UNIT 1 AN INTRODUCTION TO NIGERIA AND TO THE YORUBA WORLD

Structure

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1.0 OBJECTIVES

I shall begin by spending a little time briefly introducing the history and politics and economy of Nigeria, the homeland of Wole Soyinka, to you. A knowledge of this is essential since Soyinka's literary works have a crucial link to history and politics. His plays provide a commentary, often ironic, on past or contemporary events in Nigerian history and politics and suggest possible alternative modes of operation. This unit also includes a look at the main elements of Yoruba myth and religion. Soyinka's plays are replete with Yoruba mythological figures and without some preliminary knowledge of Yoruba myth and religion, you will feel lost. This unit ends with a look at Yoruba art and the way in which Soyinka distinguishes it from western artistic modes.

1.1 HISTORY AND POLITICS OF NIGERIA

Nigeria is a federal republic in Western Africa that was formerly a British dependency. Nigeria became an independent member of the Commonwealth of Nations in 1960. The following year it was joined by the northern part of the British Cameroons, a United Nations trust territory. In 1963 Nigeria adopted a republican constitution but retained its Commonwealth membership. It might be appropriate to keep in mind what Wole Soyinka observes in a 1993 interview:

When did Nigeria as a nation come into being? And how did it come into being? Nigeria was an artificial creation, and it was a creation which did not take into consideration either the wishes or the will or the interests of the people who were enclosed within that boundary. They were lumped together. So, the genesis of Nigeria, as with many African countries, is very flawed. (Maja-Pearce 153)

Western Nigeria is a complex of powerful city states and the first of these is Ife. According to Yoruba mythology it is the centre of the universe. Its ruler, Oni, remains an important figure in Yoruba religion. Oyo challenged Ife's supremacy and became more powerful in the 17th and 18th centuries. In the 1830s the new city
states of Ifadun and Abeokuta were founded as civil war became endemic. (Soyinka has been closely associated with all these states.) In the 1890s the British declared a protectorate over Western Nigeria. Wars and slave trade continued.

Since it was formed by the decisions of the European powers Nigeria was an unnatural creation. It has more than 300 languages although English is the official language. The various linguistic groups naturally have different political, economic, social and religious traditions, much as in the various states and union territories of India. The nations and polities within Nigeria range from the small to the large. The largest of Nigeria's so-called nations are Hausa, Fulani, Kanuri and Tiv in the north, Yoruba and Edo in the south-west and Ijaw, Ibibio and Ibo in the south-east. Of these, Hausa and Fulani have been Muslim for centuries.

The Yoruba and Edo peoples organised themselves into powerful kingdoms, some of which existed before 1000 A.D. In the state of Ife, over eight centuries ago the Yoruba produced some of the world's finest art. The most successful and complex Yoruba kingdom was Oyo, which dominated vast areas before its fall in the nineteenth century. Smaller but nonetheless powerful states succeeded Oyo and
some of these, such as Ibadan, Abeokuta, Ijebu and Lagos, continued to function
with British support even after colonisation. For example, in the kingdom of Benin,
the rival of Oyo and the centre of the Edo speakers, the wishes of the king were still
law to the hundreds of thousands of inhabitants when the British took over the city.
Yoruba and Edo had extremely complex religions which permeated through all
levels of the society. Despite the work of the Christian missionaries, the traditional
religion of Benin and Yorubaland claimed the support of millions. The impact of
these traditional religions and myths may be sharply felt in Soyinka's *A Dance of the
Forests*.

