

The 'African World' In Wole Soyinka's Death and The King's Horseman

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Abstract: Death and the King's Horseman is a play written by the Nigerian Nobel Laureate Wole Soyinka. The paper attempts to showcase the writer's act of work deriving power from the essential forces of an African culture, impossible to conceive his work outside Yoruban religious beliefs and systems of thoughts. The presentation of the African world is intimately connected with the 'self-apprehension' of African subjects to elicit an African sense of self from history, mythology and literature. The paper also tries to explore the 'African World' which is taken for granted as a self-evident historical and cultural experience. It also discovers forms of drama that developed in pre-colonial African societies and incorporating them in his play, especially the emphasis on the Yoruban cosmos, the ritual closure. The play depicts the truth of literature as emerging from a deeper realm of meaning and experience, metaphysics rather than an engagement with the ever-changing world. This is the reason underlying his preoccupation with the African world and a cluster of ideas from Yoruban cosmology, including a concern with the space of transition between life and death. The writer also conveys the importance of music, making rituals and proverbial language as important locations of meaning in this play.

Keywords: Cultural Identity, African Identity, Yoruban Cosmolgy, Colonial Experience, Individual Consciousness, African World And Rituals.

PAPER

The decolonization of Africa elicited powerful reactions from a generation of African writers, many of them born in the 1930's, who came of age in the last years of colonial rule and almost single-handedly created the institution of African literature in English. In the last two decades of independence in particular, many of these writers were motivated by a desire to counter the European image of Africa and dispel the denigrating myths and stereotypes that were inextricably linked with this image. Influenced by cultural movements such as the Negritude in France, these writers wished to reclaim a sense of African self-determination, self-reliance, and self-respect by celebrating and idealizing Africa through collective notions of African culture and African identity.

Using the modes of representation that were inherent in its cultural systems, these writers thus attempted to acknowledge their culture, history, and achievements, as well as reclaim their contributions to the world and restore their rightful place within the global community. These beliefs led to the conception of an 'African world', that is, of a cultural entity that was constructed as reflecting the integral reality of a pre-colonial, traditional Africa. This fundamental aspect of the world view of Africa was seen largely as a response to the European conception of Africa as a metaphysical vacuum, to counteract the European gaze and its role in the construction of an African identity. This conception provided a largely romantic view of the African past in an effort to express solidarity in their common ideal of affirming pride in their African heritage. Thus it accorded a metaphysical and mythic unity to African conceptions; in other words, an "African metaphysical solidarity" as Anthony Appiah remarked (Appiah 109).

This construction of an African world rooted in a mythic past invariably led to the assertion of a collective identity and a literary mission which was primarily based on two beliefs. The first was the belief that the writer needs to be committed to the rehabilitation of the cultural image of Africa, that is, the liberation of the collective portraits of black peoples from negative and disfiguring colonial images and representations. Secondly, these writers during the last years of the colonial rule insisted that the function of literature was to educate its readers about their cultures and societies. Therefore, the literary projects of this generation were inevitably canonical texts of nationalism – shrouded in romanticism, naiveté and an idealization of the 'African' World.

In contrast to these writers, Wole Soyinka disavowed movements that celebrated and attacked African or Black identity, though he was keen to insist that he was not against the idea of an African world as such. One of the staunchest defenders of African cultural interests, it would appear that he was wholly committed to the idea of an African world but not its celebration. He was categorical in his assertion that such "established ideologies of identity" such as that of an African image was not a substitute for what he considered as a "literary truth" (Gikandi ix). On the contrary, his primary concern was the reassessment and critique of the African world that emerged from such texts that engaged in a political imperative through their concern for the meaning of the African past before and after colonialism.

The reason for such a standpoint was that Soyinka's attitude towards history and the past was more critical than that of other African writers. He lamented the fact that in their dealings with the aspirations of nationalism and a fascination with the past, the writers of his times had negated another kind of reality – an African world that was informed by depth and vision (Gikandi x). It was the second kind of reality that he came to associate with art and literature. As he argued in *Myth, Literature and the African World and Art, Dialogue, and Outrage*, the truth of literature emerges out a deeper realm of meaning and experience, metaphysics rather than an engagement with an ever-changing world.

