Wole Soyinka's *Orí Olókun* Emprise and Autobiography[1]

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Abstract

In *Telling Our Stories: Continuities and Divergences in Black Autobiographies,* I suggest that the overwhelming presence of the community is one of the major continuities in Black autobiographies of Africa, the Unites States, and the Caribbean. This focus on community manifests itself in terms of resistance, solidarity, and inclusiveness in the autobiographies of slaves, creative writers, and political activists. A new dimension to the superordinate presence of the community in Black autobiography is in terms of diaspora sensibility. This disapora consciousness is symbolized in the *Orí Olókun* treasure that Wole Soyinka foregrounds in *You Must Set Forth at Dawn*. This paper focuses on the development of Soyinka's diaspora consciousness in relation to the perceived presence of *Orí Olókun* in Bahia and his attempt with his colleagues to forcefully repatriate the treasure back to the public domain from where it was removed. The paper argues that what operates at the background of Soyinka's group's project of repatriating *Orí Olókun* from Brazil to Nigeria is the communal spirit of Yoruba and African nationalism that cuts across colonial geographical boundaries. The paper considers the role of Soyinka, Yai, Isola, and Abimbola in the attempt to repatriate *Orí Olókun* back to Nigeria. Emphasis

1 I thank the University of Mississippi for the travel grants that made the research for this paper possible. I also appreciate Dr. Sabrina Gledhill for introducing me to some of the contacts that I interviewed for this essay in Salvador da Bahia in Brazil and for giving me some excerpts from Pierre Verger's biography. I am grateful to Dr. Henrique Momm for translating the excerpts from Pierre Verger's biography for me from Portuguese to English. As well, I thank Ms. Solange Bernabo, Mrs. Nancy Bernabo, and Dr. Angela Luhning for the interviews they granted me for this paper.

is also on Soyinka's narrative strategies and specifically the implications of his autobiographical medium to represent his and his community's struggle to return what rightly belongs to them back to Nigeria. How the autobiographical genre develops that umbilical cord that links the Yorubas in Africa and the diaspora through the *Ori Olokun* episode is also considered.

Introduction and Theoretical Background

"I had taken this mission too seriously, I now realized, the perfect prelude to a punitive deflation." Wole Soyinka, *You Must Set Forth at Dawn,* 202.

In "The Value of Autobiography for Comparative Studies," James Olney categorizes the autobiographical genre broadly as auto-autography and autophylography. While auto-autography is individualistic and Western, autophylography is communal and African. For auto-autography, Olney cites Michel de Montaigne, Carl Jung, and Jean-Jacques Rousseau to discuss the focus on the self. From Jung's prologue to *Memories, Dreams, Reflections*, Olney cites the following auto - autographical passage: "My life is a story of the self-realization of the unconscious…. I cannot employ the language of science to trace this process of growth in myself, for I cannot experience myself as a scientific problem… Thus, it is that I have now undertaken, in my eighty-third year, to tell my personal myth. I can only make direct statements, only 'tell stories.' Whether or not the stories are 'true' is not the problem. The only question is whether what I tell is *my fable*, *my* truth" (Olney 217). For autophylography, Olney cites the interdependence of Africans on one another, illustrating his arguments with the Xhosa and Sonjo people, particularly the belief that one exists only because a community surrounds one. As the Sonjo people put it: "I am because we are, and since we are, therefore I am." Although I have concerns about Olney's discussion of Richard Wright's *Black* Boy as auto - autography in his essay, I find his arguments on autophylography to be a forceful approach to reading Soyinka's *You Must Set Forth at Dawn.* The book is unique because it vacillates between Soyinka's experiences as an individual and those of the community that nourishes his existence.

After my discussion of Olney's arguments above in *Telling Our Stories: Continuities and Divergences in Black Autobiographies,* I suggest that the overwhelming presence of the community is one of the major continuities in Black autobiographies/autophylographies of Africa, the United States, and the Caribbean. This focus on community manifests itself in terms of resistance, solidarity, and inclusiveness in the autobiographies of slaves, creative writers, and political activists. As Henry Louis Gates, Jr. argues, "[t]he narrated, descriptive 'eye' was put into service as a literary form to posit both the individual 'I' of the black author as well as the collective 'I' of the race" (11).

