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Cultural Rites in Traditional African Societies: A Study of Wole Soyinka's *The Strong Breed* and *Death and the King's Horseman*

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Abstract

From New Historicist, Cultural Materialist, and Post-colonial literary perspectives, this paper examines the representation and significance of cultural rites in traditional African societies through a critical analysis of Wole Soyinka's *The Strong Breed* and *Death and the King's Horseman*. As two of Africa's most traditional plays, Soyinka employs ritual as a profound artistic and philosophical framework for exploring the interconnectedness of the individual, the community, the ancestors, and the spirit realm. The article relies on a cluster of metaphysical ideas drawn from Yoruba cosmology, which highlights the realms of transition between life and death. The paper argues that cultural rites in these plays transcend ceremonial practices, functioning instead as vital mechanisms for preserving communal identity, ensuring social continuity, maintaining moral order, and mediating the relationship between the physical and the metaphysical worlds. The dramatic conflict of transition which doubles as the central theme of the plays under study, the powerful presentation of deities and ancestors in everyday life, usually through artistic representation, the nature of life and death in the structuring of aesthetic forms and above all, the space of transition that divides and conjoin the realms of the living and the dead in Soyinka's cosmic world have moulded and shaped Yoruba art and culture. This article adopts a qualitative textual analysis to examine the selected plays and how characters in the plays manage to handle the ritualistic assignments assigned to them by tradition and the community in which they live. The article expresses major cultural rites like purification, sacrifice, death, transition, and communal responsibilities, demonstrating how these rituals have impacted the lives of the people in their respective communities. The tragic incidents portrayed in his works bring out the complexities in the plays and underscore the belief system and practices of the African people through rituals and how rituals mediate between the two worlds – the world of the living and the

world of the dead, as he strongly exemplifies in the selected texts under study.

Keywords: Cultural rites, tradition, identity, ritual, sacrifice.

INTRODUCTION

The relation that fiction bears with reality The relation that fiction bears with reality is fundamentally related to the means by which reality and fiction are represented. Soyinka's philosophical import of human and black experience is the central concern in his art, which makes him different from other black writers. In traditional African societies, cultural rites are the backbone of spiritual balance, social order, and the collective and individual identity of a community. The display of cultural rites in Soyinka's drama is manifested through rituals, songs, drums, music, proverbs, masks, and dance.

The historical set-up of the Yoruba people as observed in Soyinka's plays shows that the ritual of passage has been observed for centuries to retrace an invisible cultural circle, thereby reaffirming the order of this Yoruba world. *The Strong Breed* and *Death and the King's Horseman*, which are our main texts, are two of Soyinka's most African plays in which cultural rites of a people are built on the dynamics of tradition.

Eldred Durosimi Jones, in his article titled "Death and the King's Horseman," explains that in *The Strong Breed* and *Death and the King's Horseman*, there are analogies between the call of blood and the fatal call of duty. Eman in the first play seeks to evade the call of his destiny. His father predicts, "Your own blood will betray you, son, because you cannot hold it back. If you make it do less than this, it will rush to your head and burst it open" (34). Despite the call of blood, the play goes on to show how, when confronted with the ultimate sacrifice, a human being can flinch, and that, the act of self-sacrifice is not merely a mechanical ritual. In *Death and the King's Horseman*, Elesin Oba's

destiny, and his "blood" destine him for the ultimate sacrifice. The praise singer's elegy and the Elesin's dance of death, remains fundamentally unchanged as memory recasts them from generation to generation.

From a New Historicist standpoint, our understanding of a text is based on what the facts of history mean. How they fit within the complex web of competing ideologies and conflicting social, political, and cultural agendas of the time and place in which they occur is what Historicists consider as strictly a matter of interpretation, not facts. They claim that ideological representation in texts, serve mainly to reproduce, confirm, and propagate the complex power structures of domination and subordination which characterize a given society. To New Historicists, there is no such thing as a representation of facts, there is only representation.

Soyinka uses the facts of history in his works. Eman and Elesin in *The Strong Breed* and *Death and the King's Horseman* respectively, are ritualistically willed to die to save their lands from ancestral curse and to ensure the continuity of life in their communities as has been the case from past generations. In the plays, Soyinka dramatizes two key forms of ritual sacrifices – the sacrificial duty of the king's horseman, and the purification role of the scapegoat.

