



**GHOST, DIRGE AND THE FOREST DANCE IN SOYINKA'S METAPHYSICAL  
PLAY *A DANCE OF THE FORESTS***

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**ABSTRACT:** *A Dance of the Forests is a metaphysical play that integrates Yoruba ghost-summoning ritual, dirge, and forest dance into its textual creation. This integration transcends the opposition between the living and the dead, facilitating a reenactment of history and a critique of historical injustice. Although considered an obscure play, Soyinka's A Dance of the Forests is rooted in Nigerian reality, conveying the author's realistic concern of re-occurrence of historical injustice and the fate of Nigeria in post-independent days.*

**KEYWORDS:** Soyinka; *A Dance of the Forests*; Ghost; Dirge; Dance; Metaphysical play.



## INTRODUCTION

As the first African Nobel laureate in Literature, Wole Soyinka (1934-) has earned numerous accolades, including the “Prometheus of Africa”, “Shakespeare of Africa”, and “Father of Modern English Drama in Africa”.

Among Soyinka’s many seminal works, *A Dance of the Forests* (1960) occupies a prominent position. It is Soyinka’s first metaphysical play. The word “metaphysical” has three layers of meanings: related to metaphysics; based on abstract reasoning; transcending physics matter or the laws of nature. Metaphysical plays are recognized by

(a) their preoccupation with the theme of death, (b) their abstract and intellectual content, (c) their use of juxtapositional and elliptical techniques, and (d) Soyinka’s deliberate insertion of their action within a worldview that is specifically African. This is a worldview of ritual in which order and harmony are mandated upon the imperatives of cosmic law (Maduakor, 1986: viii).

These elements collectively contribute to the deeply metaphysical and thought-provoking theatrical experience of *A Dance of the Forests*. As the title suggests, all characters (humans, spirits, and the deceased) and actions in the play revolve around a central event: a national festival celebrating the nation’s glorious past and promising future. However, this festive atmosphere is disrupted by the appearance of two ghosts from three centuries prior. These spectral figures cast a shadow of doubt upon the jubilant human celebrations, exposing the veritable nature concealed beneath the veneer of victory. They reveal that the present is not a novel entity, but rather a mere replication of the past, and that the perceived victory exists solely within the realm of imagination.

In *A Dance of the Forests*, Soyinka incorporates elements of Yoruba tradition into the text and presents a nonlinear, fragmented narrative that challenges the conventional distinction between history and reality. This approach metaphorically alludes to the turbulent and chaotic period that followed Nigeria’s independence.

## THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The study’s theoretical framework draws upon Yoruba cosmology and the sense of ghost by Jeffrey Weinstock (2014). The Yoruba cosmology emphasizes the connection within the living, the unborn and ancestors, underscoring how Yoruba people derive a sense of inviting the dead (ancestors) or the God to participate in secular affairs. This cosmology situates ghosts, dirge and dance within the broader context of cultural anthropology, which helps the public to understand the role of traditional culture in contemporary Nigerian society. Specifically, ghosts emerge not merely as ancestors, but serve as a warning force and a means of articulating historical injustices. The dirge and dance serve as entertainment while also acting as a potent medium for the expression of personal sentiments and historical experiences.

Weinstock reevaluates the traditional connotation of ghosts. He contends that ghosts are not confined solely to the souls of the deceased, but also refer to the essence of language, the totality of humanity, the persistence of memory, and the act of authorship itself (2014). Central to this conceptual framework is the acknowledgment that ghost is not a simplistic term; rather,



it is deeply entwined with the intricate tapestry of social and historical contexts.