Diaspora Consciousness and *Orí Olókun*

A new dimension to the superordinate presence of the community in Black autobiography is in terms of diaspora consciousness, as symbolized in the *Orí Olókun* treasure in Soyinka's *You Must Set Forth at Dawn*. According to Soyinka, "Olókun—literally the owner, or god, of the seas—was the consort of Oduduwa, the twain thus seen as primogenitors of the Yoruba, the black race, and indeed, of all humanity. If Oduduwa was sent to Earth by Olodumare, the Supreme Deity, to directly create and animate Earth, Olókun, his consort, performed a parallel task for the seas and the oceans" (190-191). It therefore follows in Yoruba mythology in Africa and the diaspora that the origin of the race is traceable to Olókun and Oduduwa. *Orí Olókun*, translated into English from Yoruba as Olókun's head, is the bronze Ife sculpture excavated by Leo Frobenius in Ile-Ife in 1910. As it was typical of the colonial era, the treasure was probably seized from Frobenius by the British colonial government and ultimately shipped outside the country. Wole Soyinka, Olabiyi Yai, Wande Abimbola, and Akinwumi Isola, a group of renowned Yoruba intellectuals based at the University of Ife in the 1970s, concluded that the treasure somehow found its way to Brazil and was lodged in a private collection in Bahia. Their concern was not just that the sculpture was outside Nigeria, but that it was in a private collection not ordinarily accessible to the teeming Yoruba population in Africa and the diaspora.

Soyinka's sub-title for the *Orí Olókun* section of *You Must Set Forth at Dawn* shows his play on words. He puns *Olókun* to come up with *Olórí Kunkun,* another Yoruba word that describes his activities in relation to *Orí Olókun*. He actually describes himself and Olabiyi Yai who are involved in the attempt to repatriate *Orí Olókun* as *olori-kunkun*.[2] Of course, this pun is easily lost on Soyinka's non-Yoruba reader. While *Orí Olókun,* as mentioned earlier, means Olókun's head in Yoruba, *Olórí kunkun* in the same language means someone with a stubborn head. Although Soyinka and his colleagues' stubbornness in relation to the repatriation of *Orí Olókun* is undeniable, it is a very positive commitment to addressing a previous wrong done to their community when an artifact of monumental communal importance like Olókun's head was taken away from the community.

Soyinka's recollection of the *Orí Olókun* episode starts with a "preface" on his interactions with some Nigerian military regimes, which he describes as "dining with the devil" (179). One of those governments was the military

2 See page 208 of Soyinka's narrative: "So much for the fate of Orí Olókun. Of more immediate concern to us was our own fate, the two olori-kunkun who had undertaken this thankless mission."

regime of General Olusegun Obasanjo from 1976-1979. Of course, the relationship between Soyinka and Obasanjo was not necessarily without regular hiccups. Soyinka actually describes their relationship as that of "qualified" friends (184) and describes Obasanjo as a representative of "a model of the power of an unusual—and dangerous—kind, most especially as he remained basically insecure and thus pathologically in need of proving himself, preferably at the expense of others" (185-186). He is "[a] bullish personality, calculating and devious, yet capable of a disarming spontaneity, affecting a country yokel act to cover the interior actuality of the same, occasionally self-deprecatory yet intolerant of criticism, this general remains a study in the outer limits of a sense of rivalry, even where the fields of competence and striving are miles apart" (186). Soyinka concludes his introduction to Obasanjo by quoting the statement by Kole Animashaun that the general's "ego is bigger than his head" (187). Soyinka mentions the first suggestion of a link between *Orí Olókun* and Obasanjo as follows: "the size of the general's ego was not uppermost in my mind, however, when I invited myself to dinner in 1978. When a prize such as *Orí Olókun*, the long-lost bronze head of a principal Yoruba deity, shimmers so alluringly within the sight of an *olórí-kunkun*,* one may be forgiven for forgetting the long spoon, even with full knowledge that a swishing tail may be hidden beneath the khaki uniform" (187).

The preamble to the *Orí Olókun* section described above is crucial primarily to justify Soyinka's judgment on Obasanjo's behavior later in the text. Soyinka employs one of the strategies of an accomplished storyteller by continuing to keep his readers in suspense from the *Orí Olókun* tale. Instead of telling the story, he uses a flash-forward technique to advance the story to a few years after the *Orí Olókun* episode to when he was teaching at Yale. The new episode was when he went to watch *Indiana Jones and the Temple of Doom*, "what was at the time considered a 'cult' film" (187) with his former student but then Yale colleague Henry Louis "Skip" Gates, Jr, having been introduced to the film by Robert Farris Thompson "the ase-driven scholar" (187). Watching the film was to Soyinka like "watching a souped-up documentary of one of my better-forgotten undertakings. My feeling throughout was that I had been deliberately set up to be lampooned by Steven Spielberg in the storyline, without even the consolation of a love angle. I was grateful for the darkness that covered my blushes" (187). At this point, the link between the film Soyinka was watching and the *Orí Olókun* episode was not clear. Until he picks the thread of the *Orí Olókun* story back in Ife when he was finishing teaching a seminar in 1978 and three of his colleagues, Professors Akin Isola, Wande Abimbola, and Olabiyi Yai came to see him for a conversation that the reader later discovers has to do with *Orí Olókun*.

