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The Road Is Made by Crossing: Cultural Knowledge and the Making of Postcolonial Identity

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INTRODUCTION

Before there is a passage, there is a schism. Yoruba cosmology imagines this separation as an abyss dividing the worlds of spirits and of human beings. Ogun crosses it, carving a way through what had previously resisted movement. The road is not discovered waiting beneath his feet. It comes into existence because he crosses.¹ Knowledge, like a path, is not always a material preexisting something that one can find and possess. Sometimes it is made through the act of crossing: between generations, between forms of performance, between languages and cultures, and between past and present. This does not mean that cultural traditions are invented from nothing. Rather, they continue to live because people encounter them, embody them, alter them, and sometimes resist them. This essay approaches cultural knowledge through four modes: *resonance*, *enactment*, *mediation*, and *opacity*, using the plays of Wole Soyinka. Taken together, Soyinka's *Death and the King's Horseman*, *A Dance of the Forest*, and *The Bacchae of Euripides*, suggests that cultural identity cannot be comprehended merely as something that is inherited intact from the past. It is heard, performed, transformed, and finally, never thoroughly explained.

Peter Paul Rubens' *Four Studies of a Head of a Moor* provides a visual framework for this

argument. The face from four single view gives makes something something else heads therefore different offer four ways of



painting depicts the same slightly different angles. No us the whole face. Each visible while leaving outside the frame. The four do not represent four identities. Instead, they approaching the same

subject. Rubens' artwork suggests something entirely different. Understanding may require repeated encounters rather than a final perspective.

Rubens' artwork suggests something entirely different. Understanding may require repeated encounters rather than a final perspective. The face remains the same, yet our relationship

¹ Wole Soyinka, *Myth, Literature and the African World* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1976), 140–62.

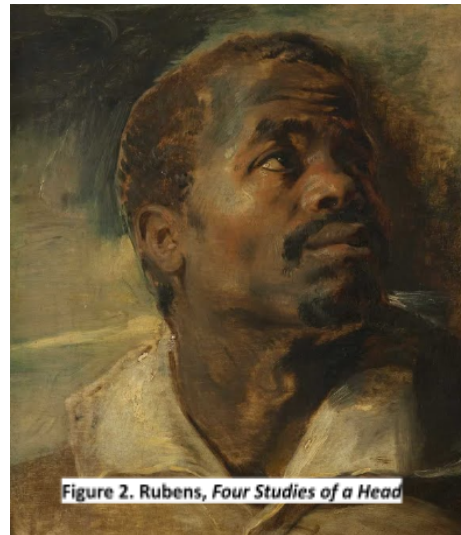
to it changes each time we look. The first head asks how something can be encountered before it can be explained. The second asks how something can become known through action. The third asks what changes when knowledge moves between languages and forms. The fourth asks whether everything we encounter needs to become completely understandable before we can enter into relation with it.

These four questions structure what follows.

RESONANCE

The first head seems to have been caught just before speech becomes language. The mouth is open, but the expression has not settled into a statement. This provides a way of thinking about resonance: the experiences of encountering something through sound, rhythm, feeling or participation before being able to put into words.

Soyinka's *Death and the King's Horseman* is vital here as its opening is built around forms of speech that are inseparable from performance. Characters such as Elesin and the Praise-Singer communicate through praise, proverb, repetition, and call-and-response. The audience encounters the ritual through its rhythms, voices, and music. This distinction matters because cultural knowledge does not always take the form of information that can be simply transmitted from one person to another. Diana Taylor's distinction between the archive and the repertoire is valuable here. Taylor distinguishes the archive, which stores knowledge in durable materials, from the repertoire, through which knowledge survives in embodied acts such as speech, gesture and ritual.² However, repetition does not mean that nothing changes. A gesture performed today is never performed in exactly the same conditions as it was yesterday. The person performing it has changed, as has the community, and the historical situation surrounding the performance. Cultural memory, then, survives not because it remains



² Diana Taylor, *The Archive and the Repertoire: Performing Cultural Memory in the Americas* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2003), 19–20.

