The African World and the Japanese Spirit: Cultural Dynamics in the Writings of Wole Soyinka and Watsuji Tetsurô

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Orientalism, in literary scholar Edward Said’s famous treatment, is both a practice and an ideology. As a practice, it features treating non-Western cultures as objects of Western academic investigation. An Orientalist outlook presumes that the “knowledge” that results is correct and ought to be valued, in principle, above the assertions and viewpoints of indigenes from the cultures in question. As an ideology, Orientalism holds that non-Western cultures are primarily passive and static, in contrast to the observing West, which is primarily active and dynamic. As Said points out, Orientalism—in tandem with imperialism—has heavily affected European and American perceptions of non-Western cultures during the past two and a half centuries. Importantly for intellectual history, it has also served as both a barrier and an impetus to self-understanding on the part of non-Western intellectuals educated in Western and Western-style institutions.

This essay will examine the attempts that two twentieth-century non-Western thinkers, Wole Soyinka (1934–) and Watsuji Tetsurô (1889-1960), undertook to respond to Orientalism’s denigration of their respective cultures. These two figures initially appear to have little in common. Wole Soyinka, from Nigeria, is a prolific playwright—receiving the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1986—and a progressive political activist. In contrast, Watsuji Tetsurô, from Japan, was an abstruse academic philosopher and a strong if sometimes quirky supporter of his nation’s militaristic turn in the 1930s. Soyinka writes in English and is widely read outside Nigeria; Watsuji, on the other hand, wrote in Japanese and is little known outside Japan.

Added to biographical differences between the two figures, their respective countries have experienced the modern world in contrastive ways. Nigeria was the self-conscious creation of British colonialists, who forcibly united several completely unrelated ethnic groups in the Niger River delta region within a single administrative structure. Since attaining political independence in 1960, Nigeria has undergone a wrenching civil war and six coups d’état—a greater number than any other nation in the coup-afflicted continent of Africa.
Japan, a nation with few internal ethnic divisions, independently and successfully industrialized in the later nineteenth century. It became a regional colonial power early in the twentieth century, and, following defeat in World War II, fashioned the second largest national economic market in the world after the United States. In short, the national histories with which Soyinka and Watsuji, respectively, have grappled are sharply divergent. Both personally and historically, Soyinka and Watsuji seem like an exceedingly odd couple.

This picture changes on closer examination. In the wake of European imperialist activities through much of Afro-Eurasia in the late nineteenth century, both Soyinka and Watsuji lived in countries that had to contend with the military, economic, and cultural hegemony of the West. And perhaps owing to personal sensitivity, both figures found the cultural challenge of the West to be especially urgent. Interestingly, this challenge emerged directly from their respective educations: both figures had been raised in intermittently “traditional” environments that they left to enter largely Western-style schools.

Wole Soyinka was born the son of the headmaster of a Christian primary school in the Nigerian city of Abeokuta. Following a period of attendance at his father’s school and another local school, Soyinka moved on to secondary education at Government College and college at University College, both British-established institutions in Ibadan. From college, he proceeded to several years of graduate work at the University of Leeds in Britain, where he studied under the well-known Shakespeare scholar G. Wilson Knight. Following graduation, Soyinka served as a reader at the Royal Court Theater in London and began to write his own plays. He returned to Nigeria in its year of independence, 1960, after which he quickly gathered fame for his playwriting, play-directing, and often controversial literary criticism.

Watsuji Tetsurō was born the son of a medical doctor in the small Japanese village of Nibuno west of Kobe. After establishing a strong record in primary and middle school, he moved to Tokyo to attend the prestigious First Higher School. From there, he proceeded to Tokyo Imperial University, where he received a B.A. in philosophy. During the 1910s, he wrote two books on European existentialist philosophers, after which his interests steadily shifted toward ancient Japanese art and culture. In 1925, he became a professor at Kyoto Imperial University at the invitation of Nishida Kitarō, the most noted philosopher of twentieth-century Japan. Watsuji wrote prolifically throughout his adult life—his collected works fill 27 volumes—and influenced a broad range of
as the above sketches indicate, both of our figures grew up in somewhat Westernized households: one headed by a Christian headmaster and the other by a Western-style medical doctor. The schooling that each received included a heavy exposure to foreign languages: much of Soyinka's education was conducted in English, and Watsuji's education, though conducted in Japanese, stressed linguistic proficiency in English and German. Both figures excelled in their studies, which valorized Western—and thus putatively universal—reference points over those of their respective countries' native cultures. Despite this training, each of them turned partway back to their native cultures: Soyinka abandoned Christianity for Yoruba animism as soon as he was able, while the youthful Watsuji became strongly attracted to ancient Japanese Buddhist art, and by extension, to the culture that produced that art.3

Soyinka and Watsuji, respectively, had early encountered the Orientalist defamation of non-Western cultures.4 As they matured, however, they sought to challenge that defamation by highlighting both the strengths that they found in their cultures and the flaws that they espied in the modern West.

