

Mytho-Ritual Dramaturgy: Death as Rite of Passage in Wole Soyinka's *Death and the King's Horseman*

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The present study aims at investigating the perspective through which the Yoruba of Nigerian view death as a rite of passage using Wole Soyinka's *Death and the King's Horseman*. It examines the customs and traditions of the Yoruba as they relate to deaths, like that of the king's horseman. It argues that although death is a physical separation of one from his kith and kin, it is not the end of life. Lexical items like honour, duty, voyage, and sacrifice acquire additional cultural meaning in relation to death, meaning which is unknown to the outside world other than the Yoruba themselves. Informed by the cultural materialist critical theory, the study reveals that unlike the everyday meaning of the word death which refers to "the last end of life", death means sacrifice, honour, and duty but excludes sorrow, tears, mourning, and solitude as our knowledge of the text has shown. Thus, death is passage that leads to total satisfaction. The study also reveals that death has a cultural meaning when a notable dies for the sake of the community, which necessitates the mytho-ritualistic dramaturgy of Wole Soyinka's art. To Soyinka, death takes an additional dimension such that its meaning is characterized as "duty + honour + sacrifice + satisfaction". The study further reveals that transition from life to the world beyond reminds us that life is a continuum and as we continue to the world beyond we take up our responsibilities depending on what we were on earth.

Keywords: mytho-ritual, dramaturgy, passage, death

Introduction

Bronislaw Malinowski, using some aspects of the Tylorian items of culture maintains that culture comprises inherited artifacts, goods, technical processes, ideas, habits and values when he intimated: "Culture is that complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, law, morals, customs, and all other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society" (Qtd in Firth, 1957, p. 16). The changes which occur in the lives of individuals in most African societies are marked by special initiation ceremonies which may take the form of rites which vary from culture to culture and may at times involve the mutilation of certain parts of the individual or even death. The term "rite-de-passage" (rite of passage) is associated with Arnold Van Gennep (1909) who argued that in most societies, changes which occurred in human experiences were ritualized changes in the social status of individuals and all social activities which involved the full participation of the whole community.

The custom of ritualizing the changes which occur in the life of the individual starts from birth through adolescence, to marriage, election to an office and later to burial rites. Our study is limited to the last stage

(death). But before we talk about death as a rite of passage, it is good to know that rituals in general perform certain social needs in the society as they are symbolic expressions of deeper feelings of a social group, "rites of passage are not merely exotic ritual practices of simple societies...but rather an important religious observance with far-reaching social implications" (Ayisi, 1979, p. 51). Therefore, the ritualization of a change in status helps to admit initiates into the new status. Geoffrey E. Parrinder holds the view that transitional rites indicate the passage from one place or stage of life to another (Parrinder, 1968, p. 90), and death, being the last stage of transition is always ritualized by the Yoruba so that the spirit of the dead may be contended in the world beyond and will not return as a dissatisfied ghost to plague his/her family or society. Some of such rituals are funeral ceremonies organized for the dead that usually are the last transitional rites that introduce a man into the world of spirits (Parrinder, 1968, p. 98) as is seen in the text under study.

Death as a rite of passage has attracted a lot of attention such that writers and critics have found it to be one of the fertile grounds for research. Bernadetta Janusz and Maciej Walkiewicz (2018) studied the processes identified in the course of functional-structural analysis of chosen studies and drew the conclusion that rites of passage are a tool that can be used in the judgment of transgression processes in life. On her part, Erica Hills (1998) examines one component of Moche iconography-the-Burial-Theme in which she used the tripartite "rites of passage" framework which she says provides the means for exploring prehistoric cosmology through iconography, and concluded that rites of passage occur cross-culturally during major events in the life-cycle and have three major components. Again, Nol Alembong (2003-2004) studying the personality of an individual interwoven with cultural factors or/and determinants, shows how the beliefs and values related to events such as birth, puberty, marriage, and death help in defining an individual and give him a personality of his own in the corporate group that he is part of. He concludes that the personality of an individual is greatly influenced and conditioned by cultural factors, especially as embodied in rites of passage. The above critics and many others have studied death as a rite of passage from different perspectives that warrants this researcher to look at death as that thing that brings honour and satisfaction to the dead.