The concept of cultural rites in post-colonial literary studies is of prime importance to the Yoruba in particular and the African in general as it stands in preserving identity, morality, spirituality, and social cohesion among people and their communities. Based on external forces like the Pilkings and the local government officials in *Death and the King's Horseman*, and the person of Eman in *The Strong Breed*, Soyinka

manifests in these plays how ritual remains a symbol of cosmic order and continuity. The preservation of cosmic order in Soyinka's drama underscores the importance of ritual as a medium through which African societies negotiate identity, culture, and communal existence.

New Historicist, Cultural materialism, and Post-colonial are critical tools that will be employed as basis for this paper as they emphasize that a literary text or any other kind of cultural production performs cultural work to the extent to which it shapes the cultural experiences of those who encounter it.

Cultural Rites in Traditional African Societies

The Yorubas placated a luxuriant pantheon headed by an impersonal deity, Olurun and other lesser deities, some of them formally mortal, who performed a variety of cosmic and political tasks. One of them, Oduduwa, is regarded as the creator of earth – a mystical creation. Oduduwa founded the city of the Ife and dispatched his sons to establish other cities where they reigned as priest-kings and presided over cult rituals. This is the world of myth and rituals that Soyinka builds in two of his most prominent African plays: *The Strong Breed* and *Death and the King's Horseman*.

In *The Strong Breed* for instance, there is need for a carrier who has to be sacrificed for community purification. The play is based on the Yoruba ritual of Oro sacrifice or carrier ritual sacrifice. The carrier tradition is a ritual of cleansing the sins of the community before a new year begins. Similarly, in *Death and the King's Horseman*, Soyinka exercises this aspect of ritual. The Alaafin of Oyo dies. To guide the Alaafin's horse through the narrow passage of transition as tradition demands, the horseman of the King, Elesin Oba, must, on the night of the king's burial, commit ritual suicide through the submit agency of his will.

Henry Louis Gates Jr. in "Being the Will and the Semantics of Death in *Death and the King's Horseman*" opines:

The action of the play occurs on the day of this death. Death for Elesin is not a final contract: it is rather the rite of passage to the larger world of ancestors, a world linked in the continuous bond of the Yoruba metaphysics to that of the living and the unborn. It is death that Elesin seems willingly to embrace... (156)

Here, the ritual of human sacrifice is an ultimate bond that shows the rites of passage or the world of transition between the living and the dead. The rites are not mere customs, but sacred duties believed to regulate the relationship between the living, the ancestors, and the gods to establish spiritual connection and cosmic balance.

James Booth in "Human Sacrifice in Literature: The Case of Wole Soyinka," makes reference to *The Strong Breed* and *Death and the King's Horseman* where Soyinka challenges European images of barbarism, and asserts tradition through the ritual of human sacrifice, a communal interrelationship between the individual and the society, that which makes it different from that of the individualistic "West". Soyinka, in the selected plays, attempts to rescue and to rehabilitate this most irreducible symbol of primitivity. Booth sees Soyinka as unique among African writers in a historical imaginative commitment which he gives to the motif of human sacrifice in his work.

Henry John Drewal et al. in "The Yoruba World" in R.S. Smith's *Kingdoms of the Yoruba*, remark that the Yoruba conceive of the cosmos as consisting of two distinct yet inseparable realms – Aye (the visible, tangible world of the living) and the Orun (the invisible, spiritual realm of the ancestors, gods, and spirits. Such cosmic conception is often visualized as either a spherical gourd "whose upper and lower hemispheres fit tightly together, or as a divination tray with a raised

figured border enclosing a flat central surface" (p. 69). The images clustered around the perimeter of the tray refer to mythic events. They depict a universe populated by countless competing forces.

Generally, traditional Africans believe in life after death. They believe that persons live, depart, and are reborn, and that every individual comes from either a god or one's ancestors on the mother's or father's side. A case in point in Alobwed Epie's *The Lady with a Beard*. After Mechane's burial, her house is locked and the key is traditionally thrown into the bush as a symbol of no return. Failure to perform this rite, her spirit will hover around her compound and the neighbourhood, which will warrant an urgent sacrificial rite to keep the soul at rest. The concept of cultural rites in traditional African societies is essential for the enhancement of cosmic balance.

It is worth emphasising that all gods, like humans, possess both positive and negative values, strength, and foibles. Hence, only their modes of action vary, which is the actualization of their distinctive life force as expressed by their nature and personalities. Rituals are more effective only when they are performed regularly according to tenets from the past and creatively represented to suit the present. Cultural rites are essential to every traditional African society for they preserve identity, enhance morality, spirituality, social cohesion and above all, they enhance cosmic balance.

