

# Ambivalent Relation with the Divine in Wole Soyinka's *The Road*

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## Abstract

*This essay proposes a long overdue reading of Wole Soyinka's play, The Road. For his eccentric demeanor, Professor, the central figure of The Road, has greatly preoccupied scholars, but the attention accorded to the character has also subjected him to a significant amount of negative criticism. For scholars, Professor is an agile opportunist who manipulates the gods and his companions for self-aggrandizing objectives. In this paper, I nuance this reading and demonstrate that Professor is, in fact, not the only character in The Road who uses the divine for personal motives and that characters such as Samson and Say Tokyo also have an ambivalent relationship with the spirit world. Professor, one of the central characters of Soyinka's The Road, has not only occupied a central place in scholastic discussions of the play but has also been the subject of many criticisms. The judgments that critics cast on the character usually start with a portrayal of the hero as a megalomaniac and abusive persona and end with a description of his spiritual quest as no more than a deceptive strategy of control conducted under the guise of religion. However, the main criticism usually is that Professor is a dishonest and demented figure whose personal concerns and goals involve a lifestyle that constantly aborts his discovery of—and perhaps “nirvanic” fusion with—the Word that he incessantly seeks. In this article, I put forth that Professor does not stand alone in his ambivalent relation with the divine. I argue that the elements behind Professor's defective spirituality also affect the lives of other characters, precisely Samson and Say Tokyo. As a result, the sacrilegious manifests itself not only through the main protagonist, but also through Samson and Say Tokyo. The basis for this claim will become more pronounced as I successively engage with the criticisms held against Professor, his oddities, the characters' acceptance of the divine, and the modern concepts leading them to continually fail the gods and goddesses.*

## Soyinka

*The Road* is authored by Wole Soyinka, one of the most outspoken contemporary and internationally recognized African writers and intellectuals. Soyinka's activist stance regarding social, political, and cultural issues concerning human beings, especially Nigerians, is well-known. A testament to this is the twenty-month detention period he underwent, from 1967 to 1969, for his involvement with the Biafran war. His attempt to reconcile the Biafra secessionists and the federal Nigerian government was qualified as an act of treason by Yakubu Gowon, then head of the federal union. During the Abacha years (1993-1998), Soyinka was obliged to escape Nigeria via the Nadeco Route on a motorcycle following a death sentence pronounced against him in absentia by General Abacha.<sup>1</sup> The price he has paid for venturing into the political arena has not deterred him from voicing his belief in a just and dignified society. Soyinka's involvement with his compatriots' social life has certainly contributed to giving him an international acclaim, but it seems that his fame is mostly due to his exceptional artistic talents.

In addition to being an energetic public figure, Soyinka is a very prolific writer. The man cannot sit still. His characterization by Femi Osofisan as a tiger on stage seems to be an appropriate metaphor to describe this writer. Soyinka appears to enjoy multitasking and trying himself at different things. As a writer, Soyinka has published in almost all literary genres.<sup>2</sup> Despite this artistic versatility, one can contend that the novel has not been a particular area of strength or interest for him. He excels as a dramaturge and has written more than twenty plays, and all of them have received considerable attention from scholars. Just as his reputation as a public figure extends beyond the Nigerian borders, so does his fame as a writer. The award of the Nobel Prize in literature in 1986 attests to this. Although Soyinka writes and concerns himself with other issues, one must nonetheless admit that he has devoted a significant part of his career to articulating and giving voice to the Yoruba gods and deities,<sup>3</sup> and *The Road* is one of his plays where this preoccupation with the Yoruba, or perhaps African, spiritualities is prominently reflected.

## The Plot

Published in 1965, *The Road* is tragedy and comedy evocative of the Shakespearean style. It dramatizes the lives of a gang of drivers and truck-park layabouts. As underprivileged and uneducated people (only one of them, Professor, is educated) in a city undergoing rapid modernization, they battle with unemployment and seek different ways of making both ends meet. The characters' subject matter is not only economic and material; they also take a special interest in supernatural matters. They want to understand the concept of the Word to which Professor makes reference and which he compulsively seeks. Some of them think it necessary to make dog-sacrifice rituals for Ogun, the Yoruba god of fire and creativity. They attempt to grasp the mystery that surrounds the character of Murano, regarded by Professor as the living embodiment of the world existing between the realms of the dead and the living. The play ends with the fatal stabbing of Professor by Say Tokyo, one of the lorry drivers, due to the former's encroachment on the power of Ogun that they all revere.

