

UNCOMPROMISING AFFIRMATION OF CULTURE: SOYINKA'S *DEATH AND THE KING'S HORSEMAN*

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ABSTRACT

Wole Soyinka's Death and the King's Horseman is the convergence of two issues: the first focuses on the Yoruba priest Elesin, who represents the embodiment of the mythology and the history of the people; the second concentrates on the "sterile, existential wasteland" (Ralph-Bowman, 1983) of the white colonialists. The two issues come into conflict in the sacrifice of Elesin's European-educated son, Olunde, whose death represents a significant and uncompromising affirmation of Yoruba cultural tradition. The sacrifice of Olunde, though appears as metaphysical, is entirely secular and practical. He dies to preserve the safety of his community and his action can be appreciated as a form of martyrdom. Olunde's sacrifice symbolizes an act that asserts the value of higher duty against both the internal threat of materialistic self-interest and the external threat of an imposed alien culture.

INTRODUCTION

Recipient of the 1986 Nobel Prize in literature, Wole Soyinka has attained the stature of a theatrical mythographer of African People's experience. His achievement has been seen as analogous to that of Peter Shaffer, Eugene O'Neill, and Athol Fugard. While many critics, most notably Eldred Durosimi Jones, Clive Barnes, Frank Rich, and John Beaufort, have lauded his poetically realistic methods of dramatizing the "experience of people and society" (Trudeau 1992), the self-sacrifice, endemic to the construction of these people's identity as African Yoruba in his plays, remains a largely unanalyzed facet of his dramaturgy. This critical blind spot is a noteworthy aspect of Soyinka's drama which offers an entrée for a cultural critique of his work.

The possible explanation for the critical blind spot with regard to racial struggle in Soyinka's plays is specific to his position as an African mythographer. Writing of the relationship between Soyinka's life and work, Lawrence J. Trudeau (1992) notes, "As a child Soyinka was exposed to the pull between African tradition and Western (British) modernization. Soyinka's grandfather introduced him to the pantheon of Yoruba gods and to other tribal folklore, while his parents were greatly influenced by the British colonial experience". As Soyinka matured, the conflict between the two divergent cultures became apparent to him. This conflict allowed him to locate himself in the tradition of African activists who have advanced the cause of their race through the reclamation of African culture and history.

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Soyinka has written more than a dozen plays. Since this article is not a full-length study of his dramas, it focuses on his *Death and the King's Horseman*, a play that deals amply with the conflicts between Yoruba values and British colonial ideals.

METHODS

Death and the King's Horseman perpetuates a racial ideology. It dramatically defines the Yoruba values by contrasting them with the attitudes of the uncomprehending whites. To address this issue, I have made a critical examination of the play by analyzing Soyinka's interviews and notes and a few critics' commentaries.

RESULT

The colonists' inability to comprehend Yoruban values gives an impression of a wider confrontation of cultures and consequently provides the play with the theme of Yoruba people's uncompromising affirmation of their traditions.

DISCUSSION

In *Death and the King's Horseman* there is a parallel existence of two cultures: the British and the Yoruba. But, due to British people's inability to understand Yoruba values, specifically those relating to ritual sacrifice, gives rise to a confrontation between these two cultures.

The story of the play is simple. It is set in the Southern Nigeria, the original place of Yoruba. The play opens in a town marketplace. A king has died and is to be given a ceremonial burial. According to the custom of the culture, the dead king's Horseman – in life his closest friend and adviser – Elesin Oba must die in the ritual and be buried with the king. Preparations for the sacrifice are well made. On the night of his death, Elesin, as the custom, would take a new bride. He chooses, against town elders' advice, a young virgin. The local British District Officer, Simon Pilkings learns of the planned ritual. Horrified at the idea of ritual suicide – an act both barbaric and illegal in the eyes of British authorities – Pilkings issues an order that such act be stopped. His order rouses anger in Yoruba community. Olunde, the son of Elesin and student of medicine in England, also comes back to take part in his father's Dance of Death. But then the play takes an unexpected turn. Elesin shows his weakness to meet the ritual death. His beautiful bride is everything for him. Elesin's failure to die is shameful for Yoruba people, so Olunde takes his father's place.