In the context of studying ghost, dirge and forest dance in Soyinka's *A Dance of the Forests*, Yoruba cosmology and Jeffrey Weinstock's sense of ghost enable scholars to explore how these above mentioned cultural elements function as expressions of historical memory or historical injustice within the specific context of post-independence Nigerian society.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

This play has been deemed a challenging work by numerous scholars. Derek Wright, for instance, describes it as "the most uncentered of works" (Wright, 1993: 81), for which there is no discernible main character or plot line. Mathew Wilson even directly defines this play as a work of confusion and obscurity (Wilson, 2000: 3). In contrast to Wright and Wilson's perspective, this paper posits the play as a seminal piece. This play represents a pivotal shift in Soyinka's dramatic style, marking a departure from traditional realism and embracing a fusion of realistic and mystical elements. More important, it serves as a metaphorical allusion to the chaotic years that followed Nigeria's independence.

Academic circles have interpreted the text from the perspectives of post-colonialism and the symbiotic relationship of binary opposites, pointing out that *A Dance of the Forests* was written to celebrate Nigeria's independence. However, Soyinka's intention transcends a mere celebration of national sovereignty. In an interview, Soyinka emphasized that "Independence should be a sobering look at history, not just euphoria, and so on" (Gibbs, 2001: 83). In light of this, this study focuses on traditional Yoruba cultural elements like ghost, dirge and dance within the metaphysical context of the play, to uncover the implicit political viewpoints espoused by Soyinka.

### Ghost: The Presence of Ancestors' Unsettled Souls

Julian Wolfreys, a contemporary British historian, believes that "the narratives of history must necessarily include ghosts...history is a series of accounts of the dead, but it is also a series of accounts by the dead; the voices we overhear in our dealings with history are spectral without exception, they spectralize the possibility of knowledge" (Wolfreys, 2002: 262). Ghosts, also known as the spirits of the deceased, exist in a state between presence and absence. Jeffrey Weinstock (2014) has conducted an extensive examination of the concept of "ghosts", arguing that ghosts not only include the souls of the deceased but also encompass language, humanity, memory, and authorship. The unifying characteristic of ghosts across diverse cultural and historical narratives is their inherent incompleteness, instability, and a peculiar form of absence. It is worth noting that this absence is not a state of total absence but rather a latent presence.

In Nigeria, stories about ghosts are acknowledged as ghost lore. According to Rem Umeasiegbu (2006),

Ghost lore is a neglected subtype of literature – oral or written – in Nigeria. Just as many people here do not want to talk about death and dying, many others do not wish to have anything, real or imagined, to do with the dead. The result is that stories about dead people or stories involving dead characters are unpopular. (5)

Ghost lore, whether in oral or written form, has not received the same level of attention or



recognition as other genres of Nigerian literature. Despite this neglect, ghost lore remains an important aspect of Nigerian storytelling, providing a unique perspective on national historical experiences. These stories often explore themes of life, death, the afterlife, and the impact of the past on the present. By exploring the presence of ghosts or deceased characters, ghost lore encourages a deeper understanding of the human condition.

Ghosts in Soyinka's drama embody deceased ancestors or historical memories. They are not merely intangible apparitions that cannot be touched or experienced; rather, they are endowed with the ability to communicate and interact with the living. In this sense, the ghost in Soyinka's drama is not a silent and passive figure, but a dynamic and vocal presence that speaks to the complexities of human experience and the enduring legacy of the past.

In *A Dance of the Forests* published in 1960, Soyinka employs a traditional ancestor-summoning ritual to bring a couple of deceased spirits from 300 years ago into the human realm, granting them temporary agency within the human realm to engage in secular activities. At the beginning of the play, a male and female ghost emerge from beneath the earth's surface. The male ghost is adorned in tattered warrior attire, and the female ghost is featured with a discernible pregnancy, both of whom establish a somber and tragic tone that permeates the entire dramatic work.

An empty clearing in the forest. Suddenly the soil appears to be breaking and the head of the Dead Woman pushes its way up. Some distance from her, another head begins to appear, that of a man. They both come up slowly (Soyinka, 1961: 3).