## Professor, the Main Protagonist

As stated earlier, literary criticism on *The Road* has devoted much attention to the character Professor, but has also been very critical of him. Scholars' condemnation of this character hardly goes unnoticed. In "Waiting for the Word," Probyn describes Professor in a derisive manner, missing what I believe is a sincere desire to find and perhaps possess the Word. Professor's quest does not amount to mere "messianic schizophrenic" agitations, yet he is further portrayed as a delusional personality who searches for the truth in ridiculous things such as "football pools coupons" and in "secret signposts."<sup>4</sup> Professor's method of spiritual search seems absurd and deviant to Probyn. One must now ponder the question: are there set, fixed, and "normal" ways of attaining spiritual enlightenment? This absolute and outright condemnation by Probyn in regards to Professor is also found in Ogunba's comments on the character in *The Movement of Transition*.<sup>5</sup>

For Ogunba, the man is nothing more than a deranged person who should be avoided as he leads those around him into degradation. While Professor's spiritual aspiration is ridiculed by

Probyn, Ogunba questions his character. According to Ogunba, not much attention should be accorded to Professor, and this undermines and invalidates what seems to be his most crucial existential preoccupation of the moment: his spiritual quest. The discrediting of the character is taken into the material domain. In "Exorcising Faustus from Africa," Phillips ponders and questions Professor's commitment to the community. For this scholar, Professor is concerned about nothing more than taking advantage of his community, specifically those who gravitate around him.<sup>6</sup>

In Phillips's judgment, Professor is the perfect illustration of an African who has fallen prey to what he calls "Westernized goals," which, in his judgment, include unethical business relationships, mental abstractions, lack of reverence for the gods, and narcissistic behaviors and objectives. This is an interesting comment because it assumes that all of these so-called Western traits are social trends or foreign habits that cannot be found in the context within which the play takes place, meaning Nigeria or Africa. The author seems so eager to ridicule his object of study that he seems to fall victim to a dualistic method of intellectual inquiry. Phillips places Africans and Westerners on either side of the line and attributes a set of characteristics to each. For him, Westerners are capitalist, un-godly, and rational, which, I assume, defines Africans as non-capitalist, godly, and irrational. Phillips's comment recalls Senghor's memorable statement that black people were emotional and white people rational. There is a failure to practice detachment in Phillips' analysis of Professor that clearly contrasts with Jeyifo's unemotional evaluation of the character.<sup>7</sup>

Though Jeyifo draws attention to the rather unusual nature of the Professor and of his mental peculiarities, he nonetheless does not get caught up in an emotional criticism of Professor. His analysis of the character implies a certain detachment that we do not see in Probyn's, Ogunba's, or Phillips's comments. This is not an attempt to undermine the latter's perspective on the character. Besides, their analyses of Professor are actually condoned by the fact that he is, as some of them say, quite an eccentric character.

Professor does stand out for several reasons. He enters the stage in a quite pompous and grandiose manner, dressed in a Victorian style.<sup>8</sup> While the outfit does not always say much about the individual's beliefs and identity, it does in this very instance. By dressing in a Western way, something that in the context of Africa,

particularly in settings similar to the one in which this drama is set, Professor takes on manners usually attributed to the educated classes in Africa, and one can say that at least, in this case, he is not misleading his peers. He seems to display more authenticity as far as the use of the title of professor is concerned.

According to Ogunba, there is a social practice within contemporary Nigeria that legitimates the “usurping” of abilities and skills usually associated with “big, high-sounding titles” such as Professor for purposes of self-aggrandizement.<sup>9</sup> While Professor’s use of the title Professor can be legitimated (because he did go to school and was a religious teacher) and differentiated from the way it could be used by one of the horse or bicycle riders that Ogunba alludes to, the reader can still trace the personality cult that the usurpation of the title is purported to foster in Professor’s case. Professor creates a cult around himself with one of his main preoccupations: the Word, defined by Gerald Moore as “the all-creating Word which expresses the indestructible energy of God.”<sup>10</sup> This religious, mental, and transcendental interest allows Professor to elevate himself above the rest of the characters with philosophical and religious abstractions that they do not seem to understand. None of them has been schooled nor is an “intellectual match” to him, which permits him to launch into the most aerial and disconnected speeches. Professor uses language in *The Road* in a very fragmented and incoherent manner.

