ogun slaying his subjects. Ogun’s promethean instinct, which does not discredit the consanguinity of other primordial godheads and their peculiar capacities, is seen in his enormous willpower to venture where others have failed. In “the beginning”, at the “home of the iron one”, all the other gods—Orisanla, Orunmila, Esu, Ifa, Ogun—also in attendance but apparently not in despair “assembled” distraught, hopeless, and frustrated; their energies sapped because of the failure to fraternize with man. In the end, Ogun, true to his pledge, breaks the jinx as he was able to “create a path to man”. The poet says Ogun’s:

... fingers  
Drew warring elements to a union of being ...  
And taught the veins to dance of earth of rock  
Of tree, sky, of fire and rain, of flesh of man  
And woman. Ogun is the god that ventures first  
His path one loop of time, one iron coil  
Earth’s broken rings were healed. (*Idanre and Other Poems* 69)

However, through the constructive rebellion of Atunda, Orisanla’s ex-slave and Ogun prototype, Soyinka amplifies his thesis which equalizes all godheads when, in his appraisal of Atunda’s rupturing of the slave social system that subsisted, he writes:

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

At the evolution of Soyinka’s primordial setting in “Idanre” we see a coincidence of deluge scenes in the creation narratives of most foreign religions. In the metamorphosis of the cosmos into material and mundane existences, one finds attraction in Soyinka’s uses of words such as “saint”, “genesis”, “trifoliate” (which relates to ‘trinity’ in the Judeo-Christian religion). However, most intriguing is the poet’s universalizing of the local and his localizing of the universal by canonizing Atunda alongside Zeus, Osiris, Yahweh, Christ, and Orunmila. Perhaps, the poet finds incorporating western forms into his African setting easier because, in the words of Derek Wright, the Yoruba worldview, distinct from “the rigid unfriendly narrow essences of western phenomena, allows for seamless fluidity, accommodation of new values and continuity” (*Idanre* 8–9). Msiska elaborates further on this point, noting that the Atunda action shows:

Soyinka's commitment to a generalised non-hierarchical ideal of redemption is [...] observable in his surprising privileging of the slave Atunda over his chosen deity, Ogun. Atunda, as a slave to the founding godhead, one day deliberately rolled a boulder over his master, splintering him into several entities, thus effecting a diversity of divine power in an act that decentralises divinity, enabling the emergence of gods such as Ogun, Sango, and Eshuoro. ("Divine Ways of Cognition: The Burden of the Poet-Seer in Soyinka's *Idanre*" 252)

Soyinka's acceptance of the 'infiltration' of foreign godheads of Christianity, Islam, and oriental religions such as Buddhism (*Samarkand and Other Markets I Have Known* 54) into the African landscape becomes impetus for his exploration of those tendencies seen in his exportation of Ogun to diverse foreign settings. A valid example is seen in *Ogun Abibman* where, transcending his primordial space in Idanre hills, the miscegenation of Ogun and Shaka Ogun provides rejuvenation in the resistance against the oppression and suffering that ravage the amaZulu. Soyinka's refrain in the second section of this poem reads:

*Roghodiyan!*  
*Ogun re le e Shaka*  
*Roghodiyan*  
*Ogun gbo wo o Shaka*  
*O di roghodiayn!* (*Ogun Abibiman* 17)

Turmoil on turmoil!  
Ogun treads the earth of Shaka  
Turmoil on the loose!  
Ogun shakes the hand of Shaka  
All is in turmoil. (*Ogun* 24)

Similarly, Soyinka also widens Ogun's borders beyond the African landscape in "Samarkand and Other Markets I Have Known". He says:

Ogun came riding through the streets  
Of Jerusalem. The Chosen barred his way

His bright metallic lore was profanation,  
Railed the wandering tribe, custodian now  
Of streets and pathways, closed in hallowed days  
To songs of iron and steel, even a child's meandering  
Bicycle, or infant crib (*Samarkand* 48)

Soyinka's commitment, well enunciated in *Credo of Being and Nothingness*, is "to bring [all] [...] religious [...] tribes [...] to an understanding that they represent only a part of the many global strains of spiritual adhesion that constantly threaten to bring [the] world [...] to a presumably blissful condition of nothingness" (7). His transpositions fracture all parochial monopolies of spirituality and subjective claims of dominance of godheads in their endowed primordial milieus.

