

# Onomastic Vortex in Soyinka's Plays: A Study of Fabricated names in Selected Works

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## **Abstract**

*There is no need stating the obvious that various aspects of Wole Soyinka's works have been treated over and over again by critics and theatre practitioners in Nigeria and the world over. Yet, very few have comprehensively touched on a vital index to the mood in the plays of Soyinka which the names used in many of his plays betray. This paper seeks to investigate the significance of the names of characters in Soyinka's *A Play of Giants* and *King Baabu*. It demonstrates that naming is important to the writer's thematic concern. It analyses the interplay between names of characters and their roles in the selected plays. The questions this paper asks are: What is in a naming? Is a name just an appellation? Is it symbolic? Does it carry along with it certain character traits that betray the notion of the bearer? An analysis of the plays not only shows the symbolic connotation of the names used by Soyinka, but also betrays the fact that the names he uses are in fact vital keys into the treasure of Soyinka's artistic creations. The significance of this work rests on the way Soyinka's work is re-examined using his plays to show his satirical posture of many African leaders whose names are creatively woven to symbolize their negative behavior and actions to the people they govern.*

**Keywords:** onomastic, fabricated names, mythical names, onomatopoeic connotation

## Introduction

Hirsute hell, Chimney spouts, black thunder thoes  
Confluence of coarse cloud fleeces-my head sir!  
Scourbrush in bitumen, past fossil beyond fingers of  
light-until...!

Thus, Soyinka galvanized a coterie of symbols to describe the condition of his head before the harbingers of old age surreptitiously arrive and these are the first three white hairs. This arrival, he further describes:

Sudden spring as corn stalk after rain, watered milk weak;  
As lightning shrunk to ant's antenna, shriveled...  
THREE WHITE HAIRS! Frail invaders of the  
undergrowth Interpret time (282)

However, one could trace parallelism between this poem and the various panegyric poems of the Yoruba people. The work of Soyinka has shown his tendency to follow the traditional pattern of ancient bards, especially by hiding meaning within a spectrum of nouns and specific words while the understanding of such words depends on a proper assessment of the way they originated or on their contextual fabrication.

In this paper, a searchlight is beamed on an aspect of Soyinka's instrument of satire and this is the origination of the names he uses and their contribution to the understanding of the satirical barbs in the plays. For convenience, the names have been categorized into the 'creative' and the 'mythical' spheres. The comprehension of this signification by Soyinka in his character sketches and as a means of justifying the actions of the character serve as one of the keys to open Soyinka's artistic, literary and dramaturgical treasures.

One could equally see that cutting across Soyinka's plays and novels are names that originated from Nigerian socio-cultural background. These names are reworked to create new meanings. Sometimes, names are fabricated to resemble those from Nigerian socio-cultural background. And sometimes, the names stand as signposts in the understanding of the characters and their motives in the play or novel. And this has nothing to do with the creative or realistic content of such work.

Even an autobiographical narrative such as *Ake* could be properly understood through the signpost of meanings Soyinka attributes to the names of some characters that populate the work. These include the father, the king of the town and his mother. The central role his mother occupy in the narrative could only be better understood through the symbolic meaning the readers are made to ascribe to the name “Wild Christian” which Soyinka calls his mother in the narrative.

Many such creative names are available in plays such as *A Play of Giants*, *The Road*, *Beatification of Area Boys*, etc, while mythical names are also common in plays such as *The Strong Breed*, *A Dance of the Forests*, *Kongi's Harvest* etc and what they signify to Soyinka is essential to the totality of comprehension of the plays.

#### **‘Mythical’ and ‘Fabricated Mythical’ Names in Some Plays of Soyinka**

The name Jaguna in *The Strong Breed* derives its origin from traditional Yoruba culture. It is a warrior’s title in Yoruba land. However, this play is not primarily set in Yorubaland and Jaguna in this play is a priest. Thus, the title is traditionally derived, but creatively used in an all-embracing Nigerian context.

*A Dance of the Forests* is populated by many quasi-mythical names. The name Mata Kharibu takes the audience’s mind to ancient African empires such as Songhai, Mali, Ghana, Zulu and so on where powerful African emperors such as Mansa Musa, Kinjeketile, Chaka, and so on held sway before the advent of the white people. One other name is Aroni. In Soyinka’s construction this is the Lame one. Aroni in Yoruba mythical world is a spirit versed in the use of magic and herbs. The creature is believed to be one-legged. His role in the play is to conjure the ancestors and show the guilty characters what they have done in their previous life.

Agboreko (Elder of the Sealed Lips) seems to derive his name from the root ‘Agbo’ (the old or the wizen one) and ‘reko’(all over the forests or villages). Put together, therefore, the name indicates the character as one of the oldest of men or one of the most wizen one in the entire forest or villages and the environs. The name is not mythical, apart from the fact that Soyinka tries to create a mythical ambience round the name. The significance of the name is to connote a sum total of representatives often referred to as the old ones and by this, the wise ones, and in this category

you find the priests of Ifa oracle, those in the *osugbo* and the *imole*. This is further confirmed by the tag ‘Elder of the Sealed Lips’ which is an appropriate meaning of the word “Babalawo” (father of Secrets) and members of those secret societies who are the custodians of individual’s and societal secrets.