Professor captivates the reader’s attention more than any other character and holds a significant place in the play. His words and statements resonate so much that they end up shaping the structure of the play and, thereby, its obscurity. The reader’s attention is very often solicited by an abstract and mythic language.<sup>11</sup> Professor’s statement reveals one of several moments in the text when language become very theoretical and cloudy because it deviates from a clear sequence of dialogue between the characters. In the scene in question, Professor’s response abruptly demarcates from the dialogue that he has been having with Samson and throws the reader off into a domain peculiar to Professor. He talks about having a bed among the dead, when the discussion is not about the dead, but about Kotonu. Professor’s answer is a reaction to Samson’s refusal to let Kotonu leave with Professor. A similar scenario is presented to the reader at the time of Professor’s death. His prophetic language can certainly be differentiated from

the everyday and common vocabulary used by the other characters, especially the pidgin used by Samson.

This brief presentation of Professor's role and position in this text suggests that he is a highly visible protagonist, which may raise suspicions that his public display of interest in the divine—the Word—is that of the Pharisee, as Probyn, Ogunba and Phillips have suggested in their analysis of the characters. This line of inquiry is encouraged by the fact that Professor embezzles the church funds confided to him. It can also be put forth that the reasons behind his decision to become a church leader are monetary. And it is probably this interpretation of the financial scandal involving him that may have led the congregation to dismiss him.

What undermines this vision of the character as a fake spiritual aspirant is the fact that he accepted to be trained in and to spread the teachings of Christianity, and it is usually after a long period of genuine dedication and exposure to Christian theology that the individual is trusted with the functions and responsibilities associated with the practice of priesthood. He does seem to have a genuine interest in discovering and unifying himself with the Word, but like most human beings, he is also entangled in the realities of the concrete material world. Because of this dilemma and mental distortion, Professor is involved in a life pattern that simultaneously kills and resurrects the god or goddess. In this respect, the points made by the critics mentioned earlier cannot be totally discarded. As was well put by Eldred Jones, Professor has “conflicting elements” in his character.<sup>12</sup> He has his demons, but if this metaphysical approach to *The Road* is applied to the other characters, it becomes evident that Professor is not the only one who resurrects the god or goddess and kills him or her later, and this results from the fact that he is not the only one who accepts the idea of a transcendental being in the play.

### **The Characters and the Unseen World**

Almost all the characters in *The Road* adhere to a worldview extending beyond the material into the spiritual world. Their submission to a supernatural world is expressed through collective and individual beliefs and practices. They take part in the Drivers' Annual Festival performed for the god of the road, Ogun. This traditional ceremony, taking place in a semi-urban context,

witnesses the appearance of the Egungun mask, a symbol of the deceased ancestor.<sup>13</sup> The fusion with the ancestral realm takes place when the mask bearer enters into a trance. It is believed that the masquerader, once possessed, becomes a pure receptacle for the ancestors who use it to transgress the boundaries separating them from their loved ones, their family. The Egungun festival provokes a removal of the veil separating the characters and their gods and their ancestors. In other words, through this religious celebration, the reader is invited to witness and mentally participate in one the most noted dimension of religious rituals, that is, the rapprochement and fusion of the spiritual and physical world.<sup>14</sup>

Our characters' acceptance of the existence of a world beyond the visible and material dimension is further demonstrated by their interest in Murano. We are told by Soyinka that Murano is in suspension between the world of the living and that of the dead.<sup>15</sup> Murano is caught in this liminal space after Kotonu, a passenger on board his lorry, runs him over during the Annual Driver's festival. When Murano's car accident happens, he is masquerading as the god Ogun. This car accident, which would be regarded as a tragedy, becomes a highly valuable event for Professor, who sees in the injured masquerader, Murano, an entity with powers that can procure the individual an entry into the hidden realm of the spirits. So, Murano becomes an object of tremendous importance for Professor, who captures and holds him hostage with the secret desire of gaining access into the invisible world. And, as amply verified by the characters' daily evening gathering at Professor's, it is not only Professor who develops a serious interest in Murano subsequent to his accident. The other characters are also preoccupied with Murano's whereabouts and mostly with the reasons for his daily journey into the forest. It is also their opinion that Murano has acquired powers that allow him to gain a rare knowledge from the forest. The other characters gather at Professor's house to drink palm wine while awaiting Murano's return.