Now for a little of Nigeria's recent history. In 1966 the army intervened in an
attempt to create a unitary government but the regional rivalries deepened. The
following year the Igbo officers from Eastern Nigeria declared the secessionist
republic of Biafra. This was followed by three years of warfare in which the federal
government of General Yakuba Gowon liquidated Biafran independence. Gowon
tried to prevent future secession by enlarging the number of regional states to twelve
(these were increased to nineteen in 1976) but the government lost the people's
support because it was so hungry for power. In 1975, Gowon was toppled by a coup
led by Brigadier Murtala Ramat Muhammad. The change was short-lived: the
following year Murtala was assassinated. The army continued in power under
General Olusegun Obasanjo who instituted measures to restore Nigeria to civilian
rule. As a means to this end multiparty elections were held in 1979. These led to the
formation of the second republic under President Alhaji Shehu Shagari. In mid 1983
Shagari won a second term. The revenues generated by the 1970s oil boom were
drying up due to, as most people believed, flagrant corruption and mismanagement.
In a 1993 interview Soyinka said that Shagari's "reign" from 1979 to 1983 was a
"disaster....a zero, a minus" (Maja-Pearce 151). By the end of 1983, the second
republic was replaced by a military regime under Major General Muhammad Buhari.
Buhari promised that the new Federal Military Government (FMG) would end
corruption and strengthen the economy. The currency was devalued, government
jobs were cut back and university budgets trimmed. These measures were seen as
harsh and they alienated workers, students and the middle class. The immediate
expulsion of 700,000 aliens as a result of an order in March 1985 caused friction
between Nigeria and other African countries. Moreover, in early 1985, the FMG had
issued two divisive ordinances that were bound to be seen as autocratic, unfair and
curbing the freedom of the people: the first--criticism of public officials was
determined a criminal act and the second--the government could imprison
"subversives" without trial.

Not surprisingly Buhari was replaced in a military coup by General Ibrahim
Babangida, the leader of the dissenting members of the FMG, and who now
promised, like his predecessors, to return Nigeria to civilian rule by 1992. He had
the tough task of grappling with Nigeria's deepening economic chaos--a debt of $25
billion to begin with--for which the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the
World Bank promised assistance after protracted and complicated negotiations.

Under Babangida the style rather than the structure of the military government
changed. Babangida promised leniency towards dissenters, he repealed the two
offending ordinances of Buhari mentioned above and he released more than a
hundred political prisoners. He continued to cut back on government expenditure
but he diverted more funds to agriculture. He also put into motion the regulation of
the monetary currency, the *naira*. Babangida's first few months in power were eased
by a slight improvement in the economy, but many of Nigeria's old problems
remained. The most critical of these were a) a continued dependence on oil exports,
b) existing corruption at all levels, c) overpopulation, particularly in the cities, d)
numerous conflicting ethnic groups and e) the friction between the two main

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religious systems, Islam and Christianity, although both are replete with Yoruba influences in the way they are practised.

In December 1985 there was an attempted coup by Babangida's friend General Maman Vatsa. In 1986 student disturbances erupted. They began at Ahmadu Bello University and were quelled only after forty persons were killed and twenty campuses closed. Anti-police riots erupted in Lagos. Student protests continued at universities over the FMG's withdrawal of fuel subsidies. The escalation of violence, student protests and the action of workers and religious zealots threatened Babangida's regime and prevented it from fulfilling its plans of a return to civilian rule in 1992. A new decentralised civil service structure was built and in March 1988 elections for the local government councils were held. Plans for the second stage of transition to a civil government were drawn up. In April 1988 elections were held for members of the Constituent Assembly responsible for drafting the new constitution. The FMG based its plans on an improved economy on loans from the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the continuation of a unified government with minimal corruption under the broad military command structure.

I have given these details because Soyinka is a writer with a very strong social commitment. He has taken a strong and outspoken stand on many of the political shortcomings of the various military regimes as you will see from the description of his life in Unit 2.

1.2 ECONOMY OF NIGERIA

Nigeria is one of the African states with the most complex, diverse and potentially strong economies, in spite of the shocks resulting from the decline in oil sales. The traditional sector provides enough of the staple foods to keep imports at a minimum. The soils of Southern Nigeria are among the most fertile in the continent. The land in the north is enough for grain, cotton, and peanut cultivation. The drought of the 1970's caused severe damage only to a few districts because of effective water conservation. Thus it seems that many of Nigeria's ills come from corrupt politicians and autocratic military regimes rather than any radical shortage of natural or human resources.