The concept of cultural rites can be highlighted through rites of passage, funeral rites, and purification rites as highlighted by Soyinka in his plays.

The Rite of Passage

According to Arnold Van Gennep in his foundational book, *Les Rites de Passage*, later translated in 1960 by the University of Chicago Press as *The Rites of Passage*, he defines the concept as ceremonial rituals that mark an individual's transition from one social, cultural,

or life status to another which include birth, marriage, puberty, and death (p. 12). In Soyinka's *The Strong Breed*, and *Death and the King's Horseman*, there are analogies between the call of blood and the fatal call of duty.

In *The Strong Breed*, there is a tradition of a "scapegoat" where an individual is chosen to undergo rites of passage for the community's well-being. In Eman's village, the ritual of a carrier is symbolic. A carrier family is devoted for the purpose of carrying the sins of the village at the beginning of every new year. Such a family belongs to the strong breed of which Eman happens to be part. On the day of the ritual exercise, a carrier's body is decorated by elders of the village with oil and camp-wood. White rings are marked around his eyes. No one chases or beats him. He is sent with a mark of respect by drumming.

The carrier is not sacrificed, but in his place, a small boat is built that contains indefinable items that symbolize the sins of the village. This small boat is taken to a river by the carrier, and the boat is drowned in the middle of the river. Eman is next in line for the ritual. But he seeks to evade the call of his destiny by escaping to another village where he seeks refuge for fear of the call of blood. He fails to understand that he comes from a family of "strong breed". His father warns him, "your own blood will betray you, son, because you cannot hold it back. If you make it do less than this, it will rush to your head and burst it open" (*The Strong Breed*: 34).

Soyinka complicates the ritual exercise further in Oroge's village in that it is a "scapegoat ritual," which simply implies that the village can use anyone for the ritual when it is time for it. Eman ponders on this kind of sacrifice that involves the life of a fellow human being. He is in exile among a people whose sacrificial practices are characteristic to those of his own people, but equally different. Unlike Eman's people, the Oroges do not customarily kill their victims, but merely drive him out into

the bush, and never allow him to return to the community. One may presume that this is equivalent to a "death sentence". Oroge lectures Eman in *The Strong Bread*, "No carrier may return to the village. If he does, the people will stone him to death" (p. 129). This seems to contrast with the custom of Eman's people since his father had presumably been allowed to return to the village each year after his ritual pursuit for the past twenty years (*The Strong Bread*: 133).

A more important difference, however, and one which is central to the theme of the play, is that Oroge's people always chose a defenceless stranger as their scapegoat, rather than a member of their community. Once this is done, the scapegoat is flogged, taken round the village right beyond the boundaries where he is left to his own fate.

Soyinka highlights aspects of rites of passage in *Death and the King's Horseman*. Elesin Oba, the protagonist of the play is the king's horseman who ritualistically wills himself to die on the night of the king's burial according to the customs and traditions of the Oyo people. Elesin, conscious of his ultimate will of death, makes his entrance at the village market square, where he dances with enormous vitality. Biodun Jeyifo in "Ideology and Tragedy" in *Death and the King's Horseman* articulates that, "Death is no negation, especially the kind of death which the Elesin will die; it is a crossing over to the world of the dead, the living, and the yet to be born" (p.166); rather, it is a transition in one's life.

In the opening scene of the play, Elesin enters with drummers and praise singers in full celebration at the market square, where they are latter joined by other members of the community, together with market women who all filled the atmosphere with praise and honour. Elesin, faced with the enormous task, decides to live his best. His demand for richer cloths and a new bride are a call for concern. One will wonder why Elesin should ask for richer and finer cloths on the night of his death.

His destiny, his "blood" has similarly destined him for the ultimate sacrifice: it is not he who calls himself Elesin Oba, it is his blood that says it. As it called out to his father before him and will call to his son after him...." (Eldred Durosimi Jones in *Death and the King's Horseman*, p.152).

Iyaloja, the leader of the market women and other market women did not take it hard on Elesin for his demands of richer cloths. Instead, they saw that as a trivial request for a man who is willing to sacrifice himself for the sake of the community. What stuns the market women most is Elesin's demand of a new bride on the night of his death. Nothing must be withheld from one who has such a great mission. Elesin's ritual passage of death must be joyfully embraced by Elesin and his community. In the world of the living, there would be drumming and singing spectators/celebrants along the pathway of the community, through which those who partake in the ritual would pass.