### Religion and postcolonial commentary

Soyinka's poem titles, "Easters" and "Psalm", in *Idanre and Other Poems* compliment his copious use of Judeo-Christian lexicons such as 'canonization', 'martyr', 'saint', 'crucifix', among others, in "Idanre". However, after his "harmless" uses of those lexicons in *Idanre and Other Poems*, there is a radical shift because, after "Idanre", Soyinka's poetry, in Akporobaro's words, became more "dominated by a vision of the terrible condition of the modern man in his dissociation from the moral ideal and the divine" (475).

Like he would later do with Mandela's solitude on Robben Island, Soyinka presents his unjust incarceration by his country's military junta in "Four Archetypes" by using names and character titles to satirize his victimhood. Ojaide's rendering of Soyinka's motifs, in succinct terms, reads thus: "The four archetypes of Joseph, Hamlet, Gulliver and Ulysses are masks the poet wears to dramatize himself [...] these four personae have some qualities in common [...] [they] are strangers in the situations in which they find themselves [...] they are lonely and hanker after truth and ideals" (74).

Soyinka's sandwiching of Joseph into the archetypal strand through his poem of that title parallels the story of Joseph in the Bible. The original Joseph was a young boy who was caught between the tensions of domestic conspiracy and slavery. Though his slave status was refined to that of a chief servant by his master, Potiphar, an influential official in the palace of Pharaoh who was ruler in Egypt, he became a prisoner for resisting the sexual temptation of Mrs Potiphar, his master's wife. The plot of the original story is intact until the next stanza where the poet rebukes Mrs Potiphar for presenting, as fake evidence, her "masquerade / Of virtue" (the cloth she uses to cover her virtue) in "Tattered pieces" to criminalize Joseph:

Indeed, I was not Joseph, a cursing martyr I,  
 No saint—are saints not moved beyond  
 Events, their passive valour turned to time's  
 Slow unfolding? A time of evil cries  
 Renunciation of saintly visions  
 Summons instant heads of truth to tear  
 All painted masks that poison stains thereon  
 May join and trace the hidden undertows  
 In sewers of intrigues. Dear Mrs Potiphar  
 You seek through chaos to bury deep  
 Your scarlet pottage of guilt, your grim manure  
 For weeds of sick ambition (*Shuttle in the Crypt* 21)

The Joseph in this poem is Soyinka himself while Mrs Potiphar represents the military authorities that locked him up in prison. Perhaps the reason why the poet does not see himself as a 'saint' is the fact that he was placed in detention for fraternizing with Christopher Okigbo and other friends of his who were fighting secure secession of the Biafran nation from Nigeria. However, the poet laments that the "evil cries" that have pervaded his space have not made much impact, the "chaos" of war has not abated, and the nation has become steeped "[i]n sewers of intrigues". Soyinka's 'pottage of guilt' here refers to the resistance of his arresters to reason, but it also links with a biblical story about the theft of Esau's blessings, inheritance, or birthright by his twin brother, Jacob. In referring to all victims on the side of truth as "Time slaves / Eunuchs of will", the poet expresses ardent dedication to the course of justice and the hope in the triumph of good over evil. This expression of hope becomes more alluring in the last four lines of the poem where he says:

[...] We,  
 All whose dreams of fire resolve in light  
 Wait upon the old ancestor in pursuit  
 Of truths and to interpret dreams. (*Shuttle* 21)

In the original story, it was Joseph's gift to dream that saved his life that was rotting away in jail in the nation he was sold to. Therefore, the phrases "whose dreams of fire resolve in light" and "to interpret dreams" which end the poem not only predict his freedom from his captors but enliven his hope that a nation in which truth overtakes the reign of falsehood would be birthed.

