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*Festival Complex in Death and the King's Horseman*

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**Dedication**

To our first teacher prophet Muhammad (peace and prayer upon him).

To our parents , who have taught us that the best kind of knowledge is learnt for its own sake; they are our mirror of example and wisdom.

We would like to express our appreciation to our supervisor **Asst. Prof . Amaal Jasim** for providing the needed advice and encouragement.

Set in the colonial era (1946), written by Nigerian Wole Soyinka ,*Death and the King's Horseman*, which generally deal with sociopolitical protest against government corruption. It is more like works of the late 1950s and early 1960s, which express cultural conflict between the African and European (Western) worlds.

African literary elites have responded to the call by Africans to free the continent from all forms of colonial and slave mentality. While others have responded overtly, Soyinka does so covertly. As a result, over time, critical commentaries on his works have been on the mythical presentation of the Yoruba world as a microcosm of the entire African continent and the post-colonial experience. While these commentaries cannot be totally erased, this research exposes the pitfalls, the blind spots that characterize most African writings.

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## **Chapter One**

### **Wole Soyinka's Life and Career**

Wole Soyinka's plays, novels, and poetry record twentieth-century Africa's political turmoil and its battle to accommodate custom with modernization. With a style that consolidates the European sensational shape with customary society dramatization in the Yoruba tongue, a Niger-Congo dialect family, Soyinka presents both parody and scene on the stage. The principal dark African essayist to be granted the Nobel Prize in Literature, Soyinka is likewise outstanding as a political lobbyist in Nigeria (Wasson and Brieger,1978:993).

Wole Soyinka was born in the city of Abeokuta, Nigeria, which was then a piece of the British Empire. He was advantaged to approach radio and power at home as his dad, Samuel Ayodele Soyinka's held unmistakable position as an Anglican pastor and director. He went to St. Diminishes Primary School and later, enlisted at the Abeokuta Grammar School, where his ability in abstract arrangement was perceived and he won numerous prizes. In 1952, he moved on from Government College and after that concentrated English writing, Greek and Western history at the University College in Ibadan. In his last year at University, he dealt with a short play for the Nigerian Broadcasting Service ( Ibid).

In 1954, he moved to England and kept on pursuing his training at the University of Leeds, under the direction of Wilson Knight. Here, he turned into the proofreader of 'The Eagle', the University magazine. In the wake of graduating, he stayed in Leeds with the goal of gaining a M.A. Soyinka proposed to compose new work consolidating European dramatic customs with those of his Yorùbá social legacy. His first significant play, *The Swamp Dwellers* (1958), was taken after a year by The Lion and the Jewel, a satire that pulled in enthusiasm from a few individuals from London's Royal Court Theater. Supported, Soyinka moved to London, where he filled in as a play peruser for the Royal Court Theater. Amid a similar period, both of his plays were performed in Ibadan. They managed the uneasy connection amongst advance and custom in Nigeria ( Ibid:934).

In 1957, his play *The Invention* was the first of his attempts to be delivered at the Royal Court Theater . Around then his lone distributed works were poems, for example, "The Immigrant" and "My Next Door Neighbor", which were distributed in the Nigerian magazine Black Orpheus. This was established in 1957 by the German researcher Ulli Beier, who had been educating at the University of Ibadan since 1950. He created his new parody, *The Trials of Brother Jero*. His work *A Dance of The Forest* (1960), a gnawing feedback of Nigeria's political elites, won a challenge that year as the official play for Nigerian Independence Day. On 1 October 1960, it debuted in Lagos as Nigeria commended its sway. The play caricaturizes the juvenile country by demonstrating that the present is no more a brilliant age than was the past. Additionally in 1960, Soyinka set up the "Nineteen-Sixty Masks", a novice acting gathering to which he committed significant time throughout the following few years (S´everac,1992:41).

Soyinka composed the main full-length play delivered on Nigerian TV. Entitled *My Father's Burden*, the play was included on the Western Nigeria Television (WNTV) on 6 August 1960. Soyinka distributed works caricaturizing the "Crisis" in the Western Region of Nigeria, as his Yorùbá country was progressively possessed and controlled by the government. The political strains emerging from late post-pioneer freedom in the end prompted a military upset and common war (1967– 70) (Ibid).

In December 1962, Soyinka's paper "Towards a True Theater" was distributed. He started instructing with the Department of English Language at Obafemi Awolowo University in Ife. He examined current issues with "négrophiles," and on a few events straightforwardly censured government oversight. Toward the finish of 1963, his first full length motion picture, *Culture in Transition*, was discharged. In April 1964 *The Interpreters*, "a complex yet in addition distinctively narrative novel", was distributed in London (Killam and Rowe,2000:275).

At that year, together with researchers and men of theater, Soyinka established the Drama Association of Nigeria. In 1964 he additionally surrendered his college post, as a challenge against forced star government conduct by the experts. A couple of months after the fact, in 1965, he was captured out of the blue, accused of holding up a radio station at gunpoint and supplanting the tape of a recorded discourse by the chief of Western Nigeria with an alternate tape containing allegations of decision malpractice (Ibid).