1.3 A GLIMPSE INTO YORUBA HISTORY

From a general discussion of Nigeria I want to move on to a more specific discussion of the Yoruba, the Nigerian ethnic group to which Soyinka belongs, and its history and culture.

The Yoruba is one of the largest ethnic groups of Nigeria. There are approximately fifteen million Yoruba people in south-west Nigeria and the neighbouring Benin and Togo. They are loosely linked by geography, language, history and religion. Most of them live within the borders of the tropical forest belt, but remnants of the powerful Oyo kingdom include groups that live at the fringes of the northern Savanna grasslands. Archaeological evidence suggests that the ancestors of the Yoruba may have lived in this same general area of Africa since prehistoric times. In the mid eighteen century the slave traders sent slaves of Yoruba descent to the Americas. Some of them resettled in Cuba and Brazil where elements of Yoruba culture and language can still be found.
Traditional Yoruba city states were never single political organisations. They were sub-divided into over twenty-five complex, centralized kingdoms. Of these Ile-Ife is universally recognised as the most senior and the most important Yoruba city. It was founded around 850 A.D. Its rival was the Oyo kingdom to the north-west which was founded around 1350 A.D. The Oni of Ife and the Alafin of Oyo were the most highly respected Yoruba kings in Nigeria (the latter appears in Soyinka's *Death and the King's Horseman*). The other major kingdoms were the Ijesha and the Ekiti in the north-east; the Shabe, the Ketu, the Egbado, the Ijebu and the Awori in the south-west; and the Oado, the Owo, the Itsekiri in the south-east.

For centuries the Yoruba lived in large, densely populated cities which were able to practice special trades. Most of the people commuted to the countryside for part of the year to raise the staple crops--yams, corn, cassava, cocoa (they produced 90% of the cocoa for Nigeria)--on family farms. The economy is structured around agriculture, trade, and handicrafts. Women do not normally work outside the home. They attain social status through their role in the market system rather than through their husband's economic status. Each city-state maintains its own interpretation of history and religious traditions and its unique art style, yet all acknowledge the ritual sovereign of Ife, all consult Yoruba herbalists and divination priests, and all honour the pantheon of Yoruba gods.

The Yoruba towns were either farm-oriented or were located at the crossroads of the trade routes where traders stopped to rest. In most towns the market place was usually located in front of the king's palace in the centre of the town. The towns were founded by Baale (father of the land) who in turn was named king. He was the religious and political leader of the town. It was his job to name the chiefs, Otun, the king's right-hand man and Balogun, the war chief. The king was considered a sacred being, like a living god. He could not be seen or spoken to directly. He could not eat in public. People believed that he did not die--he merely passed on his crown to another Yoruba.

### 1.4 YORUBA MYTH AND RELIGION

There are a number of conflicting and confusing elements in Yoruba religion. The variety and lack of homogeneity is a result of the differences in religion between the different city-states and even villages. The same deity may be male in one village and female in another. The trickster god may have three different names within the same village. Also, certain elements of other religions, particularly Islam and Christianity also account for the variety.

