

SYNODALITY WITH FICTION WRITERS: A COMPARATIVE STUDY OF SOYINKA'S *THE ROAD* AND ELIOT'S *MURDER IN THE CATHEDRAL*.

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Abstract

*Synodality with fiction writers means "journeying together" with fiction writers. The Catholic Church has called for a synod which started in 2021 and ends in 2023. Through this synod, the Church intends to know the concerns, hopes and expectations of people of different walks of life vis-à-vis her place and function in the world. This comparative essay is an academic study which falls partly within the compass of this synod as it aims at journeying with Wole Soyinka and T. S. Eliot, critically looking at their works, especially *The Road* (1965) and *Murder in the Cathedral* (1935) respectively, to highlight their messages as regards the mission of the Church in particular, and of religions in general. It brings together fictional experiences of both writers, in a comparative perspective, as regards the Church's mission in the world and for a better contribution of religions in the social arena. Its results reveal that, although these dramatists belong to two different geographical and cultural settings, Britain and Nigeria, their works display similar settings and thematic concerns pertaining to different aspects of religion and convey messages for Church authorities in situation of conflict with the laity and State authorities. Yet, these similarities are not simply the outcome of influences of Eliot on Soyinka but show Soyinka's attempt at africanizing Eliot's version of Church-State relationship, which version was itself a perfect fictionalisation of a historical fact.*

Key words : *Comparative literature, synodality, Religion, Church, Conflict.*

Résumé

*La synodalité avec les écrivains de fiction signifie "cheminer ensemble" avec les écrivains de fiction. L'Église catholique a convoqué un synode qui a débuté en 2021 et qui se terminera en 2023. À travers ce synode, l'Église entend connaître les préoccupations, les espoirs et les attentes de personnes de différents horizons vis-à-vis de sa place et de sa fonction dans le monde. Cet essai comparatif est une étude académique qui s'inscrit en partie dans le cadre de ce synode puisqu'il vise à voyager avec Wole Soyinka et T. S. Eliot, en examinant de manière critique leurs œuvres, en particulier *The Road* (1965) et *Murder in the Cathedral* (1935) respectivement, afin de mettre en lumière leurs messages concernant la mission de l'Église en particulier, et des religions en général. Il rassemble les expériences fictionnelles de ces écrivains, dans une perspective comparative, en ce qui concerne la mission de l'Église dans le monde et pour une meilleure contribution des religions dans l'arène sociale. Les résultats révèlent que, bien que ces dramaturges appartiennent à deux contextes géographiques et culturels différents, la Grande-Bretagne et le Nigeria, leurs œuvres présentent des contextes et des préoccupations thématiques similaires concernant différents aspects de la religion et transmettent des messages aux autorités ecclésiastiques en situation de conflit avec les laïcs et avec les autorités de l'État. Cependant, ces similitudes ne sont pas simplement le*

résultat des influences d'Eliot sur Soyinka, mais montrent la tentative de Soyinka d'africaniser la version d'Eliot des relations entre l'Église et l'État, version qui était elle-même une parfaite fictionnalisation d'un fait historique réel.

Mots clés : Littérature comparée, synodalité, religion, Église, conflit.

Introduction

Wole Soyinka is a prolific Nigerian writer and Nobel Prize winner in 1986. Judging from his knowledge of the *Bible* and western literary tradition, many critics say Soyinka got inspiration from some Western authors. *The Swamp Dwellers*, for instance, is modelled on Synge's plays (King 1980 : 81). The plot situation and the character of Baroka in *The Lion and the Jewel* are based on Ben Jonson's *Volpone* and the battle of the sexes within this play has its parallels in George Bernard Shaw's drama (King 1980 : 80). *The Road* (1965) contains traces of influences from oral traditional and external literary texts, including Eliot's *Murder in the Cathedral* (Maledo and Emama 2020 ; King 1980). *Idanre* can be seen as an attempt to write *Paradise Lost* (King 1980 : 92). In this essay, however, the comparison will be limited to *The Road* and Eliot's dramatisation of Thomas Becket's murder in *Murder in the Cathedral* (1935, thereafter referred to as *MITC*). Religion, especially the Catholic Church, is at the centre of both plays under comparison. *MITC*, in fact, narrates the historical conflict between King Henry II and Thomas Becket with the aim of reviving verse drama (Galens 1998). The spiritual authority incarnated by the Archbishop and the King, who is the temporal counterpart, moved from being best friends into enemies. The situation recalls the havoc created by the dreadful first world war which installed pessimism in society, leading English people to start losing their faith. It is then that some dramatists like G. B. Shaw and T. S. Eliot came with the concepts of religion and Christianity in their works, embedding these with the ideas of martyrdom, sainthood and sacrifice to revive and give hope to the population in despair (Bahir 2015). Bahir further says that Shaw and Eliot used historical figures because "a nation which does not value its history and significant figures, leaders, martyrs is not worthy of respect" (12837). This also reflects the fact that "throughout literary history, the theatre has always reflected the moral order of the surrounding society" (Noureiddim 2011 : 51). The medieval mystery and morality plays—such as Christopher Marlowe's masterpiece *Dr. Faustus*—tackled issues related to the unquestionable faith in the