In introducing his guests, Soyinka foregrounds the issue of the arbitrary colonial demarcation of nations into national entities, an issue related to the colonial encounter with *Orí Olókun* as the reader discovers later. While Isola and Abimbola are professors of Yoruba Studies from the Yorubaland of Nigeria, Yai is a Yoruba professor of linguistics from Benin republic. The fact that Yai is a Yoruba from Benin republic allows Soyinka to comment on colonial disruption/destruction/stealing of precolonial African artifacts, an issue that I will return to in my conclusion. From returning to Ife in his narrative to introducing his interlocutors, Soyinka returns to Yale on the same page (188) to draw links between the Ife professors he encountered and the Yale ones in relation to the film he was watching. As he puts it, "how could I have failed, by the way, after watching *Temple of Doom*? To be struck by the coincidence that it was yet another professor of the Yoruba extended family—Thompson—who had been responsible for my presence in the theater, or that I was watching this sumptuous take off on my own escapade in the company of yet another scholar, Skip Gates, who was undergoing his own phase of Yorubaphillia in the personal of Èṣù, the deity of the random factor and reversals, and quirky messenger of the deities!" (188). What this reference shows clearly is Soyinka's diaspora consciousness in that he is able to develop links with various strands of the Yoruba/African/Black community both in and outside Nigeria. He is able to foster a relationship between the Yoruba in the diaspora and in Nigeria with Yai's presence in the group in search of *Orí Olókun*. He is able to develop the consciousness further with Professor Pierre Verger, another member of the larger Yoruba community in Ife who was intricately involved with the *Orí Olókun* episode, "a respected ethnologist—indeed, perhaps the pioneer of Yoruba ethnological studies in South America with *Dieux d'AAfrique* and others" (193). The same diaspora consciousness is what developed his interaction with other professor members of the Yoruba diaspora at Yale.

The request by the eminent Ife scholars was that Soyinka should help in securing the return of *Orí Olókun* from a private collection in Brazil. According to Soyinka, the story was incredible: "I could not believe our luck! *Orí Olókun*, these colleagues were telling me, was not locked up in a national museum with fortifications, guards, electronic monitoring devices, crisscrossing laser beams, robotic strangler guards, and all the rest, but was displayed in a private gallery, not even a public one but a kind of studio-gallery, owned by a famous artist cum architect!" (193).

The background to the request explains the connection between *Orí Olókun* and General Olusegun Obasanjo as head of state. Those soliciting Soyinka's help know that he is connected with the head of state and the question of repatriating *Orí Olókun* requires government cooperation at the highest level. Another part of the background to the request from Soyinka is the unsuccessful

attempt to repatriate a Benin bronze from the London Museum to participate in the famous 1977 (the previous year to the time of Soyinka's narrative) Festival of Black and African Arts hosted by Nigeria. The bronze mask was previously stolen from Benin during a British invasion of the kingdom. A third aspect to the background of the request from Soyinka deals with the relationship between Ogun, Soyinka's patron deity, and *Orí Olókun.* According to Soyinka: "Ogun, my patron deity, is the son of Oranmiyan, through his principal consort, Isedale, and is thus the grandson of Olókun. Therefore, I had a personal stake in the fate of Olókun, beyond the legend and mythology whose spiritual descendant—through Ogun—I have long accepted myself to be" (191).[3]

The private gallery that housed the treasure was owned by an artist/architect named Carybe and in the conversation that ensued among Soyinka and his interlocutors, Yai said he saw the treasure in the gallery and Professor Pierre Verger, the renowned ethnologist on campus, admitted taken it there to Yai. The available information was compelling to Soyinka: "We had a sighting that was less than two years old, we had a physical location, we had a live witness and a confession, and the transporter of stolen goods was right on campus. In comparison to past chases, the trail could be held to be unseasonably warm (195).