To be able, therefore, to discuss *Death and the King's Horseman* in relation to death as a rite of passage, cultural materialism is the construct suitable for the analysis of the text. This theory emerged as a literary theory in the late 1960s in reaction to theorists like Emile Durkheim (1859-1917) and Lewis Strauss who located culture change in human system of thought rather than material conditions. These idealists and relativists believed that comparisons between cultures are non-productive and even irrelevant because each one is a product of its own dynamics. It is against this backdrop that Marvin Harris coined the term cultural materialism to mean "a specific method of studying the interaction between social life and material conditions" (Harris, 1961, p. 21). His argument is that by approaching the study of culture from this perspective, one can be able to explain the variability and similarities between distinct cultures. This theory is concerned with the explanation of cultural systems (norms, ideologies, values, beliefs) and wide spread social institutions and practices through the use of population and production variable. It is a theoretical paradigm that stresses the empirical study of social-cultural systems within a materialist infrastructure-structure-superstructure framework. Thus, the theory is one that is determined by history. In other words, it is the history of the people that determines its culture. The people themselves produce their culture.

To better our understanding of the study of the text, the definition of two terms is required. These are: dramaturgy and mytho-ritual. Dramaturgy was first used by Gotthold Ephraim (1767-1769) who said that dramaturgy is the study of dramatic composition and the representation of the main elements of drama on the

stage (<http://en.m.wikipedia.org/wiki>), while mytho-ritual comes from the compounded components of “myth” and “ritual” where myth and ritual are two central components of religious practice. William Bascom (1957) elaborately discusses the myth-ritual theory of drama where he stresses that mytho-ritual theory is that which uses both myth and ritual in drama texts. Mytho-ritual, as per Wole Soyinka's work, is ritual killing of a king's horseman that appears in Yoruba mythology and coupled with some rituals. Soyinka incorporates elements of Yoruba traditional and western theatrical modes. His theatre, through ritual, becomes celebratory during pre-death and post death funeral rites.

The Notion of Soyinka's Ritual Theory of Drama

Drawn from the background of Yoruba mythology, Wole Soyinka fabricates a ritual theory of drama, but was influenced by existing theories or ritual drama of G. Wilson Knight and Frederick Nietzsche, two scholars who have both shown the relationship between ritual and drama and the effect of this on the individual and community. These scholars provide Wole Soyinka with the key to the search for the harmony of man with the cosmic forces, which help him to identify a great similarity between Greek and Yoruba mythologies. Soyinka's idea of rituals is the search for the harmony of man with the cosmic forces through death, for as Soyinka himself says:

Ritual theatre has an additional, far more fundamental anxiety. Indeed it is correct to say that the technical anxiety even where it exists—after all it does exist; the element of creative form is never absent even in the most so-called primitive consciousness—so, where it does exist, it is never so profoundly engaged as with a modern manifestation. (Soyinka, 1976, pp. 41-42)

Soyinka is concerned with defining the experience of drama in relationship to the revolutionary or liberating social consciousness, so he does this through suicidal ritualistic death that has to take the deceased to another level where he can continue to serve humanity better. He uses myth and ritual because these are universal phenomena and they go beyond from “particularity to universality”. Soyinka's use of a mytho-ritual approach in his drama is for particular purposes. First, it helps him to embrace the past in order to understand the present and to look into the future. Secondly, it helps him to present a cultural vision of continuity which is central to African metaphysics. Lastly, it helps Soyinka to approach societies' problems historically.

Death and the King's Horseman is a celebration of death and the play becomes a gigantic metaphor of the living as it explores the rite of passage or transition. Thus, ritual becomes a celebration on the rite of passage which could be aptly employed to deal with the society in the process of change.

With the use of a lot of folklore, Soyinka proposes that harmony can only be restored and tragedy averted if the community, through the symbol of an individual, is redeemed and purified through ritual appropriation. Soyinka involves a revolutionary cultural vision for contemporary African society based on the Yoruba traditional mythology that when a king dies, his horseman has to commit the ritual suicide to accompany him to the world beyond to continue his duty as the king's horseman.

