overseas theatrical experiences are reflected in the productions of his plays that took place after 1959.

4.4.1 The Longer Plays

4.4.1.i The Lion and the Jewel

*The Lion and the Jewel* is one of the most popular of Wole Soyinka’s early plays. It was allegedly written in 1958 but was eventually published only in 1963. This play has featured repeatedly in the Junior Secondary syllabi of the schools in Southern Africa. The most admirable features of this comedy are language and situation, both of which reflect Rabelais and slapstick humour. This slapstick humour is reminiscent of the *commedia dell’arte* techniques Gibbs refers to above. In addition, there are well-crafted characters as seen in the most memorable characteristics of the naïve yet very beautiful village girl and heroine Sidi, Lakunle, the half-educated clown and victim of circumstances, and chief Baroka, the wily old man who uses both tradition and modernism to lure and marry Sidi, whose consent to marriage had been already given to Lakunle, her misguided suitor. The main story occurs within one day. Its structure is divided into three “acts” named Morning, Noon and Night. This is a variation of the conventional Act One, Two, and Three common to the box-set types of modern drama plays. In this play, the dramatist does not even use the western conventional scene division techniques; instead, Soyinka effects scene change by character composition and action, a device Arden uses a great deal in *The Waters of Babylon*. For example, in the opening “scene” of the Morning act, Sidi has been for some time talking with Lakunle when a group of young people comes on stage to tell her the good news of the return of the city photo journalist (Soyinka 1963: 10). This change of scene is presented thus:

Sidi: ... *(noise off stage)*
There are people coming
*Give me the bucket or they’ll jeer.*
*(Enter a crowd of youths and drummers, the girls being in various stages of excitement).*
First Girl: Sidi, he has returned. He came back just as he said he would...

Instantly, the mood lifts from the quiet atmosphere of courtship that had prevailed between Sidi and Lakunle to that of celebration with drumming and dancing, and the topic of discussion changes from that of love, civilization and the bride-price to that of the stranger’s photographs and Lagos, the city of magic. Noted also is the technique of using dialogue to usher onto stage hitherto absent characters, for example, Sidi’s “There are people coming” and the First Girl’s “... he has returned ... just as he said he would”. This is one technique found repeatedly in older texts like Shakespere’s; it is also a technique used by some of Soyinka’s own Royal Court contemporaries, like Arden (Chapter 3). Hereafter, the whole action reverts to an event that has already happened. The action is presented via an elaborate mimed performance, a distinctly African theatrical technique, with which Soyinka manages to return to the past when this civilised man from the city visited Lagos. Furthermore, the girls’ news introduces the Bale, Chief Baroka, another main character. The Bale, who later becomes Lakunle’s arch rival, is said to be seething with anger and jealousy at not having been featured prominently in the picture magazine that features beautiful Sidi, the jewel of Ilujinle. As the Morning act ends, the chief actors and their characteristic interests and weaknesses have been introduced; the seeds of overweening pride, jealousy, plotting, and rivalry have all been sown. The main conflict has thus been set firmly in place and the remainder of the acts show its complication and finally the dénouement.

The Noon act focuses on exposing more and more of Sidi’s vainglory as Baroka manipulates the most elaborate scheme to win her. The driving force to get Sidi is not love but the urgent desire to satiate his own waning ego. When the Night act comes, Sidi falls into Baroka’s trap, while Lakunle is still starry-eyed about the fantasies of civilization. Most striking are Baroka’s tactics; with words and acts of cunning, riddles and civilization ploys, such the stamp making machine, with which he lures and deflowers her -- to the disappointment of many. The wily old fox marries her.

The internal structure of *The Lion and the Jewel* is clearly that of a typical three-act
well-made comedy, popular in many Western dramas. The disorder that seems to threaten the characters’ social concord is expertly woven in toward the end of the first “act”, it stays on right through the middle “act” to resolve at the very end with convivial dance and a wedding celebration where there is an innuendo that Sidi is expecting a baby. With the idea of marriage and fertility firmly endorsed, Soyinka concludes his comedy with a gleeful laugh at the youthful-minded Sidi and Lakunle, who are outwitted by the old and cunning Baroka, laughing last and laughing best.

This structure and other features of comedy show the dramatist’s encounter with Western drama. But such traits are not the only outstanding characteristic of the play. Soyinka’s background of African traditional theatre is also quite evident in the mime, drumming, dancing, and the ornate poetic utterances of the characters. This illustrates Abiola Irele’s point that from Irish artists like Synge who wrote about the experiences of the Irish in English, Soyinka came to appreciate the idea of going back to his folk-culture for material of embellishment. Such an influence, though traceable to Europe, is not specifically attributable to the Royal Court, especially because it is not clear when in his life Soyinka met with and emulated the Irish playwrights.

In The Lion and the Jewel, Soyinka experiments with some elements of his traditional theatre as well. The blending of modern drama with aspects of traditional theatre can be seen in this play. Traditional devices like mood, story telling, masquerade, mime, and song and dance are reminiscent of African oral theatre, and in particular, the Apidan theatre genre. Götrick (1984: 31) speaks of African traditional theatre as distinct from the accidental by its propensity toward being a theatre of celebration which is characterised by the emotional and ceremonial, where the Western is more rhetorical and discursive. Although The Lion and the Jewel displays plenty of rhetoric, like many Western plays, the mood of celebration and high emotion encases all the three acts.

In his outline of the salient features of the Apidan theatre Götrick (1984: 40-41) states that unlike the linear-plot-structured western drama, this genre houses several dramas.
within one long play. Each of these dramas stands as an independent unit that may tell a complete story. Furthermore, the actors constantly improvise and spectators are often drawn into the action to participate as co-creators. Even though it may not have been Soyink’s primary aim to present a written version of the traditional theatre, one can see the grafting in of these traditional theatrical devices mentioned above. For instance, there are two memorable “stories” within the main story: there is the story of the land surveyor who wanted to construct a railway line on a patch of land about which he could not agree with the local chief, the dispute was eventually settled when the chief was bribed with a bottle of rum. The whole incident is mimed. Another story is the re-enactment of the photo-journalist’s visit. Here Lakanle is coerced by the girls to act the part of the city visitor because he resembles him in speech, dress, and behaviour. The enactment ensues in mime again. Even though these characters are already in the cast to act out the main story, they re-cast themselves and masquerade to enact yet another story within the main action. The attributes of song and dance are sometimes not seen as a borrowing from the original African theatre but as a realistic representation of everyday African life, but my conviction is that there is no strong argument to counter the fact that even traditional theatre uses these features repeatedly. The Lion and the Jewel thrives on song and dance. It is undeniable that this play is a product of an amalgam of theatrical cultures such as the English, the traditional African and Soyink’s own individual theatre sense.

