



DIONYSUS (pronounced: DIAN-ISIS) is the god of the 1) grape-harvest, winemaking and wine, of 2) fertility, ritual madness, religious ecstasy, and 3) theatre in ancient Greek religion and myth. Also known by his Roman name, **Bacchus**, the frenzy he induces is often referred to as a bacchanalia. He carries a symbolic staff known as a **thyrsus** – a giant fennel bulb covered with ivy vines, sometimes topped with a pine cone or by a bunch of vine-leaves and grapes or ivy-leaves and berries, and dripping in honey (all fertility symbols). (See Semele for his birth story). Dionysus was banished and rejected by the Olympians and wandered the Arabian peninsula and Africa seeking followers who would affirm his status as a god.

Bromius (pronounced: BRO-mee-us) is another name for Dionysus, the son of Semele and Zeus. It signifies "noisy," "roaring," or "boisterous" - from βρέμειν, to roar.

Zagreus (pronounced: ZAG-ree-us) was sometimes identified with a god worshipped by the followers of Orphism, the "first Dionysus," a son of Zeus and Persephone, who was dismembered by the Titans and reborn.

Iacchus (also Iacchos, Iakchos; pronounced: EE-ya-KOS), was a minor deity connected with the Eleusinian mysteries. *Iacche!* was cried out during the Eleusinian procession from Athens to Eleusis.

SEMELE (pronounced: Sem-EH-lee) is the youngest daughter of the Phoenician hero Cadmus and Harmonia, and the mother of Dionysus by Zeus. Zeus fell in love with Semele, one of his priestesses, and repeatedly visited her secretly. Zeus' jealous wife, Hera discovered his affair with Semele when she later became pregnant. Appearing as an old crone, Hera befriended Semele and planted seeds of doubt in Semele's mind. Hera convinced Semele to demand that Zeus reveal himself in all his glory as proof of his divinity. Semele was consumed in the lightning-ignited flame of Zeus' thunderbolt. Just before she died, Zeus rescued the fetal Dionysus, and sewed him into his thigh. A few months later, Dionysus was born. Hence Dionysus is often called "the twice-born." When he grew up, Dionysus rescued his mother from Hades, and she became a goddess on Mount Olympus, with the new name *Thyone*.



Ancient Greece map



<< **Thebes (pronounced: THEEBS)** a city in **Boeotia**, in Central Greece (also referred to as **Hellas**). The city was a major rival of ancient Athens, and sided with the Persians during the 480 BC invasion under Xerxes. It is also the site of many Greek myths: Cadmus, Oedipus, Dionysus, Heracles and others. **Kithairon (pronounced: Sith-A-ron)** is a mountain in this region, where Dionysiac festivals were celebrated.



^^ **Phrygia (pronounced: FriDGE-ee-ya)** a kingdom in the west central part of Anatolia (Turkey).

^^ **Mount Tmolus (pronounced: Tuh-MOW-lis)** - Mountain in Lydia (modern day Turkey). Soyinka writes of the “fertile banks of Tmolus,” implying it is a

river in the city of Sardis, the capital of the ancient kingdom of Lydia.

Afghanistan >>

(part of the Greco-Bactrian Empire from 250 to 125 BCE)

Country bordered by Pakistan in the south and east; Iran in the west; Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, and Tajikistan in the north; and in the far northeast, China.



NOTE: All Soyinka's geographic references are Asian & African. Dionysus wandered here in his attempts to be recognized as a legitimate god worthy of Mount Olympus. Politically, Soyinka is also creating an Afrocentric world.



<< **Arabia (aka Arabian Peninsula)**, largest peninsula in the world, including the modern countries of Yemen, Oman, Qatar, Bahrain, Kuwait, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates.



Ethiopia, (pronounced: EETH-EE-opia) country in the northeastern Horn of Africa. It's neighbor is **Eritrea** (pronounced: Er-i-TREE-YA) >>

Libya, (pronounced: Libby-ya) country in North Africa on the Mediterranean.



