

INDIGENOUS TRADITION IN SOYINKA'S DEATH AND THE KING'S HORSEMAN

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Abstract:

Wole Soyinka is a renowned Nigerian dramatist, who was awarded Nobel Prize in 1986, for his accomplishment in the field of literature. He is a prolific writer and versatile genius of African continent. His works are based on Yoruban society, culture, tradition and politics of Africa. The dramatic environment that Soyinka creates has been enriched with variegated realistic scenes portraying African life very exactly and fashions and characters holding a mirror up to nature and presenting life as it is.

His play Death and the King's Horseman treats the metaphysical issue death and transition. Death, which occurs by the ritual of sacrifice, is considered as a rejuvenating power or life to the livings. Such sacrifice is intruded by a British officer, Pilkings and his retinue. The protagonist's procrastination and love for physical world lead him to face the tragedy. Apart from that, the white's ideology of survival and the philosophy of the native people are explicated through the rituals of Yoruba.

Key words: Yoruba, Tradition, Death, Human Sacrifice, British Colonialism.

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Introduction:

Soyinka's play *Death and the King's Horseman* treats the metaphysical issue death and transition. The theme of sacrifice handled by the artist, who is a martyr himself for the moral benefit of the society, is evident in these works. Human sacrifice is the act of killing human beings as a part of religious ritual. This practice was prevalent during ancient days in many cultures in the human society. The rituals are conducted to please or appease gods, spirits and ancestors. According to James Frazer, in the ancient days, trees, vegetables, wild and domestic animals, birds, slaves (humans), women, chieftains, priests, princes, sometimes even kings were sacrificed. Among all sacrifices, human sacrifice is considered as the greatest offering to God. The motives behind the rituals are the same, i.e. to bring good fortune and to pacify the gods to grant success in their attempts in warfare, magical purpose, business, buildings, and moreover welfare of the society.

“The Fourth Stage”

Rituals are a means of communication with the souls in “the fourth stage”. Agemo and Egungun are the traditional masquerades. They are considered as an intimate setting of trans-cosmic interaction. In the festivals, the ancestors descent on the masqueraders and communicate with the earthly beings. Such a transitional phase from earthly being to divine being is found in sacrificial rituals as well. Soyinka calls this phase of transitional abyss as “chthonic realm,” “primordial marsh,” “transitional gulf,” and “the fourth stage” and he regards it as a “storehouse for creative and destructive essences” (MLAW 2).

Death and the King's Horseman: A Ritual Tragedy

Death and the King's Horseman, a ritual tragedy, is grounded on the real event, which took place in the Oyo Kingdom in 1946. Oyo Kingdom was the most powerful Yoruba kingdom in the nineteenth century, which put up resistance against British colonialism. The play is a complex illustration of Soyinka's conception of the tragedy. Before Soyinka, Dura Ladipo, a Yoruba playwright, deals with the same historical event in his play, *Oba Waja*. Ladipo's version has only historical perspective, whereas, Soyinka's play deals with the spiritual perspective of Africans. Through the play, Soyinka narrates the rituals and customs of Africa and establishes

that they are part and parcel of their lives. The rituals, including the ritual of human sacrifice, are for the welfare of the society.

Human Sacrifice Ritual

According to the native tradition, when the king dies he must be followed by his favourite horse, Chief Horseman, and his dog to the eternal world, after a month of his death. It is their duty to cross the realm of transition and reach their master to escort him with honour to the next world. Soyinka depicts the ritual practice of Yoruba, through the character Joseph, as, “It is native law and custom. The King die last month. Tonight is his burial. But before they can bury him, the Elesin must die so as to accompany him to heaven” (*DKH* 167).

When the Horseman offers himself for the sacrifice, his position will be taken over by his eldest son. His son also will grow up with the same mentality to take up the place of his father. In this play, Olunde, the Horseman’s son, returns from London after hearing the news of the king’s death. He gives reason for his arrival: “Our King is dead.... I had to return home at once so as to bury my father” (*DKH* 194). It is in the ritual that the heir or successor is forbidden to set eyes on his father from the moment of the King’s death. The Yoruba historian, Johnson notes that the chief’s delay or reluctance to accompany the dead Alafin to the other world will face very grave moral implications by his people. But by the end of nineteenth century “all the men [chiefs] refuse to die and they are never forced to do so” (qtd. in Izevbaye “Mediation” 122).

