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Title

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Permalink

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Journal

Ufahamu: A Journal of African Studies, 11(2)

ISSN

0041-5715

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Publication Date

1982

DOI

10.5070/F7112017240

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WOLE SOYINKA'S OGUN ABIBIMAN

By

Tanure Ojaide

Thomas Mofolo's *Chaka* seems to have set a literary trail in Africa, and Shaka has been the subject of many plays and poems. Shaka, the Zulu king, "is seen primarily as a romantic figure in Francophone Africa, as a military figure in Southern Africa."¹ Moreover, "the extensive Shaka literature in Africa illustrates the desire of African writers to seek in Africa's past a source that will be relevant to contemporary realities . . ."² Shaka was a great military leader who restored dignity to his people, the sort of leadership needed in the liberation struggle in Southern Africa. *Chaka* is political, and "can be considered an extended praise song singing the deeds of this heroic Zulu leader; it can be regarded as an African epic celebrating the founding of an empire."³ It is ironic that Wole Soyinka's *Ogun Abibiman* appeared the same year, 1976, that Donald Burness published his book on Shaka in African literature, writing that "Although Shaka is alluded to, for instance, in Soyinka's *A Dance of the Forest*, the Zulu king appears very seldom in Nigerian literature."⁴

Soyinka's *Ogun Abibiman* relies on Mofolo's *Chaka* and its military tradition together with the Ogun myth in the exhortation of black people fighting for freedom and human rights in Southern Africa. Ogun is a war-god, and the bringing together of Ogun and Shaka is necessary to fuse the best in Africa's military experience. Though the two have records of wanton killings at one time in their military careers, they, nevertheless, are mythically and historically, perhaps, the greatest warlords in Africa.

Ogun Abibiman is an occasional poem, inspired by a particular happening: Samora Machel's placing Mozambique in a state of war against then minority-ruled Rhodesia, an act Soyinka describes in the preface as "the primary detonation of a people's collective will," the catalyst for the eventual liberation of Zimbabwe and a giant stride towards the bigger task of destroying the bastion of apartheid in South Africa. The poem is highly political. *Ogun Abibiman* is a synthesis of *Idanre* and *A Shuttle in the Crypt* in that it combines the subjects of Ogun and violence in *Idanre* with the politics of victimization dealt with in *A Shuttle in the Crypt*. The poet has compassion for victims of minority rule and apartheid, hence he exhorts war and celebrates the newly acquired will.

The inspiration, subject, tradition, and purpose of *Ogun Abibiman* effect a positive voice of celebration. War among the Yoruba and Zulu people is a heroic act, more so, if to assert

dignity. Soyinka combines the conventions of epic war poetry and praise songs. The Yoruba Ijala songs, for instance, combine war and praise themes. The poet's major devices of creating the celebratory voice are: repetition, rhetoric, incantatory rhythm, proverbs, praise-names, indirection, metaphor, enjambement, and alliteration. The language is elevated and intense and very apt for the call for war.

Ogun Abibiman is in three parts. The first part, "Steel Usurps the Forests; Silence Dethrones Dialogue,"⁵ argues that the liberation war is to right the physical and human usurpation perpetuated by the apartheid establishment of South Africa. The poet says a change is taking place, and "a landmass writhes/ From end to end" (p. 1). The activity going on is violent, comparable to an earthquake and a flood. The violent activity is the beginning of a process, for:

*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.* (p. 1)

If there must be confusion for the poet and his people to achieve their objective of freedom, let it be:

*the steel event
Shall even dislodge the sun if dark
Must be our aid.* (p. 2)

The spirits of dead victims of minority rule and apartheid will accompany the living in this historic confrontation in which Ogun will be silent until the task is done. Soyinka relates silence to dedication.

