

Two Chains, One Choice: Soyinka and the Quest for Freedom from the Twin Plagues of Political and Religious Maladies in Samarkand and Other Markets I Have Known

by

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Samarkand and Other Markets I Have Known, Wole Soyinka's fifth book of poetry, henceforth abbreviated to *Samarkand*, engages the twin devils of political tyranny and religious extremism. Whereas the former is a familiar demon with which the author has ever fought since his commencement of the art of creative writing, the latter is relatively new. Religious fanaticism after the September 11, 2001 attacks on the United States of America (USA) by Al-Qaeda has become a monumental global challenge that wreaks havoc on nations of the world and wastes human lives and property with utmost reckless abandon. To protest against theocratic misrule or be skeptical at all of politico-religious ideologies is adjudged a terrible heresy that deserves punishment by death at holy hands of God's self-appointed hatchet men and women. Denial of fundamental human right to life and to free expression of opinion by both political despots and religious fanatics rankles the poet and has him howl from the first poem in the collection to the last.

It is pertinent to state that most of the poems in the collection were written in exile while Soyinka lived a precarious life under the death sentence passed on him in absentia by General Sani Abacha the late Nigerian military dictator. Soyinka was ceaselessly pursued by Abacha's hired assassins who almost succeeded in bringing him down and pouring acid on his body in a hotel where he lodged in the USA but for the vigilance of a security guard who checkmated the hoodlums. That he survived the ordeal and outlived Abacha to tell the story was a matter of good fortune. The tone of the poet is acerbic and threnodic and his mood is grave, because the circumstances and events that gave birth to the poems were extremely painful and traumatic and their atmosphere reeked too much of death.

Divided into five sections, namely, Outsiders, Of Exits, Fugitive Phases, The Sign of the Zealot, and Elegies, *Samarkand* is a supreme exemplification of creative melding of the local and the global and abolition of dubious divisions, be they ethnic, ideological, political, or religious. As Soyinka argues in “Climates of Art” (1988: 247-61), the conditions under which artists live and work in the contemporary world are more or less the same as controllers of economic, political, and religious levers of every society unite against any form of art that opposes their system and insists on freedom of creative expressions.

It is undeniable that, with the rise of Political Islam and emergence of terrorist groups in several countries, the whole world is currently asphyxiated under a cloud of fear and violence, what with incessant bombings, kidnappings, and decapitations. Kurtz’s unforgettable cry “The Horror! The Horror!” (Conrad 1973: 100), an echo of Gaia’s psychic scream that expresses extreme suffering as human civilization accelerates the planet Earth towards an irredeemable ecological catastrophe, only partially depicts the contemporary world experience of political-cum-religious extremism and recalls Soyinka’s conclusion that what is being witnessed is “the very collapse of humanity” (1988: 17).

“Ah, Demosthenes!” the first poem in *Samarkand* is a trenchant declaration of the poet’s unambiguous position on the power issue. He will use all resources at his disposal and endure all hardships to crush all impediments created by power perverters and dismantle their towers of lies, in order to set the world free from their death clutch. It is a bold reiteration of all he has fought and stood for as a writer who is conscious of his moral and social obligations. Ramming pebbles into his mouth, placing nettles on his tongue, dropping some ratsbane on it, and thrusting all fingers down his throat are expressive of his desire to contend with tyrants and resist oppressors and also of his keen awareness that the path of revolutionary struggle for which he opts is perilous and might lead to loss of his own life. There is an element of sacrifice in revolutionary action that makes its hero appear as an Ogun or Christ figure, and its absence would render a revolution mere propagation of opportunism and self-promotion at the expense of the collective good. Soyinka gives the theme of ritual suicide in *The Strong Breed* and *Death and the King’s Horseman* a cerebral political interpretation that escapes many of his traducers. Ayi Kwei Armah provides a clarification on the symbolic significance of ritual sacrifice using the metaphor of petrol, something light and pure that burns itself up in order to push forward a society that is imaged as a heavy truck loaded with all kinds of people (1974: 27). The tragedy of Africa is that there are not many self-sacrificing revolutionary heroes who, like Nelson Mandela, would give their lives to the struggle for emancipation of their people.

In exercise of the will to live a full life, love, and work without fetters and abridgment of his intellectual energies and imagination by the powers that be, Soyinka very much resembles Ogun, his Muse, who is “embodiment of Will,” which is characterized as “the paradoxical truth of destructiveness and creativeness in acting man.” (1978: 150). A violent revolution is both creative and destructive. Understanding duality of power, for Soyinka, constitutes the true test of who a genuine artist is: “he is a profound artist only to the degree to which he comprehends and expresses this principle of destruction and re-creation” (1978: 150).