Soyinka's political talks around then scrutinized the religion of identity and government defilement in African autocracies. In April 1966, his play *Kongi's*

*Harvest* was delivered in restoration at the World Festival of Negro Arts in Dakar, Senegal. *The Road* was granted the Grand Prix. In June 1965, he delivered his play *The Lion and The Jewel* for Hampstead Theater Club in London. In 1970, he created the play *Kongi's Harvest*, while all the while adjusting it as a film of a similar title. In June 1970, he completed another play, called *Madman and Specialists*. Together with the gathering of 15 performing artists of Ibadan University Theater Art Company, he went on an excursion to the United States, to the Eugene O'Neill Memorial Theater Center in Waterford, Connecticut, where his most recent play debuted. It gave them all involvement with dramatic generation in another English-speaking country (Chinweizu, and Madubuike, 1985:153).

In 1971, his poetry accumulation *A Shuttle in the Crypt* was distributed. *Psychos and Specialists* was created in Ibadan that year. Soyinka ventured out to Paris to play the lead part as Patrice Lumumba, the killed first Prime Minister of the Republic of the Congo, in the generation of his *Murderous Angels*. His intense self-portraying work *The Man Died* (1971), a gathering of notes from jail, was additionally distributed. In April 1971, worried about the political circumstance in Nigeria, Soyinka surrendered from his obligations at the University in Ibadan, and started a very long time of intentional outcast. In July in Paris, passages from his notable play *The Dance of The Forests* were performed (Goodwin, 1982:78).

In 1972, he was granted a *Honoris Causa* doctorate by the University of Leeds. Before long, his novel *Season of Anomy* (1972) and his *Collected Plays* (1972) were both distributed by Oxford University Press. In 1973 the National Theater, London, appointed and debuted the play *The Bacchae* of Euripides. In 1973 his plays *Camwood on the Leaves* and *Jero's Metamorphosis* were first distributed. In 1973-74 and composed *Death and the King's Horseman*, which had

its first perusing at Churchill College, and gave a progression of addresses at various European universities ( Ibid).

In 1974, his *Collected Plays, Volume II* was issued by Oxford University Press. In 1975 Soyinka was elevated to the position of supervisor for Transition, a magazine situated in the Ghanaian capital of Accra, where he moved for quite a while. He challenged the military junta of Idi Amin in Uganda. After the political turnover in Nigeria and the subversion of Gowon's military administration in 1975, Soyinka came back to his country and continued his position at the Cathedral of Comparative Literature at the University of Ife ( Ibid:79).

In 1976, he distributed his poetry accumulation *Ogun Abibiman*, and additionally a gathering of articles entitled "Myth, Literature and the African World." In these, Soyinka investigates the beginning of supernatural quality in African theater and, utilizing cases from both European and African writing, looks into the way of life. He conveyed a progression of visitor addresses at the Institute of African Studies at the University of Ghana in Legon. In October, the French variant of *The Dance of The Forests* was performed in Dakar, while in Ife, his *Death and The King's Horseman* premièred (Wright,1993:54).

In 1981 Soyinka distributed his self-portraying work *Aké: The Years of Childhood*, which won a 1983 Anisfield-Wolf Book Award. Soyinka was granted the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1986, In 1988, his accumulation of poems *Mandela's Earth, and Other Poems* was distributed, while in Nigeria another gathering of papers entitled "Workmanship, Dialog and Outrage: Essays on Literature and Culture" showed up. Around the same time, Soyinka acknowledged the position of Professor of African Studies and Theater at Cornell University. In 1990, a third novel, propelled by his dad's scholarly circle, "Isara: A Voyage

Around Essay”, showed up. In July 1991 the BBC African Service transmitted his radio play *A Scourge of Hyacinths*, and the following year (1992) in Siena (Italy), his play *From Zia with Love* had its debut. The two works are severe political spoofs, in view of occasions that occurred in Nigeria in the 1980s ( Ibid:55).

In 1993 Soyinka was granted a privileged doctorate from Harvard University. The following year another piece of his self-portrayal showed up: *Ibadan: The Penkelemes Years*. The next year his play *The Beatification of Area Boy* was distributed. In October 1994, he was delegated UNESCO Goodwill Ambassador for the Promotion of African culture, human rights, flexibility of articulation, media and correspondence. In November 1994, Soyinka fled from Nigeria through the fringe with Benin and after that to the United States. In 1996 his book "The Open Sore of a Continent: A Personal Narrative of the Nigerian Crisis" was first distributed. In 1997 he was accused of conspiracy by the administration of General Sani Abacha ( Ibid).

In 1999 another volume of poems by Soyinka, entitled *Outsiders*, was discharged. His play *King Baabu* premièred in Lagos in 2001, a political parody on the subject of African autocracy. In 2002 an accumulation of his poems, *Samarkand and Other Markets I Have Known*, was distributed by Methuen. In April 2006, his diary *You Must Set Forth at Dawn* was distributed by Random House. Soyinka's work is much of the time depicted as requesting yet remunerating perusing. Despite the fact that his plays are broadly adulated, they are from time to time performed, particularly outside of Africa. Their moving and discourse, reminiscent of the established Greek chorale, are new and troublesome for non-African performers to ace. In any case, when the Swedish Academy granted Soyinka the Nobel Prize in Literature in 1986, its individuals singled out *Death*

*and the King's Horseman* and *A Dance of the Forests* as 'confirm that Soyinka seems to be 'one of the finest poetical playwrights that have written in English (Wilkinson,1992:67).