CULTURAL MODELS: CYCLICAL

To respond to Orientalism, both Soyinka and Watsuji employed cultural nationalist rhetorical strategies. As described by sociologist Kosaku Yoshino, cultural nationalism "aims to regenerate the national community by creating, preserving or strengthening a people's cultural identity when it is felt to be lacking, inadequate or threatened." It asserts that a community forms a single cultural unit, and thus, the essence of a given nation. Cultural nationalism differs from political nationalism in that the latter typically concentrates on achieving a representative state for the community in question. As a result, cultural nationalism may appear either in tandem with political nationalism or in its absence.

Political scientist Anthony D. Smith notes that the formation of a modern cultural identity is closely bound up with historicism, that is, the idea that the past was substantially different from the present and yet can be recovered for the present through empathetic research. In Europe, one of the founders of historicism was Johann Gottfried von Herder, an eighteenth-century Prussian who circularly asserted that each nation possessed its own distinctive character to which it needed
to remain true. In what Smith calls the ethnic-genealogical line of historicism, Herder and later cultural nationalists maintained that distinctive national characters flourished in the particularistic medieval world, while declining later, under the universalistic rationalism of the Enlightenment. The approach thus imputes a sequence of possession and loss, with future recovery depending on a rejection of Enlightenment rationalism.

Cultural nationalism, then, treats national culture as simultaneously unique, valuable, and under threat. In accord with this, it often asserts the existence of a premodern “golden age,” when the culture under discussion thrived more greatly than today. Responding to this presumed decline, a cultural nationalist will seek to remove his/her culture from the objectifying gaze of others and restore it to a position of self-determining subjecthood. This move, itself, is allegedly enabled by the spiritual resources of the earlier golden age.

Strong emotions clearly drive the cultural nationalist turn to the past. The stakes rise still higher, however, when the culture under discussion is non-European, and thus, subject to Orientalist interpretations. Orientalism will typically portray such a culture as largely static and closed. It will then assert, confidently and unceasingly, that the culture needs to replace these characteristics with the dynamism and openness that modern Western societies allegedly display.

Wole Soyinka’s articulation of Yoruba cultural dynamics directly addresses Orientalist accusations. In accordance with the general characteristics of cultural nationalism, it does so by asserting a past golden age, prior to contact with outside imperialisms, when his cultural community ably expressed its dynamic essence as a self-determining subject. This dynamic essence, Soyinka asserts, helped members of his community survive under the brutal circumstances of slavery in the Americas and remains largely intact today. However, a combination of mendacity and misunderstanding has led to the partial obscuration of this essence, with the result that an intellectual project he calls “race retrieval” becomes necessary.

Soyinka set forth his views in an essay titled “The Fourth Stage,” which he fleshed out in a series of lectures at Cambridge University in 1973. These lectures, along with the original essay, were subsequently published as *Myth, Literature and the African World*, a text that has attracted extensive critical attention among both Africans and African studies scholars abroad. This text will form the primary, though not exclusive, source of my characterization of Soyinka’s views on his cul-
It is important to note, first, what Soyinka’s culture is. Soyinka was born a member of the Yoruba people, a loose collection of groups living in southwest Nigeria. His strategy in *Myth* is to use Yoruba culture as his model for the dynamics of an alleged “African world” found in various forms throughout sub-Saharan Africa. Thus, while not asserting improbably that Nigeria as a nation has a single distinctive culture, he is asserting that Africa as a whole has shared cultural characteristics. The philosopher Kwame Appiah and others have taken Soyinka to task for this view, arguing that African cultures are diverse to the point that they forbid generalization at even a high level of abstraction. Appiah asserts that Soyinka’s move is based on his desire to fill the cultural vacuum that Eurocentrists allege to exist in Africa with variants of an underlying Yoruba model.

While agreeing with this, I maintain that a second reason for Soyinka’s turn to the Yoruba is his need to have a specific—even if sub-Nigerian—culture to assert and uphold. With Yoruba culture, he can posit the possession-loss-recovery pattern that gives cultural nationalist writing its focus and poignancy. Consequently, I will generally treat Soyinka as an advocate of Yoruba culture, even as I acknowledge his intent to address comparable instances of partial culture loss elsewhere in Africa.

Soyinka’s description of Yoruba culture centers around two Yoruba gods and four stages of human existence. Among the gods, Soyinka concentrates the bulk of his attention on the figures Orisanla and Ogun. According to the Yoruba worldview as he presents it, the world at its inception contained the single divinity Orisanla, who included all properties within himself. For reasons that differ by account, Orisanla’s servant Atunda once rolled a boulder onto his head, fracturing it permanently into innumerable pieces.

Metaphorically, this caused the primeval unity of the world to be replaced forever by multiplicity. The move was at once desirable, insofar as it replaced stasis with dynamic interrelations among pieces, and incomplete, insofar as the separate pieces retained (and retain) at some level a memory of and yearning for their earlier fused state.

One crucial effect of Atunda’s violent act was to separate the gods from humanity, with each god and each human being embodying a shard of the original oneness. From this time on, the gods existed at some remove from humanity, though close to rather than remote from the earth. One of the gods, Ogun, embodied the shard of Orisanla that
contained creativity and impetuousness. In a supremely aggressive and
hubretic act, he cut a path through the transitional divide that held the
gods apart from human beings and led his fellow gods over to them.
Powered by a combination of yearning and sheer will, Ogun’s deed
brought art and knowledge to the human community.