The name thus explains the reason for the complex sayings of this character who take advantage of every occasion to launch into gnomish tirades which ends usually with “...proverb to bones and silence”. For instance:

AGBOREKO: Oro cried last night and Bashiru vanished from his bed. Do you still wonder what became of your friend? Proverb to bones and silence. (33)

His role as the custodian of knowledge, both present and future was put to test when the troubled dwellers of the forest try to know the whereabouts of the strange visitors to the feast. Agboreko casts his nuts (Ifa nuts) to determine the situation of things and an extempore of quasi proverbs and poetry of Ifa involving the Dirge-Man and the Old Man ensues, but he discovers the dwellers of the forests have played a fast one on him:

AGBOREKO: When they heard the thunder, Osumare said, That was only me laughing at mice. If they are the dead and we are the living, then we are their children. They shan’t curse us...

OLD MAN [*very disgruntled.*]: Ho. They say when the rock hit the tortoise, he shrugged his shoulder and said, I’ve always been cracked. When his wife met him, she asked, When did you begin to clatter?

AGBOREKO [*putting away his bowl.*]: Proverb to bones and ...That was thunder! [*He hastily retrieves his paraphernalia.*]

OLD MAN: No sign of rain. I can’t see a cloud, can you?

AGBOREKO: [*casting his nuts.*]: It was thunder. Thunder. I must cast afresh! [*The rumble which they all heard continues to increase. It soon reveals itself as the*

*roar of a high-powered lorry, bearing down on them, headlights full on.] (37-38).*

Madame Tortoise (Rola) is not a mythically derived name. The only thing mythical here is ‘Tortoise’ with which the woman is compared. Tortoise in Yoruba and indeed many Nigerian tribal myths is known as a very cunning, selfish and greedy animal. Thus, the appellative “Tortoise” to the name of Rola provides an immediate and more comprehensive understanding of the character and her murderous acts in the play:

MADAME TORTOISE: I know where my canary is, but will you fetch it for me. I want it here with me. . . .

*[The poet’s novice quickly lays down his scroll.]*

NOVICE; Indeed, a royal bird may not be tired. And my hands are soft. I will fetch the canary.

COURT POET: Did not a soldier fall to his death from the roof two days ago, my lady?

MADAME TORTOISE: That is so. I heard a disturbance, and I called the guard to find the cause. I thought it came from the roof and I directed him there. He was too eager and he fell. (47)

This act is extended to the Warrior too:

MADAME TORTOISE: Torture! I have cause to torture you. Did you know the one who fell from the roof? The one who leapt to his death, on my account?

WARRIOR: Madame!

MADAME TORTOISE: He could not understand that I took him, just as I select a new pin everyday. He came back again and could not understand why the door was barred to him. He was such a fool. (56)

Adenebi’s name has no mythical root. As the Historian in Mata Kharibu’s court, his acts were responsible for the death of many people and in the present world, his name Adenebi could be divided into two: ‘Ade’ (the one who comes) and ‘nebi’ (with guilt). Taken together, the character is

the one who came with guilt. And this is so as the character is the one guilty of many crimes in the past world; and in the present one, he has committed sundry crimes including the incineration of sixty souls.

In some plays, Soyinka created many names which are encoded with significance Soyinka believed is known to all. One such is Brother Jeroboam in *The Trials of Brother Jero* and *Jero's Metamorphosis*. Jeroboam is a Biblical name and in fact as one of the Israelite kings, he is popular as the man "...who made Israel to sin". Due to this, the name sheds light on the character's behaviour in the plays.

In *From Zia with Love*, among such created names is Sebe Irawe. Sebe in Yoruba means Cobra snake, but in *From Zia with Love*, this character is Sebe Irawe. The appellation "irawe" (fallen leaves) means this kind of cobra permanently lurks under the leaves. One's attention is immediately drawn to the fact that the character bearing this name does not only engage in shady works as a kingpin in the underworld, but he also stalks from his hiding place. Again, his resemblance to the snake he is tagged with resides in the Yoruba belief that this snake has the ability to strike very fast both friends and foes from its hide-out. This action is brought to prominence even in the first act of Sebe irawe when:

*A seemingly disembodied arm makes a swift grab for the young man's head, and yanks it round, drops the album. SEBE's other forearm pins the STUDENT's neck against the window sill. SEBE grabs the money and begins to stuff the open mouth with the notes. (Soyinka, 38).*

Confirming his deadly nature as a kingpin in the underworld, Sebe in his own word explains why he is called Sebe:

SEBE. ...Don't argue with me. Just listen. Yes irawe is the leaves on the ground. The innocent leaves which make sebe even more deadly because it hides underneath them. It lies in wait. Until you step on it. Then-you don't even hear the rustle. You don't even know that something has pinched you. But one minute later (*Chuckles.*) you no longer know where you are, who you are...But suppose it is not that kind of

irawe?...suppose it is not leaves on ground at all, but that other kind which covers the lagoon? Suppose that is the kind of irawe under which Sebe is hiding? (40).

Sometimes, Soyinka uses ordinary names creatively to render varied significance to those names. In *Camwood on Leaves*, Isola is the stubborn son of Reverend Erinjobi and his wife, Moji. Isola names the tortoise he keeps in a secluded habitat 'Moji', the name of his mother. When his girlfriend, Morounke, asks why he names the tortoise after his mother, Isola explains:

ISOLA. I'll try. Moji...Moji...

MOROUNKE. Is that her name?

ISOLA. Have you forgotten? I gave her that name when we first found her.

MOROUNKE. But that is your mother's name.

ISOLA. She wouldn't mind. They remind me of each other...they look so burdened and I cannot tell their age.