4.4.1.ii The Swamp Dwellers

As noted earlier, The Swamp Dwellers was first seen when it was submitted to the 1958 University of London Drama Competition and then a year later in Ibadan, when it was presented with The Lion and the Jewel. Unfortunately, records of reviews of the London performance could not be obtained. In Nigeria, however, Sangodare Akanji gave in-depth reviews of both plays as presented by the Student Dramatic Society (University College, Ibadan) in February 1959. These plays were directed by Geoffrey Axworthy. The reviewer’s comments focus more on the literary and less on the theatrical merits of both plays. For instance, about The Lion and the Jewel he
comments: “Wole Soyinka has an instinct for the stage and the dramatic situation. He can create convincing characters and he has a superb sense of humour.” Akanji then uses the remainder of the review to explore the central characters in the play. A similar approach is used in *The Swamp Dwellers* where the introduction of the review evaluates theme thus:

While *The Lion and the Jewel* is content with making a humorous comment on village life, the *Swamp Dwellers* [sic] purports to be a play with a message. Unfortunately the message gets swamped half way through the play in a series of confused emotions (*Black Orpheus*, February 1959).

A large section of the review is directed at characterisation and theme development. Like some of the London reviewers, Akanji seems to be propagating the ideals of realist theatre and the well-made play. His interest in the message can be seen in the concluding remarks on conflict resolution where he observes that “... there [is no] genuine conflict situation ... instead of giving us a confrontation of two ways of life, the author has given us a sentimental hero and a grotesque villain, thus turning his poetic play into a melodrama.” The reviewer’s appreciation of realist theatre is also perceived in the following comments:

Tribute must be paid to the performances of the students of University College Ibadan, who fully rose to the occasion. ... Geoffrey Axworthy’s production did full justice to the possibilities of *The Swamp Dwellers*, and succeeded in creating a truly enchanting atmosphere [emphasis added] (*Black Orpheus*, February 1959).

The analysis that follows is of the text and not of any stage performance.

This play is set in some marshy swamp with one hut built on stilts. It features five visible characters -- the aged Makuri and his wife Alu, their son Igwezu, the blind Beggar from the North, and the village priest, called the Kadiye -- and two unseen others, Igwezu’s identical twin Awuchike, and the Serpent. The latter two are equally important participants in the drama even though they never feature physically on stage despite their influence on the course of story development. The story unfolds and
concludes within one day. It opens with the old quarrelsome couple agitated by the absence of their son Igwezu, who has gone out for the day, having just returned from the avaricious city in which his twin, Awuchike disappeared, years before. The most affected is the mother, while the father tries to tone down her fears with jeers and mockery. The fundamental problem is two-pronged. Makuri is worried about the rain that is not abating and continues to spoil the crop, while Alu is anxious about the return of Igwezu who has been out the whole day. But underneath Alu’s fears lies an even greater fear: that her long lost son Awuchike has probably died in the city. This two-faced problem feeds the central thread of the conflict into the exposition, in which Soyinka expertly peppers salient details such as that Igwezu is married, his father is so aged that he cannot perform his trade with the required speed, Igwezu and his twin brother were conceived on the river bed where two great rivers meet and where the swamp begins, and that the villagers seem to be held to ransom by the great Serpent of the swamp, that does not bring the destructive rain to a halt. All this is revealed in the part-humorous part-quarrelsome dialogue between husband and wife, and is intermittently disturbed by the blood-sucking fly.

In this drama, Soyinka makes very little attempt to use complex devices such as the flashback, folktale narrative, choric involvement, mime or song. The only addition to dialogue is the drumming, which is itself used very conventionally, as a way of announcing the arrival of the Kadiye (Soyinka 1986: 88,101).

Theatrical techniques used in this drama are more realist and illusionistic than the avant-garde Brechtian. First, the décor of the first scene represents a true-to-life situation; there is no attempt to tamper with the fourth wall, as is common in anti-illusionist theatre. The playwright describes the very realistic scene thus:

\[ ... the room is fairly large, and is used both as the family workshop and as the parlour ... [there] is a barber’s swivel chair... On a small table against the right wall is a meagre row of hairdressing equipment -- a pair of clippers, scissors, local combs ... \] (Soyinka 1986: 81).

Soyinka creates a very gloomy atmosphere through physical setting and the state of the
weather. This sombre mood is accentuated by the physical setting of a lone hut perched on an island, the inclement weather indicated by the gentle wash of unwanted rain, the fact that it is near dusk and the very sight of a once industrious but now aged couple living alone. This technique of evoking emotion in the audience is what Brecht opposed in Aristotelian drama when he designed his theatre to achieve the audience’s emotional detachment and emphasise intellectual involvement. Throughout the unfolding of the conflict, the characters stay wrapped in their role, not once acknowledging the presence of the audience, as one would find in an anti-illusionist theatre. The major preoccupation of the dramatist is the central psychological conflict within Igwezu’s family.

As the tension mounts, there is a false alarm, of Igwezu’s return home, but the person who arrives is a blind beggar, merely identified as the Beggar. His words of greeting are, “Allah grant everlasting peace to this house” (Soyinka 1986: 88). By the time the beggar arrives, the playwright has already established the side theme of the conflict between the old and the young, the traditional and the modern. Makuri’s grave concern is that children dissociate themselves from things that matter, like the traditional values of family loyalty; they are lured by the city that eventually destroys them. His fear is confirmed when at the end, Igwezu reveals that his twin Awuchike stole Igwezu’s newly-wedded wife Desala, and signed a business contract with him in which Igwezu had used his aborted crop as surety. Igwezu’s major source of depression is that there was no brotherly feeling at all in this transaction; everything was carried out as between total strangers. Awuchike is lost.

The Beggar is of symbolic significance in this conflict. He comes from the North, where drought has destroyed any semblance of communal existence. But this experience of man’s betrayal by nature has made the Beggar a better person than the seemingly blessed swamp dwellers. His account of his own people’s experience with treacherous nature is overheard by Igwezu, who has just returned unseen from his day-long wanderings:
Beggar: We went about the plantations and rubbed our skins against them [the shoots], lightly so that the tenderest bud could not be hurt. This was the closest that we had ever felt to one another. This was the moment that the village became a clan, and the clan a household, and even that was taken by Allah in one of his large hands and kneaded together with the clay of the earth. ... But it turned out to be an act of spite. The feast was not meant for us -- but for the locusts (Soyinka 1963: 99).