Throughout the play, the actions of the characters and dramatic conflicts revolve around a human secular event—the national gathering of tribes. This is not only a national celebration of victory but also an important ritual in Yoruba tradition. In Yoruba tradition, deceased individuals are still considered an integral part of the earthly family, entitled to continue participating in the affairs of their descendants. Moreover, the souls of the departed have the potential to ascend to the celestial realm, where they attain the status of ancestors (Falola & Akinyemi, 2016). These ancestors serve a dual function, offering spiritual solace and guidance in matters of life.

These two invited ghosts in *A Dance of the Forests* are not conventional ancestral spirits that offer spiritual guardianship to the living. That's to say, they give form to the suppressed and muted voices of history, acting as powerful emblems of past injustices. As the narrative unfolds, it becomes clear that the ghosts' prior existences are inextricably linked to the four living descendants through a history marked by brutality and bloodshed, thus serving as a stark and evocative testament to the lingering traumas of history and their persistent influence on future generations.

In Yoruba cultural belief, a profound distinction is drawn between the treatment of natural deaths and unnatural deaths. Unnatural deaths, which encompass a spectrum of fates including premature demise, drowning, suicide by hanging, fatal car accidents, and succumbing to dreaded diseases such as leprosy, are frequently attributed to the influence of malevolent forces. As a result, the deceased who meet such ends are generally denied the customary funerary rites and commendations afforded to those who expire from natural causes. It is held that those who die in an unnatural way are precluded from gaining admittance to the celestial abode or the realm of ancestral repose. This belief is underpinned by the conviction that the spirits of the



unnaturally deceased may bear a stain or curse, and their commingling with the souls of the naturally expired could potentially disrupt the equilibrium of the cosmic order.

The male and female ghosts in *A Dance of the Forests* are portrayed as victims of unnatural deaths. Here are some possible reasons for this interpretation. Foremost among these is naming. The male ghost is named Mulieru, which translates to “he who is enslaved”. This name directly connects him to the transatlantic slave trade, a historical period marked by extreme violence, exploitation, and unnatural deaths. The female ghost, though not explicitly named in the context provided, is likely similarly situated as a victim of circumstances that led to her untimely demise. The secondary aspect to highlight is the manner of appearance. In the text, the ghosts emerge from underground rather than heaven, which underscores their status as beings who are not at peace and have not found their rightful place in the afterlife. This imagery of coming from underground can be interpreted as a symbol of being buried or trapped, both physically and emotionally, by their past traumas and the injustice they suffered. The last element to discuss is the speech. The repetitive speech they uttered is “Will you take my case?” and “Will you not take my case?”, which underscores ghosts’ desperate plea for justice and recognition. The male and female ghosts harbor a profound hope that the living will embrace justice and rectify the injustices they endured. Tragically, as esteemed guests summoned from 300 years past, these two ghosts endure mockery and disdain from the living. In the eyes of the living ones, the invited guests (ghosts) are not their great forebears but unsettled souls. Thus, they steadfastly refuse to confront their shameful history and the lingering wounds of the past, even boldly declaring “These people who have come to claim our hospitality do not wish us well. We were sent the wrong people. We asked for statesmen and we were sent executioners” (Soyinka, 1961: 30). For the living ones,

...we must bring home the descendants of our great forebears. Find them. Find the scattered sons of our proud ancestors. The builders of empires. The descendants of our great nobility. Find them. Bring them here. If they are half-way across the world, trace them. If they are in hell, ransom them. Let them symbolize all that is noble in our nation. Let them be our historical link for the season of rejoicing. Warriors. Sages. Conquerors. Builders. Philosophers. Mystics (32).

It is evident that the two invited ghosts are not merely synonyms for ancestors but symbols of historical ailments left behind and projections of repressed historical traumas. Moreover, though they may qualify as ancestors, they are not honored as illustrious forebears.