Beyond exposing despots, the poet-persona intends to rid them of power, turn the tables against them, and give them an ample dose of the mistreatment they have meted out to their victims:

I'll seal their fate in tunnels dark and dank
As habitations of their hostages
Denied of air, denied of that same light (4)

The lines recall “Live Burial” in the Prisonettes section of *A Shuttle in the Crypt* (1972: 60-61), a book of poetry that delineates Soyinka’s experience in solitary confinement for almost two years on a trumped-up charge of helping the breakaway Republic of Biafra to buy an aircraft during the Nigerian Civil War (1967-1970).

The “agnostic sage” in the last stanza of the poem is Socrates who was forced to take the hemlock because he not only stood for unwanted truth but also taught it to Athenian youth, something that the political authorities of his time counted as corrupting minds of neophytes. Socrates made the supreme sacrifice in defense of truth and did not stutter. Stuttering is used in the poem as a metaphor for cowardice, making compromises in order to be close to power and enjoy its privileges, prevaricating, and spreading untruth. Whoever chooses to uphold truth in a world of endless compromises and hypocrisy must be willing to suffer for it. That, in sum, is what the phrase having heated pebbles or *wèrèpè* (nettles) on a tongue connotes.

An exquisite piece of gut writing, the poem reveals Soyinka the enemy of falsehood and tyranny who is filled with so much anger and disgust at the sordid condition of the world and manipulation of the masses by the ruling class that he desires to throw up all the bilious stuff in his corporeal system for health. The lyric takes a swipe at political demagogues, rabble-rousers, who incense the ordinary folk against their oppressors with revolutionary rhetoric but would not want to suffer in defense of truth. Their inaction is the butt of the satirical attack. Hemlock could pass not between their lips but down throats of others. In other words, they are not true leaders but frauds and fake revolutionaries who create a make-believe world in which they appear as super heroes.

“Pen for Hire” continues the exploration of the theme of treacherous manipulation of masses of people and truth in the service of the power elite. The tribe of writers is composed of both genuine and fake members. Similarly, writing is bifurcated into benevolent and malevolent types. The use-abuse dichotomy that characterizes culture also defines the universe of imaginative writing. Some writers use their works to raise the political consciousness of the hoi polloi towards liberating them from all forms of exploitation, while others use theirs in praise of the powers that be in order to be on the make and perpetuate the status quo:

The pen may beat a path to ploughshares
Pen beat ploughshares into swords
In words from ploughshare and the sword.
And pen enshrine, and pen unmask the lies
Of vain mythologies, pen enthrone
The mouldy claims of Power, urge
Contested spaces as divinely given. (5)

Some writers spread contagion in their works and thereby cause division, hatred, homophobia, and endless strife, while others use theirs to build bridges across all cultural, ethnic, gender, linguistic, political, racial, and religious divides. The only division that is partially acceptable to the latter group is between moral good and evil. Whatever promotes creativity, culture and peace, whatever expands freedom and aids scientific and technological advancement, and whatever enhances unity and the quality of life is good. On the contrary, whatever negates culture, banishes knowledge, denies freedom and happiness, robs people of their rights to life, education and work, or to associate with other human beings, move freely, speak in a forthright manner on any issue, or hold a contrary or unpopular opinion is bad. A higher morality is Friedrich Nietzsche’s that transcends the division into good and evil (1967).

Scriptural texts that were considered sacred in the dim past are deconstructed and portrayed in the postmodern world as pure human inventions without any divine origin that surpasses what creative writers regard as inspiration. That is to say just as some pens construct empty mythologies, others adopt a historical and scientific perspective and unmask the lies so erected. Joseph Atwill reveals sources of the Synoptic Gospels in *Caesar’s Messiah: The Roman Conspiracy to Invent Jesus* (2011) over two thousand years after Christians and some followers of other faiths have held them as incontrovertible truth and as the word of God. Atwill exposes the Romans’ devious strategy to use Christianity to pacify the Jews. His pen demonstrates beyond reasonable doubt that religion serves the ruling class as an instrument for making the masses compliant and easily governable. Jesus teaches people to love their enemies and turn the other cheek perpetually. Soyinka deconstructs Marx’s idea of religion as an opiate: “Religion is not so much the opium of the people as it is the Homeopathy of the human condition” (2012: 124).

Hired writers who pour paint on atrocities of government and make them appear humane have their sensitive feelers blunted for love of money. Reduced to zombies, they no longer smell “the stench and guilt of power” (2002: 6). It is such writers who justify fascism and blame it on the divine order: “But God decreed the end shall multiply the means” (2002: 6). They neither believe in change nor the human capacity to ameliorate the appalling condition of the poor and transform the order of things for the benefit of all members of society.