According to the poet, the violent effort of blacks in Southern Africa to regain their rights and land is necessary and justifiable since patience did not help them; now

*Who dare restrain this novel form, this dread
Conversion of the slumbering ore, sealed
So long in patience, now stressed
To a keen emergence?* (p. 3)

The "novel form" is violent activity, war; the "conversion" is the new militant posture of blacks who had been so quiescent that they were downtrodden. There is a resurgence of the fighting spirit, a phenomenon which gives the poet occasion to celebrate "A cause that moves at last to resolution" (p. 4). Ogun now assumes generalship of the black peoples of Abibiman in a war against apartheid. The declaration of war has smashed the "sorcerers' wands" (p. 5). The apartheid establishment has

deceived the world with Dialogue; besides, the United Nations' sanctions failed to break apartheid's backbone. These attempts were merely "games/Of time-pleading" (p. 6). In spite of calling for Dialogue, the minority white establishment perpetuated the Sharpeville massacre. *Ogun Abibiman* is an apologia for violent change if gentlemanly means fail to realize a just cause. In South Africa, the failures of Dialogue, Sanctions, and Diplomacy left the blacks with no alternative to war. The war situation in South Africa is a reenactment of Ogun's violence:

*Ogun, who to right a wrong
Emptied reservoirs of blood in heaven
Yet raged with thirst--I read
His savage beauty on black brows,
In depths of molten bronze aflame
Beyond their eyes' fixated distances--
And tremble! (p. 7)*

The first part of *Ogun Abibiman* sets the tone of the poet's heroic celebration:

*Acolyte to Craftmaster of them all,
Medium of tremors from his taut membrane
I celebrate*

A cause that moves at last to resolution. (p. 4)

The poet is acolyte to Ogun, god of war, and he is committed to fighting for his race. The poet describes the current polarization with contrasting metaphors of "green forest" and "steel." The black peoples have been "green," and had the "ancient/Reign of lush, compliant plains" (p. 1). The white minority group is associated with "steel," the locomotive:

*They, who violate the old preserves
With tracks of steel
And iron tracks. (p. 2)*

Since the blacks are violated, they are shedding their "green hopes," and "No longer are the forests green" (p. 1). Soyinka cleverly associates blacks with nature, a positive force, and the South African whites with iron and steel, brute force and artificiality. The green-steel analogy is the violation of nature by industrialization. The antithetical comparisons seem to imply the land is the primeval home of the blacks, but has been usurped. It is because "Steel usurps the forests" that "Silence dethrones dialogue" (p. 1). The poem is set on contrasts: "green" and "steel"; "black" and "white"; and "we" and "they." This creates tension which is appropriate for a war poem.

The poet's voice is heroic. Change and violence are

suggested but not stated. Repetitions emphasize and particularly create monotonous and incantatory rhythm. For instance:

*In time of race, no beauty slights the duiker's
In time of strength, the elephant stands alone
In time of hunt, the lion's grace is holy
In time of flight, the egret mocks the envious
In time of strife, none vies with Him
Of seven paths, Ogun. (p. 7)*

Usually these repetitions are interwoven with proverbs and praise names. Sometimes, there are parallel expressions such as "silence" and "Mute" (p. 3). The language is further dignified by an epic simile and inversions. Such a simile as:

*Tearless as dried leaves, where stalks
Are sealed from waste, we shed green hopes
Of nature paths. (p. 2)*

common in heroic poems is almost non-existent in the shorter poems of *Idanre* and all of *A Shuttle in the Crypt*. There are verbal and grammatical inversions; for example, "Our Food's alluvial paths/Will spring the shrunken seeds" (p. 1). This grammatical inversion represents the black people's reversal of their oppressive conditions. The language is charged with pungent short lines such as "Gods shall speak to gods" (p. 5) and "Let gods contend with gods" (p. 5). Soyinka appropriately matches medium and message so that the battle for dignity is expressed in heroic language.

The second part of *Ogun Abibiman*, "Retrospect for Marchers: Shaka!" is a reinforcement and an extension of the first part. There is a shift from the present and Ogun to Shaka and his embrace with Ogun. Soyinka starts *Ogun Abibiman in medias res*, as he does in "Idanre," only to go backwards before going forward. This part goes back to Shaka so that black fighters will gain inspiration from Shaka's generalship in their struggle for dignity.