The structure of Yoruba religion is that of "diffuse monotheism," as one scholar puts it, although given the number of Yoruba gods this does not seem to be a very helpful suggestion. The scholar probably hailed from the west and was trying to simplify Yoruba religion for western consumption. To a person living in India the plethora of Yoruba gods should sound very familiar. Obatala and Olorun/Olodumare/Edumare seem to be the most important gods, the first the god of creation, the second a supreme deity who breathes life into creation. There exist also several hundred lower gods. The pantheon of deities is called the Orisha or Orishala. It is referred to in both the singular and plural. In the oral tradition, there is a tale of the high god or 'Supreme deity' as Soyinka terms it, variously called Olorun or Olodumare or Edumare, asking the Orishala to descend from the sky to create the first earth at Ile-Ife. Orishala was delayed and his younger brother (some say his wife) Odudua, accomplished the task. Later sixteen other Orishala came down from the heavens to
create human beings and live on earth. The descendants of each of these deities is said to have spread Yoruba culture and religious principles throughout the rest of Yorubaland. Sometimes Olorun and Orishala/Obatala are seen as one and the same: Obatala is the god of creation, often a sculptor god who has the responsibility to shape human bodies. Physically deformed humans are supposed to be either his votaries or the victims of his displeasure. Olorun/01odumare/Edumare reserves the right to breathe life into these bodies. Soyinka concludes that the "art of Obatala is thus essentially plastic and formal" (Myth, Literature and the African World 140n). Soyinka does not find the concept of Obatala very inspiring. "The unblemished god, Obatala," he writes, "is the serene womb of chthonic reflections (or memory), a passive strength awaiting and celebrating each act of vicarious restoration of his primordial being....His beauty is enigmatic, expressive only of the resolution of plastic healing through the wisdom of acceptance. Obatala's patient suffering is the well-known aesthetics of the saint" (Myth, Literature and the African World 143).

Rather than Obatala, it is Ogun who sets the springs of tragedy in motion. But more of that when I discuss Ogun.

The basic pantheon of Yoruba gods is variously estimated at 201, 401, 601 or more. Some of these divinities are primordial, having existed when either Obatala or Oduduwa was creating the earth. Others are heroes, both male and female, who left an abiding impression on the people. Some of the divinities may also be natural phenomena—mountains, hills, rivers—that have influenced people's lives and history. The most popular gods are Sango or Shango (the god of thunder and lightning), Ifa or Orunmila (the god of divination), Eshu or Ishu (the messenger and trickster god), Ogun (the god of iron and of war), Olokun (the god of the sea), Shokpona (the god of the earth) and Oko (the god of agriculture). Fa or Fate is the hidden companion of the gods and of humans.

There is a continuity between the divinities, the kings and the ancestors. The two major gods are Oduduwa and Sango or Shango. They are also believed to have had human forms and to have reigned in Ife and Oyo respectively. The Yoruba still refer to themselves as the children of Oduduwa. Sango or Shango creates thunder and lightning by casting "thunderstones" down to earth. The Yoruba believe that these stones have special powers. Sango/Shango is said to have four wives, each of whom is represented by a major Nigerian river. The chief wife, Oya, is represented by the Niger.

Olorun ("the owner of the sky") or Olodumare/Edumare ("the almighty") is never actively worshipped. Unlike Sango/Shango, Olorun has no shrines and no priests and asks for no sacrifices. Although Olorun/Olodumare/Edumare is much akin to the Judeo-Christian creator of all things, the giver of life and the final judge, the Yoruba ignore him in their day-to-day lives. Some scholars conjecture that Olorun/Olodumare/Edumare may have developed through the influence of Islam and Christianity, as a simulacrum of the gods of those religions. The Yoruba possibly find the concept of an almighty god so overwhelming and remote that they cannot relate Olorun/Olodumare/Edumare to their quotidian reality.

Another important deity is Ogun, the god of war, of the hunt and of iron. A Dance of the Forests is the only play of Soyinka's in which Ogun makes an appearance. In Yoruba religion and myth, he serves as a patron deity of blacksmiths, warriors and all who use metal in their work. He also presides over deals and contracts. In Yoruba courts people swear to tell the truth by kissing the machete sacred to Ogun. He also stands for courage in battle and the spirit of pioneering, and he brings good luck to hunters. The Yoruba consider Ogun fearsome and terrible in revenge. If one breaks a pact in his name, swift retribution will follow. However, as Soyinka points out, Ogun's justice is "transcendental, humane but rigidly restorative," whereas
Sango/Shango's justice is "primarily retributive" (Myth, Literature and the African World 141). Legend has it that the Orisha were trying to carve a road through the forest. Of the Orisha only Ogun could accomplish the task because only he had the proper implements. Thus he should have been the king of the Orisha, but since he did not care for the position it went to Obatala. Some versions of the Yoruba religion combine Ogun with the trickster god Eshu. Ogun is associated with both creation and destruction and Ogun festivals include animal sacrifices and processions marked by metal-tipped palm fronds to please or to appease him.