The presence of the deceased or unsettled souls here serves as a deconstructive force, calling into question the stark demarcation between the living and the dead, subverting the traditional linear conception of time, and entwining the threads of history with the fabric of contemporary reality. Furthermore, these revenants encapsulate a mode of historical signification. As historian Frank Ankersmit points out that the meaning of a historical representation “is not found, but made in and by the text” (Zammito, 2005: 155). The ancestor-summoning ritual in *A Dance of the Forests* brings the deceased into existence, allowing them to narrate history events to the living. Ghosts’ voices, though not authoritative, carry a profound significance that serve as admonitions and prophecies, warning individuals of history mistakes and future misfortunes.



### **Type ‘D’ Dirge: Unveiling the Historical Injustice Endured by Ghosts**

The dirge, dating back to ancient Greece, fulfills a dual function of ritualistic and aesthetic dimensions. Its primary intent is to lament the departed, yet it also integrates elements of encomium, consolatory contemplation, exclamation, and entreaty. African dirges, composed of poetry and song, are typically performed at funerals for dead ancestors. Ancestors play a crucial role across Africa, particularly in Yoruba tradition. The belief in ancestors is considered to yield benefits in both the spiritual and material realms. It is believed that there are four primary categories of dirges: Type ‘A’, Type ‘B’, Type ‘C’, Type ‘D’. Type ‘A’ is characterized by its stereotyped and dignified nature. These dirges are typically concise, featuring a unified subject that runs throughout the composition. They adhere to a strict formal structure, which imparts a sense of solemnity and reverence. Type ‘B’ dirges, on the other hand, are composed of a sequence of short stanzas that can be arranged in various orders while still adhering to certain conventional patterns. This flexibility in organization allows for a more dynamic and versatile expression of grief, as the mourner can select and rearrange stanzas to suit their emotional needs. Type ‘C’ dirges are distinguished by their cumulative linear stanzas, which often conclude with a reflective statement or observation. This style is frequently employed in dirges for ordinary individuals, as it provides a straightforward and accessible means of expressing sorrow and remembering the deceased. Lastly, Type ‘D’ dirges, while lacking the dignity of the first two types, offer a unique opportunity for the mourner to express their individual emotions and reflections. This type of dirge provides greater scope for personalization and introspection, allowing the mourner to articulate their grief in a manner that is both deeply personal and emotionally resonant. (Falola and Akinyemi, 2016) . Each type of dirge has unique features. But, whether through the formal and structured Type ‘A’, the flexible and pattern-based Type ‘B’, the progressive and straightforward Type ‘C’, or the more personal and emotional Type ‘D’, these dirges provide a means for mourners to express their complex emotions.

The dirge in *A Dance of the Forest* is categorized as Type “D”. It is a two-verse dirge with concise language. In this play, the dirge man appears five times. The content of the chants revolves around a deceased couple from three hundred years ago, and the chanting technique primarily employs the repetition of key-words. Each chant is brought to a close with the recurring line---leave the dead some room to dance.

DIRGE-MAN: Move on eyah ! Move apart

I felt the wind breathe-no more

Keep away now. Leave the dead

Some room to dance.

If you see the banana leaf

Freshly fibrous like a woman’s breasts

If you see the banana leaf

Shred itself, thread on thread

Hang wet as the crepe of grief





Don't say it's the wind. Leave the dead

Some room to dance. (Soyinka. 1961: 39)

It should be noted that “leave the dead some room to dance” is not just a mourning for the deceased but also an inward cry of indignation of the dirge man. As previously stated, the couple of ghosts, who were invited to a gathering of human nations, endured endless disdain and neglect. Their treatment underscores humans’ reluctance to confront and acknowledge its shameful past. In many aspects, these spirits embody not only the deceased individuals but also symbolize the nation’s past, serving as a reminder of the consequences of unaddressed historical injustices.

