

RESEARCH ARTICLE



INTERNATIONAL  
STANDARD  
SERIAL  
NUMBER  
INDIA  
2395-2636 (Print);2321-3108 (online)

THE RITE OF PASSAGE AND RITUAL: A MODERNIST STUDY OF WOLE SOYINKA'S  
*DEATH AND THE KING'S HORSEMAN*

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Article Received: 30/10/2021

Article Accepted: 03/12/2021

Published online:10/12/2021

DOI: [10.33329/rjelal.9.4.226](https://doi.org/10.33329/rjelal.9.4.226)

**Abstract**

This paper seeks to study the interconnectedness of the rite of passage and ritual in Wole Soyinka's *Death and the King's Horseman* and cross examines the understanding of the concept of suicide to the both African community and western culture of the play. The study shows the prevalence of modernist worldview in the conflict between the two societies, that is, the dominant culture of the play uses the western canon as the yardstick to measure the reality of the African community. Although, there is a reversal of course that the western culture tries to prevent from happening through the Olunde's act of ritual suicide in his father's stead but the western worldview still expresses its dominance over the native people of the community. The paper examines the imperative of ritual in African drama and exposes the interaction of African aesthetics and the western theatrical structure. The study concludes on the fact that the play shows Soyinka's successful infusion of his drama theory in his writing endeavors.

**Keywords:** African community, Culture, Drama, Ritual

**Introduction**

The colonization of African continent in the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries have a huge influence on African people and culture in all sphere of their lives which explains that the continent is not only affected on political, economic and social grounds but that every aspect of their lives was affected based on the western claim of barbarity of African culture. The African people were forced to adopt western culture which automatically make it possible to directly reach the undiluted African culture without western culture as a gateway to what is count as African worldview. It is, therefore, not surprising that most of the postcolonial literary texts expose African culture though western culture

rather than expressing mainly African worldview. Wole Soyinka's *Death and King's Horseman* is one of the few African literary texts that is well established in African ideology and enriched with African worldview. The Nobel laureate, through his narrative, presents the pure African perspective of life before the arrival of western culture in African continent and the struggling of the culture on the arrival of western colonizers.

Soyinka infuses the African ideology and what can be count as African drama, as he places forward in his groundbreaking essay *Drama and African World-view*, into the plot development of the play, *Death and the King's Horseman*. The essay shows the manners that the African world

recognizes itself as a cultural whole that interconnects myth, ritual and literature and marks the distinctive differences and similarities from western literature. In the essay, Soyinka presents the African deities from his Yoruba culture such as Ogun, Obatala, and Esu to emphasize the cosmic birth of tragic expression and their profound parallel with Greek gods and their universal relevance. In a nutshell, *Drama and African World-view* raises the similarity of the origin of African drama with that of classical drama of Greek which took its origin from ritual. Ritual, in its African sense, is a religious or solemn rites consisting of a series of actions performed in accordance with social custom. Mbula (1983) observed that rituals were performed during socialization, marriage ceremonies and at the time of the death of a member of the family. Ritual is important aspect of life of African people. They believe that rituals assist the people to maintain continuity with important persons and events of the past. In the African cosmology, rituals can be viewed from two angles. The first is personal rituals which is usually appease gods for personal matters; families build shrines on the burial sites of those considered to be Ancestors, deceased prominent members of the family or community, to honor their spirits and to seek their favor in the ongoing life of the community. Another prominent form of rituals is that of communal rituals which are those involving transitions in royalty and other related personages. However, it is observed that Soyinka in *Death and the King's Horseman* shows African Drama draws its material from rituals and everyday life of the people.

*Death and the King's Horseman*, therefore, draws its materials from a real event of 1946 where a Nigerian king has died, and Elesin, his chief horseman is expected to commit a ritual suicide to accompany him to heaven. This exact event that the play is built upon exposes the African worldview. It shows the belief system of African people in the cyclic worldview, that is, there is connection among *the world of living, the world of the dead and the world of the unborn* which sole ideology behind any kind of ritual. Also, it reveals that there is a human vehicle, Elesin who shall serve as a seal that connect the three worlds which Soyinka calls 'a gulf of transition'. interconnectedness of communal

rituals and the rite of passage. Therefore, the communal ritual serves as form of communal regeneration, that is, the gulf of transition is a way of ensuring the continuity of the community existence. The African backdrop of the play reveals that the suicide mission of Elesin is a rite of passage which must be given to the dead king to ensure smooth interaction among the three worlds. At its climax, the play examines the understanding of 'concept of suicide' between the contrast worldviews of the community; the African worldview and western epistemology.

#### **Interpreting of Soyinka's *Death and the King's Horseman***

*Death and the King's Horseman* revolves around the story of Elesin, who is expected to commit a ritual suicide as a rite of passage which shall ensure the smooth transition of the deceased king to the world of the dead or ancestor but who delays the ritual based on his own heart desire which later lead to his detention in western community and to the unexpected climax of the play when Elesin's son, Olunde commit the ritual suicide in his father's stead. It should be noted that the play offers more than that the story of Elesin. Soyinka builds around African ritual and myth in his narrative to show the relationship between African drama and western drama and reveals their divergence in regards to the concept of tragedy between the two worldviews of the play.