Olunde sacrifices his life to affirm the tradition of his people against the power of colonial rule. Through this act of Olunde, Soyinka represents a significant and uncompromising affirmation of Yoruba cultural tradition. We can understand this affirmation better if we observe Soyinka's prefatory note to *Death and the King's Horseman*. In the note, he explains the important historical event based on which he has written his play: "This play is based on events which took place in Oyo, [an] ancient Yoruba city of Nigeria, in 1946. That year, the lives of Elesin (Olori Elesin), his son, and the Colonial District Officer intertwined with the disastrous results set out in the play." Soyinka further explains, "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... the universe of the Yoruba mind..." (King's: 7). Despite Soyinka's insistence on the incidental quality of the Europeans, it cannot be denied that one of the main ways, in which the play's Yoruba values are dramatically defined, is by contrast with the attitudes of the uncomprehending whites. The acts and the voices of characters in the play constantly generate the sense that they, both the White and the Black, stand for wider cultural principles. Colonial rules – bring civilization to dark people, administer Nigeria like a conquered territory, and make Nigerians, British subjects without concealing its perceived feeling of superiority (Kolawole 2005)– are Pilkings' normative values; he seeks to enforce these values on the Yoruba and that he is "fated to clash with the man [Elesin] more than with any of the other chiefs." His act in an antipathy to the "native law and custom" (King's: 28) that Elesin represents. Similarly, Olunde frequently uses such phrases as "your people," "you white races." In reply to Olunde's remarks, Jane, the wife of Pilkings, says, "You have learnt to argue I can tell that, but I never said you made sense. However cleverly you try to put it, it is still a barbaric custom. It is even worse – it's feudal! The king dies and a chieftain must be buried with him. How feudalistic can you get?" (King's: 53). If the scene is not intended to reveal us the confrontation between "Europe" and "Africa", such repeated antithetical and generalizing vocabulary is extremely unfortunate. In fact, it is Olunde's assertion of ethnic consciousness and Jane's assail against Olunde's free expression of attitude that precisely give the impression of a wider confrontation of the two divergent cultures and make this scene such a vivid and gripping drama. Its brilliant effect certainly does not derive from any subtle discussion of Yoruba metaphysics.

Soyinka makes use of the Yoruba ritual of self-sacrifice in his drama to familiarize the audience with African values of martyrdom. His effort, however, is not to secure the practical reintroduction of ritual suicide; he is merely using the historical incident as a particularly vivid imaginative symbol of sacrifice in general (as "the war was still on," Soyinka 1988) and of traditional Yoruba communalism (which demands self-sacrifice for the sake of its glory) in particular. It is this metaphorical level that Soyinka insists in his prefatory note quoted above. Olunde's sacrifice is not intended to demand our approval on a literal level. Very few of us will be inclined to accept that god really requires self-sacrifice of the kind practiced in Yoruba tradition. Olunde's sacrifice should therefore be seen as the metaphor for a more universal meaning. It symbolizes an act that asserts the value of higher duty against both the internal threat of materialistic self-interest (Elesin's disgraceful suicide in the end) and the external threat of an imposed alien culture (Pilking's use of force for the restriction on the ritual sacrifice of the Yoruba under the condemnation of an act barbaric and against the British law).

Soyinka sees society in need of sacrifice. This act of sacrifice is not a mass act; it comes through the vision and dedication of individuals. The individual with a vision for society has to communicate this vision and to disseminate it if society is to be improved by it. The salvation of society then depends on the exercise of the individual will. The sacrifice of Olunde is an act

that transforms the lives of the people of his community, gives direction to them to move toward the establishment of their identities and reject any kind of domination, either internal or external. His offering of life for the sake of community, which Soyinka considers as an affirmation of tradition, is fundamental to Olunde's own integrity and to the integrity of his people. Culture is the basis for identity and dignity for a person, but those who betray their culture destroy not just themselves but the whole community. Soyinka's concept of sacrifice then parallels with the universal concept of sacrifice. Soyinka is an individual who believes more deeply in freedom and is prepared to sacrifice as much for it. In his own words: "I believe there is no reason why human beings should not enjoy maximum freedom. In living together in society, we agree to lose some of our freedom. To detract from the maximum freedom socially possible, to me, is treacherous. I do not believe in dictatorship, benevolent or malevolent" (Jones 1998). Olunde's act is a symbol for a universal idea of sacrifice, which Yoruba mythology and religion conveniently supplies.