“Hours Lost, Hours Stolen” laments losses (human lives, animals, plants, mineral resources, time, and opportunities for development) suffered by underdeveloped countries on account of bad governance and overbearing attitude of centers of power in the world. It focuses on culture of waste that alienates workers of the world from their labor and depletes resources of the Earth. Wasters break bonds that bind members of the human community and connect people to earth that supplies the material for culture. The destroyers are imaged as hollow and devoid of thought of sustainable development, conservation, and re-greening of the earth. They do not let up, and are never remorseful for their horrendous deeds that ruin Nature. The threnody reaches a climactic point:

But now, they kill us slowly, from shrine to township.
They kill us slowly on farmstead, in ivory towers
And factories. They kill our children in their cribs. (8)

There is no hope that the future will be any different from the present, for their “mangy whelps / Will follow soon, and learn the sterile strut” (8). The reign of fear, slaughter and tyranny is all pervasive and leaves no relief and the dead land is covered with corpses, while those who are still alive are so filled with dread that they cannot dare come out to protest the usurpation of their collective will, or else they will be mowed down by agents of destruction: “A pall of stench descends upon the land, a stillness / Of the fear of millions crouched behind their doors” (8).

An aberration of the highest order, military rule is portrayed as utterly corrupt, predatory, and treacherous. The line “They kill us slowly with force-feeding – a diet of force” (9) conjures up the specter of military rule, which is roundly excoriated. However, the poem also recalls the history of European colonial brigandage, decimation of African populations, the Trans-Saharan and Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade, and White racism. The line “Our space is sucked into the void of their existence” (9) could be an allusion to amalgamation of the Northern Protectorate and the Southern Protectorate by Lord Frederick Lugard to form one colony in 1914 that is now called Nigeria as well as the incorporation of Africa into the world capitalist system. The poem works on the national and the international level.

In the last stanza, Soyinka is at his best as an excellent ironist who laughs at the ludicrous ways of humanity:

*Go now, school in the wiles of the thief, appropriate
The apothecary of poisoners. Learn fawning,
Master the backward bow and crawl, but – preach charity
That feeds the hand it'll bite – serve obsequiousness
As their last supper and their obsequies. (9; his emphasis)*

The stanza punches holes in the idea of civilizing savages which was used by Europeans to justify their balkanization and colonization of African people and the argument advanced by the Nigerian armed forces that they seized power in order to protect peace and forestall the breakdown of law and order. Far from altruism, the main motive of European imperialists and colonialists is revealed as economic exploitation of human and material resources of Africa, and military intervention in Nigerian politics has proven to be for self-aggrandizement. Having learnt all the bad rules of the game of governance from their wily colonial masters, African nationalists after attainment of political independence put them into practice, and add their own ingenious ploys, so that the continent is perpetually raped, and victims are ever busy with the work of mourning and never experience relief from pain. For illustration, political power is perceived by Maitama Sule, a former Nigerian ambassador to the United Nations, as the exclusive preserve of a section of his country. He declares:

God in his infinite wisdom has provided different peoples with different talents. The Igbo . . . have been provided the gift of entrepreneurship. The Yoruba make first-class administrators and educationists. . . . The North is however singularly endowed with the gift of leadership. (qtd. in Soyinka, 2012: 43)

His racial stereotyping that justifies exclusion of others from governance sheds light on the virulence of ethnic politics in Nigeria.

Of Exits, the second section of *Samarkand*, records deaths of compatriots who were murdered in cold blood by General Sani Abacha's goons because they dared to raise a voice against his dictatorship and asked questions that bordered on the necessity for democratic governance and respect for fundamental human rights in Nigeria.

They include: Kudirat, the wife of M.K.O. Abiola whose political mandate was stolen by the military under the despotic rule of General Ibrahim Babangida and who not only lost his mandate to the arbitrary cancellation of the results of the June 12, 1993 presidential election – the fairest so far in the polity – but also his life while still in government detention; Alfred Rewane, an octogenarian businessman; Kenule Saro-Wiwa; and eight other Ogoni environmental activists who drew attention of the world to the agony of their people brought on by industrial exploration and exploitation of crude by transnational companies operating in their community, which violated brazenly international best practices with impunity and were protected from sanction by government.

Soyinka indicts the international community for their conspiratorial silence over the death of Kudirat Abiola who was courageous enough to seek the release of her husband from detention. He traces the silence to protection of economic interests of the international community, the challenge of satisfying the more pressing demand for crude to solve its energy problem: “oil / Must flow, though hearts atrophy” (19). Kudirat’s death is compared to Princess Diana’s that was made a global phenomenon by the paparazzi. Although Kudirat, unlike Diana, had no royal pedigree and was not the toast of the world media, she nevertheless died a political martyr and thus was classified along with female heroines who suffered, died, or are still persecuted for pursuing worthy causes such as defense of democracy and truth and freedom from oppression.