Soyinka composes for the phase as well as dynamic in coordinating and delivering theater. Soyinka trusts that the part of performative workmanship is critical in molding and recovering the way of life and political character of a people and a country. Workmanship associates the way of life of a people with the grandiose and the prototype primal wellsprings of beginnings. Soyinka has for some time been a defender of Nigerian vote based system. His times of political activism included times of detainment and outcast, and he has established, headed, or taken an interest in a few political gatherings, including the National Democratic Organization, the National Liberation Council of Nigeria, and Pro-National Conference Organizations (PRONACO). In 2010, Soyinka established the *Democratic Front for a People's Federation* and filled in as director of the gathering .In 2014, the accumulation "Pot of the Ages: Essays in Honor of Wole Soyinka" at 80, altered by Ivor Agyeman-Duah and "Ogochwuku Promise", was distributed by Bookcraft in Nigeria and Ayebia Clarke Publishing in the UK (Ibid:68).

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## Chapter Two

### ***Plot of Death and The King's Horseman***

Death and the King's Horseman is a play by Wole Soyinka based on a real incident that took place in Nigeria during British colonial rule: the horseman of a Yoruban King was prevented from committing ritual suicide by the colonial authorities. In addition to the British intervention, Soyinka calls the horseman's own conviction toward suicide into question, posing a problem that throws off the community's balance (Soyoye, and Banigo,2010:1).

Soyinka made the play in Cambridge, where he was a related at Churchill College in the midst of his political untouchable from Nigeria. He has moreover formed a prologue to the play, clearing up what he sees as most conspicuous confused judgments in understanding it. In particular, he says that the play should not be considered as "strife of social orders." Rather, the play shows the necessity for relationship among African and European social orders, as indicated by Soyinka's post-Biafran social rationale (Ibid).

*Death and the King's Horseman* builds upon the true story which Soyinka based the play off of, to focus on the character of Elesin, the King's Horseman of the title. According to Yoruba tradition, the death of the king must be followed by the ritual suicide of the king's horseman as well as the king's dog and horse, because the horseman's spirit is essential to helping the chief's spirit ascend to the afterlife. Otherwise, the king's spirit will wander the earth and bring harm to the Yoruba people. The first half of the play documents the process of this ritual, with the potent, life-loving figure Elesin living out his final day in celebration before the

ritual process begins. At the last minute, the local British colonial ruler, Simon Pilkings, intervenes, the suicide being viewed as barbaric and illegal by the British authorities (Ibid:2).

In the play, the result for the community is catastrophic, as the breaking of the ritual means the disruption of the cosmic order of the universe and thus the well-being and future of the collectivity is in doubt. The community blames Elesin as much as Pilkings, accusing him of being too attached to the earth to fulfill his spiritual obligations. Events lead to tragedy when Elesin's son, Olunde, who has returned to Nigeria from studying medicine in Europe, takes on the responsibility of his father and commits ritual suicide in his place so as to restore the honour of his family and the order of the universe (Gargati,2015:11).

Subsequently, Elesin murders himself, sentencing his spirit to a corrupted presence in the following scene. Also, the discourse of the local recommends this may have been inadequate and that the world is currently "hapless in the void". The play was performed at London's Royal National Theater starting in April 2009, coordinated by Rufus Norris, with movement by Javier de Frutos and featuring Lucian Msamati (Ibid).

Ideologically, this can be argued as a flaw in Soyinka's perspective of the contradictions inherent in colonial societies. Historically, the schisms in such societies are both along racial lines as well as class. With the benefit of hindsight, independence in various African societies has shown that African elites and European colonialists share similar class loyalties (Obi,1986:5).

It is an aspect of Soyinka's craftsmanship that while the whole rigour of his

play is on racially-based misconceptions about social living, we are still able to infer the class dimensions in the conflict engendered by these misconceptions. It is clear by the positions they occupy in their different communities that Elesin , Iyaloja , Simon, Jane, the Resident, even Praise Singer are the elites in the society. They are politically conscious individuals who recognise that social power or influence must be maintained and controlled in their favour to maintain and control the privileges accorded to their statuses (Ibid).

From this perspective, conflict in this play is normative: it is the elites' attempt to rationalise the norms of their society to enhance their own entrenchment in its structure of relations. Therefore, the social system itself is not the fulcrum of this conflict, rather it is access to its levers and ideas about how they can be secured to the benefit of the dominant groups. For this reason, the aim of both groups is not to liquidate each other, but to gain access into each other's sphere of thought and activity, so that a certain influence may be exerted to restrain the other group from using only its own preferences and prejudices in conducting its own affairs without regard to the interests of the other group (Ilori,2000:6).

In view of this, the main force of Soyinka's drama lies in the parochialism of the colonial and native authorities. Elesin's ritual suicide becomes an occasion for both institutions to