"Shaka!" celebrates the alliance between Ogun and Shaka:

*Shaka roused
Defines his being anew in Ogun's embrace. (p. 9)*

Shaka as leader of the amaZulu is "next to the imperfect god" (p. 14), Ogun. This alliance between myth and history is to regain lost possessions:

*Ogun shakes the hand of Shaka
All is turmoil.*

Ogun is Shaka's "brother spirit" (p. 11), and:

*Our histories meet, the forests merge
With the savannah. Let rockhill drink with lien
At my waterholes. (p. 11)*

The unity of the black peoples behind them is conveyed in the mixture of the Yoruba and Zulu lines:

*Rogbodiyan! Rogbodiyan!
Bayete baba! Bayete!*

This unity of the black peoples represented by the "embrace" of Shaka and Ogun has given rise to the "upheaval of our giant roots" (p. 11).

The poet reminds the blacks reacting against physical and human usurpation that it is the will, and not necessarily size, that wins wars or achieves success. The termite-black soldier ant analogy refers to white-black records: the termite is white, the soldier ant black:

*The termite is no match
For the black soldier ant, yet termites gnawed
The houseposts of our kraals. (p. 12)*

What is important is that "the will should far outrace/Swords and sinews" (p. 12). The irony of Zulu defeat in Shaka's time was that:

*The termites that would eat the kingdom
First built their nest,
In the loin-cloth of the king. (p. 13)*

The termites are not only white colonizers, but forces of destruction, which are both external and internal.

The poet wants the black people to emulate Shaka but avoid his excesses. He is therefore aware of the Zulu king's dual nature. He notes that Shaka was sometimes "Beset by demons of blood" (p. 15) and was the "viper" that "knows/No kin" (p. 14). But the poet absolves him, as he does Ogun, for showing remorse for his misdeeds. The Zulu leader admits that "What I did/Was Shaka, but Shaka was not always I" (p. 15). So, since "Shaka was all men" (p. 14), prone to errors:

*If man cannot, what god dare claim perfection?
The gods that show remorse lay claim to man's
Forgiveness--a founder-king shall dare no less. (p. 14)*

The poet wants the inspiration and leadership of the Shaka, who as:

*king and general
Fought battles, invented rare techniques, created
Order from chaos, coloured the sights of men
In self-transcending visions, sought*

*Man's renewal in the fount of knowledge.
From shards of tribe and bandit mores, Shaka
Raised the city of man in commonweal. (p. 15)*

This is the Shaka, who "built nations, forged a new sense of being" (p. 16).

It is implied from Soyinka's prefatory notes that the negative Shaka is an Idi Amin personality, while Samora Machel is the positive Shaka. The poet's attitude to Shaka shows that his conception of violence is qualified. Violence is permissible when it is necessary as a last resort to gain freedom and dignity, but he condemns the violence that is repressive, sadistic and lustful; hence he is shocked by Ogun's carnage in *Idanre*, condemns the killings during the Nigerian Crisis, and now Shaka's killings, which are generally attributed to the King's manic-depression.

The poet's devices here are similar to those in the first part: repetition, contrast, proverbs, alliteration, and enjambement. Furthermore, there are authorial intrusions and dialogue. These later devices seem to be part of the epic convention.

"Sigidi!" the third and final part of *Ogun Abibiman*, expands the poet's perspective of the South African situation. The poet responds to potential critics of a liberation war. He says the war is not being fought for "sightless violence" (p. 19), which he calls a "sickness," but to:

*press the purity of claims that dwell
Inward in our being, outward in knowledge
Of the world. (p. 19)*

The people, who preach love and peace and fear war, are hypocrites, since "pacific love" tolerated Sharpeville. The Western outcry against liberation war is indefensible because Sharpeville is comparable to the much publicized Guernica. To him, those who are far away from a repressive scene and do not feel the inhumanity, talk of a violent change as anarchical. Such an act of violence as a liberation war is a natural act like a woman's labor before birth of a child. As birth is "holy" (p. 21), so will the fierce bloody war give way to the birth of a just society. He calls upon Ogun, "Priest of Restitutions," to win back what has been taken away. And the poet celebrates no vengeance, but positive values:

*Our songs acclaim
Cessation of a long despair, extol the ends
Of sacrifice born in our will, not weakness.
We celebrate the end of that complaint*

Innocence of our millennial trees. (p. 21)

The poet's role is that of "fortifying the heart" (p. 22) now that black people are massed on the warpath with "Ogun in the ascendant" (p. 22).