<< **Crete**, (pronounced: Creet) the largest and most populous of the Greek islands in the southern Aegean. Site of rich Greek mythology and the Minoan civilization.

Steppes of Persia, vast steppe ecoregion of Eurasia in the temperate grasslands, savannas, and shrublands biome.

Wastes of Media, wastelands or desert regions. Soyinka may mean Medina, a city located in the Hejaz region of western Saudi Arabia near Mecca.



Grapes of Boetia, (pronounced: Boh-EE-sha or Bee-OH-sha) grapes grow very well in this region of Greece. Grapes are symbols of fecundity (ripe fruit) and transformation (as they are made into wine).

Feast of Eleusis (Eleusinian Mysteries), (pronounced: EL-oo-sees and EI-YOO-SIN-ian) secretive initiations held every year for the cult of Demeter and Persephone based at Eleusis in ancient Greece. They involved the the *descent* (loss), the *search*, and the *ascent* of Persephone into and out of Hades (the underworld) and symbolized the seasonal cycles of nature. Demeter mourns in *Winter* when her daughter is underground in Hades and *Spring* comes again when Persephone emerges from the underworld.

Vestals, priestesses of Vesta, goddess of the hearth; usually virgins.

TIRESIAS, (pronounced: Tie-REE-sias) a blind prophet of Apollo in Thebes, famous for clairvoyance and for being transformed into a woman for seven years. Often referred to as the “blind seer,” he is also known for his ambiguous and plural gender.

“Dionysus, I presume?” A reference to the 1871 meeting between journalist Henry Morton Stanley, who was sent to find missionary Dr. David Livingstone, who was presumed lost in Africa for 6 years before his discovery.

Flogging or Flagellation, refers to the act of beating the human body with special implements such as whips, lashes, rods, switches. Usually, it is a form of corporeal punishment but it can also be submitted to willingly, or performed on oneself, in religious or sadomasochistic contexts.

Carceral state. Refers to the system of mass incarceration present in the contemporary United States. The jail and prison population has increased from less than 200,000 in 1972 to 2.2 million today through systemic racism, the failed War on Drugs, and a for-profit prison system. The United States has 5 percent of the world’s population but nearly 25 percent of its prisoners. See Michelle Alexander’s *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness* and Ta-Nehisi Coates’ articles in *The Atlantic*.

Stop & Frisk. Police practice of temporarily detaining, questioning, and at times searching civilians on the street for weapons and other contraband. The program became the subject of a racial profiling controversy as the vast majority of those stopped are people of color.

Law & Order. Political rhetoric that demands a strict criminal justice system and stricter criminal penalties. Also referred to as “tough on crime” or the “War on Crime/Drugs.” The phrase has a history of use by conservative political leadership. Its logic has been critiqued for its racist overtones.

KADMOS (aka Cadmus; pronounced: CAD-moss or CAD-miss) was the founder and first king of Thebes. He as the first Greek hero and, alongside Perseus and Bellerophon, the greatest hero and slayer of monsters before the days of Heracles. With Harmonia, he was the father of Semele, Polydorus, Autonoe, Agave and Ino. Their youngest son was Illyrius. He is considered the ancestor of Illyrians and Theban royalty.

PENTHEUS, (pronounced: PEN-THI-us) king of Thebes. His name means “Man of Sorrows.” His father was Ichoin (Echion), the wisest of the Spartoi. His mother was Agave, the daughter of Cadmus, the founder of Thebes, and the goddess Harmonia. His sister was Epeiros. He died at the hands of his mother, who tore him to pieces in a Dionysian frenzy.

Fascism. A form of far right-wing, authoritarian ultranationalism: Fascist states are characterized by dictatorial power (usually through a highly charismatic, often narcissistic leader); xenophobic, racist, homophobic or sexist rhetoric; forcible suppression of opposition; and strong regimentation of society and of the economy.

