

Two Minds, One World: Soyinka and Walcott Meet

by

Olusegun Adekoya
oadekoya2@yahoo.com
Department of English,
Obafemi Awolowo University,
Ile-Ife, Nigeria

Abstract

Enslavement and transplantation of Black Africans in the New World led to dispersal of African cultures that have left a permanent imprint on African American and Caribbean literatures. The result of the twinned historical event is that in works of African and Black Caribbean writers there are great affinities that are traceable to explorations of a common heritage of African cosmology and oral tradition. The essay is a contrapuntal cum comparatist reading of Derek Walcott's *Ti-Jean and His Brothers* and Wole Soyinka's *A Dance of the Forests* using culture and postcolonial theories to examine plot, setting, characterization, theme, and language in the two plays. The essay gains insight from the principle of the African continuum. The study discovers that the animist worldview shapes the imagination of the two playwrights with little influence from the Western literary tradition. It concludes that there are more resemblances than divergences in the authors' deployment of history and resources of oral traditions.

History makes similes of people, but these people are their own nouns.
–Walcott

He is a profound artist only to the degree to which he comprehends and expresses this principle
of destruction and re-creation.
–Soyinka

Critical essays on *A Dance of the Forests* (subsequently abridged to *A Dance*) abound. Critics of African literature, native and foreign, such as Olusegun Adegboye, Mary T. David, James Gibbs, Biodun Jeyifo, Eldred Jones, Ketu H. Katrak, Stephen Larsen, Obi Maduakor, M. M. Mahood, Gerald Moore, Oyin Ogunba, Tejumola Olaniyan, Adrian Roscoe, and Derek Wright, have provided perceptive readings of various aspects of the play. They all agree that the play is complex, a dark forest of symbols that are replete with meaning on a national and global level. There is equally an abundance of critical essays on *Ti-Jean and His Brothers* (subsequently abbreviated to *Ti-Jean*). Mahfouz A. Adedimeji, Segun Adegboye, Albert Olu Ashaolu, Edward Baugh, Paula Burnett, Cecil Gray, Louis James, and Mervyn Morris have written persuasively on deployment of allegory, folktale tradition, and wit in the play.

A preponderance of critical exegeses of *A Dance* and *Ti-Jean* notwithstanding, a comparative analysis of the two plays along the line of extension of African cultures and oral traditions deserves attention. The present study seeks to fill the gap and increase an understanding of the African world. Richard A. Long in “Black Studies: International Dimensions” defines the principle of the African continuum:

The principle of the African continuum is that historically radiating from the Black Core, the Black peoples of the world have carried with them modes of dealing with and symbolizing experience, modes discovered and refined through millennia in Africa itself, and that these tactical and symbolic modes constitute a viable nexus of Black culture, one of the major traditions of humanity. (424)

Writing in the same vein in “The African Presence in Caribbean Literature,” Edward Kamau Brathwaite posits, “African culture not only crossed the Atlantic, it crossed, survived, and creatively adapted itself to its new environment” (73). Of the four kinds of written African literature in the Caribbean identified by Brathwaite, *Ti-Jean* belongs in “the literature of African expression, which has its root in the folk, and which attempts to adapt or transform folk material into literary experiment” (81).

In an interview with Edward Hirsch, Walcott asseverates, “our music, our speech – all the things that are organic in the way we live – are African” (285). “The storyteller tradition,” he goes on to add, “is still very prevalent in the Caribbean. The chant, the response, and the dance are immediate things to me; they are not anachronistic or literary” (286). *Ti-Jean*, he avers, in “Derek’s Most West Indian Play,” “was the most West Indian thing I had done” (7). *A Dance*, we assert, is Soyinka’s greatest appropriation of ritual properties of the Yoruba world, the closest in his dramatic oeuvre to the tradition of the Yoruba traveling theater.