The predatory boa is used to explain the perception of Isola of his father when he names this animal after his father. This highlights the kind of relationship that exists between father, son and mother and this forms the butt of the tragedy to occur subsequently:

ISOLA. ...There is a monster of a snake which lives just across the stream...over there...in that clump of bamboos. It's a boa, I think. Really big. Anyway, I'll have to kill it. I cannot live here unless it's dead.

MOROUNKE. Do you mean to live here?...

ISOLA. I've done it before...But I didn't sleep well. Some nights I didn't sleep at all. Thinking of Erinjobi makes me uncomfortable.

MOROUNKE. Your father? Don't you ever stop thinking of him?

ISOLA. Oh, I didn't mean him. I meant the boa. I call him Erinjobi.

MOROUNKE. Isola, do you want to be a wicked son?

ISOLA. No, but it is a wicked snake. Remember the tortoise eggs? Moji hatched them all and sometimes they would swim across the stream. The snake can't swallow them, so he would pick them up and dash them to pieces against the rock. (104)

### **The Significance of the names in Soyinka's "King Baabu"**

"King Baabu" which is an adaptation of Alfred Jarry's *UbuRoi* has a spectrum of names, the origin and meaning which to Soyinka is emblematic of the prevailing situation in Nigeria of the 1980s and 1990s. Satirically coded names include, Basha Bash (later King Baabu), Fatasimu (Basha's Orderly). We also have other names such as Sankofa Heritage Bank, Pax Baboonian, Ministry of Fee-Nice and so on.

Grand neologism and word twisting are used to humorously couch many names familiar to Nigerians reminding them of the country's recent dark past. These include: "rapid disposal unit" reminiscent of Abacha's deadly killer squad; "fertilize your account" which is a euphemism for embezzlement. King Baabu's life also expires after fondling, in the word of Jide Kolade, the paradoxical "nipples". Nipples, this time euphemistically stands for the forbidden fruit (apple) purportedly eaten by the late dictator which resulted in his death (23).

Maurice Archibong also traces a familiar ring to the name of King Baabu's wife, Maariya, as the name is similar to the name of Sani Abacha's wife. The charity organization founded by Maariya, Basha Bash's wife, also has one word different from that of the wife of Sani Abacha's wife's "Better Life for Rural Women" which becomes "Better Life for Frugal Women" in *King Baabu* (9).

The Ministry of Fee-nice, apart from the onomatopoeic parallelism is actually a satirical rendition of Ministry of Finance in Nigeria. But to Soyinka, the ministry's significance in governance is nothing but a mere forum to extort money from the citizenry. The meaning ascribed to this



ministry is elucidated by DOPE after he has collected bribe from a marabout who wants to seek audience with King Baabu:

DOPE: ...Go ahead (*To Crowd*) We're all brothers and sisters in the spirit, but that's no reason for us to get so carried away that we forget all mortal decorum. And procedure! Let me remind you all that we have a Ministry of Fee-nice, to which you have to pay some respect. There is the little matter of an audience fee, right? To the best of my knowledge, none of you has settled it. That's not nice, is it? I shall therefore settle myself at this little table and you can all come up nicely with your envelopes, which of course shall be used to determine in what order you arrived here, and thus, in what order you shall have audience with His Majesty, Pa Baabu.

In the play, Sankofa Heritage Bank of Guatu is a mortgage bank. The name "sankofa" is a creatively worded name consisting both Yoruba and English. The word 'san' is an English word meaning "without" or "against". The subsequent "Kofa" is from Yoruba "ofa", a Yoruba word meaning "to lose" or "to be insolvency". Taken together, the name signifies a mortgage bank set up against or to prevent loss, or insolvency or disaster for customers. This is the first bank that King Baabu impounded and the significance is to confirm the fact that henceforth, insolvency, loss and disaster has become the lots of the entire citizenry being ruled by King Baabu.

The word "Pax Baboonian" in the play is an emphasis placed on King Baabu's ambition of conquering the whole continent and imposing himself as the ruler. This ambition in the word of Tikim is "Pax Baboonian" which as he says is that "it has fallen to King Baabu to unify the continent", but which DOPE mistakenly takes to be "Pax Baabonia"- more of a transition of government from human control to government of baboons:

DOPE: Already I hear of Pax Baboonia.

RENT: What's that?

DOPE: From what I remember of my Latin, it can only mean-Peace of the baboon. *Pax baboonia*? Human evolution is unraveling before our very eyes.

Thus, the regime of human being has given way to an animal one where savagery, cannibalism, bestiality and total lack of decorum reign supreme.

The origin of the name of King Baabu's son, Biibabae stems from Yoruba word "bii" (just like or exactly like), while 'baba' means father. The "e" is the attributive pronoun (his). Taken together, therefore, the name means "just like his father" or exactly like his father. In short, Baabu's son is born, designed and trained to resemble his father in all ramifications and to this end, his Tutor has the task of creating a little monster out of him in tandem with his father's monstrous personality.

To this end, his training is designed to make a genius out of him while his toys are barbaric in composition. After a spy has been caught by Fatasimu, the younger Baabu is given the "truth-prod" which plugs this prisoner to electric power and the similarity between father and son becomes apparent in the fiendish delight they derive from their perverse form of entertainment:

*(Biibabae applies the prod. A flash. Prisoner lets out a yell and the cage quivers violently. Fatasimu already filming the scene. Tikim wakes up in confusion and flees, screaming. MAARIYA is enraptured)*

MAARIYA: Once more. Do it again. Do it again for Mummy.