Wole Soyinka's notion of tragedy cannot be identified as modeled on the martyrdom of Christ. This is because there are basic metaphysical differences between Christ and the Yoruba pantheon or gods, for the biblical saints are pure while African gods have blemishes. The case in point is the protagonist, Elesin Oba, who has to die to save his name, that of the family and humanity but wants to enjoy his last minute life on earth before committing the ritual suicide as demanded of him unlike Jesus Christ who was faultless. Despite his human frailty, Elesin Oba's ritual death means a lot both to the Oba (the dead king) and to the community. He

has to kill himself to continue to serve his master, the king, in the world beyond, and the community's sustenance depends on his death for them to lead better lives devoid of suffering. This is why the community, especially the women, urges him to commit the suicide fast as they give him all he desires before he kills himself.

When Lesiba Baloyi S. A. says: "to the Christian or religious perspective, death is not the end of life, but rather a transition" (Baloyi & Makobe-Rabothata, 2014), he is simply corroborating our view that in Yoruba traditional religion and belief systems, death is a transition to the next world devoid of sorrow but accompanied with satisfaction of fulfilling the most wanted desire to die and join the ancestors as our paper presupposes, which is also in line with Gerald Onyewuchi Onukwugh's conception. Soyinka's theory of drama, therefore, is his mytho-ritual stance in which he uses the society's history, myths, and rituals to explain the future (life after death). Thus, we find Soyinka's most explicit deployment of ritual both as an organizing principle and as a surgical instrument for uprising upon a people's collective consciousness at a crucial moment of their historical development as if to say like Chinua Achebe: "The Africans too have a culture and civilization because they did not hear of the word for the first time" (Achebe, 1975, p. 57).

Summary of the Text

After the *Alafin* (king) dies, his horseman, Elesin Oba, is expected to kill himself to accompany the *Alafin* in his passage to the after-life. He is seen walking through the village market at the close of the business day. Followed by an entourage of drummers and praise-singers who remind him of the importance of "this day of all days", Elesin Oba is enjoying his last day on earth as he prepares to meet his death whole-heartedly that night when he joins his "great forebears". He suddenly is distracted by the sight of a very beautiful woman called the Bride who is betrothed to another man. Elesin demands that he be allowed to take her to bed before he dies. Because Elesin is at the threshold between life and death, and knowing how important his death is to the community, his demands cannot be refused. He sleeps with her and impregnates her. The District Officer, Simon Pilkings hears of Elesin's intentions to kill himself. He arrests him to prevent the ritual killing, giving Elesin another excuse not to take away his own life. Shamed by his father's actions, Elesin's son, Olunde, who returns from Europe after learning of the king's burial arrangements, kills himself in the hope to fulfill his father's duty. Elesin, shortly after seeing his son's body, commits suicide and while Olunde's body in borne and a dirge is sung in his honour in a procession by women, his father's corpse is given no attention as the play ends.

Death as a rite of passage is viewed from the perspective of it as duty, honour, sacrifice and satisfaction, death in relation to dance and market, and death and marriage as seen in the paragraphs below:

Death as Duty

There is a common adage that says that "duty calls". This is the case of death in the text under study. Duty consciousness is one of the virtues to be upheld by people if they have to advance and save a community like the case of Elesin Oba, who must die because he has to perform a dual duty: saving the community by dying and serving his master in the world beyond. Being the protagonist, Elesin is filled with a sense of duty and anticipation for the world of his ancestors, especially as he knows that by dying, he will have to continue to serve his master (the *Alafin*), as the king's horseman and "retain his name in the physical world" (Alembong, 2003-2004, p. 37). Elesin has to commit the ritual suicide for the welfare of the community as he takes the

journey to the abyss on his own accord to energize his community. This is his duty as the *Alafin*'s horseman. He owes the community the duty to save it from calamity and for as Osita Okagbue notes, the text uses the tragedy of a king's horseman to cross-culturally explore themes of duty and honour as well as question the basis and morality of the British colonial enterprise in Nigeria (Okagbue, 2001, p. 274). We are reminded of the waiting of the horseman by the *Alafin* and the need to join him when Elesin says that he has freed himself of earth and that it was getting dark and strange voices guide his feet. Elesin testifies that the strange voices he hears remind him of his duty to perform the ritual suicide fast so that the *Alafin* does not wait for long or wonder. These strange voices show the unity between mortals and the immortals. Knowing that he will join his ancestors in the shortest possible time and his acknowledgement that he hears strange voices is prove that he is ready for the journey to the after world. While he is imprisoned, he cries out: "White man, you must let me out. I have a duty to perform" (p. 216). Dying to Africans is embarking on another journey in one's life cycle. So, death is the beginning of yet another new life, not the end all.