Evohe-e-e-e! Yodel that echoes across the mountains.



Fawn skin, costumes worn by the **Maenads**, (**pronounced: MAY-nids**) the female followers of Dionysus (also known as **Bacchantes (Bak-ANTI)** or **Bacchae (Bak-KAI)**). The Bacchae were inspired by Dionysus into a state of ecstatic frenzy through a combination of dancing and intoxication. Often written off as “mad women,” they are actually sacred worshippers and holy priestesses.

Phallus, a symbolic or actual erect penis; symbol of fertility used in Greek rituals. During the major theatre festival, the **Festival Dionysus**, every Spring in Athens, phalloi were carried through the streets, wine was made and consumed, and sacrifice was made in the amphitheatre. **Priapus**, son of Aphrodite and Dionysus, is a Greek god of fertility whose symbol was an exaggerated, everhard phallus.

AGAVE, (**pronounced: A-GAA-vay**) Pentheus’ mother, third daughter of Cadmus. Her sisters are: Autonoe (**pronounced: Aw-TON-o-wee**), Ino (**pronounced: I know**) and Semele (**pronounced: Sem-EH-lee**).

Demeter, (**pronounced: Duh-MEE-ter**) goddess of the harvest and agriculture, presiding over grains and the fertility of the earth. Mother of Persephone, (**pronounced: per-SEF-o-nee**) (See **Eleusinian Mysteries**).

Apollonian vs Dionysian, a philosophical and literary concept and dichotomy/dialectic, based on Apollo and Dionysus in Greek mythology. Both are sons of Zeus. Apollo is the god of the sun, of rational thinking and order, and appeals to logic, prudence and purity. Dionysus is the god of wine and dance, of irrationality and chaos, and appeals to emotions and instincts. The Ancient Greeks did not consider the two gods to be opposites or rivals, although they were often entwined by nature.

Blasphemy, the act or offense of speaking sacrilegiously about divine or sacred things.

Heresy, belief or opinion contrary to orthodox religious doctrine.

Actaeon, (**pronounced: act-tee-ON**) Boetian son of **Aristaeus**, a herdsman, and **Autonoe**. He caused the wrath of goddess **Artemis**, when he accidentally saw the goddess naked while she was bathing in the woods. To hide from the goddess, he transformed into a deer and his well-trained hunting dogs tore him to pieces.

Hair, symbol of power, virility, and holiness. Shearing or cutting of hair suggests loss of power or prowess (**emasculation**). Delilah shaved Samson’s hair and he lost his power. Pentheus shears Dionysus’ hair as act of degradation and to dismiss his holiness as a god. He also takes away his **thyrsus (phallus)** (**pronounced: thUR-sis**)

Ululation, long, wavering, high-pitched vocal sound resembling a howl with a trilling quality used to express strong emotions. Women across the world, and especially in Africa and the Middle East, ululate when mourning or as a part of rituals such as weddings and funerals.

Make **manifest** (as in a god), is 'to make something visible, or clear, to make something known, to reveal something.' To make a god manifest is for the spiritual element to become visible in the 3-dimensional, everyday world. Spirit mediums or shamans are said to manifest the ancestral spirits through voicing, trance, masquerade and other forms of divining.



Sacred grove, divine forests throughout West Africa where, in the Yoruba spiritual tradition, ancestral spirits manifest. For instance, the Osun Sacred Grove, on the outskirts of the city of Osogbo in Nigeria, is the abode of the goddess of fertility Osun, one of the pantheon of Yoruba gods. The Greeks also had sacred groves where maenads worshipped Dionysus and other gods and goddesses.

Ecstatic state, an altered state of consciousness characterized by diminished awareness of other objects or surroundings. Religious ecstasy is an elevated state of divine possession or communion and oneness with God/the divine, often accompanied by visions and emotional (and sometimes physical) euphoria. Pentecostal, charismatic and spirit-filled Christianity are often referred to as "ecstatic religions."