Once Elesin's death is pronounced, his wife would pour earth on his eyes and his son will prepare his body for the burial in the prescribed way taught him by his father. Soyinka highlights the point where when Olunde hears of the king's death, he automatically returns to his home town in Nigeria because he understands his duty to bury his father who has to lead the dead king to his ancestors.

Jane Pilkings is shocked by Olunde's return from England. Olunde explains to Jane the necessity of his urgent return:

....my father has died in my mind for nearly one 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 taught me. I didn't want to do anything wrongly,

something which might jeopardize the welfare of my people. (Death and the King's Horseman, p. 46)

Olunde understands the rites of passage and he knows what his duties are, once the father dies. When the actual moment comes for Elesin to take his will, he refuses to die. He refuses to leave behind the pleasures of the earth.

Biodun Jegifo in "Wole Soyinka: Politics, Poetics, and Postcolonialism" holds that Soyinka's disintegration of a mythic figure, his rejuvenation followed by disintegration leads to "a celebration of life and a rejoicing in the fact of the living community" (2009: 95). The successful maintenance of rite in the play is tied to the health and well-being of the community as a whole. Soyinka maintains that the repetition of "the gods have said No" by way of response appears to show Elesin "in tune" with the ritual process and its cosmic significance, but what underlies that appearance is an absence of self... the lack of personal reference in his response. Elesin's refusal to die, his unpreparedness for his own death, makes him less honourable. In the general sense of it, he refuses to acknowledge his personal identity as the king's horseman. He has not connected the performance of a role with life.

In *Death and the King's Horseman*, the praise singer and drummers who follow Elesin Oba as he matches through the market place, gradually brings to our understanding that he is the "King's horseman" whose pride and duty is to follow the dead king to ride and join his ancestors. Here, Soyinka uses aspect of oral tradition as well as projecting the cultural value of the people. The drum has a symbolic undertone in the African context. Soyinka's introduction of songs and drums in his plays is symbolically moving. They announce important cultural events like the rites of passage of the king's horseman before the breaths his last breath. When this happens, the indigenes are aware of the task at hand. Elesin makes a grand tour as he awaits, to accompany the dead king

to the land of the ancestors, which is typical of the Yoruba people.

The dramatist brings to our knowledge that the ritual passage of the horseman has served for centuries past to retrace an invisible cultural circle, thereby reaffirming the order of the Yoruba world. The ritual dress, the praise singer's elegy, the Elesin's dance of death, all remain fundamentally unchanged as memory recast them from generation to generation.

Soyinka exposes the weaknesses of his major characters in the plays under study. Eman's failure to listen to the call of blood and Elesin's denial to respect the call of duty practically makes the ritual of passage to come to an unsuccessful close.

Funeral Transition and Purification Rites

Funeral transition and purification rites can be seen as structured traditional and religious ceremonies that are designed in honour of the dead, through rites and rituals, as care for the deceased body in preparation for burial and spiritually cleanse the departed and the living for cosmic balance.

In Soyinka's *The Strong Breed*, funeral transition and purification rites centre on the Yoruba custom of carrier, a yearly ritual where a designated individual takes on the accumulated sins, evils, and sicknesses of the community at the end of the old year to cleanse the society of all impurities. Rather than standard funeral, the ritual is a symbolic and metaphysical passage of death and societal rebirth.

In Sunma's village, Eman's new resort, the scapegoat mechanism of a carrier ritual is employed. Ifada, a defenceless, deformed idiot boy is chosen for this ritual exercise. Being a scapegoat ritual, any person can be chosen, most especially the idiotic Ifada whom the community sees as the best choice. He is god sent. The ritual sacrifice of cleansing of sins of the community before the beginning of a new year through a carrier as emphasized by the

Yoruba people of the Oro kingdom is common of Soyinka's drama. In relation to the play, Soyinka opines that:

This is another play in which I have used these African ceremonies where the town is cleansed on the New Year – where you have a sort of carrier These people go through the town and the real meaning – significance of it is that they sort to take away a lot of evil from the town. (qtd in an interview with Wole Soyinka: 479)

Soyinka use of rituals and beliefs in his plays is not a coincidence but to highlight those values which add meaning to a people's existence and that which acts as a reminder to the people that there is an inner core of their very person that needs to be revisited over time so as to improve on their individual well-being and the community as a whole.