Evidently he comes not to beg. He continuously refuses alms, but he wants to settle where the river ends and then work on the soil. Although he comes from an arid territory, his soul is rich with blessings for Makuri's household. Although he may be blind, the Beggar is able to discern that something is wrong with the Kadiye. From the voice the Beggar senses that the Kadiye is a very fat man. The irony is that the whole village is experiencing a famine. The Beggar then offers himself as Igwezu's bondsman to till the soil that has not yielded the all-essential harvest. As Igwezu flees after confronting and exposing the priest as the charlatan responsible for the unabating rains, the Beggar becomes the "brother" Igwezu has lost. He offers to stay behind and comfort the parents and face the irate Kadiye and supporters. As he stands with the moonlight falling on him through the window, the beggar represents a motley of symbolic personae: he "sees the light", he is the hope of this disheartened household, he is the pillar for the parents and Igwezu to lean on, he is the foil to the lost Awuchike, and the silent seer into situations and personalities unfathomable. The story ends with Igwezu fleeing into the night and definitely going back to the alluring yet cruel city.

Igwezu's flight need not be taken as a confirmation of the elders' fears that the young people have abandoned tradition in favour of the city. In The Swamp Dwellers the thematic statement is complex. The city and the trusted traditional home seem to conspire against the individual and destroy him in different ways. It seems Soyinka is raising the issue of human disillusionment with the pillars of society that people have been conditioned to trust, like one's siblings, the religious head, and the soil that yields the dwellers' crops. What the eye sees may not necessarily be what really is, Soyinka seems to be contending through the variety of his characters.
Igwezu is actually expelled from his traditional place of abode by the village, whose religious head is a charlatan and he has also been betrayed by nature, which ruined his crop. He had gone to the city to make his fortune and also to look for his lost brother, but he has failed in both missions. He had pinned his hope on his crop back home. He returned to his plantation and found that it could not yield any saving crop because the chief priest, the Kadiye, had been defrauding the people and not taking their prayers and offerings to the Serpent, hence the heavy rains. On the afternoon of his return, Igwezu had spent many hours talking with the Serpent, which is probably when he learnt the truth about the Kadiye. As the conflict intensifies Igwezu eventually flees back to the city because of the fray between himself and the now-exposed Kadiye. The statement of theme one gets is that such issues as tenacious belief in the religious system and blind condemnation of youth, and the seemingly unfortunate members of the community like the Beggar, should not be taken at face value because each may have yet another, unperceived side which is very different from its apparent characteristics.

This points to the view that life’s situations are a complex maze that cannot be explored easily. Nonetheless, the audience can sense the feeling of loss of hope in Igwezu and his household, despite the presence of the beacon of light, the blind Beggar.

There is an uncanny echo of Beckett in some of the issues raised and techniques applied in *The Swamp Dwellers*. The notion that Soyinka was also exposed to the works of Samuel Beckett while he was in London is clearly demonstrated in this play as shown later. To support this view Doty and Harbin relate that:

... the Royal Court was the home of Beckett and was also one of the earliest homes of the Absurdist theatre, with the productions of Ionesco’s *The Chairs* and *Rhinoceros* and N.F. Simpson’s *One Way Pendulum*, which presented an English kind of absurdism (Doty and Harbin 1990: 208).

Seeing such productions as N.F. Simpson’s play may have given Soyinka an idea: to adapt the techniques of absurdism and apply them to African drama.
Following that line of thought I perceive Soyinka’s sense of disappointment in long-standing values reminiscent of the absurdist theatre-idea, like Beckett’s *Waiting for Godot*, where Vladimir and Estragon’s faith in Godot is questioned, ridiculed, and almost invalidated when the long awaited Godot fails to appear. Although Acholonu believes that the treatment of this theme by Soyinka is identical to Beckett’s, this may be true of others of Soyinka’s plays, but not of *The Swamp Dwellers*. Acholonu observes that “... Soyinka’s themes are echoes of Samuel Beckett. His characters are gripped by the same hopelessness in which Beckett’s characters find themselves” (Jones 1984: 15). This may be true in other plays, but in my opinion *The Swamp Dwellers* differs slightly in that some of the characters, like the Beggar, still hold some faith in the Supreme Being who is being misrepresented by an earthly office bearer, the Kadiye. This differs from plays like Beckett’s *Waiting For Godot*, for example, where the notion of a people without a God is expressed. However, other techniques used by Soyinka are reminiscent of Beckett’s. For example, Acholonu correctly comments that:

Soyinka makes use of human deformity in the same way as does Beckett ... [Their] characters are either old, invalid, ailing, or nursing wounds. Blind men play leading roles. ... [This being] a device to demonstrate the sordid plight of man. Both authors allude to the entanglement of man, a condition from which there is no escape (Jones 1984: 13,15).

The deformed characters Acholonu is probably referring to are, *inter alia*, the social outcasts like the touts in Soyinka’s *The Road*, the Beggar in *The Swamp Dwellers*, and Murano in *The Road*, all of whom are blind. She compares these characters with the tramps like Lucky, Estragon, Pozzo, and Vladimir in *Waiting for Godot*, and Hamm, the blind despot in *Endgame*, both plays by Beckett. Like Beckett, Soyinka also uses the technique of creating very important characters that never appear on stage, like the Serpent and Awuchike.

As shown, Soyinka’s application of absurdist techniques does not always compare to the last detail with Beckett’s. For example, even though Soyinka’s central characters, the isolated aged (Makuri and Alu), the wanderers (the Beggar and Awuchike), and the hopeless (Igwezu), may be similar to Beckett’s tramps and wanderers, Soyinka does not address the transiency and hopelessness of life. His characters continue to pursue
alternatives to the disappointments of the present, as they still have some hope. They do not take the view that "... life means waiting, killing time, and clinging to the hope that relief may be just around the corner. If not today, then perhaps tomorrow" (http://www.imagi-nation.com/moonstruck/clsc7.html, 6 March 2000, "Samuel Beckett 1906-1989"). Like Beckett, who uses stage properties, Soyinka also uses the swivel chair on which is acted the final confrontation between the Kadiye and Igwezu. He also uses images whose staging would be quite a challenge, like the incessant rain that pours through the duration of the play, and the moonlight that shines on the face of the Beggar at the very end of the play as the would-be hero, Igwezu, flees. Soyinka's images are not always the concrete stage properties found in Beckett. Another point of difference lies in the communication skills of the characters. The explanation of Beckett's characters as:

lonely creatures who struggle vainly to express the unexpressable [sic] ... characters [who] exist in a terrible dreamlike vacuum, overcome by an overwhelming sense of bewilderment and grief, grotesquely attempting some form of communication, then crawling on, endlessly (http://www.levity.com/corduroy/beckett.html, 6 March 2000, "Bohemian Ink: Samuel Beckett"),

does approximate the portrayal of character in The Swamp Dwellers. However, this only extends as far as the existence in a dreamlike vacuum and the sense of sadness caused by the unabating rain and the loss of sons in the city. Soyinka's characters communicate very effectively. The plight of Igwezu, who seems to be on a quest to secure his identity, could be one of the few features of the absurdist character. However, Igwezu is not searching from within himself (http://www.levity.com/corduroy/beckett.html, 6 March 2000, "Bohemian Ink: Samuel Beckett"). He is looking at external figures like the city or his parents when he asks, as if in echo of the Biblical Cain: "Father. Tell me, father, is my brother a better man than I?" (Soyinka 1986: 107).