Charlatan, a person falsely claiming to have a special knowledge or skill; a fraud.

Manacles, a metal band, chain, or shackle for fastening someone's hands or ankles. Chains and manacles were historically used to control enslaved people. The **Transatlantic slave trade** transported human cargo from across the African continent to the Americas from the 16th to the 19th centuries.

Cross-dressing, the practice of wearing clothing of the opposite gender. Historically, when men wear women's clothing it is often considered a debasement, stigma, or humorous, whereas cross-dressing often affords women greater power because they can act as men. These reversals reveal the power dynamics of gender and how we have historically framed men/masculine as powerful and women/feminine as weaker.

Titans, the first twelve children of Gaia (Mother Earth) and Uranus (Father Sky), who ruled during the legendary Golden Age, and also comprised the first pantheon of Greek deities.

Ares, the Greek god of war. He is one of the Twelve Olympians, the son of Zeus and Hera.

Caryatid (pronounced: carry-A-did). A stone carving of a draped female figure, a pillar in a Greek-style building.

Bryony (pronounced: BRAI-uh-nee). A creeper; type of flowering plant in the gourd family.



Two suns and a bull, double manifestation of the god Dionysus. Dionysus was often manifested as a bull. Seeing two suns in the Theban sky is a divine omen.

Maypole dance, European medieval ceremonial folk dance performed around a tall pole garlanded with greenery or flowers and often hung with ribbons that are woven into complex patterns by the dancers. Such dances are survivals of ancient dances around a living tree as part of spring rites to ensure fertility.

Greek Theatrical Concepts: Hubris, (pronounced: HEW-bris) excessive pride or self-confidence. Aristotle, in *The Poetics*, explains how Greek theatrical heroes like Oedipus expressed an arrogant confidence that was often their undoing. For Soyinka it is Agave whose hubris gets the better of her. **Anagnorisis, (pronounced: an-ag-NOR-i-sis)** for Aristotle, is a moment in a play when a character makes a critical discovery. The main character either recognizes or identifies his/her true nature, recognizes the other character's true identity, discovers the true nature of his situation, or that of the others – leading to the resolution of the story. **Peripeteia (pronounced: pear-i-pe-TAY-ya)** is the reversal of circumstances, or turning point, in the plot.

Blood and wine, both symbols of life, sustenance, and vitality. Wine is also a symbol of transformation, as grapes undergo transformation when they are fermented. The shedding of blood (the vital force that sustains life) in ritual sacrifice precedes most ceremonies in which blessings are sought from the ancestors or divinities. Sacrifice leads to transformation.



Akinwande Oluwole Babatunde Soyinka (born 13 July 1934), known as Wole Soyinka (pronounced: WO-lay soy-YINKa) is a Nigerian playwright, poet, and essayist. He was awarded the 1986 Nobel Prize in Literature, the first African to be honored in that category. After studying in Nigeria and the UK, he worked with the Royal Court Theatre in London. He took an active role in Nigeria's political history and its struggle for independence from Great Britain. In 1972, he became a political prisoner and was put in solitary confinement for 22 months. He kept writing in prison - on any form of paper he could find. Soyinka has been a strong critic of successive Nigerian governments, especially the country's many military dictators and corrupt politicians, as well as other political tyrannies such as the Mugabe regime in Zimbabwe. His plays include: *The Lion and the Jewel* (1959), *A Dance of the Forests* (1960), *The Strong Breed* (1964), *Kongi's Harvest* (1964), *Madmen and Specialists* (1970), *The Bacchae of Euripides* (1973), *Death and the King's Horseman* (1975), *A Play of Giants* (1984), and *The Beatification of Area Boy* (1996). His prolific writing also includes novels, memoirs, poetry, and scholarly works.