“Exit Left, Monster, Victim in Pursuit” has a subtitle “Death of a Tyrant,” which is an unambiguous allusion to the death of General Sani Abacha. Poetic justice is the service rendered the randy tyrant who dies of eating a poisoned fruit in the lyric, the moral of which is the transient nature of power. Abacha is portrayed in the piece as a mean dictator who attacks the most vulnerable class of people – women, the old and faithful servitors who fall out of favor. In the last stanza of the poem, the political history of Nigeria is compared in its darkest days to that of the Borgias, a great Spanish-Italian family that was notorious for its criminality, cruelty and treachery in the late fourteenth century through the early sixteenth century. A man killing his own brother was a common phenomenon among the Borgias.

“Where the News Came to Me of the Death of a Tyrant” foregrounds the problem of racial and religious division that besmirches the reputation of the Holy Land of Jerusalem. The Jews and the Palestinians are “bound / At navel, yet strangers sworn to sword” (23). It is a land in which, according to the poet, “piety preys and wounds” (23). Peace, symbolized by olives, of which there is abundance in the region, has been elusive because of contestation over ownership of land. The conspiracy of commerce, politics, and religion makes it difficult to resolve the conflict. The poet laments: “Hope is split on the axe of history, zeal and politics” (24). Yet the two races in combat claim Abraham as their grand patriarch, which further renders their politico-religious war utterly ludicrous. Oneness of humanity is metaphorically represented as the “one road” that “leads to Jerusalem, only one” (24).

“Calling Joseph Brodsky for Ken Saro-Wiwa” examines the fate of writers under brutal dictatorships such as were witnessed in Nigeria under General Sani Abacha and in the former Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR) under Joseph Stalin. Writers who refuse to circumscribe their imagination and to write according to rules and regulations rolled out by a totalitarian regime have only one choice, that of suffering either at home or in exile. Joseph Brodsky fled the USSR and sought refuge from socialist terror in the capitalist West only to live the life of a fugitive. Kenule Saro-Wiwa did not have the fortune of escaping the noose of the tyrant’s hangman. Before he had the opportunity to escape, however, Brodsky was condemned to hard labor in cold Siberia where his hands trained to hold a pen and scribble non-verifiable truth “shoveled shit, / Carved and stitched cadavers” (26), as announced in his obituary that inspired Soyinka to compose the elegy. The Soviet State judged him a “social parasite” (26), which the poet considers a minor allegation in comparison with the charge of treason that, because he refused to write his fictions according to the dictates of the Communist Party, he was against socialist revolution and therefore an enemy of the people.

Highly satirical, the poem likens the Bolsheviks to the Houyhnhnms, all-wise horses, in Jonathan Swift’s *Gulliver’s Travels*:

Even in the land of all-wise Houyhnhnms.
Horses shit in social realism, dialectical
To the last neighing Nay, the whinnying
Aye-aye Comrade sir. (26)

It is an effective lampoon against the literary ideology of socialist realism. As used in the poem, the scatological image “shit” is both affirmative and pejorative. To shit is human, an act that is emblematic of the paradox of human nature, as manifested in ingestion and excretion, and calls into question perfectibility of beauty. Soyinka considers any economic and political system that infringes on basic human rights as oppressive and would want its operators to recognize and accept their limitations as human beings and not pretend to dubious perfection. He subscribes to a “social vision”, but “not a literary ideology,” essentially because the latter asphyxiates the creative process, consecrates works written from a favored ideological perspective and excommunicates those executed from a contrary ideological viewpoint. As he puts it pointedly in “Ideology and the Social Vision (1): The Religious Factor,” “the practical effects” of a literary ideology “on the creative process lead to predictability, imaginative constraint and thematic excisions” (1978: 61, 65).

A contrast is drawn between Moscow, which is cold, and Ogoni, the tropical heat of which is intensified by gas flaring that pollutes the environment and evidences sheer prodigality of managers of Nigeria’s resources. Although the two geopolitical spaces are thousands of kilometers apart, the former ruled by civilians and the latter by a military dictatorship, they are nevertheless unified by a cruel denial of freedom.

Both Brodsky and Saro-Wiwa experience a gross travesty of justice and, like Joseph in the Bible, suffer enormously for their dreams. Equated obliquely with prophets, poets are warned to be wary of crazy and stupid wielders of political power and admonished to eschew the literal and concentrate instead on the symbolic.