Soyinka's engagement with religious icons and metaphors becomes more pronounced in *Ogun Abibiman* and *Mandela's Earth and Other Poems*. Wright was right when, in his perspective on *Mandela's Earth and Other Poems*, he states that the themes centre around "the plague of power abuse in postcolonial Africa; the brute persistence of privation and atrocity in defiance of rhetorical mystification; and the complex ambivalence with which his own vibrant culture [...] asserts its resilience even in the throes of dissolution" (174). But Jeyifo, in harnessing antecedent, also made a valid submission that draws together the relationship between the two collections as he points out that "many mythemes loosely and suggestively connect" *Ogun Abibiman* and *Mandela's Earth and Other Poems* they "derive from [the same] emotional matrices" (*Wole Soyinka: Politics, Poetics and Postcolonialism* 226). In *Ogun Abibiman*, the poet sets out on the mission of reviving the revolutionary spirit in the scions of Shaka who seem to have been submerged by the excruciating weight and banal power of apartheid. Soyinka's title index contextualizes and globalizes the fight against the siege on humanity not only because of the synergy between Shaka and Ogun but the conspiracy against black people, bearing in mind that 'Abibiman', "from the Akan [means] The Black Nation: the land of the Black Peoples: the Black World: that which pertains to, the matter, the affair of, Black peoples" (*Ogun* 23).



Soyinka returns to the deluge motif to foreground (re)creation and (re)birth through his anticipated emancipation of the black people:

The boughs are broken, an earthquake  
Rides upon the sway of chants, a flood  
Unseasonal, a power of invocations.  
Meander how it will, the river  
Ends in lakes, in seas in the ocean's  
Savage waves. Our Flood's alluvial paths  
Will spring the shrunken seeds:  
Rains  
Shall cleanse the leaves of blood (*Ogun 1*)

His description of Ogun as “craftmaster” (*Ogun 4*) parallels the capacities for creation seen in Orisanla, his African religion, and Yahweh in the Judeo-Christian religion but also guarantees the inevitability of ‘re-creation’ because there is now “a convergence of wills—[which] / Nor god nor man can temper” (*Ogun 4*). He furthers, setting the spiritual context in creative imageries, thus:

Gods shall speak to gods.

[...]

To stir that claimed divinity of mind and limb  
Whose prostrate planet is Abibiman—  
A black endowment since the cosmos spewed  
Forth its tortured galaxies (*Ogun 5*)

As is done in the Judeo-Christian religion, Soyinka capitalizes the initial letters in his rendition of Ogun and Shaka which he considers to be “brother spirit[s]” (*Ogun 11*) in “mute companionship” (*Ogun 10*). He says Ogun “[e]mptied reservoirs of blood in heaven” (22) in order “to right a wrong” (22) and calls him, among other names, “Priest of Restitutions” (*Ogun 20*). Similarly, he refers to Shaka as one who, “Beset by demons of blood [...] reaped / Harvests of manhood when time wavered” (15). The association of Shaka with “demons” resonates with similar descriptions of demons in different faiths. Even though what is being highlighted here is the metaphysics of intervention, Soyinka bridges ethereal and mundane spaces in depicting “weaponry / Long hidden by the gods from reach of men” (*Ogun 15*) about to be unleashed in an uprising against their annihilators. The impending conflict is a result of the failure of dialogue and consequent expiration of hope and grace:

Pleas are ended in the Court of Rights. Hope  
Has fled the Cape miscalled—Good Hope  
We speak no more of mind  
or grace denied ... (*Ogun 6-7*)

No doubt, hope and grace are key doctrines in the Christian religion in which hope is perpetually elastic given that it remains permissive as transgressions escalate. Soyinka argues instead for an end to grace given the persistence of evil in the form of extra judicial killing, racial abuse, and other vices. There is, in the beginning of *Ogun Abibiman*, a situation where:

A crop of arms dethrones the ancient  
Reign of lush, compliant plains,  
A truer fastness than the sanctuary of peace  
In sermonizing woods, and words, and wool  
Over the vision of the ram—the knife  
Caresses well, the victim bleats  
A final testament of its contentment (*Ogun 1*)

