



The University of
Tehran Press

Online ISSN: 2588-7092

Journal Homepage: <https://jor.ut.ac.ir/>



Manufacturing Beginnings: Ritual, Image, and Chronopolitics in Wole Soyinka's Kongi's Harvest

Kotaba Saleh Fenjan ¹✉

1. Department of Digital Media ,Massmedia College ,University of Thi-Qar,Nassiriya City -Iraq.E-mail: qutaibasalih@yahoo.com

Article Info

Article type:
Research Article

Article history:

Received: 25 January 2026
Received in revised form: 23 April 2026
Accepted: 25 April 2026
Available online: 22 June 2026

Keywords:

Chronopolitics, Ritual, Spectacle, Postcolonial Sovereignty, Media Technologies, Necropolitics

ABSTRACT

Kongi's Harvest demonstrates that postcolonial sovereignty is not a given but a deliberate feat of aesthetic-historical engineering. Transcending the dichotomy between traditional and modern, this reading shows how autocracy buttresses itself by commandeering the infrastructure of rites, policing public images, and brutalizing a new temporal infrastructure through terror. Rather than practice the politics of policy, the despot pursues authorial power—coercing communal harvest into a national epoch to discipline the populace into an undifferentiated “now.” Yet, a critique of this edifice of performative governance exposes its inherent instability. Broadcast acoustic saturation, image inculcation, and slogan dictation, despite their claims, cannot displace the far more embodied, affectively grounded dynamics of the rites being mobilized. The attempt to reduce the immense bodily energy of the New Yam Festival to a PR stunt—treating communal belief as automatically transformable into an image of resignation—is violently betrayed by the vibrancy of the historical bodies that rise in solidarity to reject the despot's aestheticization of his own sovereignty. Using critical approaches to media studies, chronopolitics, and spectacle to trace the structural weaknesses of dictatorial aesthetics in relation to the forces it attempts to dispossess, I demonstrate that though the postcolony may command its calendar, the renaming of space, and the production of images, it can never dominate the brute and irreducible corporeality of the body in ritual.

Cite this article Q. Fenjan, "Manufacturing Beginnings: Ritual, Image, and Chronopolitics in Wole Soyinka's Kongi's Harvest ". *Research in Contemporary World Literature*, 31(2), 327-344 <https://doi.org/10.22059/jor.2026.415233.2851>

© Author(s) retain the copyright.

Publisher: The University of Tehran Press.



<https://doi.org/10.22059/jor.2026.415233.2851>

1. Introduction

What Kongi wants is not the submission itself, but a submission visible, a public image: “I say I want a total, absolute submission—in full view of the people” (Soyinka 1967, 47). And it is the very emphasis on this publicity that allows the harvest festival to come not as a component of the yearly cultural events calendar, but as a mechanism of state, as a performance of a “beginning” during which sovereignty might be disguised as spontaneous goodwill, and the history of it appears to happen with historical inevitability. In Soyinka’s play, we are thus working with a state which utilizes ceremony in the process of ruling; a state in which the process of ruling not only needs to be achieved, but needs to be visible to have been achieved, an “established fact” witnessed by the assembled masses.

And therefore, for the representatives of power, the holiday as a New Yam Festival becomes a question not of devotion but of image: “Who really cares for the Festival of New Yam anyway? / It is all a matter of face” (Soyinka 1967, 48). The lines are far from dismissible; they reveal the core of Soyinka’s problem with the state, as it attempts to make the most sacred cultural events mundane by transforming them into a question of “face,” a surface reality that is easily manufactured in order to acquire political “legitimacy.” The celebration of the harvest festival becomes, then, an effective “beginning” because it becomes a reported or broadcast opportunity for the regime to suggest the historical necessity of Kongi’s ruling. Soyinka shows this takeover with particular clarity through the conflation of actual time (sacred time) with bureaucratized time.

The Secretary tells the King that “The first yam is more than a symbol of our harvest. / It will represent ... The official start of the Five Year Development Plan” (Soyinka 1967, 67). The yam thus shifts its position from being primarily a relation within a cosmology of return to an emblem of state, a public signpost of the future, and a ritual to be performed in order to legitimize an economic plan. As Achille Mbembe observes: “the banality of power through rituals of command and bureaucratic repetition” is essential to the legitimacy of postcolonial sovereignty in a regime without democratic authority (Mbembe 2019, 6). In Kongi’s Country, the natural rhythm of the harvest calendar has been replaced by the temporal rhythm of the Five Year Plan.

Anthropologist Don Handelman differentiates between ritual and spectacle by claiming that ritual is performance as transformation, whereas spectacle is performance as show (Handelman 1997, 4). It is precisely this type of transformation that Kongi’s state achieves through its staging of the New Yam Festival as a national spectacle. The communal, restorative purpose of the ritual is suppressed in favor of a showing of authority and the production of legitimacy through visibility. As Aradhana Sharma and Akhil Gupta discuss, the modern state comes into

being through the signifying practices of ceremony and representation (Gupta and Sharma 2006, 14). In *Kongi's Harvest*, Soyinka's state presents itself as a state and manufactures sovereignty through its signifying acts, producing a notion of statehood as image rather than reality.