Both plays begin with a prologue. A Black Caribbean etiological tale, *Ti-Jean* provides an explanation in its prologue for the dark patch of the Moon. A signification of the defeat of power by wit and a mockery of omniscience, it belongs in a category of animal tales in which a small, weak but exceedingly smart animal outwits a big, powerful but extremely foolish animal. In an interview with Paula Burnett, Walcott says:

there's always one figure in the folk imagination who is kind of a protestant figure, an elusive figure, who is not part of the cosmology and upsets the hierarchy somehow, either by defiance, or by wit, or by solving challenges. Like most West Indian jokes, which are based on African stories, [there is] somebody always challenging Tiger, always making an idiot out of Tiger . . . and in a sense the Tiger represents a kind of deity. And this person who is sceptical and smart and avoids the power of the Tiger is really a kind of protest against . . . or query or scepticism [of] . . . omniscience or power. (qtd. in Burnett, *Derek Walcott* 95)

Frog, the narrator, opens the tale with "Greek-crack, Greek-crack" (85) and ends it with its Creole form "creek. Crack" (166), which combined conjures up the dual cultural cum literary heritage of the play and its author. Alluding to *The Frogs* by Aristophanes, it evokes the opening strategy of an African folktale, suggests coughing that clears the narrator's throat, and requests audience attention.

Tired of causing evils and vices from which he does not suffer, Devil in *Ti-Jean* sends Bolom (a spirit of an aborted fetus), his servant, to Mother, a poor, old Black widow, to deliver a message that whoever among her three sons fails to make him feel anger and rage, as humans do, will die, while any of them who makes him feel human will be richly rewarded. The first two sons Gros Jean and Mi-Jean fail the test and Devil consumes them, but Ti-Jean passes it and receives blessings. Therefore, God puts him with his hunting dog and the bundle of sticks left for him by Devil on the Moon to "light the evil dark" (86).

A Dance, like *Ti-Jean*, begins with a prologue. Aroni, a lame spirit that carries about a bundle of sticks made of wisdom, informs the audience in the prologue that there is a Feast, the Gathering of the Tribes, to which the living have requested the spirit world to send some of their illustrious ancestors to grace the grand occasion. Aroni seeks and gets permission of Forest Head (Almighty God) to respond to the request and send the living two ancestors, Dead Man, a captain in the army of a tyrannical African king called Mata Kharibu, and Dead Woman, the captain's wife, who in previous life were linked to four of the living. The celebrants reject the two guests sent to them and drive them away. Aroni receives them; and forest dwellers, spirit beings, consent to give them a dance, a befitting burial, so to say, to which Forest Head lures three members of the human community.

They are Demoke, a carver (in previous life a court poet), Adenebi, a council orator (in previous life an historian), and Rola, a courtesan in the past and the present. Demoke has carved Oro's sacred tree as a symbol of the Gathering of the Tribes and in the process caused the death of Oremole, his apprentice, two crimes for which Eshuoro, the spirit that used to dwell in the carved tree, seeks to take vengeance on him, while Ogun, God of War and the carver's patron God, defends his servant. Conceived as part of Nigeria's Independence Celebrations in 1960, the play was rejected by the Independence Ceremonials Committee who found its gloomy mood to be disharmonious with the festive atmosphere of the occasion.

Set in a human habitat and a forest that combine to present an animistic world, either play portrays the cosmos as a field of forces that attract and attack each other. In *Ti-Jean*, thunder accompanies the appearance of Devil with his troop of fiends and the sky turns red (80), engendering fright in Mother and her three sons. The opening of *A Dance* is similarly eerie as the soil at an empty clearing in the forest appears to be breaking and heads of Dead Woman and Dead Man push their way up (3). The gristly appearance of the dead couple sets the human characters on edge. Feelings of guilt assail Demoke, Adenebi and Rola and they become tetchy. There is a slight difference between the two human habitats. In *Ti-Jean*, it is a village and in *A Dance*, a town. As represented in Soyinka's translations of D. O. Fagunwa's novels *The Forest of a Thousand Daemons* and *In the Forest of Olodumare*, the forest is symbolic of the incomprehensible. Both plays portray the cosmos as composed of three worlds of the living, the dead, and the unborn with emphasis on their interconnection. Soyinka wrote in *Myth, Literature and the African World*, "life, present life, contains within it manifestations of the ancestral, the living and the unborn" (144).