The poet uses the expressions “sanctuary of peace [...] sermonizing woods” and “final testament” to lampoon the forced quietude of the oppressed and the consequent unabated extra judicial killings. Soyinka calls those

who were killed in the struggle for their rights “martyrs” and stresses their metaphysical value and credential as supporting the living in the struggle:

A savage memory racked  
From veils of ashes, bores  
Light tunnels through the years.  
A horde of martyrs burst upon our present—  
They march, beside the living (*Ogun 2*)

Soyinka’s hope that the oppressors whom he referred to as “sorcerers [whose] wands are broken” (*Ogun 5*) vacillates between metaphors of carnage and restoration which draw on the Bible. For instance, he interpolates the vision of the prophet in Jeremiah 7:32 and 19:6 thus: “I sought of, the dreams of race which beckoned me / From Slaughter Valley to the Hill of Destiny” (*Ogun 12*). Not only this, his “vision” (*Ogun 15*) and “Apocalypse” (*Ogun 20*) echo the experience of John on the island of Patmos in the book of Revelation. This does not only relay the failures of the past and the trials of that moment but also the prospect of freedom as suggested by the following lines: “For who shall say of the processes that strip / Millennial trees of grandeur” (*Ogun 19*) and “We celebrate the end of that compliant / Innocence of our millennial trees” (*Ogun 21*). The word “millennial”, which is also found in the revelation of John, captures the sublime essence of utopia in the Christian religion whereas its juxtaposition with “trees” evokes the virtues of longsuffering and perseverance in the resistance that ensues.

Soyinka’s first use of “midwives” (*Ogun 3*), which was in respect of the inevitability of conflict, becomes more grotesque in his Eucharist idioms which reads:

Labour is holy—behold our midwives with  
The dark wine and black wafers of communion  
Ministering to history, delivering the missing  
Chapters of the text ... (*Ogun 21*)

The codes in the words “ministering” and “chapters” have their religious undertones but, importantly, Soyinka draws from the story of midwives, in the period of Israel’s captivity in Egypt, who superintended births by Hebrew women and rendered ineffectual the decree of Pharaoh to kill newly born male children of Hebrew dissent. The wine and the wafers (or bread) are critical ingredients of the communion in the Christian religion. Just as the communion is held to remember the passion of Christ, the poet here has used these words to communicate that ritual of remembrance be instituted after the passing phase. The domestication of the celebration of the new era concludes *Ogun Abibiman*:

Now, before sad spaces recreate the loss  
Before the shields are frayed that would  
Protect the frail, now is true need  
Of song and lyric, of festal gourds,  
Libations, invocations of the Will’s  
Transubstantiation!—  
Ogun is the ascendant—let us now celebrate! (*Ogun 22*)

The critical words here include “gourds”, “libations”, “invocations”, and “transubstantiation”. While the first three words relate to the ritual domain of the poet, he codifies the transition from the immaterial to the material in the anticipated victory of suffering black people in his deployment of the Eucharistic process of “transubstantiation”.

We come into a robust engagement with the prison experience of Nelson Mandela on Robben Island, the suffering of the black majority who are outside Mandela’s prison wall, and the global conspiracy that sustained apartheid for many decades in the six poems under “Mandela’s Earth”. Soyinka’s tendency of deploying religious lexicons is discernible in his projection of the collective suffering of Mandela’s compatriots who, for instance, were murdered in cold blood despite fulfilling all stringent conditions to bury their dead in “Funeral Sermon, Soweto”. Soyinka’s use of “sermon” in the title moralizes on the issue of injustice to appeal to the conscience of the white minority and their backers in their sacrilegious acts. He predicates his comeuppances on ephemerality of existence and acquisitions in what he tagged “ancient vanities” associated with moribund kingdoms such as that of Pharaoh (*Mandela’s Earth and Other Poems 14*) where the Israelites were held in bondage of slavery for about four hundred years.