Ogun seems to be a particular favourite of Soyinka's. In terms of Hellenic values he sees Ogun as a combination of the Dionysian, the Apollonian and the Promethean "virtues." To Soyinka, Ogun is, in many ways, the "first artist and technician of the forge," a creature who "evokes Nietzsche's Apollonian spirit, a massive impact of image, concept, ethical doctrine and sympathy." Obatala is the placid essence of creation; Ogun the creative urge and instinct, the essence of creativity (Myth, Literature and the African World 141). We may recall that Prometheus, son of Iapetus, was the figure in Greek mythology who in one version of the creation myth, formed humans in the likeness of gods, using the clay and water of Panopeus in Phocis (Robert Graves, The Greek Myths 1:34). Prometheus was also believed to have stolen fire from the gods to give to the mortals and was punished by Zeus for his pains. Soyinka sees Ogun as "the first actor--for he led the others...(the) first suffering deity, the first creative energy, the first challenger, and conqueror of transition. And his, the first art, was tragic art..." (Myth, Literature and the African World 145). In an interview he says that he found Ogun not just a warrior but a creative influence, "by implication the father of poetry", and very liberating, "having grown up in a narrow form of Christianity" (Wole Soyinka on Yoruba Religion).

Significantly, the Yoruba pantheon has no evil gods. The trickster god, Eshu, is merely mischievous. Legend has it that posing as a merchant he once sold magnificent gifts to a man's two wives. The ensuing battle for the husband's favour tore the family apart. Eshu is also the guardian of houses and villages. In this role he is called "Baba" or father (the same as in Hindi or Bengali). Eshu is also the god of Ifa, a sophisticated and complex divinatory tool, some call it a form of writing, which uses nuts, signs, and increasing squares of the number four to predict the future. Geoffrey Parrinder claims that Ifa is "the only instance of writing practised in modern times" among the non-Christian and non-Islamic peoples. It has remained enormously popular till today.

Festivals are an integral part of Yoruba life. The three main celebrations take place in July (in honour of Ifa), in September (in honour of Orun) and in January. The last is called Bere and is the most important festival. It marks the end of harvest time. In all the festivals, processions and performances take place, but in the Bere festival, the fields are ritualistically set alight to celebrate and illuminate the fruits of the soil. The Yoruba New Year takes place in March, when the villages and towns take part in communal purification rites, helping each other to confess their sins and starting the new year afresh together. Soyinka's A Dance of the Forests is modelled on this New Year festival.

The Yoruba treat their ancestors with great respect, which is only to be expected in a culture with only oral records of the past. Anthropologists debate whether the rituals dealing with ancestry are religious in nature or simply a mark of respect. At least a few Yoruba tribes believe that their ancestors become demi-gods after death, but only once they have assumed the persona of the true deity. This belief resembles another facet of Yoruba faith--the phenomenon of possession--in which mediums take on the characteristics of one or another of the gods. The characteristics of some of the main gods are so well known that mediums as far off as Haiti can loll back
their heads and cross their legs in the same way when possessed by, say, Sango/Shango the lightning god. The earth is seen as the home of the ancestors' remains. When offerings are made to earth they also become offerings to the ancestors to make them comfortable in their new home. The dead ancestors are thus viewed as religiously significant and close to the earth.