Elesin Oba (literally translated as "Horseman of the King") owes his duty to join his departed master, the *Alafin*, in the ancestral world 30 days after the *Alafin*'s "voyage", thereby completing the cycle of the "old plantain" and opening a new lease of life both for himself and his society. It is, thus, as a result of his realization of this duty that he owes himself and his society that he goes to the market, a place he has chosen to carry his leave-taking to commune with one of the most influential groups of his community, the market women. It is the fanfare that he needs to accompany him that takes him to the market square and as if corroborating this, Isidore Okpe who notes:

Titled men and women are usually mourned with fanfare and extensive ceremonies lasting days; the ceremonies are a celebration of a life well and fully lived and an ushering (with appropriate implements and paraphernalia) into life in the world beyond. (Okpewho, 1992, p. 119)

Iyaloja further reminds us that it is part of his duty to sleep with the Bride before he commits the ritual suicide when she says: "what gives you the right to obstruct our leader of men in the performance of his duty?" (p. 176) and so should not be obstructed. Again, Olunde says:

But I knew I had to return home so as to bury my father... I came home to bury my father. As soon as I heard the news I booked my passage home. In fact we are fortunate. We travelled in the same convoy as your Prince, so we had excellent protection. (p. 194)

He is basically reminding us that Elesin's death is a responsibility which he, by virtue of his birth as a king's horseman, owes himself, his household and his community. Elesin's death, therefore, is a duty he owes that must be discharged as tradition demands, "he [MUST] voyage forth so that in the company of the king, he will now be invoked as an ancestor" (Parrinder, 1968, p. 66), such that the whole community knows as confirmed by Joseph the houseboy to the Plikingses.

Pilkings: Thank God for some sanity at last. Now Joseph, answer me on the honour of a Christian—what is supposed to be going on in town tonight.

Joseph: Tonight sir? You mean the chief who is going to kill himself?

Pilkings: What?

Jane: What do you mean, kill himself?

Pilkings: You do mean he is going to kill somebody don't you?

Joseph: No master. He will not kill anybody and no one will kill him. He will simply die.

Jane: But why Joseph?

Joseph: It is native law and custom. The King die last month. Tonight is his burial. But before they bury him, Elesin must die so as to accompany him to heaven.

Pilings: I seem to be fated to clash more often with that man with any of the other chiefs.

Joseph: He is the King's Horseman. (p. 167)

All the characters in the play, including those of the lower class like Joseph, the houseboy are aware of the calamity that might befall their community Elesin should not commit the ritual suicide.

Death as Honour

The Yoruba view death as honour, because when one takes his last breath on earth he continues to be counted part of the family even though people know and realize he is physically separated from them (Alembong, 2003-2004, p. 37). The expected performance of the duty in order to accompany his master, the king, to the world beyond is something honourable to do, honour to himself, to his family and to his community. Even the market women know this and jointly affirm "We know you for a man of honour" (p. 154), but when Elesin's son, Olunde, dies in place of his father, Iyaloja does not hesitate to state:

There lies the honour of our household and of our race. Because he could not bear to let honour fly out of doors, he stopped it with his life. The son has proven the father Elesin, and there is nothing left in your mouth to gnash but infant gums. (p. 218)

Elesin has betrayed his people by failing to kill himself for the community. His dishonour is compared to his son's sense of responsibility and honour and, therefore, Elesin's ignominious choice to gnash "infant gums" is contrasted to Olunde's honourable ascent to the role of "father" for the entire community.