Having been hounded into exile and pursued day and night by hired killers and having been kept incommunicado in solitary confinement in prison for almost two years, Soyinka has gained insight into the sad experience of the two writers and hazards of imaginative writing generally. “But we had become immune to dread,” he avers (29). It is instructive that in solitary confinement he felt “fear of madness” (Adekoya 2006: 245), for which reason he destroyed his jottings in *The Man Died* (Soyinka 1975: 273-74). His confession: “I think of yours because I own that closer death / Too close to dirge, too bitter to lament” (2002: 29) is certainly an allusion to the attempt on his life by Abacha’s hit men. In a trulythrenodic tone Soyinka beseeches Joseph Brodsky, who has gone before Ken Saro-Wiwa, to receive the latter scribe, calm his restless soul in the land of the dead, and show him the way: “Take his hand, / Lead him, and be led by him” (29), an affirmation of brotherhood of the pen and chirality of textuality.

The Sign of the Zealot, the fourth section of the book, is composed of just two poems, namely, “Twelve Canticles for the Zealot” and the eponymous “Samarkand and Other Markets I Have Known.” An agnostic to the core, Soyinka appears in all verses of the former poem as mordantly critical of all revealed religions preached by overzealous believers. He identifies “Political Islam and its hegemonic aggression” as “the latest among the destabilising factors that continue to confront the African continent” (2012: 86). However, he does not doubt the social and spiritual value of religion as an institution that offers adherents an anchor and a sense of balance in a chaotic and impenetrably dark world. He confesses:

I acknowledge that the world would be a much poorer place without the phenomenon of religion, and I do not refer merely to their architectural and artistic legacies but even to the inspirational value of their scriptures, the lyricism in which they are frequently couched, and the intellectual challenges of their exegeses. (1991: 18)

Nevertheless, he is highly skeptical that religious tenets, particularly those that relate to creation and afterlife, could be taken as literal truth. Two twinned things that he finds most abhorrent in Christianity are “the attenuation of terrestrialism” and “cosmic Manichaeism” (1978: 24, 4). They explain why “a new god [Jesus Christ] walks on water without getting his feet wet” (1978: 4). In Christianity, the corporeal is contemned and crucified in order to fully realize the spiritual. In contrast, the *Ifá* (Yoruba divination) corpus “exhibits a sense of the impish or humorous, sometimes scatological, recognizing that deflation of afflatus is a necessary part of social and spiritual balance and general well-being” (Soyinka 2012: 91-92).

His skepticism of the veracity of claims of all revealed religions is registered right in the first verse of “Twelve Canticles for the Zealot...”

He wakes from a prolonged delirium, swears
He has seen the face of God.
God help all those whose fever never raged
Or has subsided. (43)

A literalist might be taken in by the poet’s tongue-in-cheek prayer, but the bard is only subtly suggesting that religion is a form of neurosis that is paradoxically psychotherapeutic. He reminds religious extremists in the poem of pagan roots of their faiths that they erroneously believe place them above animists and nature worshippers. Take away pagan concepts and practices, such as anointing with oil, liturgical chants, baptism, possession dance, fasting, healing with the power of the word (incantation) or prayer, invocation, initiation ceremonies and rites of passage (birth, naming, puberty, marriage, and burial), processional hymns, human and animal sacrifice, rites of purification, sacred symbols and totems, the Trinity, and casting out demons, especially throwing stones at Satan, and all revealed religions would be enfeebled and rendered hollow. It is thus ignorance that leads religious fundamentalists to condemn doubters of their faiths to eternal damnation. Their unchanging coda is: “Come with me or - / Go to – *hell!*” (Soyinka 2002: 43; his emphasis). Soyinka insists that it is a little bit more complicated than that simple binary division. In any case, as W. B. Yeats reveals in *A Vision*, “Each age unwinds the thread another age had wound . . . all things dying each other’s life, living each other’s death” (1966: 270-71). Absolutism and separatism, as practiced by religious purists, are the source of the plague tagged culture war that is currently ravaging the world.

Soyinka does not blame children who are recruited by adult jihadists and made to swallow the fiction of scriptures as literal truth and serve as suicide bombers in the war but their teachers who abuse their unfledged minds and cause their mental disorientation. Sheik Gumi did not promote peace but hatred and religious warfare when he uttered his memorable words “christianity is nothing” (qtd. in Soyinka, 1991: 5). The directive contained in a document taken from the headquarters of one Sheik Musa Hilal: “Change the demography of Darfur. Empty it of all African tribes” gave vent to the crime of mass murder committed in that region of the Sudan (qtd. in Soyinka, 2010: 177). One scriptural text, the poet argues, cannot substitute “A hundred thousand / Vacuities of mind” (43). In other words, children who graduate from koranic schools where instruction takes the mode of indoctrination have not received a proper education but have only been bamboozled and fed on fluff that they subsequently recite as mantras *ad nauseam*. Soyinka considers taking advantage of innocents as another terrible crime against humanity.