Wole Soyinka describes the Yoruba religion as a "liberating" one because it is so open to other religions and so tolerant of them. "The Oba would go to a mosque even if he was a Christian," he says. "Traditional religion is not only accommodating, it is liberating because whenever a new phenomenon impinged on the consciousness of the Yoruba...they do not bring down the barriers--close the doors....They do not consider it a hostile experience. That's why the corpus of Ifa is constantly reinforced and augmented....You have Ifa verses which deal with Islam, you have Ifa verses which deal with Christianity." For example, the myth of Moremi who sacrificed the only son to save the town has clear parallels with the story of Jesus. Soyinka claims that the Yoruba "had no hostility to the piety of other people" because they had the ability to see other beliefs as other systems and not as "pagan" or "kafir" or superstitious mumbo-jumbo. Soyinka is implying that Islam and Christianity do not possess the same tolerance towards other religions as does the Yoruba faith. We in India can see a link between Soyinka's view of Yoruba religion and the words of Ramakrishna Paramahansa who said all religions are but different paths to the same godhead. (Significantly, in the passage I quote from Geoffrey Parrinder above, the word "pagan" is used, but I have substituted in my paraphrase the more tolerant description "non-Christian.") Soyinka terms all religions as "metaphors for the strategy of man coping with the vast unknown."

1.5 YORUBA ART

The Yoruba were famous for their art and craft. Their wood sculpture remains famous to this day. Everything in this society is carved out of wood: doors, drums, ritual masks. The doors are often covered with carved panels of scenes of everyday life, of history or of mythology. Even the hinge posts are carved with figures, making them look like totem poles. The masks are simple facial carvings that represent different types of Yoruba society--the trader, the servant or the seducer.

In Myth, Literature and the African World (1976), Soyinka writes, "Yoruba traditional art is not ideational...but 'essential.' It is not the idea (in religious arts) that is transmitted into wood or interpreted in music or movement, but a quintessence of inner being, a symbolic interaction of the many aspects of revelations (within a universal context) with their moral apprehension" (141).

About Yoruba music Soyinka says that it tries to return to the roots of language and expression. Words are not seen as alien to music: the "nature of Yoruba music is intensively the nature of its language and poetry, highly charged, symbolic, myth-embryonic....In cult funerals, the circle of initiate mourners, an ageless swaying grove of dark pines, raises a chant around a mortar of fire, and words are taken back to their roots, to their original poetic sources when fusion was total and the movement of words was the very passage of music and the dance of images" (Myth, Literature and the African World 147).

Both religious ritual and music play a large part in the creation of Yoruba drama, as Soyinka evocatively explains in Myth, Literature and the African World. Soyinka links the birth of Yoruba drama to the Ogun mysteries. No "copying of actuality" or straightforward mimesis of the seen world is required here. Yoruba theatre,
particularly Yoruba tragedy springs from what Soyinka terms a sense of transition, a transition from the immortal to the mortal. However, the "element of eternity which is the gods' prerogative" is not sensed as something exclusive to the gods or excessively remote from human experience as in the Christian world view. The Yoruba concept of time being, as I understand it, not exclusively linear or teleological, accounts for what Soyinka terms "contemporaneous existence." To the Yoruba, "present life, contains within it manifestations of the ancestral, the living and the unborn" (Myth, Literature and the African World 143-4). And these manifestations are contained in a vital, living way rather than in the form of diffuse abstractions. These concepts will become a little easier to understand once we look at the way they are realised in A Dance of the Forests.

Soyinka describes Yoruba tragedy as being "the anguish" of the "severance" between gods and mortals. He calls this "the fragmentation of essence from self" (Myth, Literature and the African World 145). The music of tragedy is "the stricken cry of man's blind soul as he flounders in the void and crashes through a deep abyss of a-spirituality and cosmic rejection. Tragic music is an echo from that void; the celebrant speaks, sings and dances in authentic archetypal images....All understand and respond, for it is the language of the world" (Myth, Literature and the African World 145).

It is important to realise that the anthropomorphic gods are in no way seen as remote—the Yoruba thus feel free to indulge in "camaraderie and irreverence" when they speak of the gods. The Yoruba religion stresses "the innate humanity of the gods themselves, their bond with man through a common animist relation with nature and phenomena" (Myth, Literature and the African World 145).