It is evidently clear that Elesin's betrayal is dishonourable, the implication being that his failure to die literally means that he is dead figuratively, that is, he is one of the dead-living and not the living-dead. It is honourable to die as the king's horseman. The population knows him as a man of honour who must commit the ritual death. He deserves to be honoured. However, all these turn out to dishonour when, instead of dying the ritual death, he strangles himself at the sight of his son's corpse who has died in his place. Olu Obafemi (1996) refers to it as "not transcendental as he does not 'raise his will to cut the thread of life at the summons of the drum'" (p. 130). By so doing, Olunde is, thus, the "favoured companion of the king" while his father Elesin will arrive "stained in dung" (p. 76). His failure to commit the ritual suicide to Soyinka is failure in African leadership. Obi Maduakoh posits that when Soyinka had said that he had offered an enlightening commentary on the text where he explored its implications for Nigeria's contemporary history in that, Elesin, who fails in his duty to the community, is seen as the ancestor of the legacy of failed leadership that has plagued Nigeria since independence. These observations have helped the editor to distil a political significance out of the play's heavily ritualistic setting (Maduakoh, 2002, p. 171). This failure to commit his ritual suicide is not without criticism and the matriarchal authority, Iyaloja, does not hesitate to speak for her people and to express their dissatisfaction and pain:

Iyaloja: You have betrayed us. We fed you sweetness such that we hoped awaited you on the other side. But you said No, I must eat the world's left-overs. We said you were the hunter who brought the quarry down; to you belonged the vital portions of the game. No, you said, I am the hunter's dog and I shall eat the entrails of the game and the feaces of the hunter. We said you were the hunter returning home in triumph, a slain buffalo pressing down on his neck, you said wait, I first must turn up this cricket hole with my toes. We said yours was a doorway at which we first soy the tapper when he comes down from the tree, yours was the blessing of the twilight wine, the purl that brings day...You said, No, I am content to lick the dregs from each calabash when the drinkers are done. We said, the dew on earth's surface was for you

to wash your feet along the slopes or honour. You said No, I shall step in the vomit of cats and the droppings of mice; I shall fight them for the left-overs of the world. (pp. 210-211)

Dying as a king's horseman is one of the ways the Yoruba honour people in their society. If Elesin had committed the ritual death, he would have been seen as highly accomplished and his corpse treated with reverence in his community, but because he, at the end does not perform the ritual death, he becomes the laughing stock of the society and through his suicidal mission after seeing that his son has committed that it in his place, he becomes an escapist. He strangles himself at the end of the play after abandoning his duties when he had to as the stage directions tell us "Heflings one arm round his neck, once, and with the loop of the chain, strangles himself in a swift, decisive pull" (p. 218), and kills himself swiftly without thought rather than bearing the shame of his irresponsibility.

On the other hand Olunde's death shows honour and the importance of dying in the culture, while the other shows shame that comes from not doing what is necessary for the good of the society in future. Dying for a course is what justifies death in Yoruba. In this case, Olunde's death is seen as honourable and admirable since he has died to save his people and to restore honour in the family and in the society at large as a person and the population does not see why they should express sorrow in death as Kofi Anyidoho says: "poets are more likely to celebrate joy of life rather than express sorrow in death" (Anyidoho, 1995, p. 256).

Death and honour are yoked in the Yoruba cosmos. Elesin himself re-echoes a reminder that he is a man of honour when he says "Life is honour. It ends when honour ends" (p. 154). Elesin had wished to be remembered as a figure of honour but will now be remembered as a fallen character having lost his honour, no doubt he kills himself after seeing Olunde's and the praise-singer reminds Elesin that it should not have been that way:

Your heir has taken the burden on himself. What the end will be, we are not gods to tell. But this young shoot has poured its sap into the parent stalk, and we know this is not the way of life. Our world is tumbling in the void of strangers, Elesin. (p. 218)

Iyaloja once more reminds Pilkings, a stranger, and regrets that Elesin's suicide mission is unjust; thus, it will earn him no honour,

He is gone at last into the passage but oh, how late it all is. His son will feast on the meat and throw him bones. The passage is clogged with droppings from the King's stallion; he will arrive all stained in dung. (p. 219)

because the king would have gone ahead ridden by Olunde. It is for this reason that it can be said that in this cultural space, Elesin can be thought to have had an accomplished life dying to save mankind.