Christian creed. Likewise, Soyinka's play resounds with Christian and traditional African gods and mythology, with the protagonist, the Professor, at the crossroad between Christianity where he was a Sunday-school teacher and lay-reader at Church and the practice of the cult of Ogun. What message are these two works voicing for the way forward of the Church yesterday and today? This is the question this comparative study attempts to address. It first shows the similarities of the two plays regarding the religious setting, themes and use of ambivalent symbols are concerned. Then, it delves on the messages both playwrights give to the Church as regards collaboration with the laity and State authorities.

I. Eliot and Soyinka : Two Religiously-minded Playwrights

Both Eliot and Soyinka are religiously-minded playwrights. Both *The Road* and *MITC* are tragedies exhibiting a strong religious setting. *The Road* dramatises the lives of underprivileged and mostly uneducated people (only one of them is educated, Professor) in a city in a process of rapid modernisation. The opening scene shows a church with a closed stained-glass window and a churchyard nearby. The stage directions present Professor, the central character, as an ex-Sunday-school teacher and lay-reader in the Church. The other characters, mostly the Professor's employees, are a gang of drivers and truck-park layabouts battling with unemployment and seeking any way of making both ends meet. They are like the feeble and "the poor at the gate" (*MITC* 14) of whom the priests speak in Eliot's drama. They live near the Church. They daily spend their time gossiping on all subjects, including economic, material and supernatural matters. Professor often makes reference to the "Word" and the others try to understand it as well as the mystery surrounding the character of Murano, whom Professor considers as the living embodiment of the world existing between the dead and the living. Some of them think it necessary to offer dog-sacrifice to Ogun, the god of fire and creativity in Yoruba mythology. The play closes with Say Tokyo, one of the lorry drivers, deadly stabbing the Professor because the latter entermingled with the power of Ogun that they all revere. As it appears, almost everything is about God, gods and mystery, all of which are at the centre of Christianity and the African traditional religion.

Eliot's *MITC* is also religiously focused. It was written upon the request of the dean of the Cathedral of Canterbury in 1935. He asked Eliot to write an original verse play with a religious topic of his choice

provided that it pertains to the Cathedral's history. Eliot chose to write on the historical martyrdom of Thomas Becket, Archbishop of Canterbury, whose conflict with his former friend King Henry II caused his assassination in 1170 as he was praying in Canterbury Cathedral. The last scene in this drama takes place in the Cathedral and the central characters are all religious people : Archbishop and priests. In the first part, the Archbishop is shown on the road from France to England while his priests, in worry, discuss his return which they dread. He did arrive against their advice not to come back to England.

In both plays, the minor characters undergo the misery of half-lived lives and are presented dreading the coming of the protagonists who both die in their presence. In *MITC*, the chorus sense an in-coming doom in which they will find themselves involved and are afraid : "The New Year waits, destiny waits for the coming... Some malady is coming upon us. We wait, we wait" (*MITC* 12). Then, it is Herald who announced the message to the priests : "Servants of God, and watchers of the temple, / I am here to inform you, without circumlocution : / The Archbishop is in England, and is close outside the city. / I was sent in haste to give you notice of his coming..." (*MITC* 14). To this announcement the priests reacted with signs of unexpectedness and dreadfulness. Likewise, in *The Road*, when Professor comes while Salubi and Samson are gossiping on various subjects, the stage directions signal that, "busy with laughter, they do not see the Professor approach. Salubi is the first to see him, he stands *petrified* for some moments, then begins to *stutter*" (*The Road* 8, italics mine). This is an example showing how all characters dread Professor's presence.