pristine, but since it can be encountered again. This is what occurs in act one of *Death*, Elesin declares, “Nor will the Not-I-bird be much longer without his nest.” The phrase draws upon an inherited way of speaking about death. Yet the Praise-Singer interrupts him: “The Not-I bird, Elesin?” The interruption matters because inherited knowledge here does not simply transmit meaning; it calls for response.³

Here, Hartmut Rosa’s theory of resonance illuminates the argument. For Rosa, resonance is not the one-way transfer of information, it involves responsiveness.⁴ As a result, a person can know a cultural form without being able to reproduce its intended effect. This tension becomes even clearer in Iyaloja’s confrontation with Elesin in his eleventh hour. When Elesin attempts to explain himself, she asks, “did I ask you for a meaning?”⁵ Her response separates comprehension from explanation. Iyaloja does not need Elesin to provide an interpretation of the ritual. She needs him to act within it. Though, this introduces a problem. If resonance depends upon response, what happens when a community already knows what response it expects? Iyaloja’s demand demonstrates that cultural belonging can provide a powerful sense of connection, but that connection can also become restrictive. Elesin’s hesitation is not just the result of ignorance. He knows what is expected of him, but his individual desire comes into conflict with communal order.

Resonance, in this manner, cannot merely mean harmony. The same inherited forms that create belonging can also make dissent difficult to hear. The scene which takes place in the British masque illustrates this denomination. The European characters reproduce the external appearance form of Yoruba ritual through wearing them as costumes, without entering the relations through which that ritual acquires significance.⁶ The colonial characters imitate (and in turn undermine) aspects of Yoruba ritual without entering the relations that give those forms their significance. They reproduce its visible appearance without partaking in its world. The British characters imitate, and within that imitation, they do not participate. Soyinka’s satire suggests that cultural knowledge cannot be acquired

³ Wole Soyinka, *Death and the King’s Horseman* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1987), page 11.

⁴ Bojan Žalec, “Rosa’s Theory of Resonance: Its Importance for (the Science of) Religion and Hope,” *Religions* 12, no. 10 (2021): 797, <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel12100797>

⁵ Wole Soyinka, *Death and the King’s Horseman*, page 70.

⁶ Ibid., Page 48.

simply by reproducing its external appearance. Nonetheless, the audience is not placed safely outside this problem. It too approaches the play through things it already knows. *Death* may recall Shakespeare's *Macbeth* through its concern with disrupted order, death, responsibility, and tragic consequence to an unfamiliar audience, yet it can also become a pitfall if the audience assumes that Soyinka's tragedy must ultimately mean the same thing as Shakespeare's. Soyinka's tragedy may resonate with *Macbeth*, but the comparison should not make the two tragedies equal. Instead, the encounter can make the familiar seem strange. The question becomes only what the Shakespearean tragedy allows us to see in Soyinka, but what Soyinka makes newly apparent about the tragic forms we thought we already understood.⁷

Olunde's conversation with Jane Pilkings reverses this direction of interpretation. Jane cannot understand how Olunde could regard the captain's suicide as an "affirmative commentary on life."⁸ Olunde, however, questions the European world around him. He asks why a society that accepts mass death in war finds individual sacrifice so difficult to understand.⁹ Therefore, the scene does not only contrast "African" and "European" values. It forces the audience to realise that its own assumptions can also become objects of interpretation. The unfamiliar does not merely need to be explained by the familiar, it can make the familiar both feel and appear strange.

Resonance, then, is not the successful transmission of an unchanged cultural meaning. It is the encounter between an inherited form and a person who receives it. It can create recognition, but it can also create disturbance. It can sustain communal memory, but it can also constrain individual experience.

⁷ Craig McLuckie, "The Structural Coherence of Wole Soyinka's 'Death and the King's Horseman,'" *College Literature* 31, no. 2 (2004):157-158.

⁸ Ibid., page 157-158

⁹ Ibid., page 157-158

ENACTMENT



Figure 3: Rubens, *Four Studies of a Head*

The second Rubens head turns with the body. Here the face is no longer simply caught in an expression, it is doing something. Even its slight smile is crucial. A smile is not an object hidden inside the face waiting to be interpreted. It is a gesture. It produces a relationship with whoever sees it, but it does not tell us exactly what that relationship means. It may invite, conceal, affirm or unsettle.

The second here embodies enactment, as identity is not merely something that exists internally and is then expressed through the body. It can be produced through what the body repeatedly does.