Death as Sacrifice

It takes a lot of sacrifice to die for a community, especially when one knows when he has to, talk less of killing oneself for the purpose. It takes only Christ in the Bible to be the sacrificial lamb for the whole mankind, no doubt the protagonist asks for favours before he commits the ritual suicide. It will be an understatement to say that the type of death to be undertaken by Elesin and that undertaken by his son is not a sacrifice. The dialogue between Elesin and the women at the market enunciates the difficult task that underlies the type of death Elesin is to face and they try to make him face it lightly and will not want to hurt him in any way when they say: The gods are kind. A fault soon remedied is soon forgiven. Elesin Oba, even as we match our words with deed, "let your heart forgive us completely" (p. 155). More importantly, the comparison of the captain's self-sacrifice to save travellers on board a ship with Elesin's ritual sacrifice underlines the level of sacrifice this

is in relation to the experience of WW II in 1944.

Olunde: I found your people quite admirable in many ways, their conduct in this war for instance.

Jane: Ah yes, the war. Here of course it is very remote... Mind you there is the occasional bit of excitement like that ship that was blown up in the harbour.

Olunde: Here? Do you mean through enemy action?

Jane: Oh no, the war hasn't come that close. The Captain did it himself [...] The ship had to be blown up because it had become dangerous to the other ships, even to the city itself. Hundreds of the coastal population would have died. [...] The captain blew himself up with it. Deliberately. Simon said someone had to remain on board to light the fuse.

Olunde: I don't find it [the news] morbid at all. I find it rather inspiring. It is an affirmative commentary on life.

Jane: What is?

Olunde: The captain's self-sacrifice. (pp. 192-193)

The captain's action is dynamic in the same sense in which Olunde himself is soon to die. With all the praise and niceties offered him, Elesin may have been tempted not to be able to summon the will to perform the ritual of transition as revealed by the praise-singer's premonition of tragic possibilities of Elesin's failure when he says of women: "They love to spoil you but beware. The hands of women also weaken the unwary" (p. 148). Soyinka himself corroborates this when he questions: Will this protagonist survive confrontation with the forces that exist within the dangerous area of transformation? (Soyinka, 1976, p. 42) This is considered the area of the unvoiced fear.

Pilkings had sent Olunde to London and not to Ghana which would have been closer to where he had to take up the duty as the king's horseman after the death of his father. Olunde's ritual death to correct his father's failed attempt is seen as religious and cultural as well as a corrective active, recuperation and cultural power. He exercises freely his individual will and has made a voluntary sacrifice, sacrificing for the family and for the whole society. This is why, when he says, "In a night which falls before our eyes/However deep, we do not miss our way" (p. 183), he does not have any doubt or fear that he will die. The characters in the play know the burden to carry on such exercise. As a rite of passage, the praise-singer plays a major role to make light the ritual killing. His role, like that of Elesin, is hereditary. He jests, warns, praises Elesin with traditional wisdom as Elesin will soon embark on his journey. In fact, it is the praise-singer who gives the reader the first clue about the tragic nature of the king's transition and it is he who contends with Elesin's to be sacrificial act when he says:

Shall I now not acknowledge I have stood/Where wonders met their end? The elephant deserves/Better than that we say "I have caught/A glimpse of something". If we see the tamer/Of the forest let us say plainly, we have seen/An elephant. (p. 183)

Elesin is aware of the burden he carries and that which awaits him. The Not-I-Bird story he narrates is remarkable for its depth of meaning. He relates that death comes calling, but no one hears it call. But death finds the little bird nesting in the leaves and after; this Not-I bird becomes the symbol of death (pp. 149-151). Through the song, Elesin is reassuring all around him that no one needs to fear anymore and that "I am the master of my Fate./When the hour comes/Watch me dance along the narrowing path/Gazed by the soles of my great precursors./My soul is eager./I shall not turn aside" (p. 153) and warns that he is not the Not-I-bird that escaped when death came calling. Though a difficult task,

the realization that death is not a finality but the start of another cycle of existence makes it incumbent on us to prepare adequately for the ["great beyond"] a fitting metaphor for the inscrutable nature of the world of the living-dead. (Alembong, 2003-2004, p. 38)

It is due to the difficult task of taking away one's life by himself that we regard death as an undertaking to ensure cosmic peace in the land, thus sacrifice, reason why the women pamper Elesin at the close of his life on earth so that he could commit the ritual death for universal peace to reign in the land as per the laws and traditions of the people.