In this way, the festival serves as an example of what has been described by scholars of postcolonial politics as a "liturgy of state", a secular ritual machinery that appropriates sacred forms as legitimating shows of power (Weise 214). The yam itself becomes more than a site for sacred renewal and instead is turned into a bureaucratic icon representing national advancement. O. A. Ilori explains that Soyinka's theatre situates myth and ritual within the traumatic modernity of African politics, exposing how sacred performance can be conscripted by the state (Ilori 1988, 83). *Kongi's Harvest* not only illustrates the mechanisms by which postcolonial sovereignty manufactures itself as a show; it critiques the ways in which the postcolonial state utilizes ceremony as a form of representation and branding, making spectacle the ultimate public relations campaign. The play thus asks a more pressing question than simply whether the sacred can coexist with the modern; it asks what occurs when the sacred must first serve as a public relations campaign, or as what Mbembe discusses as an optic for governance rather than a site of regeneration.

These concerns seem to align *Kongi's Harvest* with discussions commonly surrounding Soyinka's work and postcolonial performance: what is the primary value or focus of political theatre—the satire of authoritarian modernity, or the devastation of sacred practices and forms by the postcolonial state? Soyinka constructs the processes of statecraft as aesthetics by explicitly articulating the bureaucrats' need for "an image. ... We are building a nation" (Soyinka 1967, 27). It is important to note here that the "nation" that the bureaucrats seek to build is not a lived entity but an enterprise in image management; culture, as this play implicitly argues, is valued for its demonstrable ability to be displayed, to become commodified, and to circulate as the evidence of a united and developing citizenry.

The play further clarifies that this "beginning" is not only symbolic but temporal as well. Kongi's government attempts to rewrite history by rewriting the calendar: "B.K.H.... Before Kongi's Harvest. / A.K.H.... After the Harvest. / We date the years" (Soyinka 1967, 31). If the state must have origins, the state invents them by turning a harvest into an epoch—Year Zero. The humor of the satire lies in Soyinka's presentation of the regime's manipulation of time as a cultural coup. The King does not merely rule within time but rules with the authority to redefine it through its basic unit of measure.

At this juncture, theory is useful only insofar as it helps clarify what the play vividly illustrates. Agamben states that the state of exception is now "the primary form of politics" and

its practices and concepts have “undermined the established distinction between constitutional forms” (Agamben 2005, 14). Soyinka’s episode of juridical justification captures that erosion of distinction when the character calmly concludes, “preventive detention is not political persecution... The law says so” (Soyinka 1967, 42). This scene is chilling because it does not illustrate the regime’s abdication of law, but rather its proficiency in “writing illegality in the grammar of law,” presenting coercion as administered concern.

2. Sovereignty after “Beginning”

If one element is the exception, then death and mercy form the second element, and Mbembe provides the term for understanding the issues at hand: “The final dimension of sovereignty ... [i]s contained in the power ... [o]f deciding which are those who may live and those who are to die” (Mbembe 2019, 74). In *Kongi’s Harvest*, this necropolitical theater is neither veiled, nor is its timing a casual occurrence; it is calculated to have the largest possible public effect. Mercy, thus, becomes a variable factor in Kongi’s regime; his magnanimity is a state secret reserved until just “five minutes” to hang, and “The gift of clemency is a confidential performance until ... five minutes before the executioner should have executed his duty” (Soyinka 1967, 47). Here, it is an act, a spectating device to entertain a subject population which alternates between admiring and dreading the sovereign capacity to “make and unmake.”

The orchestration of this performance of authority relies upon a supporting network of infrastructural voices. The command is for not only the eye but the ear, and this for the replication of utterance: “This has been installed a year now. By day and by night. They listen and they talk” (Soyinka 1967, 18). The public speech of the nation is thus a regulation of attentive exposure: that which binds the subject and the authority of the state through an acoustical machine, which sets the citizen to a monotonous tune of sovereign discourse. The year-long “beginning” of this harvest serves a public which this regime has already configured by a sonic infrastructure.

Soyinka goes one further with his “ever-on civic tutors...Government rediffusion sets... never fail to listen and / to talk and talk” (Soyinka 1967, 19). The repetition of “talk and talk” highlights the technique’s nature as saturation and not deliberation: the argument has been manufactured before the citizen enters his public ear, and will be piped to him continually until he has fully assimilated, through repetition, the truth of the sovereign voice.

Kongi’s Harvest ends with a counter-rite, an anti-authoritarian moment which occurs precisely when it rejects that form of participation Kongi imposes: in the direction the feast “..... permits no spectators, only celebrants” (Soyinka 1967, 89), we see the ultimate rejection of command by *communitas*, and a truly participatory event which transcends the separation

between audience and participant, where the spectacle is not initiation into communion, but a diversion from it.

3. Context and Theoretical Framework

Kongi's Harvest is interwoven into the post-independence process of state construction, not as an abstract nation, but as a nation conceived as schedule, spectacle, and engineered public relations. Soyinka's introduction situates the play as follows: "First performed, August 1965, at the Commonwealth Arts Festival, Lagos" (Soyinka 1967, 6). This premiere location foregrounds the play not as an instance of leisurely introspection, but as an attempt to address, from within, the particular historicity of Nigeria at the height of its modernization drive and simultaneously policing regime.

Soyinka's theater does not merely depict new power but works at the level of form to expose how political legitimacy is manufactured as a series of timed events, selective audiences, and the translation of heritage into a sense of "national" grandeur.

