

Ritual Language: Soyinka's Contributions to the Debate on Language Use in *Death and the King's Horseman*

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Abstract

*There is an age-long debate on the issue of language in African literature. Many African countries were colonised by the West and they enforced their languages on the colonised. African writers are, however, divided over which language that best conveys their thoughts, culture and tradition. While Ngugi wa Thiong'o advocates the use of indigenous languages, in this case, Gikuyu and Swahili, Chinua Achebe promotes the use of the language of the colonialists in so far as it is used creatively to express the African worldview. This paper examines Wole Soyinka's use of ritual language in *Death and the King's Horseman* as a unique contribution to the controversy about the ideal language for African literary expression especially in drama. The paper is a theoretical analysis of the language debate in which Soyinka's text is considered as an exemplification of Achebe's position. Nonetheless, references will be made to instances of ritual language such as the use of chants, rites, incantations, drumming and dancing. Analysis of the play reveals that Soyinka's usage is ritualistic yet dramatic but also couched in African imagery and anecdotes even as it is accessible to the world. The paper concludes that although Soyinka has been accused of difficulty, complexity and inaccessibility in his use of words (*Jeyifo xviii*) in many of his creative works, his use of language in *Death and the King's Horseman* encapsulates creativity, an index of ritual language of African identity and culture.*

Keywords: *Language, ritual, style, drama, Wole Soyinka*

Introduction

This paper examines the use of language in Wole Soyinka's *Death and the King's Horseman* and classifies language use in the play as language of ritual, affirming that Soyinka's creative deployment of language marks his unique contribution to the discourse on the language of African literary experience. At the emergence of written African literature generally, the issue of the language that is appropriate to express African thoughts has been a crucial and critical one. This is owing largely to the colonial experience of Africa. Indeed, many of the first-generation post-independence African writers have had to engage in the debate of what language would best communicate the culture of the African. The argument was that African literary expression has a lot to do with cultural identity for Africans. Mukoma wa Ngugi recalls that the purpose set by the young African writers at Makerere University, Uganda in 1962 was to "define, or at least agree upon, the parameters of an African literary aesthetic that would also be in the service of political and cultural decolonization" (2). One of the major achievements of the conference, argues wa Ngugi, is that the writers "helped shape future debates about the languages of African literature (2).

According to Kole Omotoso in *Achebe or Soyinka? A Study in Contrasts*, the debate at Makerere continued in Accra, Ghana and at Festac 77 in Nigeria. Obi Wali in "The Dead End of African Literature" published in *Transition* (145) argues that African literature would not develop in a foreign language. The awareness of the implication of adopting a foreign language as a medium of expressing African literary genius dawned on African writers to the extent that individuals' positions further polarised the ways in which African literature was being perceived in its criticism. In fact, to repudiate the western toga foisted on him, an important writer like James Ngugi changed his name from James to his Kenyan name, with a promise to write henceforth only in Gikuyu and Swahili in 1972 (Omotoso 145).

Similarly, Chinua Achebe, a foremost African novelist of the first generation, argued for the use of the White man's language for the sake of international audience. Others such as Ngugi wa Thiong'o proposed that Africans could agree on the use of Swahili as a common language for literary expression in Africa. Achebe's position is, however, with a caveat, which is that such use should be a medium to convey the African worldviews. In other words, even when a writer uses a foreign language such as English or French, he/she must make sure that the traditions,

myths, proverbs and culture of Africa predominate the content of the work. It has to be stated also that, the diversity and cultural dispersal of the African continent are sources of complex explanation in this regard. Contextually, Africa is a geographical space where there are numerous languages and dialects and where people in the same country do not understand one another but for the introduction of the coloniser's language.

Wole Soyinka's use of the coloniser's language is in the same vein as what Achebe clamours for. Soyinka's use of language is wrapped in ritual, steamed in African proverbs and myth, esoteric yet accessible and a delight. It is this peculiar use that this paper examines and holds up as a good example of the language of drama in Africa. By ritual language, we refer to the use of such idioms as drumming, music, rites, incantations, chants and dancing. This language is taken out of its ritual origin/context and transferred to the literary stage without losing its ritualistic significance in its use as entertainment. As used by Soyinka, it is the totality of his ability to encapsulate the idioms, proverbs and the peculiarities of the Yoruba language in a festival into the English language: it is his unique contribution to the agelong debate.