The poet goes to the heart of his former faith by linking the greed and Machiavellian manipulations of the apartheid regime to the posture of the Jews in “Like Rudolf Hess, The Man Said”. The lines read:

A brilliant touch—let’s give the devil his due.  
Who would seek the Priest of Vivisections  
Masquerading as a Black-and-Proud?  
No living heart in mouth, one step ahead  
Those Jew-vengeance squads  
Safe on Robben Island, paratroops of Zion. (*Mandela’s Earth 4*)

He continues in the same poem using the same Jewish metaphor by stating that:

Gold! They wore their ransom in their teeth  
Their dowry, tithes, death duties. But—  
No need *here* for that painful dentistry,  
Assaying the yellow fire even before

[...]

The gold exposed you. Bloodhound Jews  
Whose mouth you quarried for your pay—  
Your passion tasting still of blood—  
So their burgled gums to crack you down  
To the golden tip of the black continent (*Mandela’s Earth 5, 6*)

The consanguinity between “Jew” and “Zion” rests in the fact that Jewish people are also called “children of Zion” in the Bible. However, the combinations in “Jew-vengeance squads”, “paratroops of Zion”, and “Bloodhound Jews” evokes the grim arrest, trial, and eventual crucifixion of Jesus, the Messiah of the Jewish people. The poet is unequivocal about the fact that self-centred economic considerations was one reason why the global outcry to end apartheid, which the poet referred to as “[I]eaven in the dough of love” (*Mandela’s Earth 10*), fell on deaf ears. He describes the process of the exploitation of gold as “tithing”, a controversial doctrine of the Christian faith which many see as opportunistic and exploitative. In “So Now They Burn The Roof Above Her Head”, dedicated to Winnie Mandela, the poet protests against the desecration of the home. Not only this, the global conspiracy and open secrets that sustained the apartheid regime are described (with emphasis on “mammon” and “hypocrites”) in expressions that have very negative connotations in the Christian faith such as “Mammon Grand Alliances” and “The League of Hypocrites” (*Mandela’s Earth 11*).

Just as Christ, the icon of the Christian faith, suffered in Gethsemane and Golgotha, Mandela’s travails on Robben Island are portrayed in similar messianic ways in “Mandela’s Earth”. In “Your logic frightens me, Mandela”, the poet lambastes Mandela’s detractors who have become a sore to their host, thus:

Doves metamorphosed into milk-white talons?  
Not for you the olive branch that sprouts  
Gun muzzles, barbed-wire garlands tangled thorns  
To wreathe the brows of black, unwilling Christs (*Mandela’s Earth 2*)

The reference to “tangled thorns” recalls the crown of thorns placed on the head of Christ at his crucifixion while “unwilling Christs” alludes to the unfair treatment and pain inflicted on the black hosts by their guests. The poet also aligns Mandela’s travails with Christ’s in the following lines:

In our world light-years away, Mandela?  
Lost in visions of that dare supreme  
Against dire supremacy of race  
What brings you back to earth? The night guard’s  
Inhuman tramp? A sodden eye transgressing through  
The Judas hole? Tell me, Mandela  
That guard, is he *your* prisoner? (*Mandela’s Earth 3*)



The reference to “Judas” here is instructive as it hints at betrayal as a possible reason behind Mandela’s lengthy stay in jail. Yet, this is not the allusion to Christ’s experience by Soyinka. In “No, He Said”, the poet spotlights Mandela’s stoicism and commitment to the struggle:

No! I am no prisoner of this rock, this island,  
No ash spew on Milky Ways to conquests old or new.  
I am this rock, this island. I toiled,  
Precedent on this soil, as in the great dark whale  
Of time, Black hole of the galaxy. Its maw  
Turns steel-wrought epochs plankton—yes—and  
Vomits out new worlds.

In and out of time warp, I am that rock  
In the black hole of the sky. (*Mandela’s Earth* 20)

The multiple references to Christ’s re-christening of Peter as “rock” on the Mount of Transfiguration coincide with Mandela’s rejection of tempting conditional offers of release by the apartheid state which the poet describes, heretically, as “an offer even / Christ, second-come, could not refuse” (*Mandela’s Earth* 19). Just like Peter’s confession is seen as a foundation of the Christian faith, the poem projects Mandela’s uncompromising rectitude as the source of its optimism for a “New World” (*Mandela’s Earth* 19).