Their receptivity is suggested not only by their interests in Professor's definition of Murano but also by their implicit acceptance of the forest as a domain with roads leading to a higher knowledge that Professor seeks to obtain throughout the play. The characters' expectation of a revelation from Murano indicates an unavowed conception of the forest as a space charged with secret knowledge. This conception of the forest as a mysterious domain,

as one replete with hidden and authentic wisdom, is prevalent within certain shamanistic circles. This is validated by the value given to the sacred woods among the Diola people of southern Senegal. One of the most or perhaps the most important rites of passage, life initiation, is believed by the Diola people to take place within the precincts of “les bois sacrés” (the sacred woods). The centrality accorded to forests may also be due to the quietness and secrecy that are sometimes sought by mystics. This can also be attributed to the fact the forest is perceived in certain societies, such as the Mande societies of Sierra Leone, as the abode of deep arcane knowledge.<sup>16</sup> The characters’ consumption of alcohol prior to Murano’s arrival can also be regarded as a mental preparation, a soothing of the logical brain, for a reception of the information that they expect from Murano. The use of hallucinogenic substances, such as alcoholic drinks and certain medicinal herbs, for a fusion with the supernatural is encouraged in some cultures.<sup>17</sup>

### **Animist and Anthropomorphic Beliefs and Practices**

The characters’ involvement with the supernatural is also reflected on an individual level. One can see their acceptance of the principle of anthropomorphism, meaning that they adhere to the idea that objects have souls. Say Tokyo’s attributes life to material objects, timbers in this particular case. What is assumed to be dead, bereft of life in many contexts, is infused with a consequential power. Timbers, in Say Tokyo’s eyes, have the power to affect unwanted metamorphoses in humans’ lives when mishandled; they can bring misfortunes to the individual who treats them with neglect and disdain. Say Tokyo’s anthropomorphic approach to his timbers expresses a personal conception of nature as a living power. The vision of nature as a dead and powerless aspect of creation is nullified here. It can be stated and verified that the characters’ acceptance of the supernatural is not limited to the collective only. It is also assimilated at a personal level. The characters are propelled into action by the personal relation they have with the invisible realm. This is further corroborated by Samson’s anguish and insistence that Kotonu kill a dog for the god Ogun.<sup>18</sup>

It seems that a dog bears less value than a piece of wood. The timber is not harvested, cut and sold easily, but it seems that a dog can be run over without damage to its vital essence. The life

conferred on the timber is not given to the dog. Aside from this, it can also be noticed that the recognition of the invisible is carried to a higher level in this scene. Earlier, the spirits were to be reckoned with when cutting a timber, now, they are to be given food. A sacrifice has to be performed for them. Kotonu and all the other drivers are supposed to kill a dog for the god Ogun. Let me emphasize that that Samson asks Kotonu to submit to the dog-killing ritual twice. Despite the fact that his desire to have the ritual performed is to protect himself, and that it emanates from a fear of the god, we can still see that his reaction is an outcome of his adherence to the reality that the god Ogun embodies. What is meant here is that he is set in motion by his belief in Ogun. His acceptance of the existence of Ogun comes with obligations that he attempts to honor. His eagerness to fulfill the ritual demonstrates that just like Samson, he is also prompted into action by a belief in an invisible entity.

This repertory of the different rituals in which the characters participate presents enough evidence of the rather ritualistic nature of their existence. Their lives are pervaded by rituals, which is a confirmation of their openness to the supernatural. As mentioned earlier, rituals bring into existence a liminal space where the visible and the invisible can meet; they fathom domains where the human enters into contact with the non-human, the spirit. In *La Route*, Christiane Fiou pou defines the characters' worldview as animist.<sup>19</sup> Moreover, the pagan *Weltanschauung* would seem to suggest that the characters do not have a concept of a Prime Creator, a Universal God. Evangelical movements' estrangement of a concept of God from pagan spiritualities has helped them persuade believers to reject their pagan faiths and practices and embrace monotheist religions. For most practitioners of monotheist religions (Islam, Christianity, etc.), pagan religions do not incorporate the notion of one God, but that of multiple gods. Judging from this view of animism then, one would assume that the characters do not accept the concept of one Universal Creator that monotheist religions adopt. However, we find our characters making reference to and invoking the same God.<sup>20</sup> Professor's reference to an All Seeing and Ruling Entity, the monotheist God claimed by monotheist religions, could be attributed to his church experience. Professor used to preach at the church, and

it is for blasphemy and “funds issues” that he was banished from his parish.