That effort at working within the form actually begins even before the plot, through an explicit attempt to make spectators complicit in the performance of the state: "A roll of drums such as accompanies a national anthem. Presumably the audience will rise. The curtain rises with them" (Soyinka 1967, 8). Soyinka thus conjures the specter of citizenship for the theatergoer, making the latter adopt the posture of the citizen before forcing them to perform this posture, and thus revealing its price. This is a typical Soyinkan ruse. Spectatorship is not neutral because the aesthetic experience is itself an enacted exercise in civil life. The play is thematic because of its procedure—its very structure—which articulates the production of the state's "beginning" as a communal affect long before the idea comes to discourse.

This emphasis on mediated legitimacy also explains why *Kongi's Harvest* fixates so much on how a ruler looks from the outside. Later in the play, a staged scene includes an "International newsman and a foreign journalist" while labeling a staged moment as "Last Day of Meditation; A Leader's Anguish!" (Soyinka 1967, 38). Kongi's power is presented as an export commodity. A ruler fabricates innermost thoughts and "anguish" as an addition to the value of the regime's image, and the process of journalistic documentation takes its place within the spectacle. Soyinka, therefore, stages postcolonial sovereignty as being caught in the meeting place between domestic ceremony and foreign scrutiny, where the reality of political existence is continually renegotiated into something that can be photographically documented.

A first lens is ritual theory, particularly its canny integration of liminality into a technology of consent. Soyinka offers within the play a terrifying schema for manufactured *communitas*. Kongi's intellectuals claim that the old superstitious festival is to be substituted: "the old superstitious festival with a state ceremony governed by the principle of Enlightened Ritualism"

(Soyinka 1967, 24). The word choice is important; the project of the state is stated outright. It is not the abolition of ritual, but its reinvention, to the end that it should not merely maintain the intensity of liminality, but rechannel it toward a collective rapture ending in surrender instead of mutuality. The harvest festival, in this sense, becomes a regulated threshold, a transition from “old” to “new”, which has the appearance of spontaneity but has been implemented as state policy.

A second lens is the management of spectacle and imagery. Sovereignty is assured not by brute force alone, but by disseminating reproducible slogans throughout public discourse. Soyinka as a playwright is an ironic embodiment of the state's investment in chant and refrain; Kongi's entourage is drilled with jingles until it is ready to repeat: “Every-Ismite-Must-Do-His-Mite,” later compressed to a marketable “Ismite. ... Is Might!” (Soyinka 1967, 23). This is propaganda presented as branding: language simplified into rhythms designed to spread faster than reasoning. Debord's treatment of the integrated spectacle provides terms for the contest here: the spectacle establishes “unanswerable lies” and “an eternal present” (Debord 1990, 12), and Soyinka's slogans function exactly as such; instead of persuasion, they command attention and transform protest into incomprehensible noise before its formal criminalization. Fanon explains the psychological aspect enabling such power: “I am overdetermined from without,” he writes, “the slave ... [o]f my own appearance” (Fanon 2008, 87). *Kongi's Harvest* makes this psychological dynamic part of a political structure, constructing public identity as a smooth, photographable, and replicable surface.

A third lens is chronopolitics—the state regulation of time through the use of the calendar, epoch-making, and the claim of the right to set and initiate the narrative of history. Soyinka foregrounds this as a political performance of temporality: “This second coming is time for harvest,” the chorus intones about a ruler who has already made a claim of reign (Soyinka 1967, 83). More than a moment in time, the festival attempts to colonize time by creating a temporal turning point that pivots between a collapsed “before” and an officially sanctioned “after.” This manipulation of time mirrors Debord's point that the spectacle will be an emulation of producers whose spectacle's activity of mass media production is that of “manufacture of a present”, which will be the only acceptable “now” (Debord 1990, 12), thus relegating all other pasts and futures to either disorder, or an outmoded sentimentalism, or seditious action (Debord 1990, 20).

A fourth way to frame Soyinka's text is via the performative nature of the sovereignty of the state of exception, an action designed to prove the sovereign's legitimation by demonstrating that law may be broken for the sake of the sovereign. The final stage direction of the play offers the starkest visual testament to this performative assertion of power: “In it the head of an old

man” (Soyinka 1967, 84). This stage direction is not a mere spectacle, or an effectistic bloodbath, but the attempted reification of a political ontology. In this vein, it relates to both the well-known claims regarding the apex of sovereignty being “the right to decide who may live and who may die” (Mbembe 2019, 66–67), and Agamben’s argument about the centrality of the normalization of the state of exception to the modern state and even the normal internal fabric of the state apparatus (Agamben 2005, 69). Soyinka’s severed head becomes an emblem of the ultimate performative negation, collapsing these two ideas into a ritualization of sovereign power that reinforces the ritualistic renewal.

The final lens of Soyinka’s discourse on the matter is the domestication of exceptionality through a techno-legal form that would make the spectator an accomplice: after the “celebration,” one voice proclaims that “to be there at all... is to be guilty of treasonable conspiracy etcetera” (Soyinka 1967, 86). As the state is less interested in what you do than in who you are, or where you are (the notion of presence itself as a category that warrants suspicion), the state seems less interested in regulating action than in controlling identity. This reflects Agamben’s hypothesis of the state of exception’s becoming “a paradigm” for sovereign power (Agamben 2005, 3), and Mbembe’s notion of a sovereign community organizing itself around a “state of suspicion” (Mbembe 2019, 33). The harvest festival, a celebration of beginning, ends by enacting a closing of a loop whereby ritual, imagery, and the state are harmoniously and predictably brought together into one cohesive way of operating.