BIIBABAE: He was so funny. Did you see how his neck suddenly stretched out?

BAABU: Like a cock about to crow morning time-the boy get observing eyes in head.

TUTOR: I promised I would make a genius of him, your Majesty.

BAABU: The boy born a genius! He take after us, which is as it should be.

TUTOR: Of course, your Majesty, my sentiment exactly. (66)

Biibabae gradually turns the torture of the prisoner to a sport of sort, while Baabu hops up and down in manic excitement and Biibabae eventually kills the prisoner with an overdose of the prod to the delight of Baabu (68)

The only onomatopoeic resemblance to the name Fatasimu correlating to the name of real personality is in the “Fata” available in Fatasimu which corresponds with Al Mustapha, the aide to the late dictator, Sani Abacha, being satirized. Kunle Owolabi, tracing similarity between this character and that of the real life personality maintains: “A cursory interpretation of the characters in King Baabu could yield Abacha and Fatasimu, his chief security officer as the dreadful Al Mustapha, the chief security officer of the late despot. Mariya, Baabu’s wife could be the wife of the late dictator” (15).

The name ‘fatasimu’ means ‘put pepper in the nostril’ in Yoruba parlance. And in Soyinka’s conception, the name adequately describes and gives meaning to the action of this character in the play. Fatasimu is tagged Basha’s Orderly, but a comprehensive meaning to the name is derived from his duty as described by Basha himself. Like a dog with a keen sense of smell, Fatasimu has pepper in his nose, thus could smell and dig up dissenters in the country. Basha says of him:

BASHA: Wait! Time Basha start doing some smart thinking. Maybe I keep discovering enemies to him- good job I keep Fatasimu- he real specialist at digging enemies out of worm-holes... (6)

And Fatasimu performs his duty of sniffing enemies out at the inauguration of Basha as:

*(“...Fatasimu videotapes the crowd, whispers occasional instructions to his aides, pointing to a trouble spot below”).*

This role is further described by Basha himself as he states after Fatasimu caught a rebel spy:

BAABU: Fatasimu smell him out like a dog shit. (65)

And confirming the meaning of the name in Yoruba, as well as the duty of Fatasimu, the character himself states the reason why he is called Fatasimu:

BAABU: You tenderize him? Served him the *fatasimu* garnish?

FATASIMU: I try to live up to my name, Your Excellency. When the pepper shot up his nostrils, he nearly suffered terminal convulsions. (65)

The name Basha Bash traces itself to the main figure being satirized. Although Soyinka affirms the play is not about Sani Abacha, Maurice Archibong states that after watching the premier of the play in Lagos:

...the play makes little pretense to be much about anyone else. Both in roles, and even some stage names, the play is scarcely allegoric... Nigerians seem generally agreed as to the identity of a disaster called ruler who came to a celebrated fatality after allegedly eating euphemistic apples... (9).

Tunde Okoli equally compares “King Baabu” to *A Play of Giants* where “...traits of African dictators, past and present, especially, late General Sani Abacha are discernible from the character, Baabu” (24). The end of Baabu also confirms the parallelism between Baabu and Abacha. As Olayiwola Adeniji observes: “...Baabu falls victim of his insatiable lust...details of his death are similar to those of a recently expired potentate whose aim was to hold onto the reins of power forever”. The actions and inactions of characters in the play also confirm the conducts of real personalities in the locust years in which Abacha held sway.

Awosanmi considers the title King Baabu itself a bi-dimensional metaphor. The first being the ordinary understanding of the name as a Hausa word meaning “nothing” which further progresses into the existentialist philosophy of nothingness. The second level of metaphor

he sees as Soyinka's satirical art of cynicism fundamental to many of his "mathematical" dramas. He traces this to Soyinka's *Opera Wonyosi* which connotes a metaphorical conglomerate of cynical meanings inherent in "ope ra wonyosi" (fool buys wonyosi cloth). This is a type of cloth sold expensively and was popular in the 1970s. And in *King Baabu*, he traces the name to a mathematical approximate of the last three totalitarian personalities in Nigeria: "(BA) bangida + (A) bacha+ (ABU) bakar=BAABU (Nothing!)" (35).

However, the onomatopoeic connotation of the name solely to that of Abacha could be distinctly noticed and this leaves no one in doubt that apart from Olarinde's observation that Soyinka's quest was to address the "dictatorial quest of many African leaders and inequality in the society" (60), Soyinka's main target was the maximum ruler Abacha. Awosanmi, confirms this unconsciously thereby disproving his own initial mathematical permutation of the name when he states: "And the fact that the writer-director had to change the play's title from "Sauna Bash" (Sani Abacha?), under it was worshipped [sic] in Switzerland a couple of months back, to the present more universalized epithetical one even strengthens this position metaphorically..." (35).

More than the significance of this mathematical permutation is the Yoruba meaning of the name when the conjuration of the destructive and senselessness of the character come into scrutiny. In some Yoruba dialect, the name Abacha would be pronounced Abasha (thus underlining the word bash), but more importantly, the name could become a Yoruba adjective "bashabasha" as used in a sentence such as: "o se gbogbo re bashabasha: (he did everything upside down' or he mashed up or destroyed everything). This Yoruba meaning seems to be more at the back of Soyinka's mind in his creation of the character and his choice of appropriate name for this character.