Even though The Swamp Dwellers may not be classified as a typical drama of the absurd, like the works of Samuel Beckett and Eugene Ionesco, it does have features
that are reminiscent of the theatre of the absurd. Perhaps one may perceive it as Soyinka’s brand of the absurd theatre in the same way that Edward Bond and John Arden have modified Brecht to suit their British situation (Innes 1992). Like most of his early works, it seems in this drama Soyinka is attempting yet another of the then popular theatre forms that were showing at the Royal Court in the 1950s.

Beckett’s is not the only theatre form The Swamp Dwellers echoes. Features of the realist theatre can also be found. The focus on character, conflict, and theme is quite characteristic of realist theatre. The stage directions at the end of the play clearly confirm the realistic bent of the theatre-form favoured by this play. For instance, the playwright describes the enrapturing atmosphere as follows:

[The door swings. The Beggar sighs, gestures a blessing and says.]
I shall be here to give account.
[The oil lamps go out slowly and completely. The Beggar remains on the same spot, the moonlight falling on him through the window.]
THE END

(Soyinka 1986: 112).

The stage performance of this portion of the play should be very florid and emotionally engaging, and therefore far from the anti-illusionist ideal of Brecht who

... detested [a] drama [that attempted] to lure the spectator into a kind of trance-like state, a total identification with the hero to the point of complete self-oblivion, resulting in feelings of terror and pity ... [because] he didn’t want his audience to feel emotions -- he wanted [it] to think ...


The ending of The Swamp Dwellers is in sharp contrast to Brecht’s idea stated above. The last scene in The Swamp Dwellers evokes a very alluring atmosphere. For example, the light from the oil lamps fades slowly while the Beggar stands rooted on one spot, the moonlight shining on him. Such a scene, in my opinion, would create the illusionist mood that Brecht so vehemently discouraged.

A blend of different theatre idioms can be perceived in the design of The Swamp
Dwellers. This play has fused both Africa and the West in being a traditionally-formatted play with features of both the realistic and the Beckettian drama, and also uses symbolic features like the rain, the swamp, and religious conflict in order that characters may be better understood by an African audience which shares the same cultural background within which the story unfolds. Although there are no conventional demarcations of scene and act, this play may be taken as a one-act drama. As in The Lion and the Jewel, change of scene is effected without the text expressly stating so. Again, Soyinka creates scene change by means of action and character composition. For example, where there are perhaps two characters focussed on some issue on stage, this issue of focus may be changed slightly or completely with the introduction of a new character (Elam 1988). In this play the use of drumming, particularly in the introduction of the Kadiye, also serves to alert the audience to a change of scene, just as in The Lion and the Jewel. This innovative technique of scene/act change is part of the dramatic idiom Soyinka was creating, drawing ideas from the African principles of theatre to complement the different theatre forms that he encountered at the Royal Court Theatre.

4.4.2 Observations on the Longer Plays

The comic tone of The Lion and the Jewel does not underplay Soyinka’s concern about, and mockery of, the embracing of half-baked knowledge of foreign cultures by Africans, a theme that resurfaces in The Swamp Dwellers. Of the two plays, the more complex to unravel, The Swamp Dwellers, seems to touch on the same theme of African traditional values, like filial piety and veneration of religious leaders, being threatened by corrosive influences from both the western (Awuchike) and the African (the Kadiye) worlds. The prevailing feeling throughout the drama is the absurdity and meaninglessness of life where one’s traditional anchor becomes a point of disillusionment that forces him or her to flee to an alternative world which turns out to be even more cruel and callous, as is seen in the chief character, Igwezu.

The thematic idea that we live in a chaotic and meaningless world imparts to The
Swamp Dwellers another characteristic of the theatre of the absurd, where the plight of humanity is the despair and purposelessness of existence (Hinchliffe 1977: 1). In the nature of absurdist ideals, Soyinka tries to create a drama that depicts "... the struggle of the human imagination against religious complacency, moral apathy, and social conformity" (Hinchliffe 1977: 2), using the conflict that exists between the Kadiye, the twin brothers, and their parents. The negative attributes of the Kadiye give the impression that although Soyinka is trying to depict a "people for whom God is dead" (Esslin 1980: 318), his attempt is dampened by the presence of the Beggar who stands for the direct opposite of despair and godlessness. The Beggar's continual reference to Allah suggests that God is not dead. Despite the Beggar's strong faith, there is a feeling of despair and helplessness in Makuri and Alu who have worked tirelessly all their lives, have given their whole being to a faith that has in turn, betrayed them. Theirs has been a world with worthy causes, with hope and convictions but now, for Igwezu and by implication his parents, this pillar is broken.

One of Soyinka's points in The Swamp Dwellers is that humans have to find means to survive even if they live in a senseless world. Their god is not dead. If they do not have a god it could be because they have defiled the shrine of godliness. There is room to repair the damage, but each individual makes his or her own choice. The Swamp Dwellers does not depict total bleakness and despair. It has a very sombre ending where several signs of long-standing order crumble. The play ends in sadness as the lure of the city and the betrayal of traditional virtues rob the aged Alu and Makuri of their two sons. There is no physical death of any character but there are several metaphorical deaths: Alu's disintegrated household, the severing of blood ties between siblings, and the loss of faith in the religion of the forefathers are some of the most glaring examples that force the audience to join Soyinka and ask, "Is social order a mere illusion then?"

The Swamp Dwellers articulates a sense of the disorder of human life. Wole Soyinka's source of discomfiture seems to be the devastating effects of meddling European industrialisation and imperialism on the African state, for example the city in The
Swamp Dwellers and Western norms in The Lion and the Jewel. In both The Lion and the Jewel and The Swamp Dwellers Soyinka does not necessarily glorify the African state. as perhaps would a negritudist writer, but he points out the additional burden this new influence has on an otherwise not so pure society. For instance, the Bale does not flinch from using the gadgets of civilisation, like the stamp machine, to lure Sidi. As he unveils this “strange machine” the Bale explains that this is:

Baroka: The work, dear child, of the palace blacksmith
Built in full secrecy (Soyinka 1963: 46).

Although this may just be Baroka’s tactic to win the naïve Sidi whose love for modern things seems to be her major weakness at the moment, Baroka’s choice of snare shows that the traditional villagers are not innocent bystanders whose lives are taken over and corrupted by Western civilisation; they participate in the “tainting” of their lives.