The coherence of this loop is why the exuberant declaration of Soyinka’s, “to be there at all... is to be guilty of treasonable conspiracy etcetera” (Soyinka 1967, 81), works less as a utopian vision than as a subjugated affirmation of the sovereign’s ability to reframe a “plenitude” into the very aesthetic evidence of a wholly other order, an ordered and knowable body.

4. Rituals, Props, and Calendars

It is not merely for the sake of public theater that the Secretary commandeers the harvest festival; rather, he reorganizes the harvest festival into a formal “Day One”; the performative dawn when the government plan will now, on a regular annual basis, become an accepted pulse of the year. When the Secretary announces, then, that it has “been designated the official inauguration of the / Five-Year Plan,” the ritual is effectively reduced to the pronouncement: “The slogan is Harmony. Total / Harmony” (Soyinka 1967, 19).

Here, the people are made aware of, and participate in, the beginning of their nation, a beginning marked not by the recurrence of an already accepted, genuine historical event, but by the inclusion of government planning within the official annual cycle as a necessary tradition

of sorts, and so, once more, legitimized as tradition because it, too, will appear again year after year.

The entire temporal manipulation requires less of an argument than an icon, an image of a father who can take ownership over the national “start” of the cycle, as often as the occasion arises.

The Secretary frames legitimacy through the rhetoric of marketing development when he proclaims, “The leader’s image in the coming Five-Year Plan is the father of the nation” (Soyinka 1967, 18). And when the state’s “beginning” is not constitutionally legislated, it is made to be familial, making the rule seem like care and protection. This idea leads us to Agamben’s understanding of exceptionality as “a threshold, or a zone of indifference, where inside and outside do not exclude each other but rather blur with each other” (Agamben 2005, 23). The Kongi ritual, for instance, conflates sacralized inheritance and state governance until it is no longer possible to distinguish one from the other, an ambiguous optic that disguises domination under the guise of protection.

The very image is an artifact itself; the yam becoming the emblem of a legitimizing ceremony, handed over as a token of assumed consensus. As the Secretary outlines the state’s strategy for the enactment of Danlola’s release, he positions the ritual as a manufactured reciprocity: “as a measure within the amnesty / given with this harvest festival, to give back some kind of reassurance... ‘as an exchange of courtesy’—the Oba / will grant freely of the first yam to Kongi” (Soyinka 1967, 41). Instantly, the gesture of the yam is perceived as theatrical: “Kabiyesi enjoys acting... His kingship is a performance” (Soyinka 1967, 41). The yam has been transmuted into a commodity in the political exchange, an object that enables Kongi’s public display of “harmony” as a transactional process. It is also important to consider Kongi’s word choices, for they highlight the ceremony’s vacuousness. If kingship is a “performance,” then the ritual turning the yam into the emblem of legitimacy is not born of the community; rather, it is an artifice that simulates reciprocity: so that there will not seem like Kongi is being forced to yield, so it appears as though he voluntarily gave back some consideration.

Fragility leads Kongi not only to the effort of occupying space through institutionalization, but to attempting to master time through names, temporal inscriptions, and epochal pronouncements. The Secretary’s desire to prescribe the calendar of the coming year is outrageous: “This year must be marked as the year of Kongi’s / Harvest. The past will be remembered as from this year” (Soyinka 1967, 37). This goes beyond a metaphor; this is mastery over time itself as the state seeks to allow future events to be narrated as emanating from the name of Kongi, with history and expectation oriented toward a single ruler. The holiday becomes chronopolitical in the way it functions as a government institution, precisely

because it can be reenacted. The naming of a year enables the state to mold an experience of the past and future into one of loyalty. This same chronopolitical urge then radiates throughout the city, this time through name-changes that represent developmentalism as a series of titular events.

In the performance of the Harvest feast, “pictures are projected of various / buildings, factories, dams, etc., all clearly titled Kongi Terminus, / Kongi University, Kongi Dam, Kongi Refineries, Kongi Airport, / etc.” (Soyinka 1967, 64). The state does not simply construct; it gives the constructions names that convert infrastructure into a dispersed monument, into an environment repeating the ruler as a prefix. Debord’s observation that “This is the integrated spectacle, which has since tended / to impose itself globally” (Debord 1990, 8) seems apt here for naming the sort of spectacle that Soyinka dramatizes: the regime’s temporal domination cannot be divorced from media representation and the display of images that turn built spaces into ceaseless advertising for the leader’s era. Kongi wishes for history to read like his portfolio, and the annual festival offers a repeated screen that allows that portfolio to be reissued as time itself.

The body rhythm of the festival actually surpasses the leader’s words; the medium of the ceremony refuses to function as a podium. It is not just this final “shattering climax,” but the earlier failure of state control over the form of ritual which constitutes it. This climax is articulated in the stage direction: “The rhythm of pounding emerges triumphant, the dance grows / frenzied” and Kongi “harangues his audience” only to be consumed by the energy of the ritual, turning him into “a demonic mass of / sweat and foam at the lips” (Soyinka 1967, 83). The importance of this is the way in which the state, in forcing ritual to function as a legible “beginning,” a clear commencement for the Plan, discards the reality of physical, and hence affective, rhythm. The embodied tempo of ritual creates a different form of temporality that cannot simply be represented in slogans such as “harmony,” while the body’s rhythm simultaneously emerges as a means of counter-governance; it reduces the leader’s speech to a mere background din for a ritual that is not cleanly representative.