The Horseman and His Society

The Horseman of the society is not just a horse rider or an orderly of the king, but he is like Marshal or Prime Minister to the Alafin. Sacrificing such an honourable person is not an ordinary thing, yet his death is essential for the survival of the society in future. “Most African peoples accept or acknowledge God as the final guardian of law and order and of the moral and ethical codes. Therefore, the breaking of such orders, whether by the individual or by a group, is ultimately an offence by the corporate body of society” (Mbiti 206). As the prime saviour of the society, he must safeguard the spiritual well-being of the society. It is his duty to enhance the spiritual well-being of his community. Regarding this Ojaide says,

Order to Africans is perceived as natural and ritualistic to ensure harmony, the absence of which will bring calamity to the whole group. For this reason, an individual could be sacrificed to avoid a war, a plague, or any anticipated communal disaster. In other words, the individual can be sacrificed for the well-being of the community. (48)

After his death, he will act as a mediator between the people and the other world, i.e. the world of the dead and the unborn. His act will reinforce the bridge between the ancestors / Gods and the living. It establishes a close-knit connecting the phenomena of conception, birth, life and death as continuum. Soyinka, in an interview with Appiah explains the Yoruba philosophy of life and he justifies the ritual:

We believe that there are various areas of existence, all of which interact, interlock in a pattern of continuity: the world of the ancestor, the world of the living, and the world of the unborn. The process of transition among these various worlds is a continuing one and one which is totally ameliorated. For instance, the function of ritual, of sacrifice – whether it's a ram or a chicken – the function of seasonal ceremonies, is in fact allied to the ease of transition among these various worlds. (Appiah 781)

Regarding this philosophy of Yoruba, Mary T. David opines that “Yoruba belief that death is not a cessation of existence but a mere transition into a continued existence, and that the unborn, the living and the dead form a continuum underpins the play’s metaphysical scheme” (Wole Soyinka 85).

Importance to the Dead and the Unborn

Every living human individual is important to all the communities in the world, but in the Yoruba society, the community gets the primacy. It gives importance to the dead ancestors and unborn lives. The dead ancestors are worshipped as guides and companions. The Yoruba people believe that their blessings will save them from all evils. Moreover, they believe that life is a continuum. In fact, it is their fundamental belief. The transition from the physical world to the eternal world is a very important moment in the Yoruba idea of life cycle.

In his “Author’s Notes,” Soyinka states some of the misinterpretations made by the westerners and native writers, regarding the historical incident and ritual:

The bane of themes of this genre is that they are no sooner employed creatively than they acquire the facile tag of ‘clash of cultures’, a prejudicial label which, quite apart from its frequent misapplication, presupposes a potential equality *in every given situation* of the alien culture and the indigenous, on the actual soil of the latter. (DKH 144)

In addition, he warns against critics and directors not to focus from the point of view of clash of cultures – European and indigenous. He brings out the reason for the clash, which is not based on cultures, but the White Officer’s lack of understanding about the age-old wisdom and horseman’s solemnity and loyalty to his tradition.

The Colonial Factor is an incident, a catalytic incident merely. The confrontation in the play is largely metaphysical, contained in the human vehicle which is Elesin and the universe of the Yoruba mind – the world of the living, the dead and the unborn, and the numinous passage which links all: transition. *Death and the King’s Horseman* can be fully realised only through an evocation of music from the abyss of transition. (DKH 145)

James Booth observes, “Soyinka challenges European images of barbarism, and asserts through the ritual of human sacrifice a communal inter-relationship between the individual and society” (“Human Sacrifice” 14).

Images and Symbols

At the very outset of the play, Elesin Oba enters market in the company of his Praise-singer and Drummers. Here market symbolically portrays the earthly life. According to Yoruba, the market is considered to be a microcosm of life itself. Moreover, they have great regards for market, because they consider that “The market square facilitates more than just the exchange of goods and services for humans. Spirits, goblins, and other ethereal characters are believed to come there to buy and sell, and to bless and curse humans, too” (Adeeko 79). As a man of “enormous vitality” (DKH 147), he speaks, dances and sings with enjoyment on looking

anticipation of his ritual death that night. Dance and music are a part of their lives. Dance, poetry and music are the three media of human expression that draw the performer of rituals into the abyss. Katrak says that all the three means of human expression fail to lead him into the metaphysical gulf (96). Soyinka employs this art significantly in his plays. In this play, through the song of “Not-I” bird, he symbolically portrays further actions and his poetic vision of images, symbols and allusions depict the tragedy.