Finally, the form of The Lion and the Jewel suggests a comedy that begins with quasi-concord, a disturbance in this peace, and then a denouement and conclusion, which is the lovers’ union in marriage. This wedding is very effervescently celebrated with dancing and drumming, all hard feelings between enemies buried and forgotten. The resolution to the central conflict is marriage and festivity, and Soyinka expertly fuses this otherwise basic plot with African theatre attributes such as the three mimes, the drumming, and dancing. Explaining the significance of the mime in Yoruba folk-theatre, Martin Banham states that:

The mimés emphasize the continuity of life of the community by taking us back into episodes that are part of the lore of the people, events that have their consequences in the present action and which, by implication, will go on being told and re-told in the future as new generations remember their roots and their traditions (Banham 1981: 15).

The mélange of theatre-dramaturgy from both the African and various Western traditions endorses the long standing observation that Soyinka, ostensibly a child of two worlds, has had to try and create a harmonious co-existence of two different value systems for most of his life (Ogbonna 1992: 52). The African attributes of the plays
are probably what the Royal Court audience could not easily relate to.

4.4.3 Theatre in the Street: Sketches and Revues

Gibbs's comments in the Nobel Prize for Literature interview (1986) highlight that 1960 was a very exciting time for any young Nigerian playwright. This new political dispensation came with fresh expectations for many, but perhaps not for Wole Soyinka, whose pessimism and cautious scepticism are further enunciated by Abiola Irele in my interview with him (Appendix B1):

Irele: But I've tried to argue that a certain critical disposition is already evident in his early plays. This standpoint merely intensified by the bitter experience [with Gowon]. There is a sense in which Soyinka anticipated some of the events themselves in Nigeria and when they occurred, they confirmed his own pessimism.

Zodwa: Actually, that is what I would like to establish, whether earlier, before he had a brush with the law that landed him in gaol, whether he was always angry and anti-establishment.

Irele: There is that, you know. If you look at Kongi’s Harvest (which I perceive as a political play in many ways) you can already see elements of that stance. Well, I wouldn’t say anti-establishment, but -- what shall I say -- he’s not just merely critical of ...

Zodwa: Perhaps he challenges the injustices ...?

Irele: That is right! The whole idea -- note that there are certain contradictions in Death and the King's Horseman for instance. A certain sceptical disposition is already implicit in his early work and that includes his comedies and the more serious plays. All this deepened by the encounter with the events and grim experiences of life. ...

Zodwa: Professor Irele, I would like us to go back to theme in the works of Soyinka; particularly the theme of combat. When you look at his drama, do you see a drama of combat -- I mean a very angry combative drama, or it is a drama of social relevance conceived in a world that continually challenges him to act in that angry way? That is, a society that perpetually tips
the scales of justice, thus provoking him to react?

Irele: By combat you -- you have to define your terms of combat. Usually terms like combat, commitment and so on are associated with left-wing causes. When you think “combat” you think of the literature of commitment, you think of the literature of social struggle and so on. Certainly, his is a literature of critical -- there is a critical stance in his writing and social criticism is a major aspect in it. In fact, it has been since the very beginning.

Zodwa: That is true.

Irele: Now to see it as literature of combat, you must then see the way in which it draws on certain tradition[s] of commitment (Appendix B1).

Irele calls to attention the fact that Wole Soyinka had been sceptical of the Nigerian leadership even before it came into power. This scepticism is better explained by Maren in Ibadan, who acerbically depicts the decadence in which the politician of the emerging Nigerian state was steeped. Soyinka saw these statesmen as

... the self-centred, exhibitionist train of the politicians that he had encountered in London, making him wonder if he had not been sweeping in judgement of the class. Flamboyant, egotistical and extravagant, they turned up with or without reason ... . Their children were spoilt, elitist brats who infested the British public schools with their loutish manners, imitation accents and a moneyed condescension toward the talented children of less privileged families (Soyinka 1995: 57).

It is therefore understandable why Soyinka could not be easily swept along by the fever of independence celebration in his country and the rest of the continent, whose new leadership showed similar tendencies (Soyinka 1995: 57). More views shared with his contemporaries and other eminent researchers, like Basil Davidson (1966), show that it was the entire brand of emerging leadership in Africa in the wake of imperial rule that the young African intelligentsia was generally concerned about (Appendix B1). Given the kind of person Soyinka was, it is not hard to believe that the political situation in African was something Soyinka was familiar with. As an intuitive literature student, a self-politicised scholar, and a keen reader, Soyinka’s interest in continental African
affairs as well as world politics probably added to his ability to discern the disastrous direction in which some African governments were headed at the time. In that case, then, his works -- the main source of Irele's perceptions -- should reflect this absence of a blind acceptance of African leadership by Soyinka.

In these sketches and revues the writer has chosen a microcosmic approach to address an immediate local situation, unlike the approach he took in other plays like The Invention and The Play of the Giants, where he undertook to comment on and criticise situations in other parts of his continent. It appears the writer momentarily put aside the writing of major works to focus on sketches because of the despotic situation his country was in. These consciousness raising sketches enabled Soyinka to address the urgent social issues in Nigeria. Their function can be illustrated more concretely through the examination of some of them.

4.5 The Shorter Plays

The use of minor works to address pressing sociopolitical concerns can be seen as a case of a wheel coming full cycle in the literary history of Wole Soyinka. As an undergraduate student at Ibadan, Soyinka preoccupied himself with this kind of literature. This tradition was improved at the Royal Court Theatre, where he participated fully in protest productions such as the Hola Camp improvisation, read poems protesting against the testing of the nuclear bomb in Egypt and against racism in England, and joined the Aldermaston Marches against nuclear armaments. It comes as no surprise to find Soyinka reverting to the same device of agitprop theatre -- which he prefers to call "guerrilla theatre"-- to address similar situations in independent Nigeria. In his interview of 16 April 1998 with Harry Kreisler, Soyinka elaborates on the value of this kind of theatre in addressing pressing issues as he points out:

What I call "guerrilla theater"[sic] for instance, can respond immediately. Some people call it living theater, some people call it newspaper theater. Whatever it is, street theater, it can respond immediately to both events and the
changing pattern of events. It responds to the dynamics of any situation
(http://globetrotter.berkeley.edu/Hilberg/Soyinka/soyinka-con.html, 8 March
2000, “Writing Theater Arts, and Political Activism: Conversation With Nobel
 Laureate Wole Soyinka”).

It is highly possible that this is the same premise that the Royal Court used when it
staged the improvisation about the killing of the eleven Kenyans. The Court’s decision
to use this kind of theatre can be traced, *inter alia*, to the influences of Brecht, who we
learn “... also wrote what he called ‘Lehrstücke’ (teaching plays) -- [which were baldly]
didactic works for performance outside the orthodox theatre” --
(http://www.cs.brandeis.edu/~jamesf/goodwoman/brecht_bio.html, 6 March 2000,
“Bertolt Brecht”). In these sketches one can see Soyinka drawing directly from his
experiences of the Court and from Brecht, to address a situation in newly independent
Nigeria.