Soyinka's ideology on the relationship between the individual and the Yoruba community is stated. He focuses on the theme of ritual purification. In a flashback conversation between Eman and his father, Eman's father insists on Eman to do his duty as one who comes from the strong bread lineage. Eman refuses to listen to his father and gives a reason, "I am unfitted for your work father...I am totally unfitted for your call", and he adds, "father, there are other tasks in life father. This one is not for me" (105).

Eman finds solace in Sunma's village where he serves as a school teacher and as a village doctor. But his fate does not end here. He realizes that in Sunma's village, an idiotic Ofada is chosen to bear the sins of the old year. Ifada seeks refuge in Eman and Sunma's house. Aware of the disastrous consequences that befall anyone who happens to harbour the scapegoat carrier, Sunman warns Eman, "for God's sake don't interfere.... before it's too late, let him go. For once Eman, believe what I tell you. Don't harbour him or you will regret it all your life" (*The Strong Breed*: 95). Instead, Eman insists on keeping Ifada and see him as one "Just

a little more unlucky than other children" (*The Strong Breed*: 83).

There is a mass hunt for Ifada who after the ritual preparation ceremony runs away and leaves the community in total confusion. He is already contaminated for all the rights of a carrier have been performed on him and the laws of the land hold that any house in which a contaminated person enters, is equally contaminated and must be burnt down (97). Despite all these explanations, Eman remains adamant.

Sunman even advises Eman to go away for a couple of hours, a day or two and can only return after the sacrifice is done. Eman does not heed to Sunma's advice and replies "There is peace in being a stranger" (91). Eman's blood draws him closer to his destiny. As a consequence of Eman's refusal to let Ifada go, he assumes Ifada's position as carrier. Here, we encounter a shift in village custom as Eman is substituted for Ifada for community redemption.

The Yoruba custom of scapegoat ritual needs to be revised. Eman, rightly says, "a village which cannot produce its own carrier contains no men" (98). It is untraditional and inauthentic to base ritual on gambling.

Eman dies in order to purge the land of sicknesses, evil, and contamination. Though Ifada flees, the ritual death of a carrier is finally accomplished. Eman's father warned him, "...your own blood will betray you son, because you cannot hold it back...." (105). Eman is the archetype image of the scapegoat. He dies as Christ died for redemption of world sins. Wole Soyinka shows the universality of this image as he implies that the tradition of a willing carrier which is Eman's inheritance is one worthy of respect.

Soyinka expresses his wide metaphysical vision of the African world in *The Strong Breed* as he affirms that the sacrifice of Eman is not just dying to save people or

preserve the ritual, but to rejuvenate love among the people like Christ did. Through the character of Eman, Soyinka acknowledges that in Yoruba tragedy, the factor of living community is very important. Eman's death is not wasteful and a mere show off of his sacrifice, his destiny leads him to accept the demand of the society and he serves as a carrier and fulfils his purpose of his life as he belongs to the family of the "strong bread". His death is a cause for the community to rethink some of its traditional customs to pave the way for a new direction.

Soyinka's "Author Notes" in *Death and the King's Horseman* is a reference to the historical condition that took place in the later years in the Yoruba Kingdom of Oyo. Soyinka explains:

This play is based on events which took place in Oyo, 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. (3)

This is in line with New Historicists who believe that our understanding of history is based on what the facts of history mean. How they fit within the complex web of competing ideologies and conflicting social, political, and cultural agendas of the time and place in which they occurred is what New Historicists say is strictly a matter of interpretation not fact. They maintain that there is no such thing as a presentation of facts, there is only representation (Critical Theory Today: 279).

Soyinka uses this historical event to represent traditional situations of the Yoruba people of Oyo in *Death and the King's Horseman*. In the play, the king is dead. According to native laws and customs, the night of the burial of the great king, Elesin Oba, the king's horseman will have to die that night to accompany the king in his journey beyond. Joseph, the houseboy of the British District Officer, explains, "It is native law and custom. The king dies last month. Tonight

is his burial. But before they can bury him, the Elesin must die so as to accompany him to heaven" (22).