Soyinka’s stagecraft, therefore, reclaims the body as the site of historical agency, allowing it to serve as a performative language against political rhetoric. The surplus tempo of pounding and its association with Ogunian frenzy that Soyinka theorizes in “The Fourth Stage” demonstrates what Michael Mathuray has termed the eruption of the sacred into the political, whereby a body rhythm destabilizes bureaucratic politics. This eruption also helps to illustrate Tejumola Olaniyan’s theory of the enchantment of the state, whereby performativity simultaneously founds and undermines postcolonial sovereignty, since the performative modes

used to enchant can also demonstrate the means of performance (Mathuray 2009, 50; Olaniyan 2017, 65).

In *Kongi's Harvest*, enchantment becomes panic. When the copper salver comes into Kongi's possession, we see: "In the ensuing scramble, no one is left but Kongi... / Kongi's mouth wide open in speechless terror" (Soyinka 1967, 84). The *communitas* scripted by the state degenerates into a rout: the crowd becomes not "one people," but "one stampede," and the leadership's command collapses into a flat expression on the face. When G. T. Fai interprets festival scenarios like this, he reads them as occasions for speaking where the group's beat and pulse, its "rhythm," refuses the state's translation of ritual into propaganda (Fai 2020, 6). On a similar reading, Simge Ayyildiz and Samet Güven's interpretation of Kongi's transformation from orator to dervish literalizes the spiritual exhaustion of postcolonial nationalism (Ayyildiz and Güven 2015, 11). Soyinka stages a scenario where the spectacle produced by the state is defeated by the rhythmic movement of the body ritual; for, as the autonomous body with its own rhythm, it becomes a resistant archive of memory and revolt (Msiska 2007, 70). A future launched in state spectacle is not destined to endure; it falls apart in somatic discord, a beginning that is unsustainable for the reason that its ritual form retains a deep, inconvenient memory of the past.

Soyinka's satire reaches a peak in that the counter-rite not only disrupts Kongi's solemn ritual but forces the assembled community to acknowledge the cost of engagement with the spectacle, even as resistance takes the form of participation. The character Segi articulates survival calculations when she insists on what she calls her tactical maneuvering: "Sing, damn him, sing! Let none of our people know what / has happened" (Soyinka 1967, 81). In another instance, she is cynical in her recognition of the speed with which the state may refashion catastrophe into further control: Mbembe offers what he sees as the definition of sovereignty, "sovereignty means the capacity / to define who matters and who does not, who is disposable and who is not" (Mbembe 2019, 80). A beginning produced through the management of the disposable, when a rite encounters its own repeated use, will fail when the state's projected rhetoric of "harmony" fractures under its own weight. What Soyinka's bitterly ironic play reveals is that state-engineered beginnings, like product launches or public holidays, are marketed, packaged, and scheduled and cannot finally control whatever returns to them in ritual: what history, in bodies, is unwilling to forget.

5. Image Work and Media Technologies

Soyinka defines "image" less as something a leader constructs in governance than as the means, mechanism, and apparatus by which governance is enacted, staging ideology as PR and addressing authority as a problematic of signification that must first be "solved" prior to its

experience. For the Reformed Aweri Fraternity, entry into politics is framed as an issue of public “performance,” noting of their forthcoming premier public appearance: “Tomorrow being our first appearance in public, it is essential that we find an image” (Soyinka 1967, 11). The whole sentence equates politics with presentation. However, “appearance” is no mere transparent reporting; it is a stage on which authority may be contested, the “image” a portable sign-system by which the material concrete may be replaced by a signifier readily “readable.” In this context, the play offers a critical thesis on post-colonial power: politics is above all a game of manipulating how things are to be seen, for on “viewing” alone does a “nation” assume the guise of “natural.” The Fraternity’s search for an “image” may thus be read as ideology in pure marketing guise: they seek the construction of a recognizable sign for the party, while endeavoring to control the interpretation in the head of the receiver, ensuring the text is read reverentially and not interrogatorily (Soyinka 1967, 12).

As Ian Bigot puts it, Soyinka has turned performance into a semiotic battleground where spectacle and gesture turn out to be languages through which power both displays and disguises itself (Bigot 2019, 5). In *Kongi’s Harvest*, the Fraternity’s clamoring for an “image” shows how visual rhetoric should be seen as governance itself. Bigot’s statement is useful because it demonstrates how the physical presentation of power whether in costume, gesture, or setting, is less ornamentation and more operation, and is the key to an organized and hence legible display that simultaneously limits excess exposure. When the Fraternity decides they want an image, this is not solely indicative of individual narcissism; it signals the onset of power in operation, the need to rehearse this command performance in “readable” terms, and establish governance as fashionably legitimized. Soyinka satirically targets this conflation: for post-colonial governments, to show one’s presence is equivalent to governing, and governing is equivalent to showing one’s presence as it is possible, through the anticipation of “viewing,” to construct power’s reality.