This time around, however, the Ibadan college student halls of the early 1950s -- which
were his first “stage” -- the Royal Court stage of the Hola camp saga, and the streets
of London in the late 1950s have all been replaced by the real streets of 1960s Nigeria.
It is therefore, my conjecture that Soyinka was drawing from this Brecht-Devine
inspired culture of living theatre when he created the sketches analysed below.

Those who use the model of formal drama that seeks well developed theme and well
rounded character find it easy to dismiss these sketches as not having any artistic
quality -- a trap both Ricárd and myself fell into in our cursory evaluation of these
revues (Appendix, B3). The better way to understand these works is to look at them
from the point of view of their function primarily as “guerrilla theatre” or agitprop
writings.

Agitprop theatre, we should recall, aims at conducting working-class propaganda and
agitation through dramatic performance. It is the theatre of the poor where stagecraft
implicitly becomes the main characteristic. Its anti-bourgeois bent is also detected in
the preference for devices like songs, stereotype characters, and absence of script
rigidity. Performances are made in the street and not in the formal proscenium stage

188
My approach in the ensuing discussion is therefore more descriptive because there is no literary analysis. Close analysis is made redundant by the fact that there is very little in the sketches' content to sustain in-depth theatrical scrutiny, as the plays tend to be repetitive in dramatic technique.

As expected, the theatrical features that are common in Soyinka's sketches include the small cast, a relatively bare stage, action presented through music, dance, and mime, and various types of flashback. All themes in both the long and shorter plays seem to be woven into the central thread that deals with the state and human dignity, freedom and fullest liberty, without which life ceases to make meaning (Soyinka 1986). To actualise this ideal, Soyinka uses a blend of theatre traditions such as the Brechtian, the theatre of the absurd, agitprop, and the Aipadan. It is however, the latter two that seem to sustain his "theatre on the street".

So what is the idea, form, and function of Soyinka's revues? It would serve the interests of this research also to ascertain if there are any similarities and differences between these and the early works written in Ibadan. The study will establish whether or not there has been any major shift, in the playwright's dramaturgy and issues of interest, between these latter works and his earlier writing for the stage. The four texts catalogued below are the object of analysis in this section.

1. *My Father's Burden*
2. *The Night of the Hunted / The House of Banigeji*
3. *Before the Blackout* (thirteen sketches)
4. *The Detainee*

*Before the Blackout* is a collection of thirteen even shorter sketches which take various forms. These sketches are mainly cast in poetry and drama, categories which easily lend themselves to public performance.
4.5.1 i. *My Father's Burden*

I have a strong conviction that the manuscript I evaluate below (located in the library of the University of South Africa) is the original text. I comment on the text in this form with its deletions and amendments. The text bears the date, April / May, 1960, and it still has handwritten scribbles and cancellations showing the wordsmith at work. It was fascinating to examine the crafting process and to witness the chopping and moving around of words, clusters of words, sentences and sometimes whole pages. As a matter of honesty, at times it was difficult not to go through the cancelled material just to see what was written there. In the reading of this text, I tried very hard to confine my comments to the final version that Soyinka decided upon.

*My Father's Burden* is a television drama that presents a story of the purging of corruption in government. It is a story of the sins of the father (Nwane) visited upon the son (Onya) and the latter’s giving up of all privileges to correct this accursed “inheritance”. The story opens on a messy and terribly-littered living room. It is Onya’s apartment and he is moving house. Onya, a young government official armed with English university training in law, discovers after five years that his esteemed position as Public Relations Officer for Ferrari [some times written as Farelli] and Sons was in fact pre-arranged by his father, Chief Nwane, then a very influential government minister. On his return from law school, all had been set in place by the father, who saw nothing wrong with nepotism and wheeling and dealing. The young man feels a moral responsibility to dismantle this “empire” even at his own personal loss; this attitude, his wife, Tola, does not agree with. Throughout the play, his friend Chuks does not want openly to side with anybody. It is a burden and a moral stigma for Onya to stay in a job which he got with the underhand help of his father. Meanwhile, his father, the instigator, is comfortably retired and feels no remorse. Soyinka’s point is that nepotism is morally unacceptable.

The playwright openly attacks a number of issues in this drama. He raises so many issues that he is unable to deal with all of them conclusively at the end. The central
subject matter points to the effects of corruption, left by the older generation in the hands of their children to eradicate. Onya belongs to the Igbo group, while Tola, his wife, is Yoruba. The dialogue is overtly spattered with tribal slurs. Tribal biases against the Igbo particularly come out in utterances such as:

Mrs A. ...There are men enough in this country, but my daughter had to choose an Ibo man. The most treacherous people on earth. (Soyinka 1960: 37).

The last line has been struck out (by Soyinka), but there is a handwritten note next to it (stet), indicating the author’s change of mind about the implemented deletion. This suggests that Soyinka retains his feeling about this negative attribute of the Igbo as perceived by the Yoruba.

In addition to this sub-theme of tribalism, Soyinka also raises the subject of henpecking, as seen in the dialogue between Tola’s mother and her son in-law:

Mrs A. Be quiet young man. ... I can’t wait for the chance for Tola to be rid of you once and for all. If you think I’ll be a patient silently suffering wife to humour your stupidities[,] you are mistaken.

Onya (Under his breath) Not if she takes after you. (Soyinka 1960: 36-7).

The characterisation of the overbearing Mrs A. is also not developed much. These minor issues may seem to have been just fused in without much thought or intention for full development by the writer; as they fizzle out and fail to tie up conclusively at the end. The nature of the theatre they are meant for, however, can allow for this “newsflash” technique briefly to raise the audience’s consciousness, while the central theme of corruption is sustained to the end.

Nwane is an unrepentant, venal old man whose manner of dealing with difficult issues is by bribing his way out. Chuks still does not support his friend Onya; instead he plays the devil’s advocate by urging him to take the bribe from his father and go and resettle
overseas. In tears, Tola blames herself for interfering in her husband’s business, so the story ends in some kind of fragmentation of this family. There is a hint at victory for the morally upright when the father pleads for his son’s mercy. When the play begins there is also a fragmented family, with Tola even threatening to leave Onya. As it concludes, they are still together, but Onya and his father Nwane are not. However, Onya’s fundamental mission to assert himself and stand up against the corrupt old order is successful. His war is not just waged against the old guard of erstwhile government ministers; it also permeates the younger generation which, in turn, finds itself using euphemisms for bribes, nepotism, and corruption. His outburst against the naïve Tola sums it all up in these words:

Tola: ... My father in-law gave me something and you call it a bribe. What bribe?