Soyinka presents the later, all-accommodative Orisanla as Ogun’s
opposite number. As Ogun presides over moments of hubris, so
Orisanla presides over the periods of harmony and reconciliation that
appear after the hubris has run its course. Consequently, life consists of
an alternation between daring transitions on the one hand and peaceable
reunions (such as that between the gods and humanity) on the other.

The four stages referred to in the title of Soyinka’s original essay
on this metaphysical schema, “The Fourth Stage,” pertain to the Yoruba
community. Three of the stages (or realms) in question comprise rela-
tively stable, if temporary, forms of human existence: ancestral, living,
and unborn. In accord with the Yoruba notion of reincarnation, an indi-
vidual is born into this world, lives in it, dies to join the ancestors and,
after a time, shifts to the realm of the unborn for rebirth into the world.
In contrast to these stable realms of existence, the fourth realm is inher-
ently unstable: it is the realm of transition, and it surrounds each of the
other realms like a moat, hindering movement between them. To cross
this perilous realm—e.g., to be born or to die—it is necessary to possess
the high audacity that Ogun displayed.

In Soyinka’s view, Yoruba tragic drama intensely renders the meta-
physical confrontations—e.g., self versus realm of transition—that
Yoruba people see as basic to life. An audience witnessing such a
drama undergoes a great deal as it empathically participates: the drama
quickly forges the audience into an emotional unity and, by the end,
produces an enlarged “self-apprehension” that provides the community
with transformative energy. This energy is available not only for tran-
sitions from one ontological realm to the next, but for political transi-
tions, as for example that between colonial rule and independence.
Thus, while leftist critics often argue that Soyinka’s schema is fatalistic,
he has insisted that it is not, inasmuch as it valorizes change and the
arduous attainment of new starting points through successive cycles.

Soyinka’s explication of the major Yoruba gods and four realms of
existence is far more complex than this brief description indicates.
Nevertheless, it is clear that his cyclical model of Yoruba culture coun-
ters Orientalism’s aspersions at important points. First, a culture riven
by the confrontations described above is definitely dynamic rather than

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static. Cosmic unity (the state that Orientalism typically attributes to Africans) gives permanent way to multiplicity, and thence, to periodic strenuous attempts to bridge reality’s severed pieces. In one sense, the repeated cycle is highly destructive: Soyinka stresses Ogun’s exorbitantly sanguine character. Yet in more important ways, the cycle is not destructive. This fact repays our attention, because it is here that Soyinka begins to turn the tables on European arrogance.

The cycle is non-destructive, first, in the sense that it permits Yoruba culture to maintain sequential contact with both its hubretic and its accommodative components. It does not permanently lose either of these components, because it will return to each in turn as the cycle repeats itself. In the context of prejudicial European images of Africa, this means that neither the image of Africans as fierce nor that of Africans as quiescent is correct in isolation, insofar as Europeans have overlooked the complementarity of these characteristics.

Second, the cycle is non-destructive because its endpoint, the reunion of bridged pieces, fosters a general ethos of acceptance over inflexibility. Indeed, Soyinka refers to this endpoint as “the harmonious Yoruba world . . . which accommodates every alien material or abstract phenomenon within its infinitely stressed spirituality.” Soyinka’s “alien phenomena” prominently include foreign concepts and practices. For example, he stresses that Ogun, traditionally the patron god of Yoruba ironworkers, is now regarded as the “primal motor-mechanic.” All in all, he holds, “[t]he deistic approach of the Yoruba is to absorb every new experience, departmentalize it and carry on with life.”

Importantly, such an approach stands in strong contrast with Soyinka’s depiction of the “occidental creative rhythm,” which he describes as “period dialectics” and “a series of intellectual spasms.” Typically, he asserts, modern Europeans transform aspects of experience into “separatist myths (or ‘truths’),” which they proceed to adopt and abandon in feverish succession. Interestingly, Soyinka’s critique on this point resonates with another of his themes, namely, that monotheistic religions like Christianity lack anchorage in the natural forces of the earth and thus generally approach its diversity from a rigid rather than a reasonable standpoint.

Throughout the above instances, Soyinka counterposes what he regards as Yoruba peaceable dynamism to Western destructive dynamism. To summarize his overall view: the Yoruba lived in a fundamentally appropriate manner at one time, during a golden age preceding contact with aggressive outside peoples (i.e., Muslims and
Christians), but partially lost their wisdom owing to the seductions of rigid external worldviews. With properly directed effort, however, they can retrieve that wisdom and again experience the replete if sometimes dangerous reality that lies at the base of the human condition. In short, Yoruba culture is not static and closed as Orientalism alleges; rather, it is dynamic and open.