Theoretical Context

The theoretical plank upon which the analysis of ritual language use in *Death and the King's Horseman* is established in this paper is the aspect of Archetypal theory of Myth Criticism. Particularly as offered by Carl Jung, archetypal theory views literature as a cultural product laced with recurring patterns, motifs, and symbols that are universal in nature. It is incontestable that drama in the West and in Africa evolved from ritual, myths and religious ceremonies. The interconnection of myth and ritual in African experience, in particular, is a veritable platform to consider *Death and the King's Horseman* as a product of the collective unconscious experience of the Yoruba culture and tradition in which it is contextualised. Myths emerged from various elements of the African tradition and culture such as the worship of gods and goddesses, performance of rituals, explanations of the cultural history of the race etc. Even though the conflict in traditional drama may not be fully developed, that they offer the background for later developments of dramatic constructions in African drama cannot be denied. As a matter of fact, most of Soyinka's plays, particularly *The Strong Breed*, *The Swamp Dwellers*

and *Death and the King's Horseman* are a huge festival based on ritual and myth.

The dramatic elements that foreground myth as the common backbone for interrogating reality can be found in festivals. It is not unexpected however that this has been a subject of heated controversy among major theatre critics in Nigeria. M. C Echeruo, Oyin Ogunba, Ola Rotimi and Ossie Onuora Enekwe have argued from different angles on the idea of drama being in festivals (see Yemi Ogunbiyi's *Drama and Theatre in Nigeria*). While critics like Ogunba believe that festivals contain elements that make them traditional dramas, Echeruo insists that since they are sacred, they are therefore religious in all ramifications. What cannot be discarded is the fact that festivals consist of myths and rituals which are essential kernels for dramatic constructions as shown in Soyinka's works.

Theoretically speaking, ritual and myth in African drama are entrenched through an acting out of religious consciousness which, paradoxically, constitutes that archetypal consciousness underscoring the human participation in the rite that communicates the message. This is the theoretical base of African ritual performance; establishing African drama practice as argued particularly by critics such as Oyin Ogunba, Michael Echeruo and Wole Soyinka in *Myth, Literature and the African Worldview*. Indeed, ritualised myth can be regarded as a form of language, complete in itself and containing elements that can be analysed and studied to reveal its communication strategies. Ritual language is conceptualised in archetypal theory of myth criticism as functional because it is capable of being subjected to principles guarding human neurological system (Grainger 9), which operates as the process of discriminating or differentiating one idea or concept from other ideas. In this paper, ritual language is understood theoretically as the linguistic system and choices which Wole Soyinka deploys in communicating the link between the sacred and the ordinary human experience. Much of this use of language in *Death and the King's Horseman* evokes religious immediacy of human contingency as a result of the mythological base upon which characters' actions, ideas, thoughts and perceptions of life are erected.

More importantly, the language of ritual is conceptualised within the mythological framework of an absolute formal perfection, which speaks more directly to the imaginative reality of the myth of Elesin Oba being deployed in *Death and the King's Horseman* in order to bypass, as

it were, the ordinary and mundane statements involving the audience in an experience of human relationship with the world of the ancestors. For instance, the imaginative ambience and or reality created in *Death and the King's Horseman*, through the reference to the myth of redemption and renewal in Yoruba cosmology, reflect an embodiment of mythical truth. The centrality of the myth is acted out through characters' expressions of their knowledge of their culture and worldview which then surpasses the mere level of imagination. The dramatisation of the rite of passage in the play is a language codified to communicate a specialised kind of message. Thus, this paper argues that Soyinka's use of ritual language communicates the religious presence of communion with the primal truth of the Yoruba conception of human being, confirming Grainger's position about human connection to ritual as 'not with the signs of a presence, but with the presence itself... (9).