On hearing this, the district Colonial Officer sees this as an act of barbarism, and orders for the arrest of Elesin. The district Colonial Officer – Pilkings, did not understand that Elesin's call was hereditary, tied to lineage; his father before him occupied the social position he currently occupies, so will his son after him, thereby ensuring the continuity of Oyo tradition and social-spiritual harmony. Elesin's failure to successfully complete the ritual could destroy the Yoruba universe. The death of the king has occasioned the ritual through which Elesin must go. If he fails to honour his duty as the king's horseman, the king is trapped alone in the pathway between the living and the world of ancestors. As a result, to borrow from Joan Hepburn in "Ritual Closure in *Death and the King's Horseman*" there is an unspeakable curse on the living. As a result of the curse, nature would suffer unspeakable punishment: all of humanity would be in a state of imbalance and chaos.

Elesin's egocentric nature is manifest on his taking of a new bride on the night of his ritual suicide. Iyaloja, the leader of the market women consents to and arranges this ritualistic union of life and death. Shockingly, Elesin refuses to die and give honour to his name and his people. Elesin's son, Olunde, who has newly returned from England on account of coming to bury his father, faces his destiny. Instead for his father to die, Olunde dies in his place. This alters the ritual of passage. D.S. Izerbaye in "Mediation in Soyinka" remarks that:

The key to Elesin's failure would be found in his excessive love for material world symbolized by cloths and sex. It is significant that in the crucial third Act when Elesin is being put through his paces by the praise – singer who is both the voice of tradition and the spirit medium for the Late Alaafin, it is the

reminder of his vows as well as the good life which Elesin has enjoyed (good food, fine cloths) which prefaces the ritual test of his preparedness for his spiritual role. (146)

Izerbaye maintains that in a state of paralysis in *death and the King's Horseman*, where action is impossible and fulfilment is frustrated for the protagonist cannot be celebrated for having danced and joined the ancestors (144).

The colonial intervention of the Pilkings in the Oyo ritual suicide further complicates things. Instead of one person to die, two people died at the end. Elesin not able to bear the sight of Olunde's corpse, he responds by strangling himself in his call with the chains which the colonial police used to bound his hands. Earlier in the play, Iyaloja doubts Elesin's unpreparedness for his task. But when Elesin realizes his failure, he addresses the issue as he speaks to his young bride:

First, I blame the Whiteman, then I blame my gods for deserting me. Now I feel I want to blame you for the mystery of the sapping of my will. But blame is a strange peace offering for a man to bring a world he has deeply wronged, and to its innocent dwellers. Oh! Little mother, I have taken countless women in my life, but you were more than a desire of the flesh. I need you as the abyss across which my body must drown: I filled it with earth and dropped my seed in it at the moment of my preparedness for my crossing.... I confess to you, daughter, my weakness came not merely from the abomination of the Whiteman who came violent into my fading present, 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. (53)

Blame is Elesin's final contract in the play. He blames the intervention of the colonizer for his lack of will. He blames the gods for not

preventing him from all interference; he blames the young bride for winning his mind over her, he blames himself for not fulfilling the ritual death at the right time. Elesin's words are emotionally moving, but the fact remains, he fails in his duty as the king's horseman. Though he dies at the end, his death is not fulfilling. Iyaloja addresses him:

You have betrayed us. We fed your sweet meat such as we hoped awaited you in 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; 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 faeces 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 his cricked hole with my toes.... We said yours was the borry of wine whose burden shakes the tapper like a sudden gust on his perch. You said No, I am content to lick the dregs from each calabash when drinkers are done. (56)

The community through Iyaloja, is disappointed in Elesin's lack of will to embrace the royal sacrifice. Like Eman in *The Strong Breed*, Elesin's death however re-establishes a state of sacredness before the gods and the community by sustaining social and spiritual order.

Significance of cultural rites in contemporary African societies

Wole Soyinka employs the concept of cultural rites in *The Strong Bread* and *Death and the King's Horseman* as a means to emphasize that rites or rituals are not mere ceremonies, they function as a moral institution which acts as a metaphysical bond that binds society, the cosmos, and individual identity together. We live in a world that is englobed by diverse cultural values and conflicting ideologies, which if African traditional cultures are not preserved, they may fall in a state of imbalance and chaos

which may to a greater extent affect individual and national identities.

Soyinka has constantly argued that what African cultures share is not a set of problems generated by colonial encounter, but belief systems that have a basic unity. In *Death and the King's Horseman*, Elesin's ritual suicide should not be one of regret, but a will full gesture that harnesses universal order. As Elesin will have to die with the king, it will ensure that the dead king has a companion to the afterlife which remains a vital mechanism in the fabric of Yoruba cosmic order.