In *Ti-Jean*, the living are represented by Mother, her three sons, and the animal characters, the dead by Gros Jean and Mi-Jean who pass behind a red curtain of flame that signifies hellfire (159), and the unborn by Bolom. In *A Dance*, the town dwellers and the Court of Mata Kharibu constitute the living; the forest dwellers, Dead Woman and Dead Man are the dead; and Half-Child represents the unborn.

Although both plays bear signs of Christian influence, the impact is heavier on *Ti-Jean* that alludes to Paradise (162), the Crucifixion of Jesus in Mother's prayer (158), the fight between David and Goliath (165), the struggle between Jehovah and Satan that leads to the expulsion of the latter from heaven (151), and the Last Judgment (162). The influence of Christianity on construction of *A Dance* reflects largely in the character portrayal of Forest Head.

Soyinka mocks the idea of omniscience of the Christian God. Obaneji's statement "recognition is the curse I carry with me" (21) transforms omniscience from something positive into an encumbrance. Analogous is Friedrich Nietzsche's negative perception of divine love: "Even God has his hell: it is his love for man" (*Thus Spake Zarathustra* 89). All Yoruba Deities are fallible. Walcott derides pretensions of the colonial conquistadors to omnipotence. By aping God, they expose themselves to piquing.

The biological state of Bolom and Half-Child depicts the terrible distortion or temporal suspension of the historical development of the Black race as a tragic consequence of colonization and enslavement. The passion that leads Bolom's mother to commit an abortion is by no means different from love that makes Sethe kill her own daughter in a desperate attempt to prevent her enslavement in Morrison's *Beloved*. Bolom's twisted shape emblemizes distortion of African history and destruction of African cultures by European colonialists. However, Africans are as culpable as the foreign perpetrators of the horrendous crimes.

Unlike Bolom's unwilling mother and Madame Tortoise (Rola) who are callous and negate the stereotype that women are tender, Mother of the Jean brothers is all compassion and kindness. Bolom calls her "creature of gentleness" (97) whose hut reeks of love and radiates warmth. Dead Woman and Mother symbolize true motherhood and its excruciating pain. Given the travails and sufferings of mothers and existential agonies and cruelties, they think it is better not to be born. Mother says in *Ti-Jean* ". . . it is luckiest / Never to be born" (96) and Dead Woman speaks for all mothers in *A Dance* and asks pathetically, "Was it for this, for this, / Children plagued their mothers?" (69). Bolom hates the woman who terminated his gestation. Dead Woman, too, hates Madame Tortoise who caused the "arrest" of her pregnancy. She says, "The hate alone. The little ball of hate / Alone consumed me" (69). Forest Head's reply to her petition is dispassionate and pointed: "Child, there is no choice but one of suffering" (69). An acute awareness of inescapability of suffering in the world explains the choice of the word "Withers" in Bolom's statement: "Whatever flesh touches me, / Withers me into mortality" (96). In other words, to live is to die and to grow is to decay. The vision of the two playwrights is paradoxical. Yet, in spite of their consciousness of humongous horrors and egregious pains of existence, Soyinka and Walcott celebrate and affirm life.

Both authors use metempsychosis and role change as dramatic devices. Dead Man and Dead Woman journey from the spirit world into the human, and Half-Child that has stayed in Dead Woman's womb for several centuries, leaves the neither-nor gulf of transition and is born. In *Ti-Jean*, Devil masquerades as Old Man and as Planter; and Bolom leaves the spirit world for that of the living. Mother warns Gros Jean as he prepares to go into the forest in quest of wealth: "Beware of a wise man called Father of the Forest, / The Devil can hide in several features, / A woman, a white gentleman, even a bishop" (103). In *A Dance*, Forest Head masquerades as Old Man.