The similarities in the depiction of the environment reflect the pitiful social life people found themselves in but which needed improvement and playwrights undertook the task of improving it. There is a difference, however, between the two plays in the presentation of the setting because in *MITC* the fear is a reverential one ; the priests love the Archbishop, yet they are afraid of him coming to England as the King is looking for an opportunity to kill him. In *The Road*, Professor rather uses fear as a tool to compel the other people to take care of him, especially financially. His employees have to pay for consultation or to get a piece of advice of him (*The Road* 36, 41, 43).

Besides, historical facts lie at the very basis of both plays. Soyinka wrote his play following a dream. At an interview, he made this telling confidence which illuminates the sources of the play : "*The Road* is based on what I might call a personal intimacy which I have developed with a

certain aspect of the road ... It concerns the reality of death. It is a very strange personal experience which developed out of my travels on the road. It was almost a kind of *exorcism* writing that play.” (Colling 1968 : 879, italics mine). Exorcism is a religious practice consisting of driving out evils, *jinn*s, from a person or place by prayer or magic. The act of writing this play constituted like deliverance prayer that helped purge Soyinka’s fear of death. In fact, during the early sixties, administrative duties compelled Soyinka to travel frequently on the dangerous road from Lagos to Ibadan during which he witnessed many road fatal accidents, the frequency of which caused him to fear for his own life. This “personal relationship” which he developed with “the road” explains his attraction to, and fear of, death which he tries to purge through drama, hence the word “exorcism”. Likewise, *MITC* is a dramatisation of a historical event. As already said, this play was written upon the request the dean of the Cathedral of Canterbury made to Eliot to write a play with a religious topic of his choice pertaining to the Cathedral’s history. Eliot chose to write on the historical martyrdom of Thomas Becket. In addition to this historical factor, the protagonist, Thomas Becket, dreaded taking the road back to England from where he fled to escape the King’s wrath. The fear was so nightmarish that he often dreamt about it. Accusing the tempter of offering him only “dreams to damnation”, Becket had this as a reply : You have often dreamt them” (*MITC* 39-40). So, like Soyinka, Becket dreaded taking the road from France to England. Yet the fourth tempter counsels Thomas Becket, saying : “All other ways are closed to you/ Except the way already chosen” (*MITC* 36) and encourages him to “seek the way of martyrdom.../ on earth, to be high in heaven” (*MITC* 39). It is after all these pieces of advice that Becket can accept and assert : “Now is my way clear, now is the meaning plain” (*MITC* 44) and declare himself “more ready for martyrdom” (*MITC* 63) and to walk alongside this road. The road and the way are used as synonyms, for, as Bahir (2015 : 2) puts it, with the canonisation of Becket, “the old Roman road running from London to Canterbury is known as ‘Pilgrim’s way.’”

In addition to the fear of death it induces, as a symbol, the road or the way is ambivalent, especially in Soyinka’s play. It refers to Jesus in Eliot’s play and mostly to Ogun and also to Jesus in Soyinka’s play. Jesus is the “the way and the truth and the life” (John 14 : 6). Becket’s life is similar to that of Jesus. Jesus was afraid to take the road to Jerusalem to meet his death at the hands of the Emperor. He was tempted by Satan and even by his apostles not to drink the cup but at the end he decided

to undertake the road of his passion and death (Mt 26 : 36-39). Becket's life is an imitation of his. Yet, in *The Road*, the symbolism of the road can be understood in a Christian as well as in the Yoruba mythology. Professor is a former lay-reader in church and he is preoccupied with the "Word". Jesus is the Word of God. As St John says, "In the Beginning was the Word and the Word was with God" (John 1 : 1). The Word became man and dwelt amongst us. He is divine and human, in heaven and on earth. He is the Way to the living God. In the Yoruba mythology, the road refers to the god Ogun who also has two natures : creative and destructive.

Ogun is the god of the road. He is usually hungry for food, whatever its form, whether dogs deliberately killed by his taxi-driving devotees or, instead, humans slain by accident. One understands then the reason why Samson in this play is made to repeat word by word the same plea, "May we never walk when the road waits, famished". The road or Ogun is presented as a monstrous man-eater : an inescapable doom when it is hungry. Soyinka pays in this play a tribute to "the road" with all its religious and ritualistic connotations. "The road" is as a god whose favours Soyinka propitiates ; hence, some critics could say that "This literary deification of 'the road' is a typical innovation of Soyinka." (Dingomme 1980 : 31).