It was precisely this belief that led him to counter the "temporary dislocation" of the African world that persuades many as to its non-existence or irrelevance in a contemporary world reality (*Myth* xi). To reclaim the essential unity of experience of the African world, he positions many of his plays in an explicitly metaphysical context that is informed by the interconnecting worlds

of myth, rituals and literature. Thus, his skepticism towards the myth and romance of the African past did not preclude an attempt to discover forms of drama that had developed in pre-colonial African societies and incorporate them into his plays.

Death and the King's Horseman exemplify this to perfection wherein Soyinka presents a distinct African world through a cluster of metaphysical ideas drawn from Yoruban cosmology, including a concern with the space of transition between life and death. He conceives a world in which man exists in a comprehensive world of "myths, history and mores", which was modified only by the demands of a contemporary world (*Myth* xii).

Like all of Soyinka's other works, this play derives its power from the essential forces of an African world, and it is impossible to conceive of it outside Yoruba beliefs and systems of thought. It fully embodies its belief that what African cultures share is not a set of problems generated by the colonial encounter, but that its belief systems have a "basic unity" (Gikandi xix). By depicting the encounter between the custodians of African heritage and the representatives of colonial authority, the play provides distinction between two kinds of realities: one that reflects the surface experience of societies and nations undergoing a period of transition, and one that reflects a deeper experience that goes beyond the politics of everyday life and reaches down to the essence of culture itself, or in other words, the 'African' world.

Death and the King's Horseman deals with a theme that is common in many of Soyinka's plays – the "interrupted ritual suicide" of the King's horseman, Elesin Oba who facilitates the transition of the dead king's soul between the spaces of the living and the dead (Gibbs 115). The District officer, Simon Pilkings sees the act as a feudalistic barbarism, but for the Yoruba tribe, it is an important act of "communal regeneration" (George 208). Elesin, at the moment of self-sacrifice, embodies the collective social and psychic aspirations of the Oyo community; he is a ritual scapegoat who mediates the worlds of the living, the dead and the unborn. By his willful death at the summons of the community, he accedes to the world of the dead on behalf of the world of the living and the unborn. His death thus ensures renewed harmony between the three levels of existence constitutive of traditional Yoruba cosmic order.

In such a total context, the African world, just like any other world, is unique, a cultural whole. Soyinka thus presents an 'African world' as a "self-evident historical and cultural experience" that leads to the self-apprehension of African subjects (*Myth* x). The consciousness of Elesin Oba, struggling to respond to the needs of his community, of the Yoruba community which is an "organic whole", and the ritual sacrifice of Olunde in the place of his father, and Elesin's own acknowledgement of his failure to perform his duty provide evidence for the basic unity and harmony of the community, and by extension, the African world (Gikandi x). In his play, Soyinka fully illustrates the fact that as far as he was concerned, an artist's commitment was not to set of political and ideological commitments, but the "self-apprehension" of the African world through myth and literature. As he remarked in his preface to *Myth, Literature and the African World*,

I have long been preoccupied with the process of apprehending my own world in its full

Complexity, also through its contemporary progression and distortions... [an] effort to encapsulate my understanding of the contemporary world and its relation to the Yoruba contemporary social psyche (ix).

At the same time, Soyinka was adamant in his belief that true self-apprehension can be acquired neither through the language of cultural liberation and the assertion of pride in one's identity nor through the language of cultural liberation and assertion of pride in one's identity nor through a contrast with the cultural systems of orders. He would prefer the question of African realities and identities to be apprehended and represented outside the "orbit of external factors", including the colonial experience for Soyinka was merely a "catalytic incident", as his author's note suggests. He was strongly against the "sadly familiar reductionist tendency" of perusing the play as merely a clash of two cultures (3).

On the other hand, Soyinka engages in an interweaving of Yoruba myth with the idioms of western drama to assert the values and self-apprehension of the African world, thereby resisting colonization by western "theories and prescriptions" (*Myth* x). Returning to his native Yoruba cosmology and the rituals that derive from it, he elicits from ritual a drama of archetypes, developing in the process "a vision of history, society, and tragic drama" that contributes to this process of self-apprehension (George 68). This is manifested in his preference for opaque metaphysical systems and abstract poetic language, as well as the interconnecting worlds of myth, ritual and literature that he presents in the play.