Walcott seems to be writing in full consciousness of V. S. Naipaul's racial typology. Naipaul divides the races of the world into three. The Blacks are the "short-visioned" who would not come to much in the world; the Asians are the "long-visioned" who only dream and would not achieve anything of significance; and the Whites are the "medium-visioned," the winners, who are not taking chances with their position of leadership in the world (Naipaul 172; Rowe-Evans 57). A rebuttal, *Ti-Jean* inverts the racial order.

The long-visioned and the medium-visioned, the great philosophers of the Orient and the possessors of economic and technological power in the West respectively lose, while victory goes to the demonized and denigrated short-visioned race represented by Ti-Jean. Division of knowledge along racial lines is dubious. The moral of Devil's bundle of sticks is instructive: "Together they are strong, / Apart, they are all rotten" (164). All disciplines in the arts and the sciences and all races are needed to build a harmonious and peaceful world. In any case, according to Yoruba mythology, all knowledge issues from the same source, the head of Obatala shattered into smithereens by his rebellious slave Atunda. Abolish "the self," which Devil calls "the chink" in humanity's armor, and their magnificence will shine forth (163).

Trusting in his might, Gros Jean neglects Mother's wise counsel that he should be cautious and courteous to all. He boasts that he fears nothing, whether "man, beast, or beast-man" (106). Old Man (Devil in disguise) offers him a word of advice garnered from experience: "I think strength should have patience. Look at me today. / I was a strong woodman, now I burn coals, / I'm as weak as ashes. And nearly deaf" (106). In anger, according to the stage direction, Gros Jean "*Grabs him, hurls him down, axe uplifted*" (107) for refusing to show him the way to wealth. Gros Jean, in Old Man's judgment, is "the spirit of war" (108). The great irony is that, in the end, "world-eating worms" feed on arrogant conquerors (108).

A Dance signifies the human predilection for war, an incurable disease that reduces powerful nations of the world to savage lands. Mata Kharibu snatches the wife of another king and asks her former husband to pay him dowry, which really is an excuse to start a war. The captain of his army who refuses to go to war to retrieve the trousseau (the dowry) of Madam Tortoise, the stolen wife, is labeled a traitor and sold into slavery. Historian's perspective on war is quite illuminating: "Nations live by strength; nothing else has meaning" (57). He goes on to add, "War is the only consistency that past ages afford us. It is the legacy which new nations seek to perpetuate . . . war is the destiny." (57). In Warrior's view, there will be no end to the system of Social Darwinism in the world. He tells Physician, "Unborn generations will be cannibals most worshipful Physician. Unborn generations will, as we have done, eat up one another" (55) and challenges him to devise a cure. If, as Old Man sarcastically expresses Charles Darwin's theory of evolution in *Ti-Jean*, "they all eat each other, and that's natural law," for "might is still right" (108), the division into the civilized and the savage, higher and lower animals, and superior and inferior races is specious.

Old Man laughs humanity to scorn, especially racists who believe that they possess an intelligence quotient that is higher than that of any other race. Planter is Devil precisely because he uses his power to dominate, enslave and oppress other human beings in order to accumulate property and money, the source of all evils. His greed is insatiable and, therefore, Gros Jean's arm of iron would snap serving to meet his boss's material needs.

Both playwrights conceptualize civilization and ethic as paradoxes. Incorruptible, Warrior turns down sexual advances of Madame Tortoise who even asks him to supplant Mata Kharibu, her husband. He privileges his duty to the sixty soldiers under him over and above the bond of marriage and is not troubled by the choice. His high moral integrity notwithstanding, he is incompetent. Eshuoro calls him “a fool” and “A woman” (65) for not exercising power in the service of liberation. The principle of moral relativism is at work in both plays.