The Road shows that life and death are interchangeable from one moment to the other, being side by side, which is best deified in Ogun who is simultaneously a creative and destructive god, and also by the fact that the living, Professor and his folk, are actually sleeping in the nearby graveyard, almost "among the dead". Opposites then lie side by side in the play.

Though both Jesus and Ogun have two natures, it can be observed that while only the life-giving aspect of Jesus is referred to, only the destructive aspect of Ogun's nature is shown.

[The] dual nature of Ogun, as the embodiment of the creative destructive essence, has not been retained by Soyinka in *The Road*. Only the violent and destructive aspect of his nature are deeply explored in the play. It is in his quality of the reluctant leader of men (in 'ldanre') and of the scrap-iron dealer (in 'In Memory of Segun Awolowo') that Ogun presides over the hideous car smashes in *The Road*. He greedily slaughters animals (preferably dogs) and people alike. He is a demanding god and the roads

provide abundant meat for his diet. (Dingome 1980 : 37)

In light of such an explanation, no wonder that Samson pleads Kotonu, the driver of “No Danger No Delay”, to kill a dog for the hungry god Ogun as a substitute of his life.

The comparison at this point shows that the existence of religion or gods is intended to bring peace and tranquility to humans : while the Christian God dies to save humans, the Yoruba mythological god lives on sacrifices, animal and humans alike. The Professor is killed because of and for this god. Had he remained in the Church, he would have saved his life, benefiting from Christ’s redemption. Soyinka draws attention to the danger of leaving one religion for another. New converts or renegates are often dangerous as they can turn into bigots or be irrespective of other religions. The Professor is living in a no-man’s land, not fully in the Church as he is not in good terms with Church authorities, and not fully respecting the religion of his employees. Yet, the punishment he received is itself questionable. No religion should advise killing people who lack respect in it. But if the god lives on death and needs feeding regularly, demanding his devotees to constantly kill anything for him, should that religion have a better future ? It is likely that such a religion would be devoured by any religion like Christianity which does not require such demands of its adherents. This is one message we can get from a synodality with Soyinka in his choice of focusing only on the destructive essence of Ogun in this play.

Another field of similarity between *The Road* and *MITC* is the use of verse form. In his *Poetry and Drama* (1950), Eliot says that his intention of restoring drama in verse form is one of the reasons that led him to write in this form, thus making English drama aware of its origins which goes back to the Church (Hamed 2014 : 47). Eliot contends that verse plays should either deal with a mythological topic (like Soyinka's *The Road* which resorts to Yoruba mythology) or deal with a historical event, allowing characters to speak in verse. *MITC* meets this second criterion. It is a poetic drama that summarises the assassination of Archbishop Thomas Becket in the Cathedral in 1170 A.D. In his introduction to *MITC*, Coghill asserts that Eliot’s use of jazz-rhythm and chorus are “the first signs of Eliot’s effort to break up the sham-Shakespeare log-jam that had immobilised poetic drama for some three hundred years.” (14).

One may see Eliot’s influence on Soyinka in his choice of writing verse drama. However, unlike *MITC*, the verse form in *The Road* is limited

to the preface-poem *Alagemo* and the partitions of the chorus in the play. Critics, including Maledo and Emama, underline that the *Alagemo* poem, though short, dominates the mood of the play, carrying the symbol of death, which is the central message of the play, foreshadowing the mystery and the numerous deaths in it. Yet, it should be remarked that the difference between *The Road* and *MITC* in the use of prose and verse is only a question of proportion, as prose is also used in Eliot's play in light of Coghill's following explanation :

Eliot has followed history until the martyrdom is over; after that he abandons it and brings forward the murderer-knights to speak their bland apologies, whereas in history they stamped out of the cathedral church shouting that they were King's men. *They speak prose*, skipping out of their twelfth-century skins to address a twentieth-century audience in the language of political expectancy of our own times. (*MITC* 19, italics mine).

Prose is abundantly used in *The Road* and less of verse, and vice-versa in *MITC* for historical relevancy of the dramatic message intended for the audience. One can conclude with Coghill that "the return of poetry to the stage [...] is one of the revolutions that Eliot has single-handedly accomplished, [...] not by going back to the flower of Shakespearan style, but to the root of dramatic imagination—religion, ritual, purgation, renewal" (19). It is mostly in this revolution that Eliot influenced Soyinka who also went back to the root of traditional Yoruba dramatic performance and mythology.