Through the settings of the play, the playwright symbolically states the condition of the minds of the characters. Market, a vanity fair, symbolizes the physical desires of human, where Elesin enters to enjoy the presence of women to be decorated by them. He says, “This market is my roost. When I come among the women I am a chicken with a hundred mothers. I become a monarch whose palace is built with tenderness and beauty” (*DKH* 148). Towards his acts, Praise-Singer stresses him the necessity and importance of ritual as,

There is only one home to the life of a river-mussel; there is only one home to the life of a tortoise; there is only one shell to the soul of man; there is only one world to the spirit of our race. If that world leaves its course and smashes on boulders of the great void, whose world will give us shelter? (*DKH* 149)

Responsibility of Elesin Oba

Elesin knows the importance of ritual and his duty and responsibility to his society. He is very much ready to surrender his life for the sake of his community. He knows that his death will enhance and preserve the spiritual health of his people, and as it is his principle duty, he is bound to do that.

The folktale of “Not-I” bird, is sung by Elesin, encapsulates Yoruba’s worldview. It is an exemplary of wide and vast Yoruba oral literature. Dugga states that the “Not-I bird” is a dramatic song, which is usually employed in *alarinjo* travelling masquerade (74). *Alarinjo* is a travelling masquerade, a popular form of dramatic entertainment in Yoruba, which depicts through short episodes with a wide variety of characters in a stereotypical fashion. In the song of the ‘Not-I’ bird, an exemplary of author’s height of lyrical inspiration, the Oba (chief) assures of

his duty to his society and promises that he will perform his duty at the right time and never desert his people at any cost. With a full energy and an exuberant willingness, he expresses,

I am master of my Fate. When the hour comes

Watch me dance along the narrowing path

Glazed by the sole of my great precursors

My soul is eager. I shall not turn aside. (DKH 153)

His assured words and song with riddles and symbols seem ironic in the light of his failure to perform his duty.

Elesin has been prepared for his ritual death, since his young age. The people of the kingdom know his destiny and they trust him that he will save the honour of the community, which is laid upon him. And at the same time, they treat him as an Alafin i.e. the King, from the day of King's death to the day he performs the ritual. It is their responsibility and honour to grant him all he needs. As it is his last day, he cannot be denied anything he demands. His demands have to be offered before his departure. He asks for the best food, clothes, and even a beautiful bride. The women in the market decorate him with rich and colourful clothes like damask, *alari* – a rich, woven cloth, brightly coloured, *sanyan* – a richly valued woven cloth, and cloth of Indigo. These clothes are given to the emissary of the other world, to honour him and glorify his never return journey.

Intertwining of the Community and Individuals

The tragic destiny of the community and Elesin has made him to succumb to a sudden desire for a beautiful young girl. Even though, he comes to know that she is already betrothed to Iyaloja's son, he could not give up his desire. To fulfil the last wish of the dying man, Iyaloja arranges for their union. She eulogises the union as, "The fruit of such a union is rare. It will be neither of this world nor of the next. Nor of the one behind us. As if timelessness of the ancestor world and the unborn have joined spirits to wring an issue of the elusive being of passage" (DKH 162). The acts of Iyaloja and the people show how much importance they give to their tradition and to the chief of their community. It is difficult and incredible for other people to understand the consummation of a new marriage on the day of one's death, but it is simple and

logical to the Yoruba people. It shows their commitment to death as they are to life. “Now we must go prepare your bridal chamber. Then these same hands will lay your shrouds.” These words of Iyaloja state that the people of Yoruba treat both death and marriage equally, without much addiction to any feelings in life.

The ideology of life in the Yoruba community is very different from the Western ideology. The Yoruba gives importance to society whereas the latter to individuals. The Yoruba tradition is based on community. Their identity is their tradition. Their rituals and customs are part of their day-to-day life. The Whites in the play subdue the native people’s identity by interrupting and stopping the indigenous cult practices. Here it is very suitable to quote the idea of Meena Bhambani on tradition and culture, “Culture is then not just a matter of individual belief in its various aspects but is a mode of self-expression. It gives identity to a nation thus building an image for it and granting a standing to it as a separate entity in the world” (208).

Olunde’s Consciousness of Tradition

Olunde, the eldest son of Elesin Oba, is the next heir for the position of King’s horseman, who studies medicine in England with the help of Pilkingses. He returns from England to attend the ritual. Jane Pilkings expects that his modern life in the land of Whites would transform his character into Whites. Her anticipation comes true along with his individual quality of loyalty to his tradition and community. His indigenous tradition and culture are deep-rooted in him, which cannot be erased by the education in England. She is surprised to hear that for the past one month he has been mourning for his father’s death. She says that sacrificing one’s life for religious purpose is brutal and a savage act.