Ti-Jean succeeds while his brothers fail not because he is morally perfect but essentially because he does not allow the force of morality to unman and prevent him from acting and at the right time, too. Mi-Jean, according to Devil disguised as Old Man, is slightly morally better than his dead brother Gros Jean because he has one virtue: fear. He, unlike his senior brother, is patient to listen, even if in the end he does not utilize the knowledge acquired. Reason, his strength, is paradoxically his Achilles’ heel. He reasons that Old Man is not the Devil because “he would never expose / His identity so early” (121) by showing his cloven foot and that Planter’s argument that a goat has a soul is irrational, unscientific, and implausible, the very stuff of mythology. In fact, he is so infuriated by Planter’s argument that he breaks his self-imposed rule to keep silence. He lacks moderation. Scientists increasingly make astonishing discoveries that portray human beings in an unflattering manner as animals whose ways remain bestial. Conversely, animals increasingly manifest human attributes and traits. The idea of human bestiality is common to both plays. Demoke discloses in *A Dance* that “Madam Tortoise is the totem” and Adenebi describes the carving as “Utterly bestial” (23). Civilization appears in either text as progressive bastardization of culture and increasing human degeneration. The result is aggravation of the human condition.

In contrast to his sassy brothers who put their trust in physical strength and the power of reason, Ti-Jean respects “lower” creatures, calls them brothers, and perceives beauty in each of them in a truly pantheistic fashion. For according them their due honor and appreciating their individual qualities, the creatures give him their unstinted assistance, which blended with the power of reason, enables him to identify Devil and overcome his wiles. To Old Man’s question “is your father living?” Ti-Jean replies, “I think nothing dies” (139), which is in consonance with the first law of thermodynamics, even though it derives from animist consciousness. Even his dead brothers, he adds, continue to live in their mother’s memory. Ti-Jean demonstrates the principle of indestructibility of energy when, asked how he intends to face the Devil, he pleads, “O help me, my brothers, help me to win” and, following his supplication with action, “*He retreats to the crosses,*” according to the stage direction, in an attitude of submission that suggests worship of the dead (140). *A Dance*, too, dramatizes ancestor worship.

The brothers are not only dead Gros Jean and dead Mi-Jean who are now wise, for wisdom belongs to the dead, but also creatures of the forest, the animal protagonists in the tale, namely Bird, Frog, Cricket, and Firefly. His statement “Whatever God made, we must consider blessed (139) issues from a philosophy of acceptance and accommodation that puts all contraries in the same paradoxical basket that is the cosmos and discovers good in evil and vice versa. *Ifá* divination operates the principle of complementarity symbolized by Devil. Even poison could be curative.

Ti-Jean borrows Devil’s finagling trick and, under the guise of helping Old Man, loosens the bundle of sticks, following Bird’s cue diligently. Still pretending to be assisting him, he carefully lifts Old Man’s skirt and beholds his forked tail, a replica of the forked tongue of the serpent, the totem of the Devil in Christianity. Finally, just as Gros Jean before him lifted an ax and threatened to kill Old Man if he did not show him the quickest way to wealth, Ti-Jean lifts a stick and threatens to brain Old Man with it if he does not reveal his identity. Old Man obliges him, something he did not do for his senior brothers. Violence is indispensable, but it has to be used judiciously and at the opportune time. Whereas his brothers labored vainly to tie Planter’s goat, he gelds it, an act that gets its owner angry. Gros Jean wearied himself counting cane leaves, but he leads a slave rebellion and gets Planter’s cane plantation and his house razed. Feigning drunkenness, he gets Planter who is inebriated to swig a little more alcohol. Planter is incensed. Ti-Jean is able to defeat Devil because he mixes appropriately all contraries, especially aggression and love and deceit and sincerity. Balance, Walcott suggests, is the key to life’s conundrums, for everything has its uses.

Both plays teem with African folk beliefs and ritual practices. *A Dance* features an *Ifá* priest Agboreko whose prestidigitation appears more like an act of charlatanism than divination. He misreads the sound of a decrepit lorry on his divination board as thunder. On hearing the weird cry of Bolom, Gros Jean screams, “Line the step with fine sand / To keep the evil out!” and Mi-Jean shrieks, “Turn over, Mother, the hem of your skirt!” and they declare in unison “Let two of our fingers form in one crucifix!” (94). All three are rites of protection. Although Christians use the crucifix as a fetish or charm for protection, they condemn obeah as evil. Crossing fingers also hints at the prevalence of religious syncretism in the Caribbean. Edward Kamau Brathwaite posits, “the focus of African culture in the Caribbean was religious” (73). A pregnant Yoruba woman who ventures out at noon would tie a small pebble or metal object in her wrapper to prevent a changeling from entering into her womb and driving out the fetus gestating there. Called “*aàlè*,” the object functions like a scarecrow on a rice field. It is denigrated as magic only because the scientific principles at work in it are unknown.