Besides, a comparison of the two plays raises the question pertaining to death and God's will. How can one understand this homily by Becket which serves as the interlude ?

Martyrdom is always the design of God, for His love of men, to warn them and to lead them, to bring them back to His ways. It is never the design of man; for the true martyr is he who has become the instrument of God, who has lost his will in the will of God, and who no longer desires anything for himself, not even the glory of being a martyr. (*MITC* 57)

Listening to such homily, one wonders whether a religion can condone suicide or the killing of other people in its name. The idea of killing oneself

(self-sacrifice) or somebody else in order to obey a godly order is a central point in both plays. In *MITC*, Becket gets ready to die to preserve the authority of the Church: “Loathing power given by temporal devolution, / Wishing subjection to God alone” (*MITC* 14). At the chorus’s expression of anger over the prevailing death and corruption covering the earth, Becket responds by speaking of the redemptive power of his death: “Shall pierce you with a sudden painful joy, / When the figure of God’s purpose is made complete” (*MITC* 43). To the Second Tempter offering Becket the power of being once more a Chancellor, he firmly refuses: “Those who put their faith in worldly order/ Not controlled by the order of God, / In confident ignorance, but arrest disorder, / Make it fast, breed fatal disease” (*MITC* 22). The crucial moment of the play is when the fourth Tempter offers Becket the glory of martyrdom. This temptation is unusual and, thus, creates confusion in his mind. He cannot resist this temptation because he cannot decide whether it is his ambition that obliges him to be martyred or it is a temptation. Finally, he understands that the martyr is he who has lost his will in God’s will (*MITC* 57), which leads to his acceptance of God’s will by meeting his death at the hands of the Knights. But the Fourth Tempter’s verdict of “Suicide while of Unsound Mind” (*MITC* 81) against Becket would be acceptable if ever he has sinned in any way. Being killed for doing something wrong is a punishment and not martyrdom. Jesus, the righteous one, has been martyred, and so are many of his following, Becket included.

Eliot’s influence on Soyinka can also be seen in his centering *The Road* on the reality of death. In this play, Soyinka deeply explores the paradoxical idea according to which life is in death and death is in life. The opening lines of the ‘Alagemo’ poem help to indicate that this passage between death, freshly dissolution, and arrival in the other world is the area which Soyinka explores in *The Road*. The Egungun mask spins and falls when Professor finally meets death in the closing scene. By holding the god in Murano ‘captive’, Professor wants full knowledge of death. The “Word” he has been seeking all along is presented as “the essence of death”. “The road” also symbolises the proverbial road of life through which all mortals must travel; hence, “The Word may be found companion not to life, but to Death” (*The Road* 11) as it is not possible to obtain the forbidden knowledge and still stay alive. Murano who has one foot in the world of the living and the other on that of the dead has knowledge of death but in an incomplete way. It is in death that Professor, paradoxically, gets full knowledge of the Word. It is as

enigmatic as Becket's martyrdom. Yet, there is a difference. Nobody takes profit of Professor's knowledge of the Word or of his death. In this sense, it is unlike martyrdom. Becket announces that he will achieve victory in spite of his death as a martyr : "We have only to conquer / Now, by suffering. This is the easier victory. Now is the triumph of the Cross" (*MITC* 72). The death of the martyr represents not the defeat, but the victory of the individual over sin and wickedness. Becket's death is supposed to have brought peace to the Church, cleansing not only it, but the whole world of contaminations and tyranny. Yet, the reality is that despite the blood shed by martyrs, the Church and the whole humanity are still in a state of mess ; hence, the call of this synod to help find some ways out.

II. Synodal Messages in the Journey with Eliot and Soyinka

In the *Vademecum for the Synod on Synodality*, the handbook for listening and discernment leading up to the Assembly of Bishops in synod in October 2023, the main question for consultation is as follows : "A synodal Church, in announcing the Gospel, 'journeys together.' How is this 'journeying together' happening today in [African literature]? What steps does the Spirit invite us to take in order to grow in our 'journeying together'?" To respond to this fundamental question, literary critics are invited to follow three steps. First, to recall their experiences. What experiences of African literary works does this question call to mind ? Second, to re-read these experiences in greater depth : What joys did they bring ? What difficulties and obstacles have they encountered ? What wounds did they reveal ? What insights have they elicited ? Third, to gather the fruits to share : What is the Spirit asking of us ? What are the prospects for change, the steps to be taken ? Where do we register a consensus ? What paths are opening up for our Church ?