### **The crisis of religion in *Samarkand and Other Markets I Have Known***

According to Helon Habila, *Samarkand and Other Markets I Have Known* is a collection where Soyinka “straddle[s] the areas [of] the mythical, the religious, and the political” (142). Msiska, in amplifying the religious impulses, sees the poetry book as one in which Soyinka has demonstrated a pedigree of “a relentless campaigner for human rights and a strong opponent of all manner of dictatorship, including religious fundamentalism, both Christian and Moslem” (*Wole Soyinka* 5). In *Interventions V* (2007), Soyinka identifies one of the most lethal vices that has crippled existence in his hybridized postcolonial space when he says that “Today the greatest menaces that we confront—vectors of repression and mind closure—are political arrogance in the face of religious fanaticism. They are both sides of the same counterfeit coin which sometimes becomes so impressed in its manifestations that the ridge of demarcation thins inwards and vanishes together” (*Samarkand* 12). Osundare, describing as “a fascinating mix of creative rebelliousness and rebellious creativeness [the actions of Atunda] Orisanla’s epoch-making slave” (“Wole Soyinka and the Atunda Ideal: A Reading of Soyinka’s Poetry” 188), identifies the fact that crises have always been a phenomenal occurrence in all faiths but isolates the Yoruba example as an ideal:

At the very core of Yoruba culture and philosophy is the Atunda / Atooda paradigm. In the beginning, all power, all truth, all knowledge was vested in, symbolised, and personified by Orisanla (the absolute godhead) who ruled the universe with unchallengeable authority. Then, one day, as Orisanla was resting at the foot of a hill, Atunda, his slave, rolled down a boulder from the top, which shattered the complacent godhead into countless fragments. From each fragment arose a bewildering multiplicity of deities, authorities, truths, values, and consciousnesses, an eternal pantheon of paradigms and epistemes. But what ensued was multiplicity without chaos; the accidental fissures resolved themselves into a plural unity. A supra-segmental ontology was still in place delicate intriguingly elastic. There was no civil war among the gods. (188)

The lucid explanation made by Osundare above domesticates the vortex of existence in the primordial milieu of Nigeria (Africa), but Msiska elucidates the contemporariness of the fact by harping on hybridization and its thrust as kernel of Soyinka’s works.

The discursive hybridisation that Soyinka produces in his work[s] is according to him, not something removed from everyday experience or radically new in the history of African literature and culture [...] Hybridity is the foundation of contemporary African culture and experience, as far as Soyinka is concerned, and thus one is being most African when one adopts it as a strategy of engagement with the Other. (“Divine Ways of Cognition” 254-5)

The reality of the crises of religion is set in multiple imaginary spaces in the title index of *Samarkand and Other Markets That I Have Known*. While ‘Samarkand’ literally means a “rock town” and a “region of war”, the affinity of the space with market conveys the complexities that characterize all hybridized milieus. Even though similar

tendencies have altered peaceful existence in other parts of the world, there is no doubt that Soyinka's primary engagement here is with the Nigerian space where frictions between the dominant faiths—Christianity and Islam—have become quotidian. The poet exposes the factors that propel the upsurge of bitter fights among these religions, which have tragically claimed the highest figures since the country's independence, including fear of domination, politicization of religion, claims and fight for supremacy, illiteracy, idleness, indoctrination, and radical proselytization. Soyinka criticizes the doctrine of "Come with me or— / Go to hell!" (*Samarkand* 46) associated with these imported faiths which encourages annihilation or outright extermination of people who hold opposing doctrines in "Elegy for A Nation":

The Born-Agains  
Are on rampage, born against all that spells  
Life and mystery, legend and invocation.

[...]

Christian Talibans. Their brothers in Offa  
Murder *Moremi* in her shrine, shrieking Allah akbar  
Rivals else behold their bonded zeal that sanctifies  
Alien rape of our quiescent Muses, extolling theirs.