Ritual Language and Style in Wole Soyinka's *Death and the King's Horseman*

Death and the King's Horseman takes its source from history and myth. The playwright states this in the Author's Note included in the play which serves as a form of prologue. According to Yoruba tradition, as contained in certain myths, the King's horseman must commit suicide at the death of the king. This is the tradition of the Yoruba people who believe that the world is in three tiers – the world of the living, the dead and the unborn. This world is also a cyclical one joined together by death seen as not the final end of man but as transition. It is this myth and tradition archetypes that forms the basis on which this play is based. Again, there was a year in the Oyo Empire in which the King's horseman, Elesin-Oba, refused to die. That refusal has formed the material for Duro Ladipo's play titled *Oba Waja*. Soyinka rewrites this story about Yoruba ritual as *Death and the King's Horseman*. The play is at once a performance of the ritual and an evocation of the Yoruba tradition.

The playwright dramatises the story of an Elesin who enjoys life to a fault and his bid to "take the plunge" as expected by tradition is defeated by many reasons, one of which is the colonial factor. Although Soyinka decries the urge to see this play as a clash of cultures, this theme is obvious in the play where the District Officer and his group of white people are pitched against the culture of the Yoruba people on whose ground the actions take place. However, the play must be seen as one in which there is a deliberate effort to showcase Yoruba culture to the world and explain its tradition as authentic, backed up by Yoruba philosophy.

In dramatising the actions of the play, Soyinka shows Elesin as an archetype of the traditional man who is well-steeped in the culture of his people. In fact, his whole life is lived in support of tradition. As the Elesin, from birth, he has been groomed for this day when he must perform that responsibility required of him and save the Yoruba race from being taken from its course and plunged into chaos. As he goes to take his departure from the market among the women, accompanied by the Praise-Singer, Elesin engages in banter with his Praise-Singer. Most of their dialogues are rendered in proverbs, mythical allusions and rhetorical statements that show the richness of the Yoruba language. For instance, Olohun Iyo asks him why he is in such a hurry: “Elesin o! Elesin Oba! Howu! What tryst is this the cockerel goes to keep with such haste that he must leave his tail behind?” Elesin takes up the question by exclaiming that it is “a tryst where the cockerel needs no adornment” (136-137).

The dialogue continues between them with allusions to the earth as “a market.” There are statements referring to the “dwellers of that place.” There are references to “a journey,” “going to sleep” and to “this side.” All these images hint at his death and are references to Yoruba beliefs about death. Elesin pleads to take his departure from among the women because the market is his roost. The sheer poetry of his utterance is not lost on the audience as he states:

This night I'll lay my head upon their lap and go to sleep. This night I'll 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. (127)

The allusions and the metaphors of “going to sleep” refer to his sacrificial death and the journey he must undertake to the world of the ancestors, his great forebears.

Praise-Singer and Elesin agree on the importance of the ritual death for which Elesin must not fail. The praise-singer engages in what is called in Yoruba ritual as *Ase*. That is the authority which exists in certain formulas from which the existence of a thing is called to be (see Margret Thompson Drewal). He states:

There is only one home to the life of a river-mussel;
there is only one home to the life of a tortoise; there is
only one shell to the soul of man; there is only one world

to the spirit of our race. If that world leaves its course
and smashes on boulders of the great void, whose world
will give us shelter? (127)

The repetition of “there is only one home” in the excerpt above is poetic and it adds music to the rendition. Elesin engages in a poetic rendition of the anecdotal story of the “Not-I-Bird.” This is an imaginary bird fabricated by Elesin to prove his courage and fearlessness:

Death came calling
Who does not know his rasps of reeds?
A twilight whisper in the leaves before
The great araba falls? He snaps
His fingers round his head, abandons
A hard- worn harvest and begins
A rapid dialogue with his legs.
“Not I,” shouts the fearless hunter, “but-
It’s getting dark, and this night-lamp
Has leaked out all its oil. I think
It’s best to go home and resume my hunt
Another day.” But now he pauses, suddenly
Let’s out a wail: “Oh foolish mouth, calling
Down a curse on your own head! Your lamp
Has leaked out all its oil, has it?”
Forwards or backwards now he dare not move (128)

This poetry continues as he tells of the fear of death shown by the Courtesan, the Malam, the herbalist; Ifawomi, the evening courier and even the hyena. Of himself, he states:

I, when that Not-I-Bird perched
Upon my roof, bade him seek his nest again.
Safe, without care or fear. I unrolled
My welcome mat for him to see. Not-I
Flew happily away, you’ll hear his voice
No more in this life time—you all know
What I am. (130)

The praise singer supports Elesin’s claim to fearlessness in this way:
That rock which turns its open lodes
Into the path of lightning. A gay

Thoroughbred whose stride disdains
To falter though an adder reared
Suddenly in his path. (130)

The quote above corroborates Elesin's bravery even in the presence of danger. He is fearless. He is a man of honour and vitality. The use of language here is ritualistic because it draws from the rites and rituals and traditions of the people. This is a good example of a Yoruba Oriki chant adequately translated into English. It describes vividly the fearlessness of Elesin: like a rock, he remains unyielded in the way of the lightning. There is the use of parallelism and of course, personification. It is to Soyinka's credit that he is able to transform these ideas from its Yoruba origin into appropriate equivalence in English language.

With that resolve to perform his duty, Elesin is willing to commit suicide. His main act is to "dance along the narrowing path/ Glazed by the soles of my great precursors/ My soul is eager. I shall not turn aside" (130-131). The use of the word "dance" is instructive. In the dedication to the play, Soyinka says that his father danced to join the ancestors. Thus, dancing is the transition that literally conveys the living to the world of the ancestors.

At this point, Elesin is already armed with charms and incantations and he must work himself into a trance where the elders will meet him. But as the events unfolds, Elesin, in the market, is distracted by a beautiful young girl who is betrothed to Iyaloja's son. He seeks to have her as a parting gift. Iyaloja feels that the gift is unnecessary but as the custodian of tradition, she yields to Elesin's request. Iyaloja says: "Only the curses of the departed are to be feared. The claims of one whose foot is on the threshold of their abode surpasses even the claims of blood. It is impiety even hindrances in their ways" (137). In the dialogue that transpires between Elesin, Praise-Singer and Iyaloja, the women are seen as the uninitiates. As initiates in this ritual drama, Iyaloja, Elesin and Praise-Singer are not acolytes but performers of the ritual. Even the women do not understand what is being said. Iyaloja reminds and warns Elesin of the consequences of his action: "The living must eat and drink. When the moment comes, don't turn the food to rodents' droppings in their mouth. Don't let them taste the ashes of the world when they step out at dawn to breathe the morning dew" (138).

Elesin protests at Iyaloja's blunt truths about his taking the young bride. One of such truths is wrapped in the proverb: "Eating the awusa nut

is not so difficult as drinking water afterwards.” Another is the formulaic utterance by Iyaloja:

No one knows when the ants desert their home; they leave the mound intact. The swallow is never seen to peck holes in its nest when it is time to move with the season. There are always throngs of humanity behind the leave-taker. The rain should not come through the roof for them, the wind must not blow through the walls at night. (138)

This is the height of the esoteric language used in the play. Iyaloja adds that if Elesin wishes to travel light (shed excess weight), he must beware that the seed he leaves behind does not attract a curse. The language used by Iyaloja is proverbial. With that, she lets it be known that the same hands that prepare his bridal chamber will also lay his shrouds (138).

As one watches *Death and the King's Horseman* on stage on the 13th of July, 2017, on Soyinka's 83rd birthday at the University of Lagos, one sees the synergy live between Elesin, Iyaloja and the Praise-Singer. It is only proper to realise the ritual import of the play. The play comes out as ritual performance. On these three characters rests the power to protect the rich culture and language of the Yoruba race. They engage in poetry, proverbs, chants, rhetorical questions and formulaic sentences that only the three of them can understand. The two major scenes where they appear together are the market and at the end of the play where Iyaloja has the last words. It is also in their unique use of language that the culture of the people is revealed. As the examples given above have shown, the language of these three characters reflects their culture.

The drumming, a form of spectacle is an important aspect of this ritual language: it is necessary to get into the trance. It is through drumming that the heart of the favourite dog of the king is searched out. It is also indicative of the stages and types of actions going on at a time. For instance, Amusa and Joseph cannot differentiate the drumming on that night because it sounds like the death of an important chief and also his wedding. Drums and drumming are symbolically used to communicate meaning in a ritual festival.