The action and inaction of Basha Bash seem to justify this meaning right from the beginning of the play when Basha Bash, with his wife, Maariya are seen supervising the evacuation of the old regime from their quarters which Basha Bash assisted in bringing into extinction. Here, Basha is seen to be at his best in his area of specialization-destruction of human beings and property:

BASHA: ...or my hearing dislocated by all the shooting and death screaming and grenade bursting from throwing out Rajinda's gover'ment?

His wife Maariya, serves as the prod to more destruction and Basha reacts to this prompting:

BASHA: If I hearing you right, you say we going to died paupers. Now how that possible...coming to die paupers?

And the destructive nature of this character which earns him the name 'Bash' is highlighted with question:

MAARIYA: How many coup-pies have you had a finger in? How many violent depositions and decapitations of heads of government?

BASHA: For that one, I lose count longest time.

The significance of the name 'Bash' is further confirmed by Maariya as she directly calls Basha "General Set-em up and Knock-em-down".

The psychological instability of the character is also codified in the name as his feeling of insecurity often makes him soliloquize in a deranged manner and excrete in his pant uncontrollably. And not only this, he finds nothing wrong in rounding up imaginary enemies, torture them by pulling out their fingernails, and sending enemies' fingers, toes or testicles as present on birthdays of his boss' children and wives, on their wedding anniversary or while they are celebrating each week in office.

If there is any doubt as to the creative origin of the name by Soyinka and the meaning he intends to be ascribed to this name, the statement of Basha Bash himself leaves no doubt as to the significance of this name to the totality of the character's role in the play:

BASHA: First thing now I bash them up and wash them up and smash them up, then flush them down the mess toilet (21).

Even when Basha changes his name to Baabu, the origin, at first atmospheric, eventually goes deeper to substantiate the meaning:

BASHA: ...I common man...Baabu (35-36)

CROWD: Has he declared his personal assets?

BASHA: (*Turns out his empty pockets*) I get...*Baabu kudi* (36).

Subsequent dialogue clarifies the deeper meaning attributed to this name Baabu when the crowd asks:

CROWD: Baabu? Baabu? How will you provide jobs?

BASHA: ...Nothing. Baabu (37).

This is the final confirmation that the name Baabu, originating from Hausa means “nothing”. But it underlines the fact that King Baabu in the present and in the future has nothing beneficial to offer to the citizens he governs. This is Soyinka’s satirical comment on the regime of the maximum dictator, Sani Abacha, being satirized. It further confirms that apart from cruelty and victimization of dissents, the many African rulers, represented by Abacha have little or nothing to offer for the citizens they govern.

### **A Study of Fabricated names in *A Play of Giants***

In recent history, the African continent boasts of a large number of tyrannical leaders. They include Idi Amin Dada of Uganda, Macias Nguema of Equatorial Guinea, Jean Baptiste Bokassa of the Central African Republic, Mobutu Seseseko of Congo Kinshasa and Sani Abacha of Nigeria. Gaddafi of Libya, Hosni Mubarak of Egypt, Laurent Gbagbo of Cote d’Ivoire and Robert Mugabe of Zimbabwe had all shown that power is sweet and tried to perpetuate their stay in power. Of the lot, Mugabe still holds tenaciously to power even at over eighty years of age. African leaders have thus displayed an insatiable desire for power and an urge to permanently keep their people in oppression. It is the gruesome activities and the monstrosities of their rule that form the basis of Soyinka’s interrogation in *A Play of Giants*.

The purpose of this paper is not to explore the tyrannical rule of the four major characters in *A Play of Giants* but to do an analysis of the unique ways in which Soyinka has employed satire and irony in the choice of names of the major actors which invariably reveal their character traits.

Soyinka's impatience with this group of bad leaders knows no bounds that he invents names that vividly mirror their actions. In another instance, the names are thinly disguised in such a way that the reference is very obvious. Soyinka's introduction to the play is aptly entitled "On the Heroes of our Time: Some personal notes". Referring to the dictators as heroes is a huge joke because there is nothing heroic about them. Rather, they have used their positions to oppress the people and keep them in chains.

Soyinka insists that "no serious effort is made to hide the identity of the real-life actors who have served as models for *A Play of Giants*. He goes on to give their names as Macias Nguema, (late), Bokassa (late), Mobutu (late) and Idi Amin (late). All four are satirically portrayed as giants and Supermen. Their greatness is not a matter of physical stature in the case of Idi Amin and Mobutu for example, but a function of their bloated view of themselves and their invincibility. In their crude actions to suppress the people, these dictators are revealed as puny in mind and brain, not the giants they want people to see them as. In the Introduction, Soyinka exposes these dictators' love for titles – they are Life Presidents, Emperors for Life, Alhajis, Drs, DSc, DSO, VC, etc. In several instances in the play, Kamini makes a deliberate effort to correct people who failed to address him with his full titles. He is not simply, Mr President, he is Doctor President. The megalomaniac instinct is revealed in the high-sounding titles they ascribed to themselves; it pleased them so much to be Emperors rather than mere heads of state. Therefore, they label themselves President for life as if that will ensure them the invincibility they crave. In fact, Idi Amin is His Excellency, President for life, Field Marshal Al Hadji Dr Idi Amin Dada, VC, DSO, MC. This shows him as boastful.

First is the protagonist of the play, Field Marshal Kamini. The name is creatively generated from Idi Amin, a one-time president of Uganda who was not just famous for his crudity of language and actions but also for his lack of exposure and ignorance of international law and diplomacy. Kamini's character clearly shows the real-life actions of Idi Amin and is based on him. Idi Amin ruled as president in Uganda between 1971 and 1979 during which time the whole world felt his impact. He was born in 1925 and died in 2003.