We who neither curse their gods nor desecrate  
Their texts, their prayer mats or altars—  
What shall we do, Chinua, with these hate clerics?  
While we sleep, their fingers spread as brambles,  
Deface our Book of Life ... (*Samarkand* 82–3)

While the poet is concerned about the vocabularies of hate and sectorial profiling that have been introduced into daily conversations, traditional religion becomes vulnerable as its institutions, artifacts, sacred places, and relics have serially come under attack and are near extinction. The poet further exposes the predatory nature of these religions in "Twelve Canticles for the Zealot". Although the original number of Christ's disciples, in the Judeo-Christian faith, was twelve, Soyinka added the thirteenth canticle to this poem to satirize religious extremism. The baffling irony here is that religious fanatics are using the instrument of Ogun negatively and the poet reminds us that:

Who kills for love of god kills love, kills god  
Who kills in the name of god leaves god  
Without a name (*Samarkand* 63)

Although Soyinka picks the antidote of extremism and religious crisis from a market setting, the emphasis is on the cosmopolitan nature, multiplicity and tolerance among the diverse faiths that adorn the market space. In the same poem, he says:

Chimes of faith assail the marketplace—  
 The muezzin's prayer alert, a shrine within the warren,  
 A lean-to church dispenses chants at war  
 With hand bells. White-robed dervishes in trance  
 At crossroads of Spices Row and Fabric Lane  
 Swirl, oblivious to slender saffron flies  
 Meandering, equally oblivious to the world.  
 Fairy-bells in counterpoint to cosmic ooms—  
 Hare Krishna's other dervishes in slight  
 Ethereal motion through the firewood stalls  
 Deep in the maze of Isale-eko, Bhuddist mantras?

The orisa faithful wait their turn. In season,  
 Ogun's iron bells, Sango's ayan drums  
 Oya's chalk and coral maids reclaim  
 This borrowed space. Ancestral voice ascendant,  
 Masks of wood and webbed visors, indigo and camwood  
 Presences unfold their mats of invocation. (*Samarkand* 54)

Soyinka distils the wisdom in the principle of accommodation as it prevailed in 'Ogun's land' (*Samarkand* 50) in his admonition, thus:

Go to the orisa and be wise. Ifa  
 Shuns the excluding tongue, unveils  
 Uncharted routes to knowledge, truth  
 And godhead. Man is restless seeker,  
 What follows six, says Ifa, transcends the bounds  
 Of seven—there are no final rites to numerology.  
 Let who can, count the motes in a sunbeam  
 Or weigh the span of grief from voice to voice  
 In the home of the immolated.  
 Go to the orisa. None but fools  
 Claim guardianship of the final gateway. (*Samarkand* 56)

While exteriorizing the hypocritical claims to peace by "Taliban" and "Caliban" (*Samarkand* 51) warriors, the poet stresses his conviction that all doctrines that monopolize the redemption of the soul are faulty and that religions that are committed to tolerance and peace, such as indigenous African religions, are the pathway to the soul's earthly and eternal rest.

## Conclusion

In this article, I have demonstrated that religious tropes, mythologies, and icons are critical to understanding Soyinka's poetry. The detailed explorations of "Idanre", *Ogun Abibman*, "Joseph", "Mandela's Earth", and selected poems under the sections "The Sign of the Zealot" and "Elegies" in *Samarkand and Other Markets I Have Known* may resolve some of the allegations of obscurantism levelled against the poet and perhaps what may be called the lack of appeal his poetry may have to some readers. I have exhibited Soyinka's dialectic deployment of religious tropes which, I have argued, provides alternative access to his poetry. Similarly, I have examined the poet's concern about the ambivalent tendencies or paradox of religion which serves the causes of peace or chaos in all spaces. There is a divide between the poet who has positively deployed metaphors of faith to intervene on the social issues in the spaces he mirrored and actors in the faith crisis he abhors. However, the poet sees a resolution to faith crisis which lies in the adherence to the principles of tolerance and mutual respect (or possible harmonisation) of perspectives which naturally pervade all human spaces.

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