The state institution itself takes part in marketing rhetoric—Kongi’s advisors and close lieutenants pose for photographs in the name of disseminating sovereign affects, where the Secretary’s list of photo captions: “A Saint at Twilight... The Face of Benevolence... The Giver of Life”, offer a ready-made branding kit and suggest who knows how many other titles will accompany such pictures round the world (Soyinka 1967, 39). The notion is mass production of interpretive directives, each an add-on tag or acceptable signifier attached to an image meant to “authorize” Kongi’s body, a physical presence on which the political legitimacy of a leader is constructed. Far from merely producing information for an already existing sovereign, the photographer’s “shot”—initiated by the secretary and posed by Kongi—is the act which constructs the invention of sovereignty, the construction of it as a repeated event on the body

as manipulable surface, as photography teaches authority how to perform virtue (Soyinka 1967, 39) that, for a viewing public primed with such “interpretive lenses,” translates as proven worth.

If photography establishes the leader’s brand, broadcasts aim to solidify the public as an atomized, receptive body. Danlola’s refusal to “bandy words... with a government loudspeaker” is in itself indicative of the regime’s mediatized form of power, which, characterized by speech and non-response, works through creating an unresponsive audience (Soyinka 1967, 2). The broadcast set’s characteristic “talking and talking” and never / Take[s] a word in reply” implies an ecology of the reception, an all-receiving medium and an echoing silence, turning communication into consumption. In fact, post-colonial media apparatus reproduce colonial asymmetries of voice which replace the dialogical with mere transmission and transform publics into listening bodies (Cyzewski 2021, 8). Soyinka’s political play captures precisely this form of technology: Danlola is not simply unable to reciprocate; his counter-auditory stance signifies a reclamation of his right to be addressed and, moreover, represents the basis of this governance. The regime is in power not through popular support or debate but through its silencing effect by means of producing and sustaining unresponsive interlocution and its refusal to address interlocutors—the broadcast modernity where the public’s ears are rendered receptive to its commands, but civic exchange is reduced to a one-sided transaction.

Hereafter, this one-way communication results in an amplified public discourse where meaning falls below ordinary life as its meaning is diminished through the amplification of the machine’s ethic, as it demonstrates “no affinity” for what it refers to, and ultimately cannot compete with the “batteries and the microphones / and the insistence of one / indefatigable madman” (Soyinka 1967, 46). “Insistence,” Soyinka points out, is inherent in our machinery, and our words are of negligible effect, because machinery can give that sort of volume and reach to any utterance by whatever agent (Soyinka 1967, 46), effectively drowning out our existence. The dramatist never idealizes the authentic word to imply the possibility of easy triumph. What he emphasizes is the extremely precarious status of the everyday, or what he labels human talk whether engaged in to “just living and loving”, versus an enforced broadcasting order. This does not amount to outright propaganda, with a certain set of “untrue” messages being inserted into the public commons, yet it is an indication of the demise of conditions under which reciprocal exchange is possible. It marks politics as now being about the volume of what may be said—with whatever lies below the reach of this volume rendered utterly inconsequential.

But Debord’s account of the operation of contemporary media might be useful in unpacking the kind of structural operation that Soyinka lampooned. Indeed, for Debord, one effect of

contemporary communicative media is to foster “a unilateral purity” within which the predigested word is presented in silent splendor and essentially “what is communicated are orders” (Debord 1990, 11). Indeed, Soyinka’s stroke of genius is to translate this unilateral, or unidirectional, dynamic of the mediascape onto a postcolonial sacrificial scape and to demonstrate how a spectacular calendar, a festival, or a ritual occasion could be folded into a machinery of state coercion such that obedience itself becomes something resembling collective inevitability.

We see this fusion of speech into mediated directive, for instance, with the Secretary’s observation that: “This will be strongly projected at tomorrow’s Harvest festival” (Soyinka 1967, 19).

Thus, not only is the space of the festival now a medium on which the projected is displayed, its content is also now a command and an emotion—collectivity directed toward a determined, already constituted, postcolonial future, what is named as “the morrow.” Spectacle here is not the antagonist of ritual, then, but its parasitic reinscription: it captures the embodied attraction, the focusing capacities of the ritual body, directing them toward the dictates of a state-mediated narrative.

Kongi’s fury betrays the violent understory behind the official captions: “The amnesty is OFF! The reprieve is OFF! ... Hang every one of them!” (Soyinka 1967, 47). The pose of the sovereign now appears as a sovereign threat, and the threat becomes another form of embodiment where the sovereign appears with “mouth hanging open” and “goes into an epileptic fit” (Soyinka 1967, 47). This scene is important because it indicates the limitations of performed images, where spectacle may manage what is publicly seen and disseminated in captions, but is ultimately powerless to manage the body through which sovereignty is supposed to be enacted. The controlled, composed, seemingly benevolent face, profile, and presentation which underpin the mediascape have been exposed as a raw visibility that resists coherence—where breath turns to spasm and appearance turns into a gasp or convulsion. Within the postcolonial ritual setting, this can only result in revealing Debord’s mediascape as a spectacularization of ritual that is desperately attempting to impose its predetermined future onto the past.

6. Performance History and Archival Media

Since *Kongi’s Harvest* is already a play about the invention of public time, it cannot really serve as a decorative background. Soyinka stages his plot as calendrical: “The action takes place on the eve and the day of the National Celebrations of Isma” (Soyinka 1967, 1). This timing is itself a staging choice: a production inherits a pressure to look like a “beginning,” like a public ceremony, even when it is exposing ceremony as the tech of politics. The play arrives with its

own calendar, and it becomes a director's choice whether to read that calendar as pomp, stripped irony, or compelled intimacy—the feel of “national time” as an audience attitude.