The Journeys to Brazil and Dakar

The next stage was to contact the head of state through Professor Ojetunji Abayode, a mutual friend of both Soyinka and Obasanjo. After the meeting, a group made up of Wole Soyinka, Henry Adefowope, the foreign minister, and Ambassador Fagbenle was constituted on the task ahead. The road plan was: "[w]e agreed that Olabiyi Yai and I should travel to Brazil, locate the quarry if it was still in Bahia, and, if possible, bring it back. *If* possible? I had already resolved that if *Orí Olókun* would simply do its part and manifest itself before me, it would end its exile almost immediately, journeying back in the diplomatic bag to its home on that usurped podium in Ife Museum" (196). Before their departure for Brazil, Soyinka took some additional precautionary measures, including traveling on diplomatic passports with Yai, ensuring that the foreign ministry wrote to the Nigerian embassy in Brazil asking them to provide all necessary assistance to them, and Pierre Verger's planned departure from Nigeria should be delayed by the university (197). Finally, Soyinka went into the bush for contemplation and support from the deities whose symbol he was going to get from Brazil. The plan was to tell the architect owner of the gallery with *Orí Olókun* that they were in search of an architect to help in

3 Oranmiyan is the offspring of Oduduwa and Olókun, 191.

redesigning the Nigerian embassy. He bought a camera to take photos of Carybe's building but got a camera bag bigger than the camera he bought. Finally, they met Carybe who invited them to dinner. Soyinka recalls the meeting: "As we sat in his living room, awaiting dinner, I silently swore that before I left Bahia, I would eat more than *àkàràjẹ* from his home! I would swallow an entire head, uncooked, yet simmering in his gallery! He served drinks. I sipped but tasted nothing. Though I was outwardly calm, my inner being was quivering." Carybe finally showed them his gallery and lo and behold "seated on the topmost shelf among several sculptural miscellaneous items in a magnificent indifference to the history-laden voyage that had brought it to an alien yet native land, was the long-sought masterpiece: *Orí Olókun*. The difference between this and the *thing* in the museum gallery of Ile-Ife was intuitively obvious; in any case, I had seen photo plates of the authentic piece. This face belonged to those photographs—longer, refined, and anatomically well proportioned" (201).

Soyinka returns to the use of suspense as a narrative technique. What the reader knows up to this point was that Soyinka intends to take away the Olókun sculpture but has not done it yet. Since he planned to return to Carybe's house the following day, the expectation was that he would take the treasure then. This expectation is dashed during the trip back to their hotel when Soyinka tells Yai that he took the treasure already. The surprise is still coming. Unlike the expectation of a bronze statue, what they had in their possession was made of clay. The disappointment in the clay material they had was complemented by the news from home. Pierre Verger's documents had been released to him and he had been helped by the state security agency to leave Nigeria contrary to the initial plan of letting Soyinka and Yai back in the country prior to his release. This is why the Obasanjo connection comes in again. Obasanjo didn't fulfill his own part of the bargain as his officers were responsible for helping Pierre to leave the country and he was unreachable by Soyinka when he and Yai returned to Nigeria from Brazil/Dakar (208-209, 217). Obasanjo later apologized to Soyinka for the aborted operation (218).

The immediate decision on what to do was to carry out more research on the treasure and off to Dakar they went for further inquiries in the laboratories of Cheikh Anta Diop. Soyinka, Yai, and Diop's associates thought that what they had with them was the original sculpture only to discover the "BM" stamp on it: "What we had in our hand was nothing other than a British Museum copy, available for the regal sum of –fifteen, twenty pounds? Certainly, twenty-five pounds at the most. The deflation could not have been more definitive than that of a hot-air balloon spiraling down to earth after an unfortunate encounter with a migrating stork!" (205). Soyinka and his group's final reconstruction of the disappearance of *Orí Olókun* is as follows: "…the district

officer parted with what he *thought* was *Orí Olókun*. It was more likely to have been an imitation—that is, not a direct replica of the original but a separate head, a clumsy handiwork by Frobenius's companion. That imitation continued to this day, to occupy pride of place in Ile-Ife. Frobenius's companion had mastered the art of *cire perdue* but lacked the skills to make a copy with the finesse of the original. When the district officer demanded that he disburden himself of the precious head, Frobenius had simply given him an *original imitation*, fabricated by his artist" (213). The question still in need of an answer was if what Soyinka and co had was a copy, where was the original? That the version that Soyinka and Yai got from Brazil was a British Museum copy is corroborated in Verger's biography (269).