Soyinka has spoken of Yoruba drama and its links with religious ritual from a philosophical viewpoint. In Decolonising the Mind: the Politics of Language in African Literature (1986), the writer Ngugi Wa Thiong'o speaks of the roots of African drama in more material terms. According to Ngugi, African drama springs from many different sources:

a) harvest rituals, such as the rite to bless the magic power of tools

b) fertility rites and ceremonies which "celebrate life oozing from the earth, or from between the thighs of humans and animals" (36)

c) ceremonies to bless spears, warriors and other defenders of the community. These songs and dances would act out battle scenes. They had a story and a chorus to underline the fate of evil doers, thieves and idlers.

d) rituals to mark the different stages of life, such as the ceremonies for birth, circumcision, marriage and burial of the dead. These rituals could appease the occasionally hard-hearted gods who were represented in these rituals by men in masks. People came to believe that "Nature, through works and ceremony, could be turned into a friend" (36).

Some of the dramas could take weeks, even months to be performed. The Ithika in Kenya which is held every twenty-five years takes six months to perform.

In pre-colonial Africa, drama was not an isolated event, according to Ngugi. It was an essential part of the "rhythm of daily and seasonal life of the community" (37). Often it drew its energy from other activities. It provided entertainment as well as "moral instruction." Even more than this it was "a strict matter of life and death and communal survival." It could take place anywhere, not necessarily on stage.
For Ngugi the "real language" of African theatre can be found in "the struggles of the oppressed," the struggles which give birth to "a new Africa" (60). "The peasants and workers of Africa," Ngugi continues, "are making a tomorrow out of the present of toil and turmoil." The theatre which uses this language will find a response not only "in the hearts and minds of the participants" but also "in the hearts of those living outside the immediate environment of its physical being and operation" (60) i.e., in urban African audiences or in non-African audiences.

1.6 LET US SUM UP

Nigeria was originally a British dependency; it became independent in 1960. It is an artificial creation where people of conflicting religions and ethnicities were forced to live together. Yoruba is one of the largest ethnic groups of Nigeria, loosely linked by geography, language, history and religion, and it is the group to which Soyinka belongs. The structure of Yoruba religion has two supreme gods, Obatala and Olorun, the creator and the breather of life, as well as a number of important other gods such as Ogun and Eshu. Ogun, the god of war, of the hunt and of iron is Soyinka's favourite. He represents to Soyinka, the struggle of the artist to create. Soyinka describes the Yoruba religion as tolerant and accommodating. There is a close relation between mortals, ancestors and the gods. The gods are not seen as evil or distant from mortals. According to Soyinka, Yoruba tragedy springs from the anguish that comes about as a result of the mortal's separation from the immortal. Yoruba people feel free to laugh at their gods and be irreverent about them. Festivals are very important in Yoruba religion. Drama came from these festivals and rites, such as harvest festivals and fertility rites, and ceremonies such as those to bless warriors. *A Dance of the Forests* is modelled on the Yoruba New Year festival. Soyinka describes Yoruba art as "essential" in that it expresses "the quintessence of inner being."

1.7 GLOSSARY

**monotheism:**
document that there is only one god

**Dionysian:**
of Dionysus, the Greek god of wine, suggesting the power of emotion, or a lack of intellectual control

**Apollonian:**
of Apollo, the Greek god of the sun, suggesting intellectual control

**Promethean:**
like Prometheus, a character in Greek mythology, who, in one myth, formed humans in the likeness of gods, and in another myth was supposed to have stolen fire from the gods to give man

1.8 QUESTIONS

Q.1. Why is Nigeria an "artificial creation"?
Q.2. What, according to Soyinka, is the link between Yoruba religion and Yoruba tragedy?
Q.3. Write a short note on Yoruba religion.
Q.4. What are all the different things Ogun represents to the Yoruba people and why is he Soyinka's favourite god?

1.9 SUGGESTED READINGS

*Cambridge Encyclopaedia of Africa.*
*Dictionary of Black African Civilisation.*
*Encyclopaedia Americana.*
*Encyclopaedia Britannica.*
*National Dictionary of Nigeria.*