To help people and critics explore more fully the above fundamental question, ten themes have been highlighted. The sixth one, dialogue in church and in society, is pertinent to this study. Some of the questions that are relevant to the current research are :

Dialogue requires perseverance and patience, but it also enables mutual understanding. To what extent do diverse peoples in our community come together for dialogue ? [...] How do we promote collaboration with [...] lay associations and movements, etc. ? How are divergences of vision, or

conflicts and difficulties addressed? What particular issues in the Church and society do we need to pay more attention to? What experiences of dialogue and collaboration do we have with believers of other religions and with those who have no religious affiliation? How does the Church dialogue with and learn from other sectors of society: the spheres of politics, economics, culture, civil society, and people who live in poverty? (Secretary General 2021)

A reading of the two plays offers some answers to these questions.

In the light of the issues raised, two main synodal messages can be drawn from comparing the two literary works under scrutiny. One pertains to the relationship between Church authorities and the laity. The other concerns the collaboration between Church authorities and Government.

Concerning the first one, that is, the collaboration between Church authorities and the laity, both Eliot and Soyinka draw attention to the deadly danger of syncretism, expression of indecision in one's choice for a fixed religion, the wandering from one religion to another without making one's mind to follow one specific religion. Such a situation is fatal for the person in *The Road*. It is the specific case of Professor. He wanders in-between two religions: Christianity and traditional Yoruba religion. First, he is a Christian and has been trained to spread the teachings of Christianity, which he did for some time. His wholehearted dedication in his work led Church authorities to entrust him with the running of Church funds. Yet, money corrupts and Professor did not resist. His financial management becomes scandalous, leading his dismissal. Yet, Professor, like most of protagonists in Soyinka's plays, is an ambivalent character, having complex and conflicting elements (like Lakunle in *The Lion and the Jewel*, who, on the one hand, enjoys looking at Sidi's breasts unconsciously and, on the other hand, when he is conscious, asks her to cover them completely). Pouille (2016: 42) observes this dilemma and mental distortion in the character of Professor: "[Professor] does seem to have a genuine interest in discovering and unifying himself with the Word, but [...] is also entangled in the realities of the concrete material world. [...] Professor is involved in a life pattern that simultaneously kills and resurrects the god or goddess." This recalls the dilemma of "mourn and rejoice" in the Archbishop's homily put as an interlude in *MITC*:

At this same time of all the year that we celebrate at once the Birth of Our Lord and His Passion and Death upon the Cross. Beloved, as the World sees, this is to behave in a strange fashion. For who in the World will both mourn and rejoice at once and for the same reason ? (*MITC* 47-48).

The Professor acts as a counterfeit Christ-like figure : Professor kills and resurrects while Christ dies and rises. The realisation, through the analysis of the character of Professor, that any person has conflicting elements in his/her life should lead Church authorities to be watchful in the trust given to anybody, or, as Becket says, to have “good cause to trust none but God alone” (*MITC* 34) and also that trust does not prevent from control, given that there is “in the art of temporal government, / But violence, duplicity and frequent malversation” (*MITC* 34).

However, the protagonist of Eliot's play is the binary opposite of Professor regarding trust. Both tempters underline how well Becket managed the role and function that the King entrusted him in his kingdom. Becket himself reminds the tempter of his good conduct as a Chancellor :

I ruled once as Chancellor
And men like you were glad to wait at my door.
Not only in the court, but in the field
And in the tilt-yard I made many yield.
Shall I who ruled like an eagle over doves
Now take the shape of a wolf among wolves?
Pursue your treacheries as you have done before:
No one shall say that I betrayed a king (*MITC* 34).

Becket refuses to change from being “an eagle over doves” into being a wolf. Such a character should be considered as fidelity in trust instead of a betrayal as in the King’s interpretation of it.

On the other hand, while freedom is granted by Church authorities to the laity in the running of affairs in *The Road*, *MITC* does not offer freedom of conscience to individuals, especially government authorities do not. The King is angry because of Becket’s exerting his freedom by refusing to combine both temporal and spiritual powers :

The King intended that Becket, who had proved himself an extremely able administrator—no one denies that—should unite the offices of Chancellor and Archbishop. No one would have grudged him

that ; no one than he was better qualified to fill at once these two most important posts. Had Becket concurred with the King's wishes, we should have had an almost ideal State : a union of spiritual and temporal administration, under the central government (*MITC* 79).