The search for the original *Orí Olókun* moved to the British Museum in London and not to arouse suspicion, Barbara, Femi Johnson's English wife (wife to Soyinka's friend) was recruited to find whatever she could about the missing original treasure. Barbara contacted the original British family who acquired the treasure as requested by Soyinka's group and she discovered that the family gave the piece to the British Museum. Barbara later discovered that the British Museum lent it to the Museum of Mankind in Burlington Gardens, where Soyinka finally found it. Less than twenty-four hours later, though removed from the display. One of the attendants later took Soyinka to where they kept the head. Soyinka recalls the moment of his encounter with the real head as follows: "Outwardly calm, I simply leaped on it inwardly and lifted this exquisite bronze head in my hands. The weight was just what I had anticipated when I had climbed the makeshift ladder in Carybe's studio and lifted its copy off the shelf. The gash in the missing cheek was exactly where it had been on the copy. Reverently, I turned it around and around in my hands, peered shortsightedly into the cavity beneath the neck, and sought to guess just how old it was. I laughed aloud" (215). Soyinka later left for Nigeria, but without *Orí Olókun*. Soyinka tries to apologize to Pierre Verger, but he turns down all invitations to Ife. Soyinka concludes this section of his narrative by recalling Pierre's death. "Pierre died some years ago, reconciliation with that misused scholar was one that I truly craved, but appeasement must now be delayed until our reunion under the generous canopy of Orunmila" (221).

My Search for *Orí Olókun* in Brazil and England

I became curious about the Olókun bronze head after reading Soyinka's autobiographical account, and I went in search of the treasure in Brazil and England. On May 28, 2007, in Salvador da Bahia in Brazil, I spoke with Dr. Sabrina Gledhill of Five-Star International Communications in Brazil after I presented my paper "From Ile-Ife to Bahia: *Orí Olókun*, Wole Soyinka, and

Community" at the 32nd Annual Conference of the Caribbean Studies Association—Alternative Interpretations of the Circum-Caribbean: Interrogating Connections Across History, Society, Culture, and Performance. She told me the *Orí Olókun* event took place at Brotas district of Salvador—where Carybe's studio was and that if Soyinka and Yai just told Carybe what the issue was, he would have gladly let them have the artifact. She then gave me information on how to get to The Pierre Verger Foundation and to contact Carybe's daughter and widow. On 30 May 2007, I interviewed Carybe's daughter, Ms. Solange Bernabo, at Oxum Casa De Arte, Pelorino, Salvador da Bahia. She told me she was not home when the *Orí Olókun* event happened, but gave me the contact information for her mother, Mrs. Nancy Bernabo. I met Mrs. Bernabo at her studio on 31 May 2007. She thought I was Soyinka! I quickly corrected her that I was not, though I did not think there were police officers around to make any arrest. She told me that Carybe's real name was Hector Julio P. Bernabo. He was born in Buenos Aires, Argentina on 7 February 1911 and died in Salvador on November 1, 1997. He was an artist not an architect. He was working on a mural when Soyinka and Yai came to visit. The mural covered *Orí Olókun*, so when Soyinka went back to get it, Carybe did not notice and did not know until Pierre Verger came back and told him of his experiences in Nigeria concerning the artifact. Carybe then went to the studio and discovered that *Orí Olókun* was missing. She told me that Carybe and Pierre Verger were traumatized after they discovered the artifact was missing. Mrs. Bernabo's oral account to me was the same account reported in Verger's biography with some additional information as follows: "The writer that received the Nobel Prize in Literature, Soyinka, arrived with Yai, and we received them with open arms. It was Sunday and Carybe was at home. We talked and Carybe invited them to go upstairs in the studio and they refused. They would like to return the next day with spare time to take some pictures. The next day, when they arrived, Carybe was not at home, and I oversaw taking them to the studio. He had promised me that he would return earlier to take them to lunch at the Modelo Market. And like that he did. When both arrived with their luggage, I thought those were photograph equipment. They asked for water, and I went to get it. Carybe was painting in the studio. The canvas was huge, and to facilitate the painting job, he leaned it against the bookshelf, in such a way that it was hiding everything behind it. The imitation of Olókun's head was there, behind the canvas. I believe that while I went down to get the water, they took the opportunity to get the statue and put it into the luggage. I did not see anything. They were very calm. When Carybe arrived, we went to have lunch. We asked 'And so Pierre, when does he return?' He replied: 'Ah, one of these days he will return for sure.' After lunch, while we were asking when they would leave, because we would host them appropriately, they said: 'No,

no, we will have to go to Brasilia, and thus return earlier.' Moreover, we did not notice anything because with the giant canvas we could not know whether something was taken from behind it. When Pierre returned, he told us what had happened and asked us: Do you know what they were accusing me of? Of stealing that Olókun's head that you have here. We rushed to the studio and noticed that, for a fact, Olókun's head was no longer there. We mentioned to Pierre the visit we received from his friends and then he understood and got depressed about the story. He did not want to return to Africa. He never returned to Nigeria" (269-270).