CULTURAL MODELS: STRATIFORM

I have presented Soyinka’s depiction of Yoruba “animist metaphysics” at length in order to explore the rich relations between his views and those of Watsuji. While Soyinka presented his understanding of Yoruba culture in a single book and a handful of essays, Watsuji treated Japanese culture as his central problematic and elaborated his views in numerous volumes. Here I will turn to several of Watsuji’s texts, concentrating most of my attention on “The Japanese Spirit,” a lengthy essay in the second volume of his Studies on Japanese Spiritual History.

In contrast to Soyinka, there is never any doubt as to Watsuji’s culture: it is that of the major islands of the Japanese archipelago, where dialects of Japanese are spoken. In his earliest published writings on Japan, Watsuji asserted a past golden age, which consisted variously of the period in which continental Asian Buddhism first entered Japan or the period directly prior, when Japanese lived as “children of nature.” As he proceeded with his research, however, he placed increasing stress on continuities rather than peaks in Japanese development. It is in this context that he set forth his well-known model of Japanese cultural experience in the 1935 essay “The Japanese Spirit.”

Watsuji, like Soyinka, aimed to create a model of his culture that would combine dynamism, openness, and cohesion. His manner of establishing these qualities, however, differed from Soyinka: whereas Soyinka stressed cycles, or time, Watsuji favored the image of concurrent strata, or space.

Watsuji argued that Japanese culture, unlike other cultures, is comprised of strata, that is, layers. Each layer consists of a formalized set of practices typically associated with a craft, belief, or everyday activity. Over time, layers accumulate: new layers that either emerge from within Japan or arrive from abroad contrast with the layers immediately preceding them, setting the characteristics of the older layers into bold relief.
Watsuji presents a number of examples of this pattern, among them one from the world of Japanese theater. One of the major forms of Japanese drama, noh, centers around the ghostly souls of departed individuals. To be effective in playing such roles, actors must suppress their natural movements as people to the extent possible. Watsuji maintains that another Japanese dramatic form, bunraku (puppet theater), arose in response to this aspect of noh. Thus, bunraku utilized puppets that are endowed with all of the natural movements of people to the extent possible. What noh suppressed—natural human movement—bunraku displayed in an expanded manner: bunraku willfully contradicted the form that prevailed in noh by establishing a counter-form based on an antithetical principle. Continuing the pattern, a still later form of Japanese theater, kabuki, responded to bunraku by using human actors who deliberately moved with the less-than-total smoothness of puppets. Kabuki thus did to bunraku what bunraku had earlier done to noh.

Importantly, the rise of new theatrical art forms was not intended to vanquish the older forms. Rather, in Watsuji’s view, older forms could only express their distinctiveness effectively when set into contrast with newer ones. For example, it was when bunraku arose that its predecessor, noh, first began to live as “its particular self.” Presumably, practitioners of noh, living in an environment enriched by the new opposition, thenceforth felt inspired to accentuate noh’s distinctive features in their work. And insofar as both noh and bunraku continued to thrive, each would continue to derive stimulation from the ongoing contrast between them.

As this example illustrates, Watsuji held that Japanese culture possessed an internal dynamic based on a principle of self-contradiction. Japan, however, is famous for its borrowings from abroad: how do these mesh with the stratiform model? Watsuji’s answer, in brief, is that the borrowings themselves become formalized as additional cultural layers. As an example, he refers to clothing styles. In Japan three hundred years earlier, there were distinctive kimono styles for warriors and commoners. These styles have been preserved in modern Japan (i.e., the Japan of the 1930s), forming separate layers. At the same time, Western clothing has diffused as an additional layer on top of these.

In his discussion of this phenomenon, Watsuji carefully stresses that Japanese people have neither eliminated certain styles in favor of others nor attempted a synthesis among the styles. Instead, they have “unified” the styles—especially the indigenous and Western styles—within everyday life as a “double life.” As a single moment within
this double life, Watsuji holds, Western clothing is no longer the same as the clothing Westerners wear, because it has a different function: in Japan, it enlivens indigenous dress by contradicting it.

Watsuji's argument falters at this point: whereas Japan's internal dynamic features new layers that deliberately oppose the characteristics of directly previous layers, the borrowings from outside were not created to contradict previous layers and thus manage to do so only by difference (e.g., suits versus kimonos) rather than by opposition (e.g., vivacious puppets versus stilted actors). So while Japanese may borrow from the outside and formalize what they borrow, their borrowings do not, in Watsuji's terminology, "negate" prior cultural layers in the same manner as layers generated from within. In that respect, the integration of Western cultural artifacts into indigenous cultural dynamics has been a good deal less smooth than Watsuji's model implies.

Watsuji has several underlying motivations in creating his model of Japan as characterized by "multilayeredness [júsôsei]." Most importantly, he clearly wishes to assert that Japan is dynamic: while its extant cultural forms may not change, it regularly sprouts new forms and adopts forms from abroad. It is thus forever a work in progress with delicate tensions continually rippling through it. Moreover, Japan's dynamism does not depend solely on itself: on the contrary, Watsuji eagerly stresses the role of interactions with the outside. As he states, "No matter how far we go back in Japanese culture, we will not find an age in which evidence of admiration of foreign countries is not to be found." Pointing to such historical phenomena as Japan's ancient borrowings from China and its modern borrowings from Western countries, Watsuji asserts that Japan is distinctive in part for its sheer eagerness to learn from other cultures.