The playwright sheds light on the Whites’ ideology of survival through the rituals of Yoruba. The dialogues between Jane and Olunde bring out the devastation of war in order to save the honour of the British Empire. He argues that no such worse destruction will happen in ritual suicide than the war. Olunde justifies that ritual suicide is no more worse than mass suicide i.e. the World War II. When the White couple comes to know the cult of human sacrifice, they are surprised and Pilkings orders to arrest Elesin, in order to prevent him from the “ritual suicide.” The reason behind his order is that he does not want to get into any trouble while

the Prince visits his district, and that is more important to him than saving a life. The real intention of his arrest is seen clearly in the dialogue between Pilkings and Iyaloja,

PILKINGS (*to* IYALOJA). I hope you understand that if anything goes wrong it will be on your head. My men have orders to shoot at the first sign of trouble.

IYALOJA. To prevent one death you will actually make other deaths? Ah, great is the wisdom of the white race. But have no fear. Your Prince will sleep peacefully. So at long last will ours. We will disturb you no further, servant of the white king. (*DKH* 215)

Jane is astonished greatly and she suspects the black people's nature of love to fellow humans and particularly to blood relations. Olunde expresses his feeling towards his father, "I am really anxious to go. I couldn't see my father before, it's forbidden for me, his heir and successor to set eyes on him from the moment of the king's death. But now... I would like to touch his body while it is still warm" (*DKH* 197). She cannot get into the ideology of African's philosophy of death. He adds further,

And anyway, my father has been dead in my mind for nearly a month. Ever since I learnt of the King's death. I've lived with my bereavement so long now that I cannot think of him alive. On that journey on the boat, I kept my mind on my duties as the one who must perform the rites over his body. I went through it all again and again in my mind as he himself had taught me. I didn't want to do anything wrong, something which might jeopardise the welfare of my people. (*DKH* 198)

He warns Pilkings that if ritual is stopped, it will be result in "A calamity for us, the entire people" (*DKH* 199). When he sees his father as a prisoner in the hands of Whites, he understands that his father has failed to complete his responsibility and deserted the community. With grief- stricken heart, he says, "I have no father, eater of left-overs" (*DKH* 203).

After Elesin is arrested and kept in imprisonment, a group of women led by Iyaloja meet him in his cell, with a courier (load) to the dead King. Pilkings intervenes and stops him to touch and tell something to the courier. As a part of the ritual, the father has to give "the words" to his elder son or heir, in order to prepare or give him the position of horsemanship. Elesin states

about the process of ritual, "Mine are no words for anyone's ears. They are not words even for the bearers of this load. They are words I must speak secretly, even as my father whispered them in my ears and I in the ears of my first-born. I cannot shout at them to the wind and the open night-sky" (*DKH* 216). Through his statement, Soyinka illustrates that the process of ritual is very long and age-old.

Laggard Will of Elesin and His Penance

Elesin fails to perform the custom not because of mere intervention of Pilkings, but because of his mental failure to do his social duty and lack of will power to accept death. Pushpa estimates that he suffers from a "lack of will" and his tragic flaw is his "materialistic self-interest" ("Eunuchs of Will" 138-39). After his arrest, he is kept in an improvised cell, where he confesses his weakness,

I confess to you, daughter, my weakness came not merely from the abomination of the white man who came violently into my fading presence, there was also a weight of longing on my earth-held limbs. I would have shaken it off, already my foot had begun to lift but then, the white ghost entered and all was defiled. (*DKH* 207)

At the end, Elesin comes to know that the courier, who lies in front of him, is his son Olunde. When Olunde comes to know that his father has not performed his duty, he takes the position of horseman to save the honour of his family and society. He wants to rectify his father's blunder by his premature sacrificial death. He surrogates his father's honour and sacrifices himself. He does not escape from the reality like his father. Being a Yoruba, he has concern for his people, society, custom, culture and its roots. Ibitokun remarks about his sacrifice thus, "Olunde an inner self that believes strongly that ritual suicide is the only means to preserve its identity, dynamic and whole." (30) By his death, he upholds the ancestral tradition and links with the Gods. But unfortunately, by the death of Olunde, Yoruba has lost an important ritual from this world forever, because both the horseman and his heir are dead. Therefore, the tradition of the king's horseman cannot be inherited by others. The hierarchy of the family of the king's horseman and age-old custom of the society are destroyed by the vain

attempt of the Westerners. Puspha brings out the reason for Olunde's death and the central idea of the play:

Olunde in *Death and the King's Horseman* has come out of the claustrophobic environs of self-interest. He does not view the ritual as a cluster of dogmatic values. The power-drive launched by the whites has to be crushed by an enlightened African. The ritual suicide is an offshoot of ageless wisdom – it is not the result of blind faith or superstition. (“The Will to Power” 95)

Without realizing the metaphysical realm of Yoruba, one cannot understand the sacrifice of Olunde. Regarding this, Brian W. Last argues that the climatic sacrifice of Olunde can be understood only in metaphysical terms:

The problem arises as to whether an educated intellectual at the time would behave like this, but the argument fades into the background on consideration of the world of the play: it has a metaphysical design, not a realistic one. It may be that this did not happen in fact, but it happened psychologically, subconsciously, spiritually. (41-42)

Elesin's procrastination and love for physical world lead him to face the tragedy (his son's death). His son's death is the ultimate tragedy in his life. After seeing his son's body as courier to the dead Alafin, he becomes speechless and rock-still. In “Yoruba Philosophy of Life,” Awolalu says that a man who outlives his children is considered to be tragic among the Yoruba. Whereas a man who dies in his old age, and children grown and alive, his death is rejoiced by the people. (25) The death of his son makes him realize his duty to the society and feels ashamed of being an escapist from his responsibilities. To retain his honour, he exercises his will, in a quick moment; he strangles himself with the handcuffs and dies. About his death, Jasbir Jain comments, “Death, when it finally comes to the King's horseman, does not come with honour and glory but limping and bereft of honour and late, for the ‘moment’ is already past” (215).

Critic Katrak says that in this play, Soyinka does not glorify the practice of human sacrifice, and he questions the community for its heavy communal demand for the sake of unspecified benefit for the community (89-90). Breitinger opposes this argument and assesses, “Soyinka makes it very clear that it is up to the community to judge or redefine its cultural

values, it is not a matter for outsiders to declare cultural practice as barbaric or savage” (“Wole Soyinka” 88). But Katrak assesses, “Soyinka is criticizing this tradition, though indirectly as is consonant with his artistic method. This is implied in Soyinka’s sympathy to Elesin’s basic human instinct for survival rather than for death” (89). And Katrak adds the purpose of Soyinka employing the ritual in the play: “. . .using mythic figures is not to evoke nostalgically a perfect past but rather to fashion them for the modern world and enable them to speak to present-day humanity” (89). Breitinger views the ritual from different aspects and justifies the act of human sacrifice: “The strength of Elesin’s sacrifice lies in the firm relation behalf in the life force of the entire religio-cultural community that will affect individual lives only indirectly” (“Wole Soyinka” 88). Katrak’s point of view focuses only on an individual and his will. The view is quite contrary to the philosophy of Yoruba, which gives more importance to the community than to the individual. The people believe that the ritual and Elesin’s sacrifice will bring benefits to the whole community.

Communal Health

The people who have faith in religions believe that the prophets and saviours can bring salvation to them. That is the ultimate goal of every human being. That is why people celebrate their religion’s head as a Supreme Being of this world. The religious head by exercising his individual will, tries to transform the lives of the people of the society. From this viewpoint, sacrifice of Elesin Oba is also an act of salvation to his community. The people of Yoruba community believe that the ritual will save the world from witnessing disorder and disaster. James Booth calls it a “cosmological necessity” and he adds, “. . .philosophically quite distinct from the more familiar sacrifice of self and is founded on a principle opposite to personal moral conviction – communal or – ‘cosmic’ totality” (“Self-Sacrifice” 137). Similar to Booth’s view, Eldred Durosimi Jones states, “Soyinka sees society as being in continual need of salvation from itself. This act of salvation is not a mass act; it comes about through the vision and dedication of individuals who doggedly pursue their vision in spite of the opposition of the very society they seek to save” (12).

The ultimate theme of the play borders on the society attaining salvation by its leader a representative and surmounting over some physical and metaphysical conflicts. After Elesin’s

death, the bride does her spousal duty by closing his eyes with the earth, and then leaves him with Iyaloja. She counsels the bride: "Now forget the dead, forget even the living. Turn your mind only to the unborn" (DKH 219). The very last words of the play also emphasise the Yoruba philosophy of life and its tradition. They significantly preach the ultimate message of the play and philosophy of the society.

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