His reign was punctuated and characterized by excesses, murders, massacre and torture, and to crown these barbaric acts, he took up aliases such as Big Daddy, Butcher of Africa, Conqueror of the British Empire, Lord of All the Beasts of the Earth and Fishes of the Sea. He was deposed in a military coup in 1971. Just like the historical Idi Amin, Kamini is brutal, ignorant and excessive in his ways. Among Idi Amin's many atrocities is the murder of Joseph Mubiru, the former governor of the Central bank of Uganda. Kamini on the other hand tortures and humiliates the chairman by making him drink flushed toilet water. He gives the order in this way:

Kamini: Take this coat- and -tie kondo inside that toilet room there and put his head inside bowl. (TF SPECIAL proceeds upstairs). Each time the tank full, you flush it again over his head....Push his head deep inside. I say deep inside. Put your bloody foot on his neck and press it down...That's better. Now pull chain....Good....You leave door open so I can hear water flushing his stinking mouth. (8)

From the statement above, one notes the crudity of Kamini and the statement also shows that he is the archetypal Idi Amin. Like Idi Amin who is tall and huge (193cm, 6ft 4in). Kamini is also powerfully built. Like his model, Kamini is depicted as an uneducated man. His language is usually ungrammatical. A good example is his conversation with the Chairman of the Central Bank of Bugara:

Kamini: When I travel, I take Bank of Bugara with me, then nobody can steal money behind Kamini's back...When Kamini not home, only chairman can sign cheque, and he here with Kamini.....How much loan they give us. (4)

It is apparent from the statement above that Kamini is not only ignorant and uneducated but also selfish and exploitative. His constructions are ungrammatical and his motive for taking the chairman with him around is selfish. The conversation above continues:

Chairman: They simply insisted on certain conditions.

Kamini: Agree to any conditions just get the loan.

Chairman: They want to mortgage Bugara body and soul...

Kamini: I say what do I care about body and soul? If they can loan Bugara the two hundred million dollars, I give them body and soul. Go back and agree to any conditions they want... I know is dirty capitalist plot all over. World Bank belongs to everybody. Why they discriminate against Bugara alone? Why they give Hazena loan? You tell me Hazena still owe more money than Bugara, not so?

Chairman: They replied that Hazena had been paying interest regularly, your Excellency.

Kamini: (Angrily) what I care about rotten interest? Bugara promised to pay everything in five years. So what I care about stupid interest eh? Taking interest and taking interest and finishing up all Bugara foreign exchange....As for you, get back to Bugara right away and start printing more Bugara bank notes. When I return I want to see brand new currency notes in circulation, not hearing all this grumble about shortage of money... (4-6)

This conversation underscores the lack of exposure and ignorance of simple economics of borrowing and interest.

Second, is Benefacio Gunema. Also generated from the name 'Nguema' who is the one-time president of Equatorial Guinea who ruled historically between 1968 and 1979. He is not just a president but a "benevolent dictator." He is the benefactor for all his people. The name benevolent dictator is in itself an aberration because the mere fact that one is a dictator erases all sense of goodness in his nature. Being benevolent implies kindness, compassion and munificence, all these virtues are however missing in the character of a dictator who dehumanizes and suppresses the people he is expected to protect. Writing in *Tropical Gangsters*, Robert Klitgaard, an economist who spent two and a half years in Equatorial Guinea documents vividly the repressible acts of Nguema as he "grew increasingly maniacal"(20). The writer asserts that

according to Africanists, Nguema is rated to be worse than Idi Amin of Uganda and worse than Emperor Bokassa of Central African Republic. Klitgaard continues in his analysis of Nguema's dictatorial regime:

First there were political murders, then generalized repression; by the mid-1970s, Macias was carrying out large-scale executions of real and imagined opposition, the latter category including many of the people with any formal education. An estimated one-quarter to one-third of the population were murdered or went into exile.  
(20)

To demonstrate his wickedness, lack of knowledge and crudity, the historical Nguema destroyed libraries and banned the use of the word intellectual. Gunema who resembles him in character and in words is also the son of a witch-doctor and believes totally in the power of voodoo. His reliance on black magic and voodoo knows no bounds. This reliance in black magic is so strong that Gunema recommends same to Kamini when the latter complains of the limitations of a man fighting corrupt officers. To Gunema, the answer is voodoo with which you can catch as many officers as possible. He says: "power is the greatest voodoo and voodoo is the greatest power."(26)

The third character is Emperor Kasco who is based on the historical character of the former president of Central African Republic, Jean-Baptiste Bokassa. Bokassa ruled between 1966 and 1979. He was not just an ordinary ruler, or a president, he was an Emperor. His regime was characterized by incessant reshuffles which ended up arrogating more power to the Emperor. As the head of Napoleon Bonaparte's judicial killings, Bokassa was responsible for the death of a hundred school children for refusing to wear uniforms made in a factory he owned. He was regarded as a kleptocrat and a bloodthirsty ogre.

Like Idi Amin, he also gave himself high sounding titles to inflate his ego. His full title is: "His imperial Majesty Bokassa I, Emperor of Central Africa by the will of Central African people, united within the national political party, the MESAN." Central African Republic as of November, 2013 is undergoing a serious civil war whose origin could be found in the misrule of those early years of Emperor Bokassa. Like Bokassa, Kasco is

inspired by Napoleon Bonaparte and because of his French education, Kasco is forever speaking French. Soyinka describes him as “a comparative dwarfish creature...appears to be a deliberate parody of the big man” (1). In spite of his small body, he is a very strong man.