On 29 May 2007, I interviewed Dr. Angela Luhning, the Director of the Pierre Verger Foundation in Salvador da Bahia. She told me that Pierre Verger was incredibly sad over the incident. She told me that Verger was travelling out of Nigeria and was with Iyalorisa Giselle Cossard Binon in Rio De Janeiro. Binon passed through security, but Verger was detained. I asked her why Pierre Verger was suspected of bringing *Orí Olókun* to Brazil. Her answer was that maybe it was because the Brazilian museum was built in Salvador at the time and Verger was asked to buy Yoruba artifacts; they thought he got *Orí Olókun* for the museum. Luhning told me that Verger went to Benin Republic after the episode but never went back to Nigeria. At the Pierre Verger Foundation in Salvador da Bahia, I saw the correspondence between Pierre Verger and Professor Wande Abimbola who was one of those who asked for Soyinka's help in getting *Orí Olókun* back and later became the Vice Chancellor of the University of Ife. In the letters, Abimbola tried to ascertain whether Verger knew anything about the missing artifact, but he said he did not.

Pierre Verger commented on the *Orí Olókun* episode in his biography written in Portuguese titled *Verger: um Retrato em Preto e Branco* (*Verger: A Portrait in Black and White*) by Cida Nobrega and Regina Echeverria. His account in the biography corroborates the accounts I heard in my interviews in Salvador. According to Nobrega and Echeverria, Verger's "return trip was scheduled for March 05, 1979, but the day before, very strange things started to happen. An unidentified staff took his passport and air tickets, under the justification of standard verification. Do not worry, said the man because everything will take place in the airport, during boarding time. As described by Verger nothing happened like that, 'my passport and air ticket were apprehended by an unknown person the day before my departure from the university campus". According to what I soon realized; this was done by someone I considered a friend... triggered by an anonymous accusation from someone at Ife University. The accusation was pathetic: Verger was a thief and a South African spy; arrested while boarding an airplane headed to Brazil, his luggage already checked out. Everything was taken from him, including his T-shirt without an explanation for such violence, after all he was 76 years old and a

university faculty member. He spent a week in jail, time that he was not able to contact the French Consulate and his 'friends' at the Ife University and, at the end, with nobody that would be able to help him to escape from that situation that he considered absurd. [According to Verger,] 'I had to go through a series of incidents, so unpleasing and orchestrated unlikely to be the result of chance. In simple words, I was accused of a series of stupid things, like being in South Africa, where I had never been in my entire life, and without informing me that this was punishable. They wanted to know if I knew Mr. Siqueiro, who I do not know, without also informing me that this was a crime... and to highlight everything they asked me what I had done with Olokun's head, the famous Ife's bronze. From the conversation that I had with the police officers, they showed that they were not entirely sure of what exactly the Olokun's head was.' A week later, he took the plane that was leaving for Rio de Jannero. At that time there were weekly flights from Varig round trip from Rio to Lagos. There was no time to go to campus to get new tickets, recover the money, and his passport. He got an authorization issued by the airport security and he was required to use his own money to purchase another ticket. It would not be wise to wait another week because he could not comprehend what was happening. But, arriving in Bahia, and after telling everything to his friend Carybe, the story started to make sense" (267-269).

In Ibadan, Nigeria, on July 4, 2008, I interviewed Prof. Akinwumi Isola, one of those who met with Soyinka on the need to repatriate *Orí Olókun*. He told me that Professor Wande Abimbola did not go with them to see Wole Soyinka the first time they met with him on the issue. He also told me that they invited Mr. Iyare who posed as a detective to interview Pierre Verger about the missing bronze head.

In June 2007, I took nine students to London from the University of Mississippi for a course titled World Literature since 1650. One of the places we visited was the British Museum to show them *Orí Olókun* and to tell them the story. The artifact sat majestically in its case, and I took several pictures of it. My students later told me that it looked as if museum security men were watching me as I told them the story and took pictures. One other interesting thing during the trip was the fact that our tour guide said repeatedly that she was not interested in the politics of acquisition of the items in the museum and that several of them would have been destroyed if people did not salvage them and ultimately donated them to the museum. That was before anybody asked her any question! We know that the original *Orí Olókun* is in the British Museum in London. However, where is the copy that Soyinka and Yai brought from Brazil? Verger's biographers provide an ironic answer that confirms the epigraph to this paper that Soyinka and Yai took the search for *Orí Olókun* too seriously. According to the biography, "… when Soyinka and Yai returned to

Nigeria, with the stolen head taken from the studio and decided to open the package, they had a big surprise: the sculpture was totally destroyed, and in small pieces, since it was made of gypsum!" (270).