It is simply unfathomable that a religion that preaches compassion, love, mercy, peace, and oneness of humanity should cause egregious bloodletting, inveterate hatred, and endless strife in the world. The world of revealed religions is so chaotic that members of the same fold sometimes turn their guns inward, as demonstrated in the sixth canticle that alludes to the murder of Yitzhak Rabin Prime Minister of Israel and Anwar El Sadat President of Egypt by their own people for working with “enemies” of their countries in order to achieve peaceful coexistence between Israelis and Palestinians.

In the seventh canticle, Soyinka engages the subject of contempt with which the so-called possessors of the triumvirate Abrahamic religions – Judaism, Christianity and Islam – treat African Traditional Religion, the values of which in his estimation enhance community, harmony, and unity: “Ogun came riding through the streets / Of Jerusalem. The Chosen barred his way / His bright metallic lore was profanation” (44-45). The poet meets the umbrage and rejection bravely with the iconoclastic line: “A god is nowhere born, yet everywhere” (45), which is a variant of the Yoruba epigram: “*Bi o s’enia, imale o si* (if humanity were not, the gods would not be)” (Soyinka 1978: 10). Followers of Rama Krishna in Uttar Pradesh, India are indicted for not practicing the principle of religious tolerance, which led to their reducing a mosque to rubble. Similarly, the Talibans demolished the two Bamiyan Buddha statues carved on a rock in Afghanistan in 2001. Religious fundamentalists reverence symbols and totems of their own religion but execrate and destroy those of others, which are erroneously perceived as fetishes.

What the poet does in the ninth canticle is to generate mantras from quotations drawn from texts of six major world religions to underscore the significance of religious pluralism, which imposes obligations of moderation, restraint, and tolerance on all believers. His simple precept is: let believers seek peace in their daily intercourse with fellow citizens, their neighbors and co-workers. In other words, they should practice what they preach, and stop being blind hypocrites who in their actions substitute “*Boom* for *oom* and – sword for Word – “(46; his emphasis). He wrote:

Violence appears to be the one constant in the histories of all the major religions of the world . . . despite the lip-service which their tenets pay to the need for tolerance, peace and understanding. . . . It is time that these religions took stock of themselves, re-examined their social tendencies in the light of a constantly evolving world and resolve to transcend their violent histories (1991: 14).

The tenth canticle begins with an *Ifà* song, the English translation of which is provided in a footnote:

All earth is the home of deities
All earth is the home of deities
It was mortals who brought the gods to the world
All earth is home of deities. (48)

Soyinka is affirmative that deities, from the highest to the lowest, including their scriptures, are all human inventions. Therefore, he tells all religious adherents: “Invent your god and forge his will / The home of piety is the soul” (46).

Contrary to Islam that imprisons a woman in purdah, compels her to cover every part of her body, save the eyes, and prohibits her from working outside the home, traditional Yoruba religion is gender sensitive and permits women to participate fully in the economic life of society. Soyinka asserts:

I come from Ogun’s land where
Women plant and teach and cure
Mould and build and cultivate,
Bestride the earth on sturdy thighs
Wipe sweat off open faces.
I come from Ogun’s land where
Women spurn the veil, and men
And earth rejoice! (47)

The substitution of “earth” in the last line of the quotation implies that Yoruba *òrìsà* worship is a natural religion in which gender complementarities are crucial.

In the eleventh canticle, the poet censures the practice of stoning a Muslim woman to death as punishment for adultery or fornication in Islamic states where sharia justice system is in operation, while the man with whom she committed the sin invariably goes scot-free because it takes the evidence of four eyewitnesses to convict him, whereas pregnancy is undeniable proof of a married or single woman’s guilt. The clause “This murder / Is the rock of sin” (47) indicts administrators of sharia who condemn a Muslim woman charged with adultery to death by stoning and portrays them as sanctimonious sinners. Certainly, women are denied the right of equality before the law and get the short shrift in Islamic states. They are not even allowed to drive cars in Mecca. The world waits for Islam to reform its unjust laws just as the Mosaic Law that had sanctioned death by stoning was amended in Christianity.

Pejorative words such as “*Pagan, heathen, infidel, unbeliever, kafiri, etc.*” (47) used by Christians and Muslims to describe and denigrate adherents of African Traditional Religion, in Soyinka’s opinion, issue from abysmal ignorance and should be censored. The Muslim cleric who passed the *fatwa* (a death sentence) on Taslim Nazreem, because the female activist had the audacity to demand that God set females free by granting them the same rights enjoyed by their male counterparts, is excoriated. As regards denigration of women, all religions in varying degrees are culpable. In the twelfth canticle, the poet hits the iron on the nail and, like Taslim Nazreem, calls for gender equality of rights under the law.