A fourth character that joined the group later in the action is General Barra Tuboum who represents the late president of former Congo Kinshassa, (now Democratic Republic of Congo) Mobutu Sese Seko. He is referred to in the play as Tuboum. Sese Seko was born in 1930 in the northern part of Lisala of the former Belgian Congo. During his reign he appropriated many assets forcefully and as noted with dictators, he renamed himself as “Mobutu Sese seko NkukuNggbenduWaZaBanga” which literally translates as “The all-powerful warrior who because of his endurance and inflexible will to run, goes from conquest to conquest, leaving fire in his wake.” The love for high sounding titles noted with Idi Amin Dada is also demonstrated here. Therefore, one notes the love for titles as typical of most African dictators.

In history Mobutu changed his name from the European to the African. In this play also, Tuboum recoils from being called Alexander. This change is necessitated by his will to abandon all forms of colonial influences:

Kamini: Alexander! Welcome, Welcome.

*(TUBOUM stops short, seems to recoil.)*

Tuboum: Tuboum, my brother, Barra Tuboum.

Kamini: Barra Tuboum?

Tuboum: Barra Boum Boum Toboum GbazoTseTse  
KhorodiDzo have abandoned all foreign names. (18)

The slight rejection about his name shows a lot about Mobutu’s character. He is self-conscious and loves titles and like empty barrels, he makes the loudest noise. It is also apparent that Tuboum’s name echoes Mobutu’s. Tuboum kills people at will, even those who merely and unconsciously see where he is training his killer squad. He says:

Tuboum: They train in secret, far from the prying eyes of the common herd. Their secrecy is their power...the eyes of any stranger at the mysteries of their self-

preparation is a corrosion of that power. They kill such strangers and eat them...

Kamini: You take many prisoners?

Tuboum: Only a handful, enough for the celebration feast of my striped leopards. The rest...we did not even give them a soldier's death. We hanged them and left them hanging. (19-20)

What Soyinka seems to have done with the names is what can be referred to as an inversion. Amin becomes Kamini, Nguema is Gunema, Bokassa is Kasco and Mobutu is Toboum (in many of the inverted names, all the alphabets are utilized to form the new names). In fact, there is a time when the name Toboum was reduplicated as Toboum Boum Boum. Perhaps, this onomatopoeic representation is suggestive of the noise of the guns as they mowed down the people, "boum boum". Indeed, Sometimes, Soyinka imaginatively coded the names in such a way that their real-life actors or models are not too difficult to infer. In other words, the veil is very thin that the audience can see through to their references.

Other characters in the play are mostly non Africans. These are the representatives of the Americans and the Russians among others. Brought out for special attention is Gudrum and Prof Batey. Gudrum is not only hypocritical but hero worships Kamini for her own selfish interest. Batey on the other hand is shortsighted in his analysis of the character of Kamini. In Gudrum, Soyinka makes her name the butt of his attack- she is Rum that is good. Like the alcohol, she intoxicates her object. There is, thus a polarization of characters in the play. While some fall in the group of tyrants, others help to fan their ego. It is interesting to note that many critics see the role that the West plays in African socio-political existence as similar to this. It is said in the play that many coups that brought these dictators into power or saw their disgraceful exits were fueled by foreign powers.

A unifying factor in the whole scenario painted above is the fact of the tyranny, oppression and inhuman actions of the characters. They are the same in their parochial and wicked acts. The four characters demonstrate in their words and deed the menace that despotism has constituted in

post-independent Africa. Africa seems to have consciously or otherwise produced a long line of dictators like Mobutu and Abacha as opposed to the political leadership of Julius Nyerere and Nelson Mandela. The latter were selfless, accommodating, forgiving and people-oriented.

Again, the title of this play is in itself ironic. It is “a play of giants”; it ought to be a play about extraordinary people who perform great deeds in their communities to uplift the lives of the people from penury to prosperity. However, the story of the four people told in this play is rather the opposite. It is the story of ogres, gangsters and thugs who set out not to liberate their people but to add to their pain. These “giants” are not unusual or astonishing in any positive way, rather, they are bizarre and odd, wicked and evil. Indeed, they are not giants but are puny and small in their humanity and intellect.

Kamini’s excesses personify the lives and acts of the other three. As a matter of fact, he is the central figure in the play as he seems to tower above the other characters in words and actions, and in the use of force and expletives. His language just like the man he mirrors is full of swearwords, curses and obscenities. For instance, he uses obscenities in referring to the Chairman of the Central Bank of Bugara:

Kamini: ...You see, is this kind of traitor I have in charge of Bugara Central Bank. This syphilitic bastard talking worse than imperialist propaganda...Today I make you smell your mother’s cunt...(7-8)

This shows that Kamini is not only uncivilized but also uncouth and vulgar.

**SPECIAL TASK FORCE** refers to a group of mainly young men who are not for any renovation or constructive special duties for the president or the nation. Rather, they are the killer-squad of Kamini. They are usually called in to “deal” with rebels or the opposition. What constitutes opposition can just be a misunderstanding between the opposition and Life President, Dr, Elhaj. This is the error committed by the foreign sculptor and for which his bones were broken and he had to be bandaged all over.