Celebration of traditional ritual in Yoruba culture is the affirmation of the identity of its people. In a country where there are hundreds of tribes of different clans but who have almost the same way of life, the only means through which the Yoruba can establish their common identities are their customs and rituals. This identity is important and, therefore, the society must preserve it for its safety. For Soyinka (1988), any form of political repression is a suppression of the identity: "I've always insisted that I do not accept any kind of double standards. I do not accept a distinction, excuses on behalf of either our own black oppressors or the white oppressors of our race". This identity is also a life force that helps proceed with a distinct self. The suppression of the identity is a suppression of the very force. It is each individual's responsibility in the community to fight against suppression for the preservation of community identity along with one's own. This is the point that *Death and the King's Horseman* affirms at the symbolic level. However, this is not only a Yoruba or an African idea, it has a universal meaning. If it has validity, this is general validity. The clash between the two divergent cultures which Soyinka portrays in his play is a universal phenomenon; the martyr Olunde who is the positive product of this clash is also universal. He is honored by Soyinka in this way: "There lies the honouour of ... our race. Because he could not bear to let honour fly out of doors, he stopped it with his life" (King's: 75).

In *Death and the King's Horseman*, Soyinka also explores what he understands to be the relation in Yoruba cosmology among men, gods, and the ancestors. The essence of this relation, as he expounds it, is in contradiction to the Christian emphasis on the individual and individual salvation. For Yoruba, the emphasis is on community, and community in this context makes no distinction between the dead, the living, and the unborn. Soyinka, in his interview with Anthony Appiah (1988), admits this fact:

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 world.

The emphasis is on continuity, on maintaining the eternal relationship of these three stages of being: the dead, the living and the unborn. All important in this relationship is the fourth stage, which is vital link between the three stages. Soyinka sees the fourth stage in contradiction with the Christian concept of death in which man is essentially changed. The fourth stage for Soyinka is the world neither of the dead nor of the living: its nature is explored through Elesin who is also the image of the "carrier" who can bear the burden of the community's responsibility for the dead. Such a contradiction between Yoruba and Christian cultural beliefs, no doubt, leads to the confrontation largely at the metaphysical level. Elesin is the voyager of the Passage; he is the chosen one for the sacrifice needed to purify the dead (ancestors) of their sins and allow them to start it over again. He is about to undergo a transition, to go along the Passage: "I am master of my fate/When the hour comes/Watch me dance along the narrowing path/ Glazed by the soles of my great precursors/My soul is eager/I shall not turn aside" (King's: 14).

Elesin is both the mediator between the dead and the living as well as mediation itself. He is both act and actor. His refusal for sacrifice at the eleventh hour, however, does not allow him to reconcile with himself. He is never at ease, for he finds himself guilty of his own act. The conflict between his obligation and sensibility tortures him all the time. Finally, as a Yoruba he realizes that separation from the traditional values and beliefs of the culture leads to alienation. He then prepares himself for his sacrifice to affirm the traditional cosmology of his culture and to redeem his community from its sins: "He is gone at last into the passage" (King's: 76). Elesin is not merely an individual that Soyinka has created, since through this character, come reverberations of the great figure of the Yoruba mythology-- Eshu Elegbara. D.S. Lzevbaye (2000) has pointed out the significance of Eshu Elegbara: Eshu Elegbara he describes is "the principle of uncertainty, fertility and change, the one god who makes possible the reconciliation of opposites". Eshu is the sole messenger of gods; he interprets the will of gods to man and carries the desire of man to gods. Likewise, Elesin is the messenger of his culture and interprets the codes of culture to his men.

CONCLUSION

Death of the King's Horesman is, thus, not a literary enactment of some significant past moment of some unique historical event, but, in the words of Christian church, a sacramental activity. Olunde in the beginning sacrifices himself to preserve the dignity of his people. Elesin finally succeeds in sacrificing himself to do so. The play is therefore the representation of a significant and uncompromising affirmation of traditional values against the ideological ground of Christianity. In Elesin's cosmology, it is crucial that he must sacrifice himself so the world should not be wrenched from its ture course. He too is, as I have suggested earlier in the case of Olunde, the embodiment of the culture of his people and as such he has responsibility. It is quite simply that on him depends the existence of his people.

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