In some African societies, people use lighted torches or noise during annual renewal rites to chase evil away. The three Jean brothers perform the rite and shout, “Where are you? Where is it? / Hit it! There! Where is it?” (95). An *àbíkú* figure (a child that often dies in infancy as many times as it is born by the same woman; a symbol for the paradoxical act of creation, destruction and re-creation that goes on perpetually in the world), Bolom tells the boys, “Though you bar the door / I can enter the house” (98). The Yoruba proverb “*Àbíkú sọ olóògùnd’èké*” (Abiku proves an herbalist a liar) underscores the invincible power of the monster child over charms and magic rites aimed at arresting his wandering spirit. In *A Dance*, beaters make noises to drive away the unwanted guests, but the strategy fails and the human community resorts to fumigation (petrol fume). Drumming, possession dance, flogging, divination, pouring of libation, invocation, recitation of incantations, sprinkling of ashes, prophetic utterances, and ritual sacrifice are some elements of the African religious complex displayed in *A Dance*.

Eshuorocompels Murete, a weakling of a wood spirit, to swear that he will not tell anyone that he has seen him. To make assurance doubly sure, according to the stage direction, he “*Forces a leaf between his teeth and tears it off*” (44), as some cultists would do to initiands in their grove on such an occasion of solemn oath-taking. Parsed, the name Eshuoro could mean a combination of two powerful spirits, Èṣù and Orò, or the spirit that dwells in the orombeje tree. The name causes confusion because the word does not bear tone marks, and Yoruba is a tone language. Hence, critics give it different interpretations. Eshuorotyrannizes Murete and shows clearly that he is not a democrat but a despot. Whereas Èṣù conveys sacrifices to their destinations, Orò consumes any member of society that pollutes it. Therefore, the combination is not by any means strange.

Both texts deploy the sacrifice motif. Gros Jean and Mi-Jean serve as Devil’s dinner, or as a peace offering for Bolom to be born. The Yoruba ritualize food and perceive it as diurnal sacrifice in the proverbial expression “*Òḍṣà bí òfun ò sí, ojoojúmóní n gbẹ’bọ l’ówó eni*” (There is no deity as implacable as the throat; he takes sacrifice from us daily). Demoke is sacrificed on the totem carved by him and vengeful Eshuoro thereby blots out his shame and sanctifies himself. However, it is arguable that Demoke’s unwillingness to be a carrier or a scapegoat for the sins of the community blights the sacrifice and renders it invalid. Orò (bull-roarer), a cleansing spirit that women must not see, is all fury, noise and wind, which explains why Ogun ridicules him as “Soulless one” who utters “loud words and empty boasts” (66). In other words, the cult of Orò is one big lie. Founded on the psychology of fear, it functions as a control mechanism under patriarchy to suppress women and rid society of human pollutants. *A Dance*, more than *Ti-Jean*, represents and demystifies African beliefs and cult practices.

One of African folk beliefs carried over to the New World by the enslaved is the myth of the combat between the sun and rain, an archetypal figure of conflict or confusion with which the Devil is associated. Wily Old Man mentions the myth to test if Ti-Jean has fallen for science and lost faith in demons and the supernatural: “They say, the people of the forest, when the sun and rain contend for mastery, they say that the Devil is beating his wife” (138).

Of course, it is irrefragable that the Devil resides in everybody and presents chiral choices, always. Ti-Jean unmasks Devil who is masquerading as Old Man when he sardonically asks, “Could you, being behind it?” (138). Polysemous, the pronoun “it” could perfectly refer to the conflict between the sun and rain, the fight between the Devil and his wife, or the Devil’s face. Simply put, the Devil is the author of conflict and confusion, without which there would be neither change nor progression. Euphemized as pride, the Devil’s willful challenge of God’s absolutism, Achitophel tells Absalom in “Absalom and Achitophel,” is “a Godlike sin” (Dryden 16, line 372) because God shares neither His glory nor power.