Onya: But you see, you let me down. My father thinks that money can buy everything ... I was trying to tell him that he is wrong, and in the same moment you take,— call it a gift if you like — but it was like selling me to the enemy (Soyinka 1960: 18).

The “enemy” to which Onya is referring is made up of all the perpetrators of corruption, like his father and the other men of power in society. This discord in the family persists to the end. Tola betrays and frustrates her husband’s efforts to uproot corruption by throwing the tape of evidence over the bridge. This is the tape on which Onya inadvertently recorded a plan between a government official and some managers of Farelli & Sons to swindle the government. In their discussion it emerges that the government official will get 40% of the profit of the company that Onya works for (Soyinka 1960: 21-25). Onya tries to expose these men by taking the tape to the company director, but he is disappointed to find that the director is not keen on addressing the corruption. Speaking to his friend Chuks, Onya recounts:

Onya: That is what I thought. Until I got to the Director.
Chuks: What you thought --? Are you trying to tell me that they deliberately recorded such incriminating --
Onya: Wait. At first when I saw the Director, he pretended to be shocked. Then he asked me round to his house to come and talk it over.
Chuks: Goodness gracious! I bet I know that story. He treated you to a fabulous dinner, introduced you to his very charming wife, and all his children -- including probably a very beautiful daughter who was asked to pay special attention to you. Am I right so far?

Onya: That is not the point.

Chuks: But it is. ...

Onya: Yes, he tried to buy me. [Laughs bitterly] And you are so right about the six-month tour of Europe. (Soyinka 1960: 24-25).

It is such corruption that forces Onya to resign. Nwane goes behind his son’s back and continues to pay bribes to request his son’s job back and apologises to the bosses of the law firm for Onya’s confrontation of them. Sadly, the story ends in the same state of fragmentation which opened the first scene: Tola is blaming herself for her interference in Onya’s affairs; Chuks the friend is reneging without any strong commitment to support Onya’s cause; Nwane, the father, is bitter and disappointed and is still blindly clinging to his old beliefs and pleading with the protagonist to understand his stance.

This is a one-act play. Soyinka continues to avoid the detailed décor of realist theatre. The stage is bare and props are kept to a minimum -- there are only a settee and cigarettes. Characters do not number above four in any one given scene. Other supportive devices include music. In some of his plays, Soyinka presents past events by mime as flashbacks. In this play, he uses plain narration for flashbacks. The drama is cast in simple form where the stage setting is given in detail at the beginning of the play, while the remainder of the play largely gives directions on body movement. For instance the opening directions state:

[Inside of Onya’s room – littered with trunks, suitcases, heavy rolled mattresses, mats, bare walls. On one [side] we find Onya exhausted and perspiring all over, looking down at the littered mess ...] (Soyinka 1960: 1).

The thematic significance of this litter could not be lost on the viewers of the WNTV channel on which this drama was aired. There is a young man, overtly distressed by the mess that surrounds him and working hard to rid society of it. According to Soyinka,
man is the worst vermin that infests society, but thankfully, not everyone in his society condones the decadence that others have brought. The point of divergence between Beckett and Soyinka, as Acholonu confirms, is that although “[both] authors proclaim doom for mankind ... Soyinka sees man as the creator of his troubles, [while] Beckett’s man is helpless and incapable of changing the fate to which nature has confined him” (Jones 1984: 17).

Soyinka uses simple sentences in standard and sometimes colloquial English, perhaps in keeping with the largely young and modern cast. However, the occasional African proverb is uttered by the older character. For example, Chief Nwane exclaims, “... the cockerel doesn’t flapper unless there is a snake in the roost!” (Soyinka 1960: 48). Wole Soyinka here makes no effort to create difficult and highly poetic language as is the case in some of his works.

4.5.1.ii The Night of the Hunted (House of Banigeji)

Inscriptions on this manuscript show two dates, 1961 and 1964. As this drama is not published, one may assume that these are the first and second performance dates. A slight problem arose when a decision had to be made about the actual title of the play, which is listed as The Night of the Hunted: Being Part One of A Trilogy. This play is about the family of Banigeji. There is yet another script entitled The House of Banigeji, accompanied by the sub-title: Act 2: The Exiles. Interestingly, The House of Banigeji Act 2: The Exiles is a published text but, regrettably, I could only acquire three two-columned pages of this play, which form part of the collection submitted to the Unisa library. This latter play features the same cast as The Night of the Hunted but there is an obvious time shift. The action featured in this manuscript points to a much later setting than the story that is concluded in The Night of the Hunted. Some difficulties arise in ascertaining whether The House of Banigeji is a sequel to The Night of the Hunted: Being Part One of A Trilogy or if it is, in fact, the continuation of the same story whose title Soyinka finally decided to be The House of Banigeji: Act 2: The Exiles. Others may differ from this decision, but in the discussion that follows I will
treat them not as two separate plays but as one.

Stylistically, *The Night of the Hunted* is more mature when compared with *My Father’s Burden*. It is a radio play. The opening scene first features a number of ominous sound effects that create a very eerie mood. For example, stage directions indicate that the announcement of the play should be preceded by “Three gun-shots. Long high-pitched barking of hounds answered by the ‘drums’ of the hunters”, and then after the announcement, there should be other sound effects described as “Long low-pitched barking of hounds answered by ‘drum-rolls’...”. When the action actually begins there is to be “a long very distant harrowing scream of the witches -- ‘the witches’ call’ ” which runs:

Voice: Beware then of the shadow of the falling leaf; let it not pass between you and the sun and watch you lest the feathers of the nesting bird drown your mother’s voice when she calls at dusk”.

Soyinka effectively exploits the sound technique to create the mood of fear. Because this is a radio play, its nature easily lends itself to creative use of a variety of sound effects to establish setting and general mood.

This sketch opens like Shakespeare’s *Macbeth*. Without meaning to imply the absence of originality in Soyinka’s work, one cannot overlook the fact that this scene evokes a similar kind of fearful expectation to the opening scene of *Macbeth* where the Thane of Glamis (and later, Cawdor) meets with the weird sisters. Soyinka’s prophecy does not come from a visible figure as does Shakespeare’s, but when the action begins, the major character, Banigeji, is running about chasing the shadow of his dead wife, which eventually eludes him and taunts him for the rest of the play. Soyinka exposes the atrocities of witchcraft. His theme is the conflict of beliefs in a village set against the background of the world view of the Yoruba, where the dead and the living co-exist.