If resonance asks how something can be encountered before it is articulated, enactment asks how something can become known through action. Soyinka's *Dance* develops this problem by questioning the idea that cultural identity can simply be recovered from an untouched past. The play was written for Nigerian independence, though it refuses to present independence as a simple, naive return to a glorious cultural origin.¹⁰ Instead, the past returns in disturbing forms. The living encounter their ancestors and are forced to confront histories of violence, betrayal, and failure. The past is consequently not a museum from which the present can retrieve a perfect identity. It is something that continues to act upon the present. Demoke embodies this tension. He is both connected to inherited traditions and suspicious of them. His confrontation with Oremole revives an older antagonism between creation and destruction, while the play's ebb and flow between different periods makes it impossible to keep the past safely behind the present.¹¹ History returns for it has not been completely resolved.

This makes performance pivotal to Soyinka's understanding of identity. The likes of proverbs, names, songs, and rituals carry cultural memory because people continue to perform them.

¹⁰ July, Robert W. 1981. "The Artist's Credo: The Political Philosophy of Wole Soyinka." *The Journal of Modern African Studies* 19 (3): 477.

¹¹ Soyinka, *A Dance of the Forests*, 26–28.

Rola's title of "Madam Tortoise," for example, does more than describe her. It ignites a world of folklore within the present.¹² The cultural past survives because it is brought back into use. But this process can also fail... The character of the Half-Child personifies this. Neither fully born nor fully dead, the figure remains caught between states and cyclicly returns without completing the movement into another form of existence. Its repeated cry of "branded womb, branded womb" turns repetition into the experience of being trapped.¹³ The figure recalls the Yoruba *abiku*, the child associated with repeated movement between life and death. Soyinka's poem "Abiku" similarly describes a cycle in which return becomes almost indistinguishable from existence:

Once and the repeated time, ageless
Though I puke, and when you pour
Libations, each finger points me near
The way I came...¹⁴

The significance of the *abiku* here is that it personifies regression as a concept. The child returns, but return does not necessarily mean progress. The same movement can preserve existence whilst hindering transformation, which has political significance in *A Dance*. The family figure has been read as a possible image of the newly independent nation, a nation continuously approaching a new beginning without successfully altering the conditions that produce crises.¹⁵ The metaphor therefore moves from the individual to the political. A nation can repeatedly enact its emergence without actually becoming something different. This, then, simultaneously resists any basic assertion that identity is produced through performance. Repetition can create continuity, but it can also reproduce failure. The same practices that preserve cultural memory can carry unresolved histories into the present. Cultural knowledge depends upon the forms through which people are able to practise and transmit it. The issue was not simply that people stopped knowing Yoruba traditions (and

¹² Ibid., 24.

¹³ Ibid., 65

¹⁴ Wole Soyinka, "Abiku," in *Idanre and Other Poems* (London: Methuen, 1967), 28.

¹⁵ Derek Wright, "Pre- and Post-Modernity in Recent West African Fiction," *Commonwealth* 21, no. 2 (Spring 1999): 10

essentially culture). More precisely, the institutions through which knowledge was valued and transmitted changed.

Soyinka's treatment of Demoke's sculpture makes this tension perceivable. When Adenebi asks whether the work was "quite pagan," the question reveals a changed attitude towards inherited cultural forms.¹⁶ Something that once belonged naturally to a cultural world can come to appear embarrassing or primitive when judged according to another system of value. For the writer, however, the answer is not simply to reproduce traditional forms precisely as they existed in the past. Tradition must remain capable of responding to the present. Cultural identity therefore emerges through a continuing practice of making. The theatre itself becomes an example of this. Soyinka's use of rhythm, song, repetition, incantation, dance, and verse does not merely tell the audience that Yoruba cosmology values connection between human beings and the wider world. It grants the audience the experience of connection through that performance.

The second Rubens head captures this movement. The face turns because the body moves. In Soyinka's theatre, knowledge similarly becomes something the body carries. The audience is not simply told about a cosmological system, it encounters that system through the rhythms and movements of the performance. Enactment therefore produces identity, but does not guarantee successful transformation. The Half-Child shows the darker realm of possibility: becoming can become repetition, repetition can paralysis.