Professor’s acceptance and combination of the traditional pagan spirituality and the Christian God is commonly called religious syncretism. This widespread religious practice is something traceable in the fusion of African and Brazilian religious and cultural ideologies in Candomblé.<sup>21</sup> Religious syncretism is, in many cases, regarded as the amalgamation of the monotheist principle of Christianity or Islam with the pagan polytheist philosophy. This definition of the concept of religious syncretism may lead to a misconstrued understanding of traditional African theologies because it may fail to bring to the fore the fact that these pagan religious systems are also “monotheist” though they may look like polytheist philosophies. This is misleading if we consider that all or most animist religions incorporate the notion of one God in their worldview. Most of them arrange their pantheon around a central God, perceived within the pagan pantheons as the Primal Force behind all creations.<sup>22</sup> Professor’s terms to name God may be different, but the concept is not alien to the traditional spirituality that he falls back on after being evicted from his sacerdotal position. The characters’ disposition to the spirituality that these entities evoke is further demonstrated by Professor’s mystical and spiritual lexicon and the character’s receptivity to it.

Professor uses words that pertain to the religious domain, especially to the ascetic, logical and, rational aspect of religion. It might seem strange to associate reason and logic with religion and spirituality because of the simple fact that both of the phenomena are usually left to the world of emotion and faith. Isn’t the good believer usually the individual who does not interrogate his creed and religion, and simply believe? Examined from this angle, it is quite difficult to associate religion with the mind. Yet, it can also be contended that spiritual devotion does also involve a certain level of commitment to a code of behavior, specifically one that guarantees the spiritual development and elevation of the disciple. What this implies is that, in the process of achieving the spiritual outcomes that one desires, we make choices and adjustments. Evidently, this cannot be achieved without use of the intellect. The sacrifice made as one progresses toward higher spirituality and consciousness is already reflected in the ascetic vocabulary present in a statement by Professor.<sup>23</sup> It does not take much, for one

familiar with the discourse of the mystics (e.g., Jesus, Buddha, and Mohammed) to notice that Professor's words resonate with the narrative of withdrawal and isolation that defines the lives of such spiritual figures. His oblivious attitude toward earthly things or his attempt to remain unaffected by what we usually consider earthly concerns and realities echoes the discourse of renunciation mentioned earlier. Detachment from terrestrial matters is regarded as an important religious practice in Christianity, Buddhism, Hinduism, and many other spiritual traditions.<sup>24</sup>

Looking at the characters' participation in the Drivers' Annual Festival, their interest in Murano, their anthropomorphic beliefs, and Professor's religious discourse, it becomes evident now that they reckon with forces beyond them. This also demonstrates that they believe in the existence of forces beyond concrete, material, and visible reality. Despite their desire to honor the spiritual demands resulting from their incorporation of the invisible into their lives, the characters fail the spirits. Except for Murano and Kotonu, who constitute interesting exceptions, none of them is able to enter the spirit realm as Akara Ogun does in Daniel Fagunwa's *The Forest of a Thousand Daemons*, for instance.

### **Symbols of Modernity**

The level of involvement with the supernatural is more pronounced in *The Forest of a Thousand Daemons* than in *The Road*, but this is mostly explained by the fact that the plot of Fagunwa's text is set in the forest, and most of the characters are not human: they are spirits and deities, which makes it easy for the main protagonist, Akara Ogun, to tap into the supernatural realm. The characters in *The Road* are submerged with different concerns, cares, and worries—they have taken upon themselves too many issues that make their access to the realm of the spirits difficult, if not impossible. Their failure is, however, totally understandable for the mere reason that their environment and time differ from the one prevailing in *The Forest of a Thousand Daemons*. The socio-cultural context within which *The Road* takes place is more modern and urban than the rather traditional and rural setting of *The Forest of a Thousand Daemons*.

The symbols testifying to the relatively modern setting of the play are numerous. As early as the first page the reader's

attention is solicited by the author's careful description of Professor's "AKSIDENT STORE."<sup>25</sup> The mammy wagon and the letters couched on the front of Professor's store are early indications of the blend of modernity and tradition, newness and obsolescence in *The Road*. The auto-based vocabulary (e.g., uniformed private driver, lorry, bus, motor-park, passenger-truck, Volkswagen, limousine, Pontiac, road-signs, driving license, transport-business) and the law enforcement lexicon (e.g., prison, police) indicate that the story of *The Road* unfolds in a modern or quasi-modern setting. Reflecting on these cultural and environmental aspects of the work, one can see that the characters have embarked on a process of modernization when compared to the ones in *The Forest of a Thousand Daemons*.