Thus, Soyinka's "simultaneous" acts of eliciting from myth, history and literature leads to a continuing process of self-apprehension that reinstates the authentic world of the African peoples and ensures its contemporary apprehension through appropriate structures (*Myth* x). Myths lie at the heart of Soyinka's metaphysical concerns in *Death and the King's Horseman*, foregrounding his delineation of the African world as a cosmological reality that he takes for granted. Many of the most important myths associated with the Yoruba cosmos thus become central to our understanding of the play. These include the Yoruba view of the bringing together of the realms of the living and the unborn, the powerful presence of desires and ancestors in everyday life, usually through artistic representations, the nature of life and death in the structuring of aesthetic forms, and most importantly, the space of transition that both "divides and conjoins the realms of the living and the dead" (Gikandi xvii).

In *Death and the King's Horseman*, Soyinka manages to capture the glory and power of the ancient Yoruba state in its "dying moment", while also posing an intellectual challenge to those who would deny the conquered people their unique mode of apprehending and making sense of reality (Williams 188). It is only natural that the play should open with a grand panorama of the Yoruban marketplace, which comes to be a microcosmic representation of the African world in all its grandeur and vitality. Critic Adebayo Williams recalls the old Yoruban proverb "The world is a market place; heaven is home", to show that the market occupies a "cultural, Political, and spiritual position" in the Yoruba cosmos (188). It serves as a barometer for the spiritual and physical health of the community and also acts as the site where the distinction between the world of the living and the world of the dead is abolished. It follows naturally that the market place should be the setting where Elesin first makes his appearance and announces his performance of the ritual suicide.

An integral part of the African world presented in the play is the centrality of ritual closure with respect to the Yoruba universe, a classic dramaturgical convention of Soyinka's. As he remarked in *Myth, Literature and the African World*, the setting of ritual, of the drama of the gods, is "the cosmic entirety" (2). Thus, the African world becomes a cosmic totality in which an individual possesses a consciousness of his own "earth being", with his apprehension of self "inseparable" from the cosmic phenomenon (3).

In *Death and the King's Horseman*, Soyinka illustrates the role of ritual as a "cleansing, binding, communal, recreative force" which is central to the survival of the community (*Myth* 4). As critic Adebayo Williams remarks in his essay *Ritual and the Political Unconscious*, Elesin's ritual suicide becomes a matter of life and death for his community, simultaneously transforming a "mirror cultural functionary" of the ruling class into a "world-historic role" as the deliverer of his people (189). By virtue of his routine function, Elesin compels respect for the inviolability of a besieged culture. His proclaimed self-sacrifice becomes a classic example of a ritual that transcends its "original cultural signification" to assume a greater political and spiritual significance.

Moreover, as critic Joan Hepburn points out, Elesin's "Not - I" song at the beginning of the play is designed to assure his kinsmen of his sense of responsibility and "commitment to self-sacrifice" to benefit them (184). She also exalts Iyaloja as the custodian of ritual in the play, since it is she who goads Elesin into the passage between life and death in a bid to set aright the cosmological order that he has disturbed (Hepburn 178). Rituals that lie at the heart of an indigenous African world and the importance of rituals is repeatedly reinforced by Soyinka in the play to emphasize the integrity of Yoruba culture. Ritual drama is seen as a communal experience undertaken by the individual on behalf of the community, reflecting powerful natural or cosmic influences. This transforms the ritual into the "affective, rational and intuitive milieu of the total communal experience, historic, race formative, cosmogony" (*Myth* 43).

Another vital component of the structuring of the African world is the playwright's development of masking and its related traditions that goes beyond their social function as the rite of passage. The performers of the egungun are always men hidden under layers of clothing who are seen as the spirits of dead ancestors incarnated in the form of the masqueraders. These Yoruba masked rituals depict the transition of the spirit from the realm of the living to the domain of the dead, or in the other words, "the transitional phase or gate between the two worlds" (Soyinka 199).

However, as critic David Richards argues, these rituals surrounding the egungun are not merely assertions of the social order, they "both make and unmake the world" (199). These masquerades have a social function as satire as well as symbolizing the preservation of traditional Yoruba culture. It is the context of African cultural possessions and the African world that enables Soyinka to instill a distinct Yoruba presence in the play.