With the aid of dirge man, Soyinka unfolds the ghosts’ past and present lives to the audience. Taking the male ghost as an illustrative example, we see that three hundred years ago, he was a warrior in the Matakharibu court dynasty. Due to the refusal to execute the king’s unjust order to go to war, he was exiled and labeled as a traitor. In the view of male ghost, King Matakharibu was fond of bloodshed, and the war he initiated was unjust, so he would not lead his soldiers into battle merely to retrieve a woman’s dowry. To a great extent, the male ghost’s refusal to fight is also Soyinka’s refusal. For Soyinka, the moral imperative in the face of war is to fight for the people, to defend their rights and protect them from harm. This belief underscores his deep commitment to justice and humanity. However, in the context of King Matakharibu, this moral imperative is absent. Three hundred years ago, the warrior was exiled for questioning the legitimacy of the war; three hundred years later, his spirit, summoned to the human world for a national gathering, is still met with disdain. In a profound sense, the plea “leave the dead some room to dance” within the dirge resonates not only as the internal lament of the dirge singer but also as Soyinka’s own vehement exclamation against this injustice.

Historiographically, the past is commonly consigned to a realm of distance, absence, and irreversibility. Not only does a spatio-temporal chasm separate the past from the present, but a linear discontinuity is also posited. This entrenched perception has shaped the interplay between history and justice, leading to a chronic deficit in historical justice. Put another way, the irretrievability of historical events has provided Yet, while the past may be obscured, its vestiges are indelible. As Bevernage (2008: 149) suggests, regions such as Africa “are not living in a serial order of time, but in a simultaneous one, in which the past and present are continuous” (qtd. in Bevernage, 2008: 149). Soyinka’s *A Dance of the Forests* resonates with this perspective. The recurrent expression “leave room for the dead to dance” in the dirge underscores the fallacy of an idealized Nigerian past and emphasizes the enduring resonance of historical influence, exhorting individuals to confront historical injustices with a sense of duty. The dirge, as a calculated literary tactic by Soyinka, serves to admonish society to recognize the historical underpinnings of the present and to engage critically with the contours of their contemporary reality.

### **“Forest Dance”: A Carnival of National Celebration Intertwined with Historical Critique**

In Nigeria cultural contexts, dance serves as a ubiquitous medium for chronicling the vast spectrum of human experiences, encompassing everything from birth and growth to agricultural cycles and pivotal historical events. The diverse forms of dance are meticulously crafted to align with a multitude of festivals, religious ceremonies, and ritual observances, including but not limited to “ritual dance, masquerade dance, ceremonial dances, social



entertainment dance, maidens' dance, vocational dance, acrobatic dance, war dance..." (Ugolo, 1994: 71). Within the realm of Nigerian oral tradition, dance functions as an external mode of self-expression, a linguistic tool for intersubjective dialogue, a form of amusement, and a tool for social critique or resistance.

"Forest Dance" depicted in *A Dance of the Forests* clearly falls within the category of ceremonial dance, embodying both social critique and protest functions. As a medium of social commentary, dance possesses the capacity to underscore the failings of individuals, particularly those holding leadership roles. Simultaneously, as an outlet for social protest, it can vividly expose the transgressions and excesses perpetrated by community members. As Falola and Akinyemi (2016) astutely noted,

Dance also serves as a critique or protest of society. As critique, dance can highlight the shortcomings of people or groups, especially leaders, in society. Thus, dance highlights issues that may be difficult to verbalize; as such, it provides the context of mutual communicative reflexivity of the art form to help correct the ills of society. Dance also can serve as a protest against behavioral indulgences by the high and mighty in society (80).