Sacrificial lambs should not dwell on the perks of their office by over celebrating their exit from the world of mortals as a supreme sacrifice for the society contrary to sound reasoning. Though Elesin delays his ritual suicide and allows the forces of a new order which the colonialists had strived to establish in the society to take hold of him, he has behind his head that death is only a transition. To the British death is to be feared and avoided whereas to the Yoruba it is less scary and something to embrace, because as Anyidoho, quoting Kofi Awoonor says: "Death and song are the same mother's children/[Dunyu] is not afraid of death" (Anyidoho, 1995, p. 256). Henri Frankfort puts it:

the king's death was a crucial event in the life of all the Egyptians, since it indicated that the powers of chaos and evil had the upper hand in the land, at least till the accession and coronation of the new kind. (Frankfort, 1948, p. vii)

the same way it is in the world of the text, especially when it has to do with the personality of the individual as John S. Mbiti says:

Death is conceived of as a departure and not a complete annihilation of a person. He moves on to join the company of the departed, and the only major change is the decay of the physical body, but the spirit moves on to another state of existence. (Mbiti, 1985, p. 157)

The hero is initially revered and destined to achieve greatness and everlasting glory to the world beyond by making a tragic sacrifice.

Death in Relation to Song, Dance, and Market

The attitude towards death by the Yoruba is not negative, especially the death of an old person and one that holds an office in a community. Song and dance are used to purge the people's emotions during ritual performances. Soyinka draws inspiration from heroism in the personality of his divinity to confront the issue of the society. He replicates the personality of this divinity in Olunde for the transformation of the society. Simon Pilkings fails to grasp the significance of a ritual death the same way he fails to realize the celebratory attitudes of the Yoruba towards death. He further fails to see, in the words of Emmanuel Obiechina, that: "music serves as entertainment and as accompaniment to dance and for religious or ritual purpose" (Obiechina, 1975, p. 52). Elesin dances as the song "The still great womb of the world" is sung. Song expresses the desire to experience the rite of passage in pomp and greater excitement as it has a metaphysical role to play at the moment of transition to the world of ancestors because the ancestors influence the living and they determine who among the unborn should have contact with the living.

The Pilkingses see suicide ritual of a king's horseman as barbaric, thus should be abolished but Iyaloja makes them to know that in Yoruba land, death is celebrated. The passing of a king means a lot to them and becomes even more celebratory. Death in relation to dance acquires a culturally determined context as Elesin dances among the market women in declaration:

This night I'll lay my head upon their lap and go to sleep. This night I will touch feet with their feet in a dance that is no longer of this earth. But the smell of their flesh, their sweat, the smell of indigo on their cloth, this is the last air I wish to breathe as I go to meet my great forebears. (p. 148)

Thus, the dance he insinuates is that which he will dance with the others in the world beyond and that which no longer is of the world of the living. Although dance is necessarily related to death, neither is a synonym of the other. But because this type of death is more celebratory, the praise-singer expects Elesin to follow the beats of the drums and commit the ritual killing. He regrets that Elesin does not listen to the call of the drum when it is played: "If you had raised your will to cut the thread of life at the summons of the drums we would not say your mere shadow fell across the gateway and took its owner's place at the banquet" (pp. 217-218). Drums and dance make a burden lighter and since death as a rite of passage becomes a happy symbol of transition, the people think it is worth accompanied with drum and dance.

Death subsumes its range of the potential use of the market. The market goes beyond its literal meaning as used in our day to day life. Elesin's choice of the market as his stage for leave-taking is not accidental. This is because the market is where he has known love and laughter away from the palace and that the market has been the heart of life, the life which contains the swarm of the world in its small compass when 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 (p. 148). The celebratory attitude of the people towards death is confirmed by Elesin himself when he tells the market women that: Our spirits shall fall in step along the great passage [...] Dear mothers, let me dance into the passage even as I have lived beneath your roofs (p. 181) as he listens to the drums he dances in anticipation of transition.