Soyinka employs certain elements of drama to show the theme of tyranny in *A Play of Giants*. One of these is the use of sarcasm and satirical language which reveal the die hard, power lust and cruel maneuverings of dictators. This is most explicit in the preface to the play and especially notable in the language of Kamini. Soyinka, in the introduction to the play entitled “On the Heroes of our Time: some personal notes” states in sarcastic words that the men of ignoble characters are heroes and there has been no attempt to hide their identities because they have “succeeded in remaining entrenched in power long after they have been unambiguously exposed for what they are”.(v) In fact, in anger at Idi Amin’s atrocities, he refers to him as a “certified psychopath”.(vi) True to character, the Kamini we see in the play is crude, uncouth and lacks human emotions of kindness and decorum. Among many examples of crudity of language exhibited by the characters in the play is the one quoted below:

Kamini: only one thing to do to subversive – Khrrr! (*A meaningful gesture across his throat*) I used to have subversives too. The Western Press like to call them guerrillas. I say. I have no guerrillas in my country. Only bandits. We call them kondo. I make him smell his mother’s cunt. (2)

Another element used to depict the theme of excessive use of power is the use of fascinating and elaborate spectacles which helps to vividly portray the psyche of the power drunk. The thrones for these dictators are gilded, higher and bigger than other seats from which they look down on the others like giants. They are heavy throne-like chairs which stand for power, authority and leadership. They are also set on a balcony, opulently decorated. This extravagant use of spectacle shows the stratification in the society and that power does not belong to all; rather it trickles down to the peasants. It also shows the division between the powerful and the powerless.

The use of costumes – medals flashy, decorative, outwardly but as the Yoruba proverb states: “Aso nla ko l’eeniyana nla” meaning clothes do not make a man. In other words, a man is not just what he wears; he is an accumulation of a whole lot of other things. The clothing speaks of exaggerated powerfulness, a mere outward show backed up by delusion

of grandeur. Their flaunting of medals and symbols of achievements and many awards makes them look like over glorified war generals.

The setting of the play is the Bugara embassy in New York. All the actions take place in this building. Bugara stands for Uganda and in its syllabic representation the two words sound alike. The reference to Uganda is all too obvious. The popular anecdote is that Idi Amin ordered his Central Bank Governor to print more money when there was inflation in the country and the Uganda money was said to be worthless. This uninformed attitude is also displayed by Kamini who forces the Chairman to drink toilet water because the latter had suggested that it was suicidal to print more money while tissue paper has more value than Ugandan money. To Kamini, if there was paper, then, print more money and put his picture on it. This is a move that is not only wrong but smacks of Kamini's egoistic attitude. The Chairman has offered an informed opinion but the Head of State has countered it with an inferior one and what is more, the Chairman is brutally punished for it.

Dictatorship seems to have moved from the level of the Idi Amin to another level- that of the Late Sani Abacha of Nigeria. The monstrosities of the Abacha era have motivated Soyinka to write of the sufferings of this era in *King Baabu* which forms our subsequent discussion. Writing on adaptation in Nigerian drama, Gbemisola Adeoti also focuses on the issue of leadership crises in Africa as explored in the drama of Soyinka. He avers that Soyinka has made different incursions into the theme of tyranny and lack of leadership in Africa. Right from his *A Dance of the Forests*, to *Opera Wonyosi*, and *King Baabu*- "a play roughly in the manner of Alfred Jarry" (25).

It is, however, in Adeoti's essay aptly entitled "Post-Aminian Fantasia: Despots, Democrats and Other Mutations in Soyinka's Recent Drama" that the exploration of the trope of absolute rule is more explicit. Adeoti demonstrates that Soyinka's anger with dictators in *Opera Wonyosi* and *A Play of Giants* is more virulent. He states: "Both plays have as their butts, recognizable historical figures like Idi Amin of Uganda, Emperor Jean Bedel Bokassa of Central African Republic" (68). He asserts that Soyinka describes *A Play of Giants* as "a Fantasia on Aminian theme"- a play that dramatizes and celebrates the downfall of Idi Amin (69). What Soyinka seems to have done in this play is to take the theme of authoritarian rule



away from Nigeria and contextualized it in the whole of Africa. He shows these thinly disguised historical figures in their most debased monstrosities as perverts who claim to be “giants” while in actual sense they are dwarfs. What they lack in intellectual prowess they make do with bloated image of themselves. By their names they come off as monsters and grotesqueries rather than giants. As recorded in the preface to the play, the writer makes little effort to hide the identity of the characters.

## **Conclusion**

What we have shown in this paper is Soyinka’s anti- establishment attitude and radical posture which have led him into writing plays that ridicule existing governments and vigorously expose the antics of prominent characters behind such governments. This is the philosophy guiding the writing of *A Play of Giants* and others in its category such as *Opera Wonyosi* and *King Baabu*.

The central idea uniting these plays is the issue of abuse of power. The main characters are noted for one thing, tyranny. They are authoritarian in nature, oppressive in attitude and they lack the milk of human kindness. These are men who came to power through the back door but are willing to do anything to entrench and perpetuate their stay in power by all means legitimate or otherwise.

We have also shown in this paper that Soyinka in many of his plays uses names of characters creatively and they are imaginatively invented in such a way to make their referents clear. Thus, Idi Amin becomes Kamini, Bokassa becomes Kasco, Nguema is inverted as Gunema and Mobutu is fabricated as Tuboum. What emerges here is the commonality of traits in these tyrants using their names as pointers- the fact of their ignorance, crudity and murderous acts which demonstrate the men not as giants, but as mere terrorists.

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