In Soyinka's portrayal, the forest dance is a gathering where gods, humans, and spirits coexist, blurring the lines between the realms of the living and the dead. Specifically, the living, in a jubilant celebration of their victory, earnestly invite their ancestors to return and participate in a grand communal gathering. To the living, these ancestors are revered almost as deities, embodying the role of protectors. Yet, reality diverges from expectation, for which these two ghosts are not protectors but rather executioners. As previously elaborated, both spirits suffered unjust deaths, classified as unnatural in Yoruba tradition and attributed to the influence of malevolent spirits. Consequently, they are ostracized by the living. This dynamic between the living and the deceased mirrors the interplay between the present and history. The living's rejection of the ghosts is a manifestation of their denial and avoidance of a troubled past. Having known about the ghosts' tragic experiences in the afterlife, forest dwellers (spirits) resolve to hold the forest dance.

This unique forest dance brings together the living, the deceased, and the divine, juxtaposing history and reality, and fostering an open dialogue that resonates with Bakhtin's concept of carnival. In the carnival, "dogma, hegemony, and authority are dispersed through ridicule and laughter" (Lachmann, Eshelman & Davis, 1988: 130). This creates an atmosphere where traditional structures and norms are temporarily suspended, allowing for a playful exploration of change and crisis. Some scholars might argue that "a real carnival is no longer possible because there are no coherent communities to stage the carnivals or to rebel against" (Schechner, 2004: 2). This may be true on a large scale. But things seem to be different in Yoruba. In Yoruba cosmology, the living world, the unborn world, and the dead world are interconnected, with death serving as a crucial link that allows for dialogue and coexistence among them. Unlike western carnival, the Yoruba cosmology offers a more integrated and spiritual approach to these same themes, emphasizing the interconnectedness of all aspects of existence. The forest dance embodies a complex interplay of parallel timelines, serving as a conduit for dialogue between historical contexts and present-day realities. It facilitates a dialogue between the realms of the living, the deceased, and the spiritual entities. This dialogue serves as a platform for the expression of voices that have been historically silenced or oppressed, allowing marginal and historical narratives to gradually rise to prominence and occupy a central position within the discourse.





Forest spirits in the forest dance accuse humans of resource exploitation and discriminatory treatment. For the national celebration, humans cut down all the trees and made a road run straight into the forest.

A slow rumble of scattered voices, and the forest creatures pass through, from the direction of the lorry, coming straight down and turning right and left. They all hold leaves to their noses, and grumble all the way. Some sniff in disgust, others spit, all stop their noses, disapproving strongly of the petrol fumes. Adenebi tries to make himself as inconspicuous as possible. Some fan their faces, and one has encased his head completely in a clay pot. They are all assortments of forest spirits, from olobiribiti, who rolls himself like a ball, to the tow-headed purubororo, whose four horns belch continuous smoke (Soyinka, 1961: 42).

Soyinka depicts the reactions of forest spirits to the disruption caused by the construction of a road and the subsequent human presence in their habitat. The forest spirits, through their scattered voices and various actions such as holding leaves to their noses, grumbling, and spitting, convey a sense of disturbance and displacement as they attempt to navigate the newly altered environment. A case in point is the tree spirit (Murete).

Murete: [grumbling] Fine time to tell me he no longer needs me. What will I find at this hour but the dregs of emptied pots? If it wasn't considered obscene I would compensate for my loss from the palm tree. Can't understand why not. Human beings drink their mother's milk. Drink the milk of mothers other than their own. Drink goat's milk. Cow's milk. Pig's blood. So just because I am Murete of the trees is no reason why I shouldn't climb the palm tree and help myself (Soyinka, 1961: 44).

Murete's dissatisfaction serves as a potent symbol of the marginalization experienced by nonhuman entities within human-dominated ecosystems. He underscores the prevalence of anthropocentric perspectives that often prioritize human interests at the expense of other beings, leading to feelings of abandonment and redundancy.

Apart from the forest spirits, the ghosts participating in the forest dance articulate their grievances, voicing the injustices they suffered in both their past and present life. Three hundred years prior, the king's authoritarianism and incompetence resulted in the absence of justice in warfare and the exile of soldiers. Three hundred years later, the two ghosts continue to confront the predicament of social ostracization, thereby highlighting the persistence of injustice and marginalization over time. The female ghost laments, "A hundred generations has made no difference. I was a fool to come." (26). In response, the male ghost offers his perspective.