This comes even before the plot begins, in a gesture that explicitly conscripts the audience into a state ceremony: “A roll of drums such as accompanies a national anthem. Presumably the audience will rise. The curtain rises with them” (Soyinka 1967, 8). Audiences are then drafted into the posture of citizenship, required to look at what that posture costs. Spectatorship is thus non-neutral by definition, since the play is from the first moment conceived as a civic rehearsal, a mini-training in the synchronization of the public body. The critique, in short, is procedural as well as thematic; not only does the play criticize propaganda, but it makes the audience participate in what propaganda requires of them through ritual deference and imagined etiquette.

This same structure of mediated self-presentation of sovereignty's desperate desire to be seen correctly by outsiders persists later in the play. We watch an “International newsman and a foreign journalist” gather while the scene is branded “Last Day of Meditation; A Leader's Anguish!” (Soyinka 1967, 38). Interiority and performance (anguish) become public property, and journalism itself becomes part of the celebratory apparatus. Part of the reason this play is so easily received as merely “satire,” as something to be exported as entertainment and not truly reckoned with as a theory of sovereignty as the business of image management, is this insistent structure of performativity, this desire to be seen correctly: “the first, best, truly Nigerian play” (Soyinka 1967, back cover); the “Chaplin's *Great Dictator*.” Such language frames Soyinka's play as part of a transatlantic intellectual heritage, as a comfortable item of international culture. But the dramaturgy demands that we attend not just to the theme of manufactured consent, but to the procedural drama of its realization in public space, and through its own public space: the theater.

The staging of this same critique within the already mediated publicness that defines the condition of screen adaptation adds to its intensity, where it is used. The issue at stake is not only what has been “lost” from the stage to the screen, but rather what has been transformed when co-presence is abandoned, and the very satire of captioning, framing, and one-way address that characterized the play's idiom now utilizes the very infrastructure that produced it. The importance of scholarship on African writing and the screen, for example, relies on reconfiguring adaptation as the restructuring of audience formation and interpretation control, rather than on fidelity to plot. What is significant is not a fidelity or infidelity to plot, but the reinvention of the play's primary mechanism (the staging of ritual as legibility within national temporality) under conditions in which intelligibility arises from the processes of editing, camera choice, and distribution.

The archive necessary for a reading of *Kongi's Harvest* must include more than the text alone. The play itself articulates its own image economy, staging media labor within its action. Acknowledgment of the fact that the cast list includes a "Photographer" along with night-club habitués and bureaucratic entourages (Soyinka 1967, 2) should inform archival priorities. This illustrates the importance of the performance as a performance text: not only can press-publicity photographs and production stills serve as subsidiary documents, but they are part of the evidence of how the play's central issue—sovereignty as work on an image—has been embodied in specific productions. A full archive would contain promptbooks and rehearsal reports (in order to observe deletions, tempo, and how the audience was addressed), set and costume sketches (in order to see the ways "traditionalism" and "state modernity" were coded in visual terms), light and sound plot cues (which provide evidence of how atmospheres of anthems, radio broadcasts, drumbeats, panic, and celebration were produced), and publicity packages (which detail institutions' terms for showing the play).

Reviews and photographs in the press gain particular diagnostic importance, not least because the photograph's caption is presented as political within the play: a constructed image bound for "foreign newspapers" comes with the line, "Last Day of Meditation; A Leader's Anguish!" (Soyinka 1967, 39). This line focuses not just on the photograph itself, but on its caption as well; the caption often offers the unsaid sentence to which the photograph belongs, allowing ideology to operate invisibly as part of the image. These small-scale rhetoric of the archive are what make such analyses possible; they cannot be ignored as mere "background." Small-scale rhetoric of the archive include recurring adjectives, moralizing frameworks, and proposed kinds of fiction through which violence becomes palatable as "satire," "allegory," or "national theater."

Radio transcripts and broadcasts also offer material of interest given the one-way address and mediated publics at stake in *Kongi's Harvest*. Where these transcripts do not exist, their absence cannot be seen as an innocent vacancy; the play's account of the production of the state is an account of what can be heard, of what may be recorded, rather than registered as rumor, threat, or silence. As Mbembe asserts, "No archive exists without its cracks, its fissures" (Mbembe 2019, 173), a claim that is not so much an abstract warning as a descriptive mode. The archive's absences—the missing reviews, the impossible press shots—do not just signal their presence but document a panic over the play's critique, a panic so great that the very archive that holds the play's tale of its invented origins cannot preserve its completeness and integrity. The archive is an indispensable complement to close reading but never a substitute: performance ephemera "prove" nothing, of course, but they illuminate what and how things mean when framed by staging, marketing, and spectating. Here, Agamben's concept of a

“state of exception,” an “exceptionable zone of anomie” (Agamben 2005, 1), becomes one way of describing the conjunction of norms and applications, of the man-made genesis of the play and external forces such as state subvention, censorship, and anxiety about its spectators.

The inscriptions of these conjunctions in the archive might dampen or amplify, revise or diminish, the play’s discourse on origins.