MEDIATION

If enactment asks how identity comes into being through action, mediation asks what happens when those actions enter another form. The third Rubens head is seen from the side. The face remains recognisable, but only part of it is available. The angle determines what can be seen. With a side view, there is also no direct communication or connection. This is a particular useful visual for mediation since knowledge does not simply travel



Figure 4: Rubens, *Four Studies*

¹⁶Soyinka, *A Dance of the Forests*, 66.

unchanged between people, language or cultures. The medium through which it travels changes what becomes visible. The problem is critical in postcolonial contexts as many of the forms through which African cultures became internationally legible were shaped by colonial history. The question is then not simply what happens when oral knowledge becomes written. It is what happens when knowledge enters a language, literary canon or institution with different assumptions about what knowledge should resemble. Soyinka's *The Bacchae of Euripides: A Communion Rite* provides a particularly clear example because the play itself is an act of meditation. Yoruba cosmology reaches the reader through an ancient Greek tragedy, written in English and subsequently performed before modern audiences. Soyinka explains Yoruba cosmology in *Myth, Literature and the African World* as a "seamless whole" in which gods, human beings and ancestors exist within a connected order.¹⁷ Ritual becomes a means of negotiating the division between these worlds. When Soyinka places this understanding into *The Bacchae*, it does not simply remain unchanged.

The title makes this process clear. The play remains *The Bacchae*, preserving its relationship to its author Euripides, but adds the subtitle: *A Communion Rite*. Critic Van Weyenberg argues, the work has a "double status", it is simultaneously a revision of an earlier text and a new work.¹⁸ Greek tragedy, Yoruba thought, Christian imagery, and postcolonial politics meet without converging.¹⁹ The same is true of Dionysus and Ogun. Soyinka does not just substitute gods. Ogun provides a different framework through which Dionysus can be comprehended, specifically through their associations with movement between creation and destruction, life and death. The comparison produces a new relation instead of a mere equivalence.²⁰ Soyinka's changes to the chorus makes this clear. By introducing slaves and giving the Slave Leader greater political significance, he reorders the social world of Euripides.²¹ The adaptation changes not only the story being told, but who speaks and who participates in its collective voice. The final communion makes the ambiguity of this transformation most powerful. Pentheus's blood becomes wine, and his individual death

¹⁷ Soyinka, *Myth, Literature*, 145.

¹⁸ Astrid Van Weyenberg, *The Politics of Adaptation: Contemporary African Drama and Greek Tragedy* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2013), 44–45, 88.

¹⁹ Isidore Okpewho, "Soyinka, Euripides, and the Anxiety of Empire," *Research in African Literatures* 30, no. 4 (1999): 32–55.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 32–55

²¹ Soyinka, *The Bacchae of Euripides*, 234.

becomes part of communal renewal.²² Agave's grief is not just erased, it is absorbed into the new rite.²³ Communion therefore suggests both regeneration and the harrowing possibility that individual suffering can become material for collective renewal.

Mediation consequently involves both gain and loss. When ritual becomes a written scene, a voice becomes dialogue, or a movement becomes stage direction, knowledge becomes capable of traveling into a new form. But that movement also selects what can be carried. Mbembe's understanding of the archives clarifies such a point.²⁴ The archive does not preserve everything equally, it orders, selects, and excludes. Mediation works similarly. What passes into a new form becomes newly visible, while something else may fall outside the frame. As a result, mediation is neither simple preservation nor simple failure. Soyinka is not carrying an already complete Yoruba identity into English. He is producing a new articulation of Yoruba philosophy through his encounter with Greek literature, English, and the political circumstances of postcolonial Africa. As critics suggest, the play's power lies partly in the tension between inheritance and transformation. Okpewho's challenge to the idea of a "translation of culture, not of text" sharpens the problem.²⁵ Which culture is the work being translated into? Soyinka writes through English and through a European dramatic form even as he uses those forms to challenge the authority of the European canon. Mediation therefore creates something new without leaving what it carries unchanged. But this transformation leaves remnants: something that has not been completely absorbed into the new form.

²² Ibid., 301.