Revolutionaries and advocates of equality and freedom appropriate the Devil as their patron God because they recognize his freedom-seeking instinct and the devilry in the predatory capitalist system that only violence and war (devilry) can remove. Malediction, they reason, is the antidote to a curse. Christianity reviles the Devil and occludes his knowledge-giving quality and freedom-loving impulse. In Yoruba mythology, however, Èṣù is a trickster spirit, “the universal policeman and keeper of the *àṣẹ*, the divine power with which Olódùmarè created the universe” (Abimbola 1) and the Director of Communication in the divine cabinet who conveys all sacrifices to their destinations. Whoever makes a sacrifice or starts a project, say, house construction or marriage, and does not first give Èṣù his due only wastes effort and resource, for the sacrifice will not reach its destination and consequently the project will fail. Therefore, the mediating role of Èṣù in the Yoruba world is central. His archetypal trope is the crossroads that confuses a stranger. All human beings are strangers in the world, a marketplace. In the words of Henry Louis Gates, Èṣù is “the epitome of paradox” (30).

In Yoruba art, the two parts of the Deities that are foregrounded are the tongue, which signifies his paradoxical nature and love of equivocation, and the phallus that depicts his role as a fertility God. Walcott explores his trickster role, the emblem of which is his half-shaved head. The biblical Devil that is all negative is a total contrast to Èṣù, “a neutral force,” “the deity of choice and free will” who symbolizes natural ambivalence (Aiyejina 10, 11).

Both playwrights project a paradoxical vision. In *Another Life*, an autobiographical poem, Walcott, a mulatto, portrays himself as a divided child. In “A Far Cry from Africa,” he expresses his inability to obliterate his hybrid identity and therefore accepts with dignity the dual cultural-cum-racial heritage with which history has blessed or burdened him: “I who am poisoned with the blood of both, / Where shall I turn, divided to the vein?” (71). Soyinka’s paradoxical vision derives from his fascination for the duality of the personality of Ogun, his Muse. For both writers, the ultimate source of hybridity is ambidextrous nature.

Ti-Jean recognizes the duality of Devil’s personality and likens it to “the blinding gaze of God” (143). Devil confirms the observation, puts back the Old Man’s mask, and declares, “It is hard to distinguish us” (143). Even after the expulsion of Devil from heaven, he still contends with God. As he proudly puts it, “even today some can’t tell us apart” (151).

Analogous is the relentless struggle between humans and forest dwellers in *A Dance*. Murete boasts, “for every tree that is felled or for every beast that is slaughtered, there is recompense, given or forced” (46). In the same play, Aroni rips off the Questioner’s mask and, lo and behold, it is Eshuoro (72). The act is revelatory of the complexity and multitude of identity. Things are not what they appear to be in both texts. Jehovah, like Ogun, has a dual identity. He is a warmonger, a creator and a destroyer. Every time the God of the Jews embarks on an act of creation the Devil is always nigh at hand to throw a spanner in the works and ruin the newly created universe. According to rabbinical exegesis, the act of creation recorded in Genesis was not the first. “Twenty-six attempts,” André Neher reveals, “preceded the present Genesis, and all were doomed to failure . . . our history bears the imprint of total insecurity” (155-56). In *Ifá*, Èṣù is indispensable. “Without Esu to open the portals to the past and the future, Orunmila, the divination deity, would be blind” (Aiyejina 10).

Walcott and Soyinka humanize Divinities and portray them as flawed. In *A Dance*, the spirits, like human beings, are devious and envious. They fight, backbite, drink and get drunk, abuse, oppress and taunt one another. Even Forest Father is capricious and dithers. Devil gets drunk in *Ti-Jean*, prevaricates and breaks his oath. All Deities are human inventions and sublime metaphors for character types. In *Malcochon, or the Six in the Rain*, dying Chantal tells Old Man who suggests calling a priest for the last rite of confession, “Only God, who have a strong stomach and who is a very old man, an old rascal like me who frightening the world, could understand that,” that is, his sinful life as a recidivist (204).