Meanwhile, however, the archive is subject to its own scrutiny, for as Debord insists, “Disinformation now comes to bloom when verification is not yet possible” (Debord 1990, 30). We should consult house programs in conjunction with reviews; we should scrutinize press photos in light of parody and the play’s performance of pose. We should investigate how different venues, each attempting to consolidate this story on its own terms, stage it variously as satire, as allegory about Africa, or as nationalist drama, but not in an attempt to tally every possible reading. Rather, we would examine these varying receptions to describe the ever-present work of the play’s central narrative: the assertion of authority through founding, a narrative enacted repeatedly away from the text and beyond the performance space.

The feast is not simply the inaugural banquet that commences the state in the play but also marks the origins of an ongoing struggle for control over the images, calendar, and texts that chronicle their ever-continued development.

7. Conclusion and Implications

From a close engagement with *Kongi’s Harvest*, we can clearly understand that postcolonial sovereignty is not natural, inherited at birth, but constructed: aestheticized and timed artificially, too. This interpretation moves past the traditional–modern dichotomizing of the postcolony, illustrating that autocracy seeks to consolidate itself through co-opting the technology of rite, controlling the manipulation of public imagery, and ruthlessly enforcing a new national calendar. More so than the practical need to govern effectively, the despot seeks to govern by making himself master of ceremonies in the ordering of the state, translating the ceremonial, collective agricultural rite of communal harvest into timed epochs within an endless national day of rest: to bind the masses to an omnipresent present.

The interrogation of this edifice of performative governance reveals, however, that there is a considerable fragility and contingency at its very heart. It is not able to sustain itself because the despot’s mastery of acoustic broadcasts in airwaves, of images in circulation in the public sphere, and of dictated rhetoric can never master the somatic and the affective dimensions of the very ritual the regime seeks to instrumentalize and usurp. The aspiration of collapsing the energetic somatic potency of the New Yam Festival into public relations, imagining that a public demonstration of communal faith can easily be rebranded as an image of submission,

collapsed violently under the very raw physicality and historical presence of the collective in its challenge to the staged claims of authority.

This reading, which incorporates the tools of media studies, chronopolitics, and spectacle in relation to the plays of Soyinka, seeks to push beyond established thematic analyses.

The argument that dictatorial aesthetics face considerable vulnerability to the power of collectively situated bodies, a thesis developed as the central argument of the project, makes explicit in relation to the play how a state may declare its control over time, over national infrastructure, and over public display, yet may not fully counter the essential bodily and historical existence of the human ritual center itself, as *Kongi's Harvest* suggests so decisively.

References

- Agamben, Giorgio. *State of Exception*. Translated by Kevin Attell. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005.
- Ayyıldız, Simge, and Samet Güven. "Kongi's Harvest: The Transformation from Orator to Dervish in the Context of Postcolonial Nationalism." *The Journal of Academic Social Science Studies*, no. 36 (2025): 1–11. <https://doi.org/10.9761/JASSS2905>.
- Bigot, Inés. "Dance and Dissidence in Wole Soyinka's Plays: From Status Quo to Revolution." *Commonwealth Essays and Studies* 42, no. 1 (2019): 1–17. <https://doi.org/10.4000/ces.609>.
- Cyzewski, Julie. "The 'Tribal Drum' and Literary Radio: The Postcolonial Poetics of the Transcription Centre's Africa Abroad." *Modernism/modernity Print Plus* 6, no. 1 (2021). <https://doi.org/10.26597/mod.0197>.
- Debord, Guy. *Comments on the Society of the Spectacle*. Translated by Malcolm Imrie. London: Verso, 1990.
- Fai, G. T. "Festival in the Theatre of Wole Soyinka: 'The Occasion for Speaking' in the Postcolonial State." *Epitome: International Journal of Multidisciplinary Research* 6, no. 4 (2020): 57–63. <https://www.epitomejournals.com>.
- Fanon, Frantz. *Black Skin, White Masks*. Translated by Charles Lam Markmann. London: Pluto Press, 2008.
- Gupta, Akhil, and Aradhana Sharma, eds. *The Anthropology of the State: A Reader*. Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2006.
- Handelman, Don. "Rituals/Spectacles." *International Social Science Journal* 49, no. 153 (1997): 387–99. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-2451.1997.tb00031.x>.
- Ilori, O. A. *The Theatre of Wole Soyinka: The Poetics of Myth and Ritual*. Ibadan: University of Ibadan Press, 1988.

- Mathuray, Mark. "Dramatising the Sacred: Wole Soyinka's 'The Fourth Stage' and Kongi's Harvest." In *On the Sacred in African Literature: Old Gods and New Worlds*, 74–108. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009. https://doi.org/10.1057/9780230240919_3.
- Mbembe, Achille. *Necropolitics*. Translated by Steven Corcoran. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2019.
- Msiska, Mpalive-Hangson. *Postcolonial Identity in Wole Soyinka*. Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2007. <https://doi.org/10.1163/9789004358126>.
- Olaniyan, Tejumola. *State and Culture in Postcolonial Africa: Enchantings*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2017. <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctt2005vzd>.
- Soyinka, Wole. *Kongi's Harvest: A Play*. London: Oxford University Press, 1967.
- Weise, Constanze. "Governance and Ritual Sovereignty at the Niger–Benue Confluence." In *The Anthropology of the State: A Reader*, edited by Akhil Gupta and Aradhana Sharma, 231–48. Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2006.