Becket refused taking this proposal from the King, which enraged him. He became outrageously violent into ordering the killing of Becket for exerting his freedom. Eliot's play stands as a plea to government officials to respect people's freedom. His play is revolutionary art against the wrong attitudes and corruptions of society. Instead of uniting spiritual and temporal administration into one as the King desires, there should rather be separation of Church and State, of spiritual administration and temporal government in favour of the promotion of dialogue between the two.

Concerning the relationship between Church and State, a critical examination of *MITC* reveals another synodal message. King Henry II wanted to assume spiritual powers ; hence the Church-State conflict. *MITC* is a declaration that there are certain areas over which the State should have no jurisdiction, as is attested by this statement by the second knight :

The moment that Becket, at the King's instance, had been made Archbishop, he resigned the office of Chancellor, he became more priestly than the priests, he ostentatiously and offensively adopted an ascetic manner of life, he openly abandoned every policy that he had heretofore supported; he affirmed immediately that there was a higher order than that which our King, and he as the King's servant, had for so many years striven to establish; and that—God knows why—the *two orders were incompatible*. (*MITC* 79, italics mine).

The message one gets from journeying with Eliot in company with *MITC* is the necessity to keep Church and Crown separate and to prevent each of the two from assuming the functions of the other. Eliot's drama makes the plea that there should be some religious areas over which the Crown or the State has no jurisdiction whatsoever. The havoc the King has caused by intervening in spiritual matters is devastating for the Church and for peace in his kingdom.

Lastly, a synodal message of religious dialogue can be drawn from the playwrights' interest in religions they are not personally practising. Eliot was agnostic as Coghill (1965 : 11) expounds :

It is of course no accident that the change from agnosticism to Christianity should gradually have emerged in Eliot's writing, since it took place in his life, and was marked by the publication of a book of essays... but accident is woven into the pattern too... any more than the occasion of *Murder in the Cathedral*.

If the fictionalisation of a historical religious event can lead to conversion into Christianity, it is an omen that the reading of it can pave the way for readers' free adherence to that religion.

Like Eliot, Soyinka, though born of and brought up by Christian parents, shows interest in traditional Yoruba religion and is constantly thinking in terms of Yoruba myths, with the presence of the ancestors (Egungun) and of the Yoruba gods (Ogun) in his works; he shows signs of "triculturalism" with his use of Christian, Islamic and Yoruba symbols such as his parody of the Christian prayer "Our Father" in characters' mouths : "Give us this day our daily bribe" (*The Road* 6); the three souls "crucified on rigid branches" (*The Road* 11) of a tree which recall the crucifixion of Jesus and the two thieves; the invitation to bow at the name of Jesus Christ (*The Road* 16); the mention of the name of Adam and the tree of life (*The Road* 21) which refers to the biblical book of genesis; the mention of the Islamic "Rhamaddan" (*The Road* 61, 87), the traditional "Mask" and "libation to earth" (*The Road* 88, 96) which are practices in African traditional religion. He, thus, promotes dialogue and respect of religions as a condition for a peaceful life in society. It is in this way that the Church should journey with other religions.

Conclusion

This essay has shown the extent to which Soyinka relies not only on the Christian *Bible*, Yoruba mythology, but also on Western literary texts such as Eliot's, in the creation of *The Road* as well as Eliot's reliance on historical records in his creation of *MITC*. This entrepreneurship of both of them can be seen as "a mark of versatility and creative ingenuity" (Maledo and Emama 2020) as this reliance on external sources is not plagiarism but an instance of creative incorporation. Soyinka's literary output is the expression of a specific world view coming from his African

background and his sound knowledge of other non-African cultures. Eliot influenced Soyinka in the religious thematic as well as in the structuration of the play. The two plays have significant resemblances. In *MITC*, Eliot has portrayed Becket as a protagonist who struggles with the King as well as with himself ; Becket quenches the thirst of humans for power with his own blood. Similarly, Professor quenches his knowledge of the “Word” through death in *The Road*. The Church learns, journeying together with these two authors, the importance of keeping an eye on people on whom trust has been given in the running of Church funds, on the necessity of the separation of Church and State, the respect of freedom of religion and the need to foster religious dialogue.

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