The market square is considered an ideological and material element of the play and so cannot be ignored. The market is not just the commercial centre of the community but it is also the spiritual centre. Iyaloja, the head of the market women, is an authoritative figure speaking for the community because the market women, as an entity, is a big force to reckon with among the Yoruba. She is the matriarchal authority because both on the ritual and economic levels she is elected the leader of the women, not only as a result of her material wealth but also, and more significantly, because of her spiritual prowess. Elesin's decision to do his leave-taking at the market square is not without criticism. Iyaloja, the matriarchal authority, accuses Elesin for reversing the order of nature by saving himself to feed on the world while destroying his children and allowing their king to wander unprotected in the passage to the other world.

Ritual and audience participation represented by the market women is important. The women's role sustains traditional institutions and cultural practices and when Iyaloja leads the funeral procession that bears Olunde's boy, it is to complete the continuity ritual suicide which is that of hope and well-being.

Death and Marriage

Passage involves the action of going across, this time, not in space but in the metaphysical realm. It is a change from the condition of man to that of an ancestor. This change itself is transition but Elesin wants to transit differently, reason why he weds a bride, asks her to stay by him till he dies: "Our marriage is not yet wholly fulfilled. When earth and passage wed, the consummation is complete only when there are grains of the earth in the eyelids of passage. Stay by me till then" (p. 181).

Wedding in death signifies the link of the three-in-one component continuum of the universe. Obi Maduakor posits: "...the beaten track of the interdependence between the three areas of existence in Yoruba

cosmology: the world of the dead, the living, and the unborn, are each linked to the other by the gulf of transition" (Maduakor, 2002, p. 70). In the midst of the market woman, Elesin asks for a bride although betrothed to Iyaloja's son. This demand is granted him. The marriage between Elesin and the bride has a communal significance. It is a ritual to celebrate the union of the three worlds which ensures the continuity of the society as a sustainable link between these worlds. It signifies and establishes the continuity between the past, the present, and the future. Olunde performs the ritual function of bridging the gap of transition of different phases of existence to the world of the dead, the present, and the unborn by taking away his life to fulfill the social cohesion in the community to appease the gods and return his community to cosmic totality. Elesin's demand for a new wife at the point of his preparation for the next world leads to the grafting of a marriage rite into his death rites. He does so for a reason because as Alembong notes: "one of the most satisfying, recognized, and cherished ways in which a man prepares for his journey is begetting and leaving behind children, for part of his being survives in the memory of his children" (Alembong, 2003-2004, p. 37), reason why the matriarchal authority encourages the widow: "Now forget the dead, forget even the living, turn your mind only to the Unborn" (p. 219). The population is shocked and they warn him as sensitize him about the delicate nature of the death ritual he has to undertake, but he is adamant. The fact that the young bride ritually closes her husband's eyes as Iyaloja tells her to is indicative of the fact that the Yoruba are courageous and do not look at death as end of life that has to be grieved but as passage to another world that has to be celebrated.

Conclusion

We set out to demonstrate the fact that unlike our day to day perception of death, death has a different cultural underpinning such that it is known to be associated with honour, duty, sacrifice, satisfaction, continuation of life hereafter, and celebration through song and dance because there is an honourable destination for the departed. It is realized that transition to the great beyond depends on who we have been on earth. Death is "travelling" and the dead is the "traveller" or voyager. This insinuates that there is a destination after death where death is a pathway to yet another life and as such should not be feared. The play takes us to the origin and how the race of the Oyo people was destroyed, yet it is not about simple culture clash but a dramatic statement made by the writer on the question of transition in continuity since the writer is concerned with metaphysics and issues of life and death as they affect the communal psyche for in the words of John S. Mbiti, commenting on the relationship that exists between the living and the dead; the dead person is suddenly cut off from the human society and yet the corporate group clings to him. This is shown through the elaborate funeral rites as well as other methods of keeping in contact with the departed (Mbiti, 1977, p. 46). As evident in our discussion, therefore, we can but conclude that the play is a historic rupture of the integration between man and nature because we come face to face with the complexities of man's apprehension to nature which is given tragic elaboration in relation to his culture.

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