Soyinka's language also functions as a cohesive dimension of the African world, with the nature of Yoruban music being intensively the nature of language and poetry. In *Death and the King's Horseman*, language is considered as highly charged, symbolic, and as "myth-embryonic", i.e. having myth as its compassion (Soyinka 147). It undergoes a transformation through myth into a secret correspondence with the symbolism of tragedy. The play begins with Elesin recasting the folktale of the "Not-I" Bird; a spirit bird whose song announces the death of those who hear it, and moving on to a series of dramatic vignettes of individuals' encounters with the death bird. In this way, he builds up a vivid description of the traditional Yoruba polis: the world of gods, farmers, priests, courtesans, hunters and animals.

The presentation of the Yoruba world through proverbial language and metaphor also lies at the heart of the play's metaphysical dimensions. The Yoruba idiom is highly elaborated using proverbial speech involving puns and metaphors, as seen in the speeches of Elesin and the Praise Singer. By becoming a vehicle for the expression of the metaphysic of Soyinka's conception of the Yoruba social order and direct the reader to the "social matrix" from which the proverb originated (Richards 205). It also has a practical application in the society of the play, both at the local syntactical level as well as the grand and the metaphysical. In this way, these proverbs have "formed and cognitive similarities" to Soyinka's philosophical and metaphysical notions of the transition from the world of the living to the dead, making them especially suited for his ritual drama (Richards 204).

Soyinka's mastery of language is necessarily reinforced by the mastery of a second language, which is music, and a third of the dance. The metaphysical aspect of non-verbal forms of expression such as music and dance are also important in Soyinka's valorization of the African World as a cultural entity in *Death and the King's Horseman*. As Martin Rohmer notes, music as the "intensive language of transition" and dance as the "movement of transition" play a vital role in presenting Soyinka's holistic world-view (Rohmer 131). Language meshes fundamentally with music and dance to provide the wholeness of the African world; to "create a reality and not merely to reflect it" (Gates 161).

It is these non-verbal forms of expression which bring about Elesin's trance and make him dance into Orun, the otherworld. The harmony of the Yoruban community as reflected in its music and dance is implicitly contrasted with the gramophone music and the tango of the Pilkingses. For the Europeans, music and dance have no aspects of communication but are reduced to "status symbols or representations" (Rohmer 133). The quality of the rendition of these art forms is poor, with the Pilkingses' old, hand-cranked gramophone with its limited acoustic qualities. Moreover, the machine does not create but merely reproduces the music. The spontaneous, agile and flamboyant movement of Elesin as he prances into the marketplace announcing his ritual sacrifice unite with the music of the drums and the songs of the chorus to usher the audience into a "self-contained, hermetic" African world; an "effected reality" as Henry Louis Gates Jr. comments (161).

However, Soyinka's comprehensive vision of the African world has been subject to scrutiny by many critics who are perplexed by the paradoxes present in his desire to sublimate the African world to a "larger cosmological logic" (Gikandi xix). Anthonu Appiah, for instance, posits in *Wole Soyinka and the Myth of an African World* that Soyinka takes his African – or – Yoruban background "utterly for granted" (106). He conceives Soyinka's response to the African world as a "series of self-

misunderstandings” about Africa that are a product of colonial history and the European imagination (108). He also points out that Soyinka cannot take the African world for granted because there are so many traditions within its cultural, social, intellectual and political life which are bound by complex relationships, or often, the lack of relationship to each other. For him, Soyinka’s works are enmeshed in “unanimist mythologies”, and are based on the common assumption that his world and cosmologies can be representative of African cultures in general (107). In many ways, this argument can be seen as illustrating the homogenization of an African identity that Appiah had protested against in his essay *African Identities*:

If an African identity is to empower us, it seems to me, what is required is not so much that we throw out falsehood but that we acknowledge first of all that race and history and metaphysics do not enforce an identity: that we can choose... what it means to be African in the coming years (226).

In spite of Appiah’s vehement denial of a pan-African world and its metaphysical mythic unity, it cannot be denied that Soyinka’s attribution of the essential unity of experience to the African world and his metaphysical examination of its realities provides a literary experience whose individuality is a source of insight and pleasure. His skillful integration of the complex range of references to Yoruban rituals with the politics of everyday life in Nigeria justifies his metaphysical delineation that is encapsulated in his presentation of the African world, thereby providing one of the best instances of cultural affirmation in the African literary tradition. His reassessment of the African world and the reinstatement of values authentic to the society thus become a high point in the process of African cultural liberation.

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