The setting of *The Road* could be described as that of *The Forest of a Thousand Daemons* in a state of transformation, as is the case when processes of modernization come into effect in a locality. In *La Route*, Christiane Fioupou indicates that the characters' lives are fundamentally marked by the idea of movement.<sup>26</sup> There is a motion toward the transcendental and spiritual. The characters, as mentioned earlier, get involved in a mental journey as they seek to either perform rituals to satisfy Ogun or to discover the Word. However, they are also involved in a more physical journey. Say Tokyo transports timbers, and Kotonu is a lorry driver. And those who are not drivers are in some way or another directly involved with physical movement, as they all gather at Professor's store to share their road adventures, such as accidents. The types of mobility that the characters are involved with differ in some ways from the genre of mobility that happens in rural regions or localities that have not yet been in contact with the forces of modernity. We are indeed in the context of a culture subjected to the accelerated pace of modernity.

This implies that our personas in *The Road* are adjusting to modern concepts (e.g., mechanical mobility, the judicial system, a monetary based economy, etc.). They are not only caught in a more real universe, but Professor, Samson, and the others are also drawn into a semi-traditional society subjected to the progressivist forces of modernity. Their involvement in the process of modernity is further demonstrated by their accommodation to a system that equates money with happiness and success. Each of the characters is attempting to earn a profit. Professor holds a

second-hand and old auto-parts store (AKSIDENT STORE) and is mostly desirous of earning money. The relationships prevailing among them do not make them lose sight of the necessity of earning a living. The correlation of labor/money and happiness/worth is traceable in a discussion that takes place between Salubi and Samson.<sup>27</sup>

For Samson the individual's merit is measured according to the employment offered to him/her. This also implies that he equates the individual's well-being and satisfaction with money. His imagination cannot fathom or foresee another source of joy for the individual. This vision is also shared by most of the other characters, including Professor. Professor is not only concerned with discovering the mysteries of the spirit realm; he also seeks to create a business with Samson.<sup>28</sup> The only problem is that he wants to appropriate half of the business and leave the remaining half to the group. This is obviously an egotistic desire, which also points to his flaws. The financial needs or aspirations that lead Professor to attempt to cheat Samson are also reflected in Say Tokyo's timber trade. He does not hesitate to cut and put on the market the timber or wood that is inhabited by the spirits.<sup>29</sup> Say Tokyo also is strongly invested in financial gain. The characters' financial concerns, at times, seem to take priority over their friendship. Professor attempts to cheat Samson, and Samson prefers to have Kotonu resume his function of lorry driver instead of taking into account the latter's desire to retire from this job. Except Murano and Kotonu, all the characters are caught up in the "realities" of the modern era that prompt the individual to seek to secure financial assets in one way or another.

### **Ambiguous Relation with the Divine**

These materialist preoccupations lead them to make statements and take actions that undermine the transcendental being that they proclaim to follow. There are several examples that corroborate their betrayal of these spiritual entities. By way of illustration, we can mention Say Tokyo's murder of Professor. He kills Professor for what he sees as a de-sacralization of the cult of Ogun by the owner of "AKSIDENT STORE," but this display of devotion toward the god of the road is undermined by his destruction and commercialization of the timbers, which he sees as the dwellings

of the spirits. One can posit that Ogun is a major deity (compared to the spirits inhabiting the timbers he sells) and then justify Say Tokyo's attitude toward the timbers by the supremacy of Ogun over the spirits populating the timbers. Nonetheless, he is violating the tranquility of the spirits, which is equal to undermining the whole belief system that the characters live by, a system that he attempts to defend and preserve by putting an end to Professor's life. The contradictions in Say Tokyo's approach to the cosmology by which he and his comrades abide is again reflected in his devaluation of the timbers after presenting the latter as objects with substantial and damaging power.<sup>30</sup> Say Tokyo's defective loyalty toward the spirit world is not an isolated moment when the characters go against the religious ideas or entities that they believe in and worship.