Music is one of the ritual idioms in the play. The women sing songs to praise Elesin at the market. Songs are also used as part of the ritual of Elesin's sacrificial death. However, the songs from the Yoruba side are rich while the music from the gramophone of the white's costume

party is described as otherwise by Soyinka. Even in the dirge summoning Elesin to the final plunge, the Yoruba music of *Ale le le, awo mi lo* is meaningful and regal (151).

The Yoruba society described in this play is an aristocratic and feudal one. On the highest level is the Oba, followed by his chiefs and the common people at the lowest level. The Elesin and the Iyaloja are people of title. Among the commoners are Sergeant Amusa and the houseboy, Joseph. Another variety of language used here is the uneducated use by Amusa and Joseph. Amusa can barely write, thus his expressions depict his place in life as he tells the District Officer that “it has come to his information that a certain chief must commit death.” Joseph proclaims that Elesin will simply die because “it is native law and custom. The king died last month. Tonight is his burial. But before they can bury him, the Elesin must die so as to accompany him to heaven” (141). Soyinka employs the ungrammatical usage for the commoners in the play. Language in this sense is also a marker. It is a status of where you belong to in society.

Another variety of English expression is that of the young educated girls who take Sergeant Amusa on and debar him from arresting Elesin in the bridal chamber. These are young, educated girls. They speak English with an English accent such that they mimic the District Officer and command Amusa to stand at attention and he does:

Girl: (*in turn. In an “English” accent*) Well, well, it’s Mister Amusa. Were you invited? (*Play-acting to one another. The older women encourage them with their titters*)

----Your invitation card please?

----Who are you? Have we been introduced?

---- And who did you say you were?

---- Sorry, I didn’t quite catch your name

----- May I take your hat?

....

----- Not at all sir. Where is that boy? (With a sudden bellow.) Sergeant!

Amusa: (*snaps to attention*) Yessir! (148-149)

This is the comic relief introduced by Soyinka and when Amusa realises the trick, he commits more grammatical errors: "I'm give you warning ... (149)

In a trance, Elesin dances to his end. The dialogue between him and Praise-Singer is worth noting for its ritual import. On stage, it is like the sound of a priest and acolytes in its sheer poetry:

Praise-Singer: Elesin Alafin, can you hear my voice?

Elesin: Faintly, my friend, faintly.

Praise-Singer: Elesin Alafin, can you hear my call?

Elesin: Faintly my King, faintly

Praise-Singer: Is your memory sound Elesin?

Shall my voice be a blade of grass and

Tickle the armpit of the past?

Elesin: My memory needs no prodding but

What do you wish to say to me? (151)

On the other hand, the language of the District Officer and his group is dry and bereft of life. Soyinka deliberately depicts the Whites and their expression so. This is to show graphically the difference between the Africans and the White people. The White people see the Africans as ignorant, yet the Africans are able to display a robust culture and language. A good example is the dialogue between Olunde and Jane Pilkings. Again, it is for the sake of a ball that Pilkings and his wife desecrate the ancestral *egungun* mask. Olunde reasons with Jane Pilkings that the White people do not have respect for anything they do not understand. That is why, for instance, Simon can call Christianity, "holy water nonsense" to Joseph, an African that has just imbibed the new religion. He had to retract that because of the warning from his wife. In all, Simon Pilkings' language is condescending. It is not easy to remain blind to the differences between the White people and the Africans in the play in spite of Soyinka's warning that the play is not about clash of cultures; that the colonial factor is just incidental.

Conclusion

The paper elucidates on the language debate by foremost African writers at the beginning of African literature. It sets out to examine Soyinka's ritualistic use of language in *Death and the King's Horseman* against the backdrop of the constant debate of which language is best to envelop the

African cultures and values in African writings. There seems to be a divide in this argument. While some argue for the use of the White man's language, others want the indigenous language. For the sake of intelligibility and universality, another group clamours for the use of the White man's language only if it is tempered and strengthened in such a way as to bear the African beliefs. Soyinka's use is put to test here and held up as a great example of what the dramatic language should be. His use is ritualistic, meant for the initiates but even at that, it is also for the acolytes. The unique use does not take away from the sacredness of its origin. It is ritual language mediated by imagination.

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