Though "Sigidi" has enjambement, alliteration, contrast, and the praise name and chant features of the earlier two sections, its major features are rhetoric and the poet's intrusion into the poem. Rhetorically (reminiscent of Milton), the poet addresses opponents of a liberation war:

*And tell me, you upon whose human heart
Descends this fear, this shadow framed
Of the Apocalypse, say, pacific love
If love survives the lash, contempt,
The silenced screams in blood-lit streets,
Say, if love outlasts the writing on the wall
In hidden cells of Death's own masonry
Say, if love survives the tether's end . . .
.
Will love survive the epitaph--
.
Can love outrace the random bullet.* (p. 20; emphasis mine)

These carefully crafted lines with varied repetitions are highly rhetorical, and have an emotional impact upon the reader. They attempt to convince the opponent of war that "peace" has been futile. The poet balances with negatives and positives to defend his celebration:

*. . . Vengeance
Is not the god we celebrate, nor hate,
Nor blindness to the loss that follows
In His wake.
Nor ignorance of history's bitter reckoning
On innocent alike. Our songs acclaim
Cessation of a long despair, extol the ends
Of sacrifice born in our will, not weakness,
We celebrate the end of that complaint
Innocence of our millennial trees.* (p. 21; emphasis mine)

Sometimes, the rhetorical repetition achieves emphasis as in:

*Remember this. And remember Spain--Guernica
Remember dreams that will go sour . . .* (p. 21)

Ogun Abibiman is a celebration and a call, and its rhetorical subtlety creates emotionality, a prime mover in war.

The poet intrudes into the poem, shifting from the racial

to the personal, from "we" to "I." There are two sides to the poet: the collective spokesman for all blacks and the individual poet. The poet speaks for himself when he says: "Preach who must, I listen and take note" (p. 19). He has a role in the liberation war:

. . . the poet now is given
Tongue to celebrate, if dancers
Soar above the branches and weird tunes
Startle a quiescent world. (p. 20)

He not only encourages his people to fight, but speaks for them, propagating their true message to the outside world so that they will be understood. For instance, he makes it known that the war is not for vengeance but to end the long deprivation the blacks have suffered. He is a debater arguing against Western fears of war and citing Guernica as Sharpeville. He does for the dead of Sharpeville (and Soweto) what Pablo Picasso did for Guernica: conveying the horror of brutalization. To his people, "The drummer's/Exhortations fortify the heart" (p. 22).

Ogun Abibiman is a racial call to the black peoples to imbibe the spirit of Ogun and Shaka to fight for the liberation of Southern Africa. The poet is politically committed in his support for the victims of apartheid. The poet addresses black fighters, opponents of the liberation struggle, his heroes (Ogun and Shaka), and readers. He communicates as he does in the critical poems of *A Shuttle in the Crypt* since he wants his defence of violence to be understood. He does not rely on fancy images, as in the "lone figure" and "grey season" poems of *Idanre*, but on available materials: the Ogun myth, Shaka's history and literary tradition, and contemporary African history. Soyinka tends to communicate more when he depends on "available" materials. His voice is urgent and immediate.

The poem is epical, and there are rhetorical subtleties which show a new side of Soyinka's poetic technique. Besides, Soyinka exploits traditional African poetry, especially the *Ijala*. The poet seems to have shed his verbal playfulness and exuberance for straight-to-the-point expression. The language is intense and some of the expressions like "dust of locusts" and "blood-lit streets" (p. 20) show new strengths in Soyinka. *Ogun Abibiman* shows development in poetic expression and technique from the early poems, *Idanre* and *A Shuttle in the Crypt*.

¹ Donald Burness, *Shaka in African Literature* (Washington, D.C.: Three Continents Press, 1976), p. xiii.

² *Ibid.*

³ Ibid., p. 2.

⁴ Ibid., p. xii.

⁵ Wole Soyinka, *Ogun Abibiman* (London: Rex Collings, 1976), p. 1. Other references are paginated immediately after quotations.