Professor, for instance, declares to everyone that he is searching for the Word. He continuously and repeatedly talks about self-sacrifice, yet he puts this worldview aside and acknowledges the importance of earthly matters. Having initially ruled out the fact that Kotonu does not need to work to earn a living, Professor acknowledges later that it is important for Kotonu to find a job.<sup>31</sup> This contradiction is especially striking as the discussion is about the same matter: Kotonu has stopped driving, and his friend Samson calls upon Professor to persuade Kotonu to return to the road. Furthermore, as previously shown, Professor gives two different perspectives on the matter. A reason for this change in opinion can be found in his strategies of conquest of the other characters and his individualistic objectives. As soon as he learns that Samson wants to set up a business, he invites him to establish commerce with him on uneven terms, seeking to own the major share. Professor's changing views reveal that his opinions are not guided by a desire to give a helpful and good piece of advice to Kotonu, but to further secure his control over Kotonu and the rest of the group. In the first instance, he valorizes his ascetic and religious narrative, but in the second moment, he declares that it is important for Kotonu to work. Essentially, his answers are not permanent because they are situational. They are not in Kotonu's interest but in Professor's. Professor and Say Tokyo are not the only ones who contradict themselves and make the gods irrelevant. Samson, an unemployed driver, also displays the same inconsistencies found in Professor and Say Tokyo.

Any reader of *The Road* is very likely to remember the strong and emphatic request that Samson makes toward Kotonu to have the latter kill a dog for Ogun, just as every other “normal” driver does according to him. The zeal shown for Ogun here is undermined a few pages later by none other than Samson. Following a statement by Say Tokyo in which the latter claims that timbers are inhabited by spirits and that whoever deals with them runs the risk of being tormented by the spirits if he/she does not do the job well, Samson interjects with an outright discredit of the deities.<sup>32</sup> There is a dissonance between Samson’s desire to conform to the daily ritual of dog-killing performed for Ogun and his undermining of the spirits that take possession of the timber. A critic might point to the importance attributed to Ogun to explain his reaction. Such an argument will hardly hold, considering that it is the same abstraction validating the belief in Ogun that also supports the belief in the spirits that Say Tokyo mentions. Ogun is a spirit, an invisible entity, who becomes alive when mentioned by the characters, and so are the spirits that Say Tokyo talks about. With this in view, it becomes clear now that by undermining Say Tokyo’s statement that the timbers are living and powerful beings, Samson also questions, at the same time, his own belief system. He contradicts himself just as Professor and Say Tokyo do.

The characters who claim ownership, mastery, and knowledge of the invisible world fail the spirits. Samson, Professor, and Say Tokyo confer power to the invisible entities on one hand and remove that power on the other. It is those who lay no claim of ownership or mastery over the spirit realm who manifest a higher disposition toward embracing the life of renunciation, sacrifice and devotion usually recommended to the spiritual aspirant. Murano and Kotonu, the characters who do not find satisfaction in money and power, reach a higher level of communion with the spirits. Neither Murano nor Kotonu manifest the material and financial preoccupations that characterize Professor, Samson, and Say Tokyo. Their struggle seems to be that of the mystics maneuvering with the last remnants of their attachment to earthly matters.

Kotonu, for instance, is criticized and bullied by Samson for his decision to put an end to his driving career, but he refuses to change his mind. The more Samson attempts to dissuade him from giving up driving, the more Kotonu detaches himself from

the material and financial concerns that matter to Samson. After attempting, in vain, via multiple schemes to convince Kotonu to return to the road, Samson resorts to Professor's support. Samson also reminds Kotonu of the reputation he enjoys as a driver.<sup>33</sup> In some cases, the popularity factor that Samson uses to convince Kotonu can lead the individual to leave the path of renunciation and re-embrace the life of the "ordinary" human being. However, this does not seem to work in this particular case. Kotonu maintains his position, which leads Samson to call him an unworthy character.<sup>34</sup>

Kotonu expresses more interest in being with Murano than with Samson. Considering the fact that Murano does not have any money and nothing to offer but an entry to the supernatural domain, it can be posited that Kotonu finds satisfaction in the spirit realm now. This provides a clarification as to why he remains oblivious to the financial loss that his resignation brings about. Samson is concerned about this and desperately devises several strategies to reason with Kotonu. Kotonu's detachment from the material preoccupations that plague the lives of the other characters (i.e., Professor, Samson, and Say T.) is something that one experiences with Murano as well. Murano's daily stay in the bush far from the center of operations can be interpreted as a sign of withdrawal. As stated by Professor, Murano has a leg in each world, implying that he is naturally cohabiting between the invisible and visible worlds and that he is also above the material and financial needs that lie in the way of Professor's, Samson's, and Say Tokyo's spiritual elevation and contentment.