The writer deploys the ritual and myth with other traditional elements of his Yoruba background to enrich his narrative and at the same time to put to the wider audience what can count as African drama as woven in the structure of classical drama. The play experiments through the African belief system that a dead king, because of his utmost position in the society, must be accompanied by a human being, in person of Elesin, who will guide and serve him through his journey to the other world; the world of the dead and this rite of passage shall further ensure the continuity of the communal existence or maintain harmony among the three worlds. Thus, it is important to state that the play is more grounded in the Yoruba culture of the modern day Nigeria and the role of Elesin in the Yoruba

community is that of what is call 'Abobaku' which means 'one who dies with the king' and the fate of his community is rested upon his shoulder. This chieftaincy is a household duty for the male children in succession which is only limited to that specific household alone and in returns the this the actual Elesin enjoys a great deal of privileges and in fact he enjoys royalty life in the community. The kind of regards the whole community give to Elesin is shown as he requests to consummate a wedding with a virgin even as it is against the tradition of the community. This decision strikes the community in surprise especially the Praise-Singer and Iya-Loja but they pass a cautious message to him:

Praise-Singer: They love to spoil you but beware. The hands of women also weaken the unwary. (*Death and the King's Horseman*: 10)

The Praise-Singer and Iya-Loja serve as consciousness-raising agent who remind Elesin his traditional duty, but Elesin fails to hear their warning and adamantly ask for the hands of the supposedly spouse virgin partner of his son who he sees at the market place for marriage. Due to his position in the community his wish is granted but at this stage Iya-Loja still gives him a resounding warning that he is delaying the tradition and his action is about to bring about disharmony among the three worlds. The delay of the ritual suicide brings about the climax of the play where he is arrested by Simon Pilkings who perceives the mission differently due to his different worldview and thinks that by arresting him he is saving from barbarous culture. Elesin interprets this interruption as god's doing but came to realization of his mistake when the whole community rebuke him and at the same time when the ritual suicide of his son, Olunde reaches him. The play, therefore, mediate the reality of suicide as perceived in Yoruba tradition as against western epistemology. The African society of the play perceives the ritual suicide not as an escape from shame but as a necessary way of maintaining the connection with other worlds and as well ensure the continuity of the whole community existence while the western culture of the text perceives the mission as show of barbarity. Another way through which the writer deploys African myth is through the *Egungun*

(masquerade) costume which expresses African belief system in the connection of the world of the dead and the living. Soyinka displays this belief system through Sergeant Amusa who refuses to talk about Elesin's suicide mission before the costume that is strongly believe to represent the dead but to the western culture is just a piece of cloth through which they make mockery of African culture before the prince. One could notice the clear conflicting worldviews in the community of the text and this exact conflict leads to the climax of the play. The conflict is obvious even through the setting of the play which presents the two conflicting worldviews as they are set aside from each other; the western style home of the district officer, Simon Pilkings who is the representative of western worldview and that of the residence of the native people are far away from each other but the western worldview through its institution is still very much aware of the activities of the native people. The conflicting worldviews is also shown through the activities of both that they do not mingle with each other. For instance, on the same night which Elesin celebrates the rite of the passage, the western culture is also pictured having fancy-dress ball without both worlds mixing with each other. At the central of the play, it is apparent that the both worlds are critiquing each other especially the western culture which is the dominant culture of the play. Western culture perceives the activities of the African people as uncivilized, barbaric and savage while African people, Iya-Loja and Olunde question the so called the development and civilization of the western culture. Olunde claims that western people are goods at calling things that they are not familiar with by names remotely describe them, that is, through his course of his argument with Jane Pilkings he makes the juxtaposition of the ritual suicide and world war II events to justify the barbarous and developed discourse between the two cultures.

The writer infuses African ideology into his narrative in order to put to the larger audience the African philosophy. The play places so much importance on the market square which is the center of the community, where people gather to socialize, to trade, to celebrate and to perform rituals and it is here that Elesin comes as his last day

draws to a close. It is the market which Elesin meets the virgin who he desires to spend the last moment with and actually end up delaying the tradition. The meeting of Elesin and the girl in the market is quite symbolic to the African society and it expresses African philosophy that the world is like a market where people come and go, that is, it shows the meeting of two different worlds; the world of the living and the dead. Elesin in this space represents the dead while the girl represents the living which borne the child that shall further holds the Elesin household which is responsible for the continuity of the communal existence.

At the very end of the play, Soyinka differentiate African concept of tragedy as oppose to the western concept of tragedy. He presents African tragedy as communal tragedy as against the individual form of tragedy of the classical drama. The play expresses that the refusal of Elesin to carry out his duty on time is quite dangerous to the whole community and this is the sole reason why in whole community is pictured in the middle of crisis until Olunde preserves his household's honor in his father's stead.

### Conclusion

The modernist reading of the play reveals the colonizers community, Simon Pilkings and Jane Pilkings, of the play adopting the western epistemology in the course of interpreting the discourse of suicide in African community and the conflict which such interpretation generates between the two contrasting worldviews. The play is largely rooted in the African cosmology and metaphysical belief in the interconnectedness of the world of the living, the dead, and the unborn. Wole Soyinka uses certain literary forms and culture to intermix Yoruba culture and predominately European dramatic form to create a play easily understood by a larger audience beyond that of African community. He does this by deploying ritual and myth with support of traditional elements such as songlike quality in dialogue and proverbs and metaphors to show the exotic features of the people and lastly, he emphasizes the oral prowess of the native people through the Praise-Singer character. Therefore, *Death and the King's Horseman* exposes

successful infusion his drama theory in his work of art.

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