This prompts Watsuji's main complaint regarding alternative approaches to Japanese culture: from one vantage point or another, they falsely treat the culture as monolithic. For example, Japanese who advocate total Westernization view the single cultural layer that they have created as an adequate substitute for all of the previous layers. This shows their "abstractionality," for they have taken the complex whole of their culture and attempted to replace it with a single element within it.22

Significantly, Watsuji's complaint about the Westernizers is also his complaint about the West itself. Turning to European history, he asserts that early Western Christianity should have tried to "negate" ancient Greek culture rather than to eliminate it outright. If it had done this-

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that is, if it had responded to Greek culture after the manner of a Japanese cultural layer—then "the Middle Ages would not have descended to such barbarism." Treating earlier cultural layers as enemies worthy of destruction was, in this view, an act of "abstraction." Even if a new cultural layer succeeds in eliminating its predecessor, it has not established the "true unity" that is gained through the co-presence of mutually contradictory layers. Fortunately, in Watsuji's view, Japan's dynamism has favored peaceable oppositions over such destructive conflicts between rigid positions.

Before leaving Watsuji and turning to a direct comparison between his and Soyinka's ideas, we need to consider briefly a simpler model of Japanese experience that Watsuji offers in another work. This model appears in a famous book entitled *A Climate* (1935), in which Watsuji describes the major civilizations of Eurasia from a broadly geographical determinist standpoint. His argument, roughly, is that the three main climatic types that appear in Eurasia are monsoon, desert, and meadow. Each of these climates fosters a different attitude toward external forces: typically, people in a monsoon area (such as South Asia) will resign themselves to such forces, people in a desert area (such as the Middle East) will resist them, and people in a meadow area (such as Europe) will serenely regulate them. Many cultural phenomena—e.g., world religions—then take shape as combinations of or variants on these basic patterns.

Japan, Watsuji maintains, is a variant on the monsoon pattern: though the Japanese national character displays much of the tractability found in other monsoon areas, abrupt seasonal changes not present in those areas give this character a proclivity for sudden emotional shifts. As an example of this, he writes with deliberate paradox of Japanese people's "typhoon resignation," a swift movement from dogged resistance to an external force to acquiescence to that force. And shifts can likewise occur in the reverse direction: under the right circumstances, acquiescence may quickly give way to typhoon-like resistance.

For Watsuji, the implication of such a pattern is that there is more to the generally calm demeanor of Japanese people than meets the eye. Such demeanor is not automatic; rather, it is "only achieved at the cost of the purge . . . of powerful emotions." While Watsuji's primary model of Japanese culture is additive, then, here in *A Climate* he presents a cyclical model of emotions (like that of Soyinka) that permits Japanese to experience a pair of opposed strong responses to their environment. In effect, this model provides another, more temporal, means
by which Watsuji asserts the complexity of Japanese experience.

The quick summaries I have provided illustrate that Soyinka and Watsuji have significantly overlapping motivations despite the contextual differences between them. As we have seen, each figure wishes to argue that his society advances in a different manner than does the modern West. From their vantage point, Western observers, frequently both ill-informed and ill-willed, perceive stasis where instead an alternative dynamism prevails.

The dynamisms that Soyinka and Watsuji articulate are not simply different, however. Rather, in their shared view, they are preferable because they display a flexibility that Western belief systems lack. The dynamism of the modern West as Soyinka and Watsuji understand it amounts to a zero-sum game among opposing ideological positions. In contrast, they hold, their own cultures incorporate and—even in Japan’s case—seek out contrastive stimuli without fanfare. In general, our two figures recast tradition—which Soyinka holds Western scholars have equated with “orthodox rigidity”—as a creative process. As they do so, the mantle of rigidity passes from their peoples’ traditions to the alleged mono-logic of Western modernity.26

THE ONE AND THE MANY

One of the major features of the respective outlooks of Soyinka and Watsuji is a shared paradoxical attraction to both unity—redolent of security—and multiplicity—redolent of dynamism. Both figures wish to conceive their cultures in ways that permit security and dynamism, respectively, to play major and continuous roles. Having addressed the dynamism that they attribute to their cultures, I now turn to the security (or “cohesive inferiority” as Soyinka once called it) that they likewise posit and the issue of how that security interacts in their models with the dynamism they esteem.

One of Watsuji’s main strategies for guaranteeing the presence of security in his stratiform model is to assert that Japan’s emperor perduringly symbolizes his country as an interconnected whole. Indeed, Watsuji explicitly argued during the later part of his career that reverence for the emperor comprised the foundational layer of Japanese culture.27 He did not regard this as limiting Japan’s future possibilities, however. Rather, the emperor’s centrality enabled Japan to permit diverse cultural forms to enter and remain within Japanese life without threatening the country’s final identity. In this respect, the emperor functions for Watsuji much as Orisanla does for Soyinka: each is a
kindly guarantor of a wide smorgasbord of cultural options.