Devil’s last test is that Ti-Jean, in spite of the loss of his mother, should sing. His song touches Devil’s heartstrings and induces tears of joy mixed with sorrow. At last, Devil discovers the magnificence of humanity and the wonder that is life if rid of greed and selfishness. Ti-Jean has made Devil feel mortality and pity and therefore has won the contest. Life, as portrayed in both plays, is an inseparable melding of joy and sorrow, a paradox of creation and destruction.

Bolom affirms the primacy of paradox and declares, “I am born, I shall die! I am born, I shall die!” (163), a bold asseveration that echoes Half-Child’s dreadful premonition in *A Dance*: “I’ll be born dead” (74). Whereas Bolom defeats Devil and does not serve as his dinner, Half-Child loses the game of “sesan” with the Figure in Red, a symbol of death (73-79). Although Nigeria did not die in childbirth, its fate is still uncertain as she continues to suffer all kinds of childhood diseases. Meanwhile, the prophecies made in the play – crime, criminality, misrule, pestilence, environmental pollution, violence and war - continue to roil the country and the world. The two plays deal with the subject of salvation of society that comprises the powerful but depraved and the honest but wretched folk.

They have a tripartite structure. *A Dance* begins in the present, descends to the past, and projects to the future. The tripartite structure of *Ti-Jean* is slightly different. It has three journeys, three questers, three challenges, and three morals. A ritual number, three signifies unity in diversity. All objects, phenomena, and processes go through three phases, namely birth, death and rebirth. The two plays also engage the subject of slavery. It is sad to observe that human trafficking is back in Africa and slave markets have reopened in Libya. Despite scientific and technological progress and all the wonderful changes that it has wrought, evil still thrives in the world. Perhaps, it is ineradicable. Devil boasts in *Ti-Jean* that he “can never be destroyed” (158). His last statement, “We shall meet again, Ti-Jean. You and your new brother! / The features will change, but the fight is still on” (164), expresses the idea of continuity. Change is possible, but its paradox is insoluble. In *A Dance*, the three human witnesses of the Chorus of the Future, Demoke, Adenebi and Rola, return and make statements that affirm the inviolability of the cyclic concept of history and time and the paradox of nature. Demoke’s “And the lightning made his bid in vain” (86), Adenebi’s “When the rock fell, alone I caught the boulders” (86), and Rola’s “Witches spread their net, trapped emptiness” (85), which are all brazen and riddled with braggadocio and negativity, imply that they have either learnt nothing or forgotten the lesson learnt. Light in *Ti-Jean* and lightning in *A Dance* signify wisdom imparted into their audience by the playwrights.

The endings are remarkably similar. Devil and his cohorts in *Ti-Jean* and Ogun, Eshuoro and Aroni in *A Dance* flee because the sun has started to rise. The two plays show that spirits operate and thrive at night (primitivism) and abhor daylight (materialism). Day and night are not only complementary but also sustain human and plant life. According to a Yoruba folk belief, a person who encounters Aroni, a healer, in the forest at night and passes his tests receives blessings, for the spirit, like Old Man in *Ti-Jean*, carries about a bundle of twigs that symbolizes boons – children, happiness, good health, long life, peace, prosperity and wisdom, with which he heals diverse ailments. The “bundle of sticks that / Old wisdom has forgotten” (*Ti-Jean* 164) is Ti-Jean’s rich guerdon for passing Devil’s tests. Undoubtedly, African cosmology and oral traditions heavily influence composition of the two plays, and their authors. There are great resemblances in their deployment of motifs and tropes and curious convergences of perspectives on history. The plausible explanation for the correspondences is the African continuum. To borrow Frog’s words as he ends his folktale and emphasizes its moral, we declare that in *Ti-Jean* and *A Dance* “brother met brother on his way” (166).

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