The suspense that sustains the entire conflict is established from the very outset, as the audience begins to interact with the drama by positing a number of questions such as:
whose shadow is Banigeji trying to whip: is it a thief, or he is mad? Is he hunted by assassins? Or is this a spooky visitation from the land of the dead? These questions are soon answered by the revelation that this apparition is actually the shadow of Banigeji’s dead wife, Itu, who is called “the witch” and is being hunted for molesting her husband’s son (her stepson). Because of the alleged witchcraft, she has been beaten badly, and as she flees the village mob, she leaves a trail of blood drawn by her husband’s whip. The allegation is that she hides her form somewhere and sends her shadow to commit ills in the village, so men must hunt and kill her to save the village from all these spells.

The mini-conflict that ensues is that Banigeji has had to accept the Christian faith of Father Patrick so as to rescue his sons from this woman’s evil spell. Banigeji wants to crack her skull but is held back by the Christian commandment that one should not kill. His dilemma arises from his torn sense of loyalty: he must uphold the values of his newly-declared faith, spurred on by his son Isuki and Father Patrick, and yet he has the strong natural desire to kill this woman and avenge himself, especially because he has not fully embraced this faith -- he merely paid lip-service to it, so as to forge a way to save his sons from his first wife, but still keeps his traditional shrine. Soyinka seems to present a society that does not take Christianity seriously; it is rooted in its own beliefs and only uses the imported faith to solve certain pressing problems.

Set both in the spiritual and the human world, this sketch addressed the theme of revenge and witch-hunt. To convey this theme, Soyinka uses one of his favourite techniques, a setting that reflects a continuum of life between the temporal and the spiritual world. His perception of life present and hereafter comes out very clearly in this sketch. Soyinka’s time setting, therefore, straddles both the present world and the world of the dead, providing a cyclic life pattern. These worlds co-exist and impact on one another equally in this drama. People living in either world are able to interact and affect the course of one another’s lives, much like people who live in the same earthly environment. This world view echoes the principles of the Apidan theatre where death is not seen as the end of existence for an individual (Götrick 1984: 37). Furthermore,
the use of rituals to symbolise rites of passage is another powerful technique of dramaturgy. Despite the strong presence of Christian influence, characters still relate to the “living dead” like next-door neighbours -- the older people do not take Christianity as seriously as do the younger converts. One cannot help but notice the negative portrayal of women in the chief character, who is the witch that has to be hunted and “killed”. This tends to perpetrate the age-old myth of women as witches in society. But this cannot be said to be Soyinka’s firm belief as there are many other plays where women are featured more positively, for instance Alu in *The Swamp Dwellers*. As a radio play, the drama’s dialogue and sound effects are well constructed to present the action convincingly. The sketch does not reflect much about the playwright’s experiences at the Royal Court. It is perhaps, like *The Lion and the Jewel*, one of the older plays that Soyinka is said to have written before he went to the Royal Court. There is also a possibility that the theme of conflict based on witchcraft, supported by the subsidiary theme of conflict between Christianity and African beliefs, came from the research into Nigerian rituals that Soyinka was doing after he left the Royal Court. Perhaps in this play Soyinka is experimenting with subject matter that was mainly focused on an African village experience.

*The House of Banigeji: Act 2: The Exiles* takes the story further, starting from Banigeji’s sons’ escape, and depicting their fear-filled life in exile. In this incomplete sketch Keri and Isuki are shown in an undescribed sitting room, living in fear of being caught by their evil stepmother. Their isolation and short sentences are reminiscent of the mood and dialogue in some scenes from Beckett’s *Waiting for Godot*. For example, Soyinka writes:

[Isuki is lying on a couch, asleep. Keri enters with a filled coal-bucket. The door shutting awakens Isuki, he remains drowsy.]

Isuki: Has no one called?
Keri: Who did yo expect?
Isuki: Is it morning, night, or noon?
Did I sleep long? I feel somehow spent into another day. ...
Keri: You were so peaceful
I thought you hardly breathed.
Isuki: Perhaps I slept.
The sleep of the defeated. ...

Keri: Who is the fellow-mourner, weeping
Long after the funeral is over?

Isuki: What is this?

Keri: Who is the fellow-mourner, weeping
Long after the funeral is over?

Isuki: I do not understand.

Keri: Riddles. Let us play at riddles. ...

Isuki: Time must be heavy on our hands, when we must
Play pointless games like those ... (Soyinka 1964: 88-89).

This extract calls to mind the opening scene of *Waiting for Godot* in which Beckett presents two characters, also waiting, one more despondent than the other. Similarly, Beckett also presents the less despairing Vladimir trying to encourage Estragon by devising games to pass time, as does Keri with Isuki:

Estragon: [giving up again]. Nothing to be done.

Vladimir: I’m beginning to come round to that opinion. ... And I resumed
the struggle. ... So there you go again.

Estragon: Am I?

Vladimir: I’m glad to see you back. I thought you were gone for ever.

Estragon: Me too. ...

Vladimir: Where was I ... How’s your foot?

Estragon: Swelling visibly.

Vladimir: Ah yes, the two thieves. Do you remember the story?

Estragon: No.

Vladimir: Shall I tell you?

Estragon: No.

Vladimir: It’ll pass the time. ... (Beckett 1982: 7,9).

Even though the manuscript that I have is incomplete, the influence of one of the major dramatists whose work was performed at the Royal Court is obvious in this short drama.

### 4.5.1.iii Before the Blackout

This umbrella title, *Before the Blackout*, covers the following thirteen pieces of work:

- *Ballad of A Nigerian Philosophy*
• In Carcarem Conicio
• Babazu Lion Heart
• Vintage Scenes: Onitsha Market
• For Better for Worse
• Symbolic Peace, Symbolic Gifts
• Obstacle Race
• Death Before Discourtesy
• Go North Old Man
• Nigerian National Mart
• Childe Internationale
• Press Conference
• Ballad of A Nigerian Philosophy.

Soyinka’s preface to this collection shows the dynamic and ironically ephemeral nature of the type of theatre these sketches were meant for. Soyinka explicitly states that the sketches are designed to address topical atrocities and implicitly suggests that the “text” might change when the circumstances it addresses necessitate that change. He cautions:

The purpose of these sketches would be defeated if performing groups felt they must be staged word for word and blow for blow. Producers should feel free to adapt them where necessary for the contemporary event and to alter entire sequences to relate the action to whatever is happening right now (Soyinka 1964/65: preface).

Similarly Brecht also conceived the “text” of his plays’ drafts to be adapted to suit current events. In the spirit of agitation, Soyinka adds to these suggestions directed at the producers an urgent request for amateur writers to “…try their hands at writing on themes and situations in which they are not only intimately involved but which they curse roundly but futilely in offices and beer parlours” (Soyinka 1964/65: preface).

a. Ballad of A Nigerian Philosophy: I Òmí à Bí Befá [a prologue]

The English translation that accompanies the Yoruba verse of “Ballad of A Nigerian Philosophy: I Òmí à Bí Befá” seems to suggest that Wole Soyinka performed this ballad