Our two figures converge elsewhere as well, as for instance in their rhetorical vocabularies. Both Soyinka and Watsuji are unabashed essentialists—the term “essence” shimmering for them with positive valence—and both use such terms as “intuition,” “purity,” “inner world,” and “symbol” regularly in their analytical writings. The fit is especially close between Soyinka and the early Watsuji: Soyinka was influenced by the Neo-Romantic terminology of his mentor G. Wilson Knight, while the early Watsuji was influenced by a largely overlapping terminology that appeared in such writers as English critic Arthur Symons and French philosopher Henri Bergson. Whatever the source, the vocabulary is clearly holistic, endowing what they most admire in their cultures with an aura of secure permanence: through the right rituals or practices, they each feel, their culture’s inner qualities can always shine through.

In a related move, Soyinka and Watsuji each tend to associate their cultures with the natural environment. For Soyinka, this association appears most clearly in the case of tragic drama. When a society lives in close relation to nature, he maintains, its tragedies will portray human disorder as spilling over into the surrounding natural sphere. Conversely, the natural sphere forms the “fundamental matrix” within which the contradictions and ironies of human life—Yoruba or otherwise—must play themselves out. Accordingly, human and natural spheres, together, form a tight whole that lends effective tragic drama its compressed, hothouse quality.

Alone the same lines, Soyinka dubs the fourth, transitional realm of human existence the “chthonic realm” and treats it as an intensification of various terrestrial (i.e., natural) forces. Inasmuch as that realm is central to Soyinka’s depiction of the Yoruba worldview, nature winds up being crucial not solely for physical sustenance but for producing metaphysical challenges as well. Nigerian critic Biodun Jeyifo asserts that Soyinka’s frequent return to the theme of nature in his plays as well as his criticism gives him a “powerful anchor” in his overall quest for wholeness. With his concerns for maintaining that anchor—and laments over the modern tendency to neglect it—Soyinka, Jeyifo argues, is likely to be “one of the last great Romantics.” Certainly, his treatment of nature as foundational helps him preserve a degree of security within his model of an ever-changing Yoruba world.

While Soyinka incorporates frequent references to especially Yoruba—or at least, West African—natural phenomena into his plays, it
is Watsuji who focusedly treats nature as culture-specific. As described earlier, Watsuji in *A Climate* divides the environments of Eurasia into several main types. Each type, he holds, inspires a different sort of culture with different central values. Nature of a specific sort—say, monsoon—thus forms a matrix within which a culture of a specific sort—say, passive and resigned—will take shape. In this instance, Watsuji is more sharply nationalistic than Soyinka: while Soyinka allows for the possibility that various cultures may understand each other at a deep level through their shared kinship with nature, Watsuji holds that nature’s dissimilar forms foster divergent cultural totalities. Even as they share an attachment to nature, then, Soyinka and Watsuji differ on just what it is—humanity or individual nations—that nature primarily helps secure.

**DIVERGENCES**

As we have seen so far, Soyinka and Watsuji share an opposition to Orientalism and a corresponding determination to argue that their own cultures are peacefully dynamic and complex rather than rigidly stagnant and simple. They regard the modern West as a battlefield of competing dogmatisms and their own respective cultures as contrastively fluid, communal, and emotionally replete. As a result, the real duality, they each maintain, is not between dynamism and staticity, as Orientalism holds; rather, it lies between a largely destructive dynamism and a largely peaceable one.

Despite these striking areas of agreement, Soyinka and Watsuji frequently part ways. At times, the departures owe to differences in the cultures they are describing, as for example between the receptive accommodativeness of Yoruba culture and the sedulous mimeticism of Japanese culture. Other divergences, however, reflect deep contrasts in aspects of their respective worldviews. Among the many divergences one could examine, I will focus here on their opposed attitudes toward social change.

Both of our writers address the rapid pace of change in the modern world and place explicit stress on *ritual* as a response to it. The similarity is deceptive, however: for Soyinka, ritual (i.e., theater) is the medium through which social change is effected, while for Watsuji, ritual (i.e., formalized social behavior) is the medium through which social change is either prevented or strongly contained. Here as elsewhere, Soyinka conjoins conservatism with progressivism, while Watsuji maintains a primarily conservative position.

For Soyinka, as we have seen, human social existence is invariably...
bound up with powerful chthonic forces. These forces, if properly channeled, can provide the impetus for substantial positive (though not utopian) change. At one point in *Myth*, Soyinka describes drama as “a cleansing, binding, communal recreative force . . . “ The stage is, or should be, “a symbolic area for metaphysical contests” by serving as “a manageable contraction of the cosmic envelope” within which people exist.33 It is, as it were, a spiritual hothouse within which communal rites of passage may be enacted and effected. Wherever stage and audience intersect, the outcome must be change of some sort, with the result that, for Soyinka, “theater is perhaps the most revolutionary art form known to man.”34

In Soyinka’s overall view, then, the culture of a society should be identified with the regenerative potential of that society. And Yoruba culture in particular contains both an outlook--its stress on metaphysical transition--and an art form--its theater--that properly highlight the transformative dimension of social practice.