...When I died

And still they would not let my body rest;

When I lived, and they would not let me be

The man I felt, cutting my manhood, first

With a knife, next with words and the dark



Spit of contempt, the voice at my shoulder said,

Go seek out Forest Head. If I am home, then

I have come to sleep. (70)

The accusations leveled by the deceased against humans all suggest that the present appears indistinguishable from the past, and reality is merely a replication and repetition of history; the living are obscured by the veneer of victory, unaware that they are perpetuating the same mistake.

It is evident that the forest dance transcends the notion of celebration, instead serving as a conduit for condemnation, judgment, and satire. By examining the composition of the participants in the forest dance and the content of their accusations, it becomes clear that Soyinka utilizes the fundamental structural elements of Yoruba performance culture to critically analyze human social issues from a synchronic perspective, and underscores the phenomenon of historical injustice. For Soyinka, the evolution of the present and the progression of the past are not marked by a straightforward linear progression. Rather, these periods mutually infiltrate and influence each other, creating a complex interplay between history and the present. As a result, escapism and separatism are deemed undesirable in the broader context of historical development. Instead, Soyinka argues that each individual within society must adopt the proactive spirit of participation that is inherent in Bakhtin's historical poetics. This involves the engagement with history, tradition and reality, thereby recognizing the interconnectedness of these elements.

## CONCLUSION

The enchantment of Soyinka's dramatic works lies in his masterful ability to intertwine drama with the social, cultural, and political idiosyncrasies of Africa. In *A Dance of the Forests*, he masterfully employs ghosts, dirges and dance to reflect on Nigerian political realities. Though the play is often classified by scholars within the genres of mythological, ritualistic, or epic drama, this paper posits that it is more precisely delineated as a political satire, critiquing the socio-political landscape through a satirical lens.

It is a well-established fact that society serves as a crucible for the development of literature, with social and historical contexts furnishing the essential substances and themes for artistic creation. For Soyinka, the concept of 'art for art's sake' is difficult to grasp, a perspective he elucidated during an interview with James Gibbs in the year 1981.

*A Dance of the Forests* was, of course, triggered by Independence, by my knowledge of the leaders who were about to take over the reins of the country. I realized that after Independence some of those new rulers were going to act exactly like their forebears did, just exploit the people. I was interested in taking another look at that history and saying: The euphoria should be tempered by the reality of the internal history of oppression. In our society this included the slave trade, in which the middle men, who were Africans, collaborated actively! In other words, I thought that Independence should be a sobering look at history, not just euphoria, and so on. (83)

As a playwright possessed of a keen sense of foreboding, Soyinka perceptively recognized that



independence represented a sudden and profound transformation for Nigeria, and that the genuine adversary in the post-independence era might very well be the nation itself. Most crucially, Soyinka's call for a sobering look at history, rather than just euphoria, emphasizes the importance of acknowledging and learning from the past in order to build a more equitable future.

In *A Dance of the Forests*, Soyinka employs traditional Yoruba cultural elements to subtly critique the dichotomy between history and reality, and offers metaphorical reflections and predictions on Nigeria's national destiny after independence. Towards the conclusion of the play, Agboreko, a townsman, asks Demoke, "Of the future, did you learn anything?" (Soyinka, 1961: 85). Demoke's reticence and subsequent disappearance from the narrative serve as a cipher for the play's thematic concerns. The author addresses to Agboreko's query by positing that history, like a phantom, looms over the present, and that to sever ties with the past is to engender an endless loop of historical recurrence.

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## AUTHOR'S ANNOUNCEMENT

This paper "Ghost, Dirge and the Forest Dance in Soyinka's Metaphysical Play *A Dance of the Forests*" has not been published previously and is not currently under consideration for publication elsewhere.



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