As the poet facetiously puts it, the thirteenth canticle is “*for the merely superstitious*” (48, his emphasis) in view of the fact that the number thirteen is perceived by those who believe in magic as a sign of evil omen. However, the canticle is really malediction that exploits fear of the odd number thirteen which, for Soyinka, is just an ordinary number, like all others. Friday, for magic buffs, is a day of evil and trouble. Hence, the poet conjoins Friday and thirteen and sends them as curses to infest dreams and intensify fears of those who dread them. The grandest conceit of the poem, a wish, is contained in the last sentence:

Would I could boast
A triple six, a Grand Slam by Satan’s reckoning –
I would have long submerged the world
In cosmic laughter! (48).

Another thingamabob dreaded by Christians, the number 666, “the mark of the beast” (*Bible* (KJV), Rev. 19: 20), which refers to Satan, who is believed to deceive all the nations and peoples of the world, is satirically portrayed as a hat trick in a tennis contest. Religion is reduced by the iconoclastic poet to a cosmic joke.

Yet, Soyinka is not an enemy of religion but a cautious lyricist of its social values who writes glowingly of church, mosque, and temple architecture and is fond of adapting Christian rituals and motifs. What he finds odious in religion is extremists’ proclivities for mindless destruction of cultural monuments and human lives in the name of God. The truth of any religion must be balanced against the force of logic, reason and science. He recommends Omar Khayyam’s immortal paradoxical aphorism “To be free from belief and unbelief is my religion” (Soyinka 1991: 11) as a shotgun to fanatics and skeptics alike. Drawing attention to the resilience and vibrancy of African Traditional Religions, he calls for an end to denigration of the African spiritual heritage.

The eponymous poem “Samarkand and Other Markets I Have Known” pushes a strong argument that the world, as conceived of by the Yoruba, is a vast market with many departments, out of which the present essay elects to examine just two: the political and the religious. The poem advocates a robust multiculturalism and religious pluralism. In “Chimes of faith assail the market place” (49), the first line of the third stanza, the verb “assail” suggests that religion is violence. Although the Crusades, the Roman Catholic Inquisition, and the Jihad were all instruments of death and suppression of truth, they pale into insignificance beside the religious violence that is witnessed in the contemporary world. Soyinka asseverates: “religion as a killing device, guarantor of impunity and homicidal inspiration, is a recent phenomenon” (2012: 120). It is, he adds, “an assiduous handmaiden to the territorial pursuit of power and the enthronement of fascism” (121-22). Yet, as virulent as the force of faith is, Soyinka contends: “our situation could be much worse without religion” (2012: 122), for it exercises a restraining and stabilizing influence on human behavior. Therefore, he pleads not for proscription of any religion, however bad the behavior of its followers may be, but freedom of worship: “Let all contend” (2002: 50), that is, search for converts without recourse to violence. There is enough space and time for each of them to win souls “till the infant cry of Truth / Resound in the market of the heart” (2002: 50). It could be argued that religious violence is on the rise as a result of increasing erosion of faith by scientific truth and that perpetrators only hide under the banner of holiness to prosecute their war for political and socioeconomic justice. The creation of the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria is apodictic proof.

Moreover, religion has become big business in the world and priests and priestesses are not averse to profit-making: “Trade and holy places, saints and salesmen / Have ever lived as soul companions, caterers / For the needs of flesh and spirit –“(50). Soyinka recommends *òrìsà* worship to the world because it is “the very embodiment of Tolerance,” the “spirit of accommodation” (2012: 130, 131), and uses *Ifà* to illustrate the point:

*Go to the orisa and be wise. Ifa
Shuns the excluding tongue, unveils
Uncharted routes to knowledge, truth
And godhead* (2002: 51, his emphasis)

It is instructive in this respect that the *Ifà* corpus is constantly updated with new knowledge derived from new discoveries made in the course of human interaction with nature and with one another.

Yoruba deities survive in the New World, Soyinka argues, because their system has always been one of adaptation, “complementarities, of affinities, and expansion – but of the non-aggressive kind” (2012: 144). “The essence of Orisa,” he avers, “is the antithesis of tyranny, bigotry and dictatorship” (2012: 139). Unlike Jesus Christ who claims to be the Truth and the only way to salvation, *Ifà* recognizes the fact that every force, be it material or spiritual, has limits and limitations.