²³ Okpewho, "Soyinka, Euripides, and the Anxiety of Empire," 50-52

²⁴ Achille Mbembe, "The Power of the Archive and Its Limits," in *Refiguring the Archive*, ed. Carolyn Hamilton, Verne Harris, Jane Taylor, Michele Pickover, Graeme Reid, and Razia Saleh (Dordrecht: Springer, 2002), 20.

²⁵ Okpewho, "Soyinka, Euripides, and the Anxiety of Empire," 50-52

OPACITY

The fourth head turns away... The face remains visible, but only in profile. One eye disappeared. Nothing has been removed from the face, yet less of it is available to the viewer. This is where the four studies reach the limit. Resonance showed that knowledge can be encountered before it is explained. Enactment showed that identity can be produced through action. Mediation showed that knowledge changes as it moves between forms. Opacity asks whether everything that remains must become completely clear.

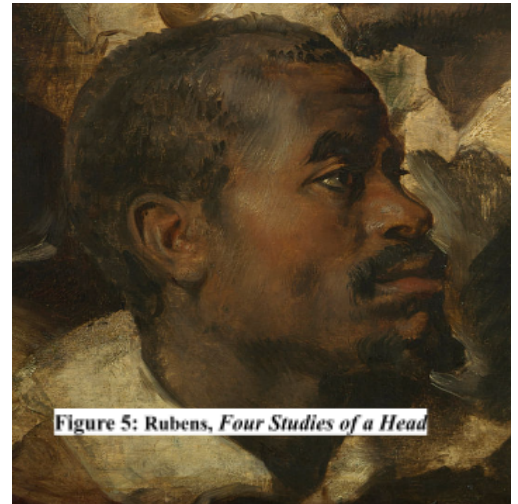


Figure 5: Rubens, *Four Studies of a Head*

Édouard Glissant's idea of a "right to opacity" does not mean something is meaningless or unknowable.²⁶ It means that people and cultures need not become completely transparent in order to enter into relation. This matters because colonialism repeatedly demanded that the colonised become legible: classified, described, and organised according to categories produced elsewhere. Yet resisting this demand does not require constructing an equally fixed precolonial identity. Cultural revival can be necessary and politically powerful, the problem begins when revival becomes the recovery of a single, pure identity imagined to have existed unchanged before colonialism. Soyinka's criticism of Negritude helps clarify this distinction. His claim that "the tiger does not proclaim its tigritude, it pounces" rejects the demand that African identity must constantly explain or announce itself.²⁷ Identity can be enacted without becoming a fixed declaration. Soyinka's own practice demonstrates this. In *The Bacchae*, Yoruba thought is neither preserved as a pure object nor absorbed completely into the Greek tradition. It changes through contact. A living culture does not need to prove that it has remained unchanged in order to remain connected to what came before. Glissant's statement, "as for my identity, I'll take care of myself,"²⁸ captures this refusal of compulsory explanation. Opacity therefore completes the movement begun with if

²⁶ Édouard Glissant, *Poetics of Relation*, trans. Betsy Wing (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1997), 189-194.

²⁷ Janheinz Jahn, *A History of Neo-African Literature*, trans. Oliver Coburn and Urs Ursula Lehrburger (London: Faber and Faber, 1968), 265-266.

²⁸ Glissant, *Poetics of Relation*, 194.

resonance asks us to listen before we explain, opacity asks us to accept that listening will never give us everything.

CONCLUSION

The four heads of Rubens' painting do not offer four identities. They offer four relationships to the same face. The same is true of the four concepts developed here. Resonance shows that cultural knowledge can be met through sound, rhythm, and participation before it becomes explained. Enactment shows that identity is produced through what people do while the Half-Child demonstrates that repetition can preserve memory while reproducing failure. Mediation shows that knowledge changes whenever it enters a new language, form or institution. Opacity names the limit of all three: something always remains outside the frame.

This is why Rubens' incompleteness matters. The face does not become less real because no single angle contains it. Each turn makes something visible while carrying something else beyond the edge of the image. Postcolonial identity can be understood in the same way. It need not be located in a pure origin waiting to be uncovered, nor in a final definition capable of explaining exactly what a culture is. It can instead be understood through the relations by which cultural knowledge is heard, performed, transformed, and sometimes withheld. The road is not waiting at the end of the journey. It is made by crossing.

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