While Watsuji, too, turns his attention to theater, his application of the notion to Japanese society contains a very different twist. Watsuji points out in a 1930 lecture, “On the Climatic Character of the Human Being,” that the English word “person” derives from the Latin term “persona,” that is, mask. From this he argues that every person, regarded as a node of human relations, presents him/herself to others through a persona.35 As Karube Tadashi summarizes, for Watsuji everyday life comprises a performing stage on which one appears before others wearing a mask. When everyone performs their persona--their role--properly, their behavior is “ethical.”36 Here the theater analogy possesses a strongly conservative flavor, insofar as it supports the maintenance of social roles over their hubretic violation.

Much as everyday social interaction takes on a ritualistic cast in Watsuji’s thinking, so too does that form of social interaction that produces and maintains the state. In the ancient Japanese state, the emperor officiated at public ceremonies that ritually unified the people in attendance. This was not an exclusionary practice, however: Watsuji stresses that the emperor (according to ancient texts) publicly venerated regional gods alongside his own ancestors.37 Likewise, in modern times, the task of a politician--similar to an emperor--is that of providing form to the social realm by gently incorporating its various parts. The analogy Watsuji employs here is that of gardening: both gardener and politician seek to create a unity among raw materials that change their appearance as time passes. In each case, the individual in charge
must respect the contingent character of the raw materials involved even as s/he continually guides and re-guides them to form a single whole. Change is inherent in this model, just as it is in Watsuji’s multilayeredness model of Japanese cultural practices. In contrast to Soyinka, however, the dynamism that appears here features incorporation far more than it does transformation.

CONCLUSION

Through most of the foregoing descriptions of Soyinka’s and Watsuji’s models of their cultures, I have deliberately avoided assessing the truth-values of these models. Have our figures successfully captured the underlying dynamics of their societies (at least as of the respective periods in which they wrote)? Or have they created models that indicate more about their own motivations than about the cultures they attempted to describe? I shall not attempt a definitive answer here. It seems worthwhile, however, to hold the issue open, that is, to assume that the models are neither entirely accurate nor entirely projective.

In certain respects, it would be easy—and intellectually satisfying—to declare that Soyinka’s and Watsuji’s models are constructs whose characteristics are unilaterally determined by the cultural nationalist motivations discussed at the beginning of this essay. This appears to be Derek Wright’s point, for example, when he suggests that Soyinka’s Ogun-centered model is “one more polemical counterconstruct” aimed at the pretenses of modern Eurocentrism. Yet this approach seems overly dismissive: it presumes that the presence of defensive motivations in an individual’s intellectual activity effaces or dramatically reduces the validity of the results of that activity. It can be argued, however, that the presence of defensive motivations—vis-à-vis Western Orientalism, for example—may selectively sharpen the individual’s insightfulness into the subject at hand.

Thus, in response to assertions that Yoruba or Japanese culture entirely lack dynamism, thinkers such as Soyinka and Watsuji may genuinely highlight and articulate dynamics whose precise operations had previously remained obscure. And if their depiction of those dynamics features a pattern of possession, loss, and (possible future) recovery, that does not by itself establish that their imaginations created that pattern out of whole cloth.

The experience of being culturally “down-but-not-out” is one that large parts of the world share in the wake of modern European imperialism. Careful thinkers such as Soyinka and Watsuji who write out of
this experience have a special opportunity to elucidate both the change-in-continuity that their cultures displayed in the past and the continuity-in-change (i.e., the partial preservation of their own dynamics) that they display today in response to European incursions.

Having maintained the possibility that Soyinka and Watsuji offer insightful models of their respective cultures, it is necessary to add several cautions. First, it is useful to be aware of the degree to which both Soyinka and Watsuji equate their respective cultures with *experience*. For both of them, culture strongly tends to fuse together deed, emotion, and comprehension. This can make for exciting reading: as authors they habitually place their readers within the matrix of a culture (Yoruba or Japanese) that continually enriches its understanding of itself without losing itself. Unfortunately, the approach tends to undercut other useful ways of understanding cultural development. For example, culture may also take the form of negotiated compromises among social groups that possess competing interests. And external forces may display substantial disruptive capacity by either suppressing certain extant lines of development or inaugurating radically new ones.

The experiential focus of Soyinka and Watsuji is understandable, given how poorly many outside observers have grasped aspects of their societies. Yet an “inside” perspective of the sort they offer may wind up privileging experiential continuity over the discontinuities (including departures from time-honored dynamics) that invariably beset all societies throughout history.