## **Conclusion**

The central argument of this article has been that the recurrent perception of Professor, the main figure of *The Road*, as the only one responsible for the spiritual decadence displayed in the play is rather problematic. As proven in this analysis, the fragile and inconsistent spiritual inclinations found in Professor are also detected in other characters specifically Samson and Say Tokyo. Like Professor, they manifest modes of thinking and perform actions that lead them to frequently turn their back on the divine even if they like to identify themselves as great servants of the gods and goddesses.

After presenting criticisms against Professor, considering Professor's idiosyncratic personality and the persona's religiosity, the analysis proves that the characters are bathed in a modern context that renders consistence in spiritual practice difficult to achieve. Accordingly, the characters, more particularly Samson and Say Tokyo, commit the same acts of spiritual forgery for which critics have chastised Professor.

### Notes

- <sup>1</sup> Wale Adebani, *Trials and Triumphs: The Story of the News* (Lagos: West African Book Publishers, 2008), 52.
- <sup>2</sup> Derek Wright, *Wole Soyinka Revisited* (New York: Maxwell Macmillan International, 1993), IX.
- <sup>3</sup> Femi Osofisan, "Tiger on Stage: Wole Soyinka and Nigerian Theatre," in *Theatre in Africa*, ed. Oyin Ogunba et al (Ibadan: Ibadan University Press, 1978), 153.
- <sup>4</sup> Clive T. Probyn, "Waiting for the Word: Samuel Beckett and Wole Soyinka," *Ariel: A Journal of International English Literature* 12 (1981): 37.
- <sup>5</sup> Oyin Ogunba, *The Movement in Transition* (Ibadan: Ibadan University Press, 1975), 4.
- <sup>6</sup> J. K. Philips, "Exorcising Faustus from Africa: Wole Soyinka's 'The Road,'" *Comparative Literature Studies* 27 (1990): 149.
- <sup>7</sup> Biodun Jeyifo, *Wole Soyinka: Politics, Poetics, and Postcolonialism* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 31.
- <sup>8</sup> Wole Soyinka, *The Road*, (London: Oxford University Press, 1997), 8.
- <sup>9</sup> Ogunba, *The Movement in Transition*, 152.
- <sup>10</sup> Gerald Moore, *Wole Soyinka* (New York: African Publishing Corporation, 1971), 57.
- <sup>11</sup> Soyinka, *The Road*, 11.
- <sup>12</sup> Eldred Jones, *The Writing of Wole Soyinka* (London: Heinemann, 1983), 92.
- <sup>13</sup> Gilbert Tarka Fai, "Soyinka and Yoruba Sculpture: Masks of Deification and Symbolism," *Rupkatha: Journal on Interdisciplinary Studies in Humanities* 2 (2010): 44-45.
- <sup>14</sup> Margaret Thompson Drewal, *Yoruba Ritual: Performers, Play, Agency* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1992), 90.
- <sup>15</sup> Soyinka, *The Road*, vi.
- <sup>16</sup> C. M. Jerdrej, "Structural Aspects of a West African Secret Society," *Journal of Anthropological Research* 32 (1976): 239.
- <sup>17</sup> Richard Evans Schultes and Albert Hofman. *Plants of the Gods: Origins of Hallucinogenic Use* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1979), 5.

- <sup>18</sup> Soyinka, *The Road*, 19.
- <sup>19</sup> Christine Fioupou, *La route : réalité et expression dans l'oeuvre de Wole Soyinka* (Atlanta : Rodopi, 1994), 71.
- <sup>20</sup> Soyinka, *The Road*, 67.
- <sup>21</sup> Sandra T. Barnes, *Africa's Ogun: Old World and New*. 2nd ed. (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1997), 90.
- <sup>22</sup> John Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophy*. 2nd ed. (London: Heinemann, 1990), 29.
- <sup>23</sup> Soyinka, *The Road*, 10
- <sup>24</sup> James Kellenberger, *Dying to Self and Detachment* (Surrey: Ashgate Publishing Company, 2012), 47.
- <sup>25</sup> . Soyinka, *The Road*, 10.
- <sup>26</sup> Fioupou, *La route*, 35.
- <sup>27</sup> Soyinka, *The Road*, 4.
- <sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, 62-63.
- <sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, 26.
- <sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, 26.
- <sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, 47.
- <sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, 26.
- <sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, 26.
- <sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, 38.

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