Not even Orunmila (the father of oracular lore) is self-sufficient, which explains why he consults and requests other *Ifà* priests to divine for him. A great deal of religious crises in the world could be reduced to manageable proportions if only the so-called purveyors of immutable truth would eat humble pie, accept their limitations and recognize strengths of other cultures, other faiths, and other perspectives. What lures youth to jihad, he discloses, is the dream of a life of unbroken bliss in paradise in company of ravishing virgins, and declares:

Who kills for love of god kills love, kills god,
Who kills in name of god leaves god
Without a name. (57)

Political extremism is what the poet finds objectionable in Samarkand, the city of Uzbek, in the former USSR, because it breeds repression of the opposition and tyrannizes. Excessive regimentation of life robs people of freedom, strangulates the market, and promotes speculation. Socialist precepts negate Soviet practices and the contradiction produces shocks that jolt people out of their complacency into an acute consciousness of their parlous economic condition that provokes the poet to ask questions to which “responses by the text” are provided (2002: 54).

Whereas the markets in Samarkand are lifeless and silent as though they were graveyards peopled by ghosts, not just because of the economic downturn, but also on account of excessive regimentation, those in Africa brim with enthusiastic traders and riotous fare and reek of “the smell of life” (53). Thoroughly disappointed, the poet flees Samarkand and its dreary markets and takes a train to Moscow, a flight that is likened to jumping from a “frying-pan to furnace” (54). Soyinka laments the absence of a free creative spirit in Samarkand and the laborious but futile attempt by bureaucrats and political demagogues to pull the wool over the eyes of the ordinary folk in the city and deceive the outside world that all is well with their system.

In *Elegies*, the fifth and final section of the collection, Soyinka focuses his search light on three representative African countries, Nigeria, Kenya and Tanzania, the narratives of which are illustrative of the tragic history of the entire continent, and probes their appalling realities. He argues in “The Children of this Land” that Nigerian youths are amoral, disrespectful to constituted authority, unpatriotic, alienated from their country, and dream of escaping into foreign “havens” in Europe, North America, Asia, Australia, and other centers of power in the world because they have been dispossessed through mismanagement of resources of their land by government. Corruption melded with prodigality, the bane of governance in Nigeria, leaves its youth destitute, unemployed, and hopeless. Hence, they turn to crimes.

Written in commemoration of Chinua Achebe’s seventieth birthday anniversary, “Elegy for a Nation” posts the obituary of Nigeria. Literalists who insist that Nigeria is not dead but only gravely sick, the poet argues, perceive not the country itself but “maggots / Probing still her monstrous womb” (68).

The poem presents a brief history of the country from pre-colonial times to the season of anomie under Abacha's dictatorship. Considering Nigeria's "lost idylls" (71), politicians' hash tag "Renaissance" sounds ludicrous and risible to the poet. He derides it: "Gang-raped, the continent / Turns pregnant with the word – it's sworn, we shall be / Born again, though we die in the attempt" (71).

Allusion is made in the poem to Amina Lawal, a Nigerian woman sentenced to death by stoning for adultery and for conceiving a child out of wedlock by an Islamic Sharia court in Funtua on March 22, 2002. The father of the child was not prosecuted for lack of evidence, even though deoxyribonucleic acid (DNA) tests were not conducted. Another allusion is to Muslim fundamentalists who razed the Moremi shrine at Offa in Nigeria. Attacks on African cultural practices and institutions by born-again Christians and Muslims enrage the poet and, added to the predatory nature of the African political leadership, drive him to a gloomy conclusion: "Our caryatids / Are weary cycles of endless debts," an oblique commentary on the endemic syndrome of dependence on other people's leftovers (77).

"Vain Ransom," the last poem in the collection, a memorial to "the dead and maimed of Kenya and Tanzania" (78), reads like a post-mortem. It dredges up milestones in the historical evolution of the two East African countries, which is similar in many respects to the lachrymal historical account of Nigeria rendered in "Elegy for a Nation." As if the horrendous hecatomb of their ancestors was not enough, the poem commences, Kenyans and Tanzanians make additional lustration and sacrifice their future, which is already stillborn anyway, on the altar of "Blind and blinding rivalries" and ancient quarrels remembered (2002:79). Other African countries that enact the rage of blood and ethnic cleansing include: "- Liberia, Congo, Somalia, Sierra Leone, Rwanda and all – "(79). Soyinka calls it "recurrent pacts / Of self-immolation" (2002: 79) that provide markets for industrially advanced countries to sell their war weapons and profit from the unspeakable misery of Africa. Acts of genocide are attributed to failure of corrupt and despotic leadership, which impoverishes and ruins Africa. Hypocrisy of pious killers is exposed and shredded and the sanctity of human life is exalted.

To conclude, in *Samarkand*, Soyinka rejects all doctrines of absolutism and separatism and celebrates "the unity, indeed, the indivisibility of the human community" (2008: 32). He emphasizes the imperishable value of balance, moderation and tolerance in both political and religious domains and chooses freedom from tyranny of despots and zealots who seek to possess the soul of humanity.

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