The models that Soyinka and Watsuji offer raise another subtle but important issue. As we have seen, each thinker wishes to regard his culture as both securely unitary and dynamically complex. The imagery of cycles and layers, respectively, enables them to portray their cultures as strikingly multiform and open-ended. Indeed, they place a premium on a virtually kaleidoscopic diversity of experience: multiplicity seems to reign supreme. Despite this, the multiplicity that they attribute to their societies often exists more within individuals than between them. An individual Yoruba as Soyinka describes him/her has a wide variety of experiences--fear, courage, and reconciliation among them--that become linked through their common connection to Ogun’s ordeals. Likewise, an individual Japanese as Watsuji describes him/her has a wide variety of experiences--living within particular cultural layers while enjoying the *frisson* of contrast with neighboring layers--that co-arise within an emperor-sponsored pluralistic space. Yet how capably can either Soyinka or Watsuji respond to an indigene who refuses to
accept the communal experience that forms his/her culture’s alleged Archimedean point? How well can Soyinka, for example, respond to a Yoruba for whom the metaphor of Ogun simply lacks resonance? Or how well can Watsuji respond to a Japanese who will not recognize the emperor as a fitting symbol for Japan as an organic whole?

There is a serious irony here. Soyinka and Watsuji have each dedicated themselves to describing their societies as, in a sense, the Other of the West. They have pursued this task by arguing that their own cultures are more accepting of alternative approaches to reality than the sectarian, conflict-ridden modern West has been. Even as they present this argument, however, they provide little negotiatory space in their cultural models for the presence of the Other—the genuine dissenter—within their own societies. In this respect, their own cultures come across as monistic—as monistic as the West aspires to be—even as these cultures absorb and develop a cornucopia of new cultural forms. To be fully pluralistic, it seems, members of any culture, anywhere, must be able not only to consult the complexity of their own souls but to sustain noncircular conversations with their different-thinking neighbors as well.

NOTES


2. Throughout this essay, I place Japanese surnames first in accordance with Japanese usage.


5. Kosaku Yoshino, Cultural Nationalism in Contemporary
6.


7.


8.


9.

While Soyinka also discusses a king-turned-god called Sango, Sango is less central to his metaphysical schema. See MLAW, 56-59, 151.

10.

Orisanla in his truncated, post-accident form is also known as Obatala (mythologically, the originally distinct myths of Orisanla and Obatala have become syncretized). See ibid., 16, 152.

11.


12.

Soyinka has stated of his plays, “The action is cyclic, yes, but is it claimed anywhere that society returns precisely to its original phase?” Wole Soyinka, *Art, Dialogue, and Outrage: Essays on Literature and Culture* [hereafter ADO] (New York: Pantheon Books, 1988), 73.

13.

MLAW, 145-6.

14.

ADO, 9.

15.

MLAW, 38, 37.

16.

The term “animist metaphysics” belongs to Biodun Jeyifo, who uses it in his introductory essay “Wole Soyinka and the Tropes of Disalienation,” in ADO, xiv.


20. Ibid., 315.

21. Ibid., 307. Here I have used the translation located in Dilworth, 250. It is worth noting that Soyinka once expressed similar sentiments with regard to Yoruba culture: “... it’s no longer possible for a purist [Yoruba] literature [to exist] for the simple reason that even our most traditional literature has never been purist.” Quoted in Derek Wright, Wole Soyinka Revisited (New York: Twayne Publishers, 1993), 13.


23. Ibid., 320.


25. Ibid., 143.

26. MLAW, 54.


28. For an example of how each author employs the notion of “essence,” see MLAW, 141, and WTZ, vol. 1, 41.

29. Beginning in the later 1920s, Watsuji was increasingly influenced by phenomenology and hermeneutics, each of which employed its own specialized terminology. Nevertheless, his holistic bias remained constant, and several terms he earlier favored—for example, “symbol”—continued to figure promi-
nently in his work.

30. MLAW, 53.
31. Ibid., 2.
33. MLAW, 4, 41.
35. WTZ, B2, 207.
36. Karube Tadashi, *Hikari no ryōkoku: Watsuji Tetsurō* [The Kingdom of Light: Watsuji Tetsurō] (Tokyo: Sō bunsha, 1995), 162. Indeed, for Watsuji even such terms as “sincerity” and “trust” simply describe the mental attitude that an ethical social participant needs to be able to play his/her given role faithfully. Karube, 163.
38. Ibid., vol. 2, 263.
39. Wright, 17.
40. The remarks that follow do not exhaust the list of useful cau-
tions. For other cautions with regard to Soyinka, see Wright, ch. 10. For a helpful caution with regard to Watsuji, see Yorizumi Mitsuko, “Watsuji Tetsurō no shisō ni okeru ‘kat-
achi’ no igi ni tuite—sono seiritsu to tenkai ni kan suru hikaku shisōteki tankyû [On Watsuji Tetsurō’s Thought with Respect to the Significance of ‘Form’: A Comparative Theoretical Inquiry with Regard to Its Formation and Development],” in *Nihon no shisō o kangaeru: kōza—hikaku shisō—tenkanki no ningen to shisō*, 2 [Reflections on Japanese Thought: Lectures—Comparative Thought—People and Thought at the Turning Point, Volume 2], ed. Nakamura Hajime (Tokyo:
Hokuju shuppan, 1993), 227.

41. Superficially, Watsuji seems to avoid this trap by maintaining that Japanese who rebel against Japanese traditions create new cultural layers within national life through their very rebellion! This line of argument seems designed to defuse the significance of their rebellion, however, rather than to create negotiatory space between those with substantially divergent outlooks. WTZ, vol. 4, 321.

REFERENCES


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