Ken H. Katrak in *Wole Soyinka and Modern Tragedy: A Study of Dramatic Theory and Practice*, believes that the exploration of metaphysical results of a society is usually positive. He notes:

Soyinka's main concern in *Death and the King's Horseman* is to dramatize through Elesin, the common fear of an unpleasantness of death which brings people together irrespective of their socio-economic status... Soyinka's purpose in using mythic figures is not to evoke nostalgically a perfect past but rather to fashion on them for the modern world and enable them to speak to the present-day humanity. (Katrak: 92-94).

In line with cultural Materialists who believe that material and or ecological practices can account for socio-cultural conditions as they attempt to understand the causes of differences and similarities among societies and cultures, Soyinka's disintegration of a mythical figure, his rejuvenation followed by disintegration leads to celebration of life and a rejoicing on the part of a living community (Jeyifo, 2009:95). The successful maintenance of rite in *Death and the King's Horseman* is tied to the health and well-being of the community as a whole.

In both *The Strong Breed* and *Death and the king's Horseman*, the carrier archetype is presented. Be it the scapegoat ritual of Eman or

the royal ritual sacrifice of Elesin, one person carries the burden of the community for redemption and spiritual renewal. Eman's father has been carrying the community's impurities for over two decades. It is Eman's turn, though he fails to perform the ritual in his own land, but fulfils the call of blood in Sunma's village. He voluntarily wills himself in place of Ifada. In the same vein, Elesin's father occupied the position of a horseman, then Elesin, and later Elesin's son after him. Though Elesin fails to respect the ritual and honour the will of his calling, he however fulfils the ritual pattern of sacrifice, thereby building that harmonious link between the living, the ancestors, and the future generation.

The drum is a symbol of culture in contemporary African societies. During traditional and cultural rites, drums are used as a medium of communication and exchange. The rhythm of the drum intensifies the intonation of songs and the dancing. The drum beat of Elesin's ritual dance in *Death and the King's Horseman* which accompanies Elesin's parade at the market place reveals enormous will and vitality in Elesin as he prepares to ride with his king to the underworld.

In *The Lady with the Beard*, drums are employed on very special occasions like birth, death, or an important event like the killing of a buffalo by Ewang. The chief plays the drum to announce an unusual gathering in his compound. Such cultural rites are performed by special individuals of the community. The chief hoops in the crowd and intones a war song:

Chief: The deity has come, the deity has come, the deity has come, the deity has come. If we are not the deities, who are the deities?

Chorus: The deity has come; the deity has come. If we are not the warriors, who are the warriors? (21-22).

The chorus intensifies the drum beat and gives more steam to the song. The ritual

dance and song in the chief's compound after the killing of the buffalo is performed to appreciate Ewang, for the precious gift he offers the community, and again to thank the gods and the ancestors for sparing the life of their son during such a risky and dangerous expedition.

Cultural Rites are of great significance to the contemporary African society in that in *The Strong Breed*, Eman has to voluntarily will himself to purge the land of sickness and disease before the New Year begins. *Death and the King's Horseman* highlights that it is only through the narrow passage of transition that Elesin can save the land from calamity. In Fritz Ilongo's *Four Pillars of Time*, he creates a myth in the journey Mana and Bano undertake to the underworld. It is only through this spiritual journey that the legendary figure – Bano can succeed in self-realization and later on safe Sunma.

Despite these advantages of cultural rites, it is well to highlight some inconveniences of such cultural and traditional phenomena. One of the inconveniences has to do with the sacrificing of human life. Eman in *The Strong Breed*, does not seem to understand why a village cannot provide its own carrier, instead of looking for a scapegoat carrier. He believes that a carrier must be willing to carry out the duties conferred to him that is for the common good of the community, but not one which is forced especially on a helpless boy like Ifada. Such act of ritual to Eman is not right and undeserving. He compares ritual practice in his village to that of Oroge's village to show that tradition should be one that is organized and maintained. Not the kinds of Oroges that even a stranger is fit for the ritual practice.

Soyinka frowns at the manner in which the Oroge community, go about rituals and how a human being is treated in the process. Moreover, the custom seems more cowardly and less morally respectable than that of Eman's people. Eman at the end dies in a ritual that was not meant for him. His conscious and his

unprepared choice of death in a strange land, reduce the ritual to a ballroom game.