Conclusion: Soyinka and the Autobiographical Genre

In conclusion, a theoretical/genre issue that arises from the interactions between Soyinka and Obasanjo in this book is whether the autobiographer can present a story that does not favor or paint him positively. In other words, why do we need to have an autobiography? One of the reasons people write autobiographies, according to James Olney in *Tell Me Africa*, is the preservation of a particular position.[4] Soyinka's books fulfill this condition. The book preserves Soyinka's position in relation to *Orí Olókun* and to Obasanjo. Since this is Soyinka's book, the expectation is a development and justification of his position and his own discourse. Therefore, I am interested in Obasanjo's reactions to Soyinka's depiction of him in the book when we hear from him about it. However, based on what I know about the public utterances of both Soyinka and Obasanjo on each other, my guess is that the chances of Obasanjo disputing Soyinka's recollection of events are high. Therefore, the autobiographical genre is a particularly postmodern and postcolonial way of promoting and disputing discourses.

It is interesting and ironic that the British museum will not even "lend" the Benin bronze discussed earlier to Nigeria for the 1977 festival. In addition, they will not return *Orí Olókun* to Ife. The irony is heightened when one remembers that these artifacts are from the so-called primitive cultures that the colonizers and missionaries had to civilize and subdue. What appears clear to a discerning student of colonialism, race relations, globalization, and pre-colonial Africa is that these artifacts prove what the colonizers want to negate: that Africa had its own sophisticated culture, history, and technology prior to colonialism and that what colonialism did was to stunt the development of various aspects of human endeavor on the continent. The irony in the colonial encounter is also foregrounded when Soyinka introduces his guests, Isola, Abimbola, and Yai, who brought him information about the *Orí Olókun* episode. Soyinka comments on the fact that colonial powers demarcated African nations arbitrarily such that the Yorubas, for example, were not only in Nigeria but also in neighboring countries like Benin with the fact that Yai is a Yoruba from Benin republic. In my own personal experience, the legacy of ethnic continuity continues to exist among the Yorubas in Africa and the diaspora. This continuity,

4 See my discussion of this issue in *Telling Our Stories*, 154.

what Abiola Irele might call the "continuity of experience,"[5] still manifests itself in the way Yoruba is used in various African countries and in the diaspora. In 2005, while visiting Cotonou and some other parts of the Francophone Benin Republic, it was easier for me to get by with Yoruba than with English. The colonizers merely saw African nations as "imagined communities" without any overriding communal and social links, to quote from Benedict Anderson's *The Imagined Community*. The link with Yai and the search for *Orí Olókun* all the way to Brazil where substantial African victims of the transatlantic slave trade were shipped to, are some examples of Soyinka's diaspora consciousness and the sustenance of the cord that still joins people of African descent everywhere in the world.

The contemptuous Eurocentric ideology that went into the arbitrary carving of African nations also went into the systematic pillaging of African treasures like the *Orí Olókun* stolen from Nigeria. Unfortunately, the gallantry of Soyinka and his colleagues to repatriate the treasure is unsuccessful. As the epigraph to this essay states: they indeed took the mission too seriously; hence, they could not repatriate the artifact successfully. As an accomplished autobiographer, Soyinka does not just tell the *Orí Olókun* story chronologically, he employs various narrative techniques, including flashback, foreshadowing, suspense, and symbolism to write an autophylography that extends the features of the genre from the superordinate presence of resistance and community to a coherent development of diaspora consciousness. Again, as an accomplished autobiographer, Soyinka left some questions unanswered, including what happened to the copy of *Orí Olókun* that he took from Bahia. Did Soyinka return it to its architect owner? How did Architect Carybe react to the disappearance of his copy of *Orí Olókun*? What of the real *Orí Olókun* at the British museum? Is it still there? Some of these questions I got answers to in my own search for *Orí Olókun* and in Verger's biography.