Also, Elesin in *Death and the King's Horseman*, is designated to die on the night of the burial of the king to ride with the king to the abode of his ancestors. Elesin's flawed will is highlighted when he refuses to comply with the ritual of death.

The colonial interference has a tragic misunderstanding in the whole ritual process in *Death and the King's Horseman*. We come to a state of paralysis in the play where action is impossible and fulfilment is frustrated by the protagonist. The fact that Elesin has arrived at the state of transition is suggested in the confusion in the mind of Joseph who cannot tell whether the chief is alive or dead. Joseph's confusion is manifested thus, ".... The drumming: I am not sure. It sounds like the death of a great chief, and then, it sounds like the wedding of a great chief. It really mix me up" (24). Joseph is not quite certain about the message of the drum. He leaves Pilkings more confused than ever before. From the historical stand point, the Whiteman's intervention in the rites of passage is the historical stopping of the drum. Elesin's myopic nature about the cultural identity of the Yorubas, terms it "barbaric". The colonial intervention treats spiritual obligation as civil legal infractions. The administrative ignorance breaks the ritual, resulting to tragic consequences that out pass Western comprehension. If Elesin was allowed to go on with the ritual, Olunde would not have died. The Pilkings, trying to stop the death of one person, results in the killing of two. Olunde dies in the place of his father. Elesin is not able to bear the sight of Olunde's dead body, strangles himself with the chains that bound his hand and dies.

According to Post-colonial and Subaltern theories, the metaphysical world Soyinka creates in his plays is highly disputable. The colonialists continue to probe into African affairs and disrupt the serenity of African

cultural rites and rituals. Maybe if the Pilkings were not present on the Yoruba cultural ground and did not intervene to that which they did not understand, the life of Olunde would have been spared, and the ritual process would have been carried out in a serene and honourable way.

CONCLUSION

Post-colonial and New Historicist are of the view that the facts of history have a bearing on the cosmology of every society based on geography, religion, and most especially cultural issues. They continue that texts are influenced by the historical conditions that shape those who hold power. Soyinka's society is built on a complex space that it becomes difficult or almost impossible for one to fully understand, given that his world is literary metaphysical.

In *Death and the King's Horseman*, Soyinka connects events of the play to a historical condition that took place in ancient Yoruba city of Oyo in 1946, when the lives of the king's horseman and his son intertwined with the disastrous result that set out in the play (Author's Note in *Death and the King's Horseman*: 3). This historical incident is the centre stage of the play, where cultural rites of a people are disrupted by external forces. Post-colonials and New Historicists continue to believe that texts are influenced by the historical conditions that shape those who hold power.

Although Soyinka had written many important and influential works before *Death and the King's Horseman*, there is no doubt that this play has come to be considered central to the study of modern drama in general, and African culture in particular. It is understood that every individual or society is guided by a tradition and the values attached to it. It does not matter where you are or what you do but that aspect of tradition always reminds you of your true identity. Eman, in leaving his village, thought, he will evade his call for blood. Rather, his blood wilfully pushes him to a new village, where he fulfils his destiny. The scapegoat ritual

purification practiced by Eman enhances redemption, which leads the community to spiritual renewal and cosmic continuity.

Tradition is part of human existence which helps to guide and lead the gateway of our very own person, preserve our cultural heritage, and above all project our identity. This is what Soyinka has succeeded to bring out of the hearts and minds of his readers as exemplified in the plays under study.

Lives are lost in Soyinka's plays, but he maintains that it is only through death – transition that the world maintains its balance. Eman's scapegoat ritual sacrifice in the *Strong Bread* gives way for the lives of others to continue, thus maintaining cosmic order, so does Olunde in *Death and the King's Horseman*.

We may suggest that African cultures in general should revise their ways of performing rituals and traditional practices. Cleansing the land and preserving the people from eventual calamity does not only require human sacrifice, ritual can be symbolically performed as is the case in Eman's village but we should not lose sight of the fact that cultural rites preserve African identity, rituals sustain social and spiritual order which harnesses community welfare, which generally requires personal sacrifice. Ritual links the living, the ancestors and future generations.

Soyinka has practically exercised his prowess in art in creating art forms for the readership of the audience. He employs different ideological views in his works which however appear to share the same vision with other African traditional societies. That of hope grounded on good will, patriotism and determinism as demonstrated by characters in the works under study. Moreso, they shape the audience response, compelling the audience to view other people, other traditions, and other cultures in a more positive manner.

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