Soyinka's search for *Orí Olókun* has significant implications for globalization and postcoloniality. Simon Gikandi in "Globalization and the Claims of Postcoloniality" argues that literature is a major instrument in the spread of globalization. He cites the English critic F.R. Leavis about the great texts of English literature. Although Leavis argument was restricted to English literature without considering literature coming out of the colonies, with the spread of colonialism, the so-called great texts were spread to English departments in the colonies to promote English literature and culture and the colonialism that went with it at that point in the globalization agenda of Britain. Interestingly, a substantial part of the resistance to colonialism and British globalization done

5 See Abiola Irele's *The African Imagination: Literature in Africa and the Black Diaspora.*

through resistance literature was coming from the colonies and the re-readings of colonial master texts championed by scholars like Edward Said in *Culture and Imperialism* and Chinua Achebe in *Things Fall Apart*, his essay "An Image of Africa: Racism in Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*, and his other works. Soyinka is also part of this group of writers and scholars resisting colonialism and globalization through literature and most critics have concentrated on his fiction, poetry, and drama. What he does in *You Must Set Forth at Dawn* is to tell the *Orí Olókun* story to show the workings of globalization and colonialism through the autobiographical genre. The bronze sculpture in question is a symbol of precolonial Yoruba and African civilization that colonialism and some of the great texts of Leavis tradition set out to obliterate. By trying to take it away from Ile-Ife where it was excavated, the British colonialists then were trying to appropriate crucial evidence disrupting colonial arguments about the alleged primitivity of the colonized. Of course, the artifact ends up in the British museum, another major symbol of global power, never going back to where it originated. ust as they did not lend the Benin bronze to Nigeria for the 1977 Festival of Arts and Culture, they probably will never lend *Ori Olokun* back to Nigeria and the Soyinkas will probably never be able to capture it from its majestic shelve in the museum.

The fact that the *Orí Olókun* sculpture was excavated by Leo Frobenus, a German ethnologist/archaeologist, was another indication of the way globalization worked. It was obvious that Frobenius's work in Nigeria was aided by European colonial agenda of the time. The British colonial officers' attempt to take the sculpture from Frobenius may have to do with the long-time rivalry between Britain and Germany in their colonization missions. The idea of the sculpture in Brazil is also a testament to the spread of globalization and literature discussed by Gikandi. The trickster-like conversation between Pierre Verger and Olabiyi Yai where Verger told Yai that he brought the sculpture to Brazil could have been possible only through globalization. Verger was a prolific scholar of African oral and written literature and art, so he was spreading culture through literature with his transatlantic encounters with Europe, Africa, and South America. Yai was doing the same thing with his involvement in the study of literature and art. Soyinka and Yai's desire to bring *Orí Olókun* back to Nigeria, however, negates some of the tenets of globalization: the idea of representing the world as a global village. If the world indeed is a global village in the interest of globalization, what does it matter whether the sculpture is in Brazil or England? One can question the presence of the sculpture in England if one didn't forget or forgive the colonial relationship between Britain and Nigeria, but how about Brazil, the biggest country with the largest black population outside of Africa? Won't the teeming black population in Brazil, where a lot of Yoruba and African traditions and religions are practiced, not

find the sculpture useful? Or is it that Soyinka and his group believe in precolonial and pre-globalization insularity? Is this a symptom of what Spivak calls "a nostalgia for lost origins" in "Three Women's Texts and a Critique of Imperialism" (272)? What was probably important to Soyinka and his colleagues wasn't the lament over lost origin. Their goal was to recuperate a symbol of the past for developing a positive image of themselves different from what colonialism handed down. Soyinka and others seem to acknowledge the argument about source and injustice in line with the Yoruba proverb that what one calls the head is the only place for a cap. No matter the distaste for the head, the cap does not fit any other part of the body. To them, then, Ile Ife, the source of Yoruba culture, where the sculpture was taken from should be where it should be returned to so as to maintain traditional Yoruba identity that the sculpture represents.[6] Also, bringing the sculpture to Nigeria symbolizes Soyinka and others' resistance to colonialism and the pillaging of African culture and artifacts. It is within this framework of resistance and the politics of identity that literature comes in and no genre allows Soyinka's ideas in this case to flower better than the autobiographical genre. It is the genre that allows him to tell his story and that of his community as their truth, unlike Carl Jung's individualistic truth mentioned earlier. Ironically, Soyinka uses successfully the autobiographical genre that literally obliterated the communal at the expense of the individual to narrate an anticolonial communal story and achievement. As well, Soyinka uses the genre to communicate major achievements of a dominantly oral tradition that is excluded from the genre's definition.

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6 There are several African artifacts looted or obtained improperly from various African communities, kingdoms, and empires in various European and American private collections and museums like the *Orí Olókun* artifact. There is a growing clamor for a return of these artifacts to their original owners. Twenty-six of such artifacts were returned by the French to Benin in 2021. See https://www.cnn.com/style/article/benin-art-returned-scli-intl/index.html and Thomas Dermine's "As a Belgian Politician, I Feel a Responsibility to Restitute Stolen Artifacts to the Congo. Here's Why My Fellow Citizens Should, Too." https://news.artnet.com/opinion/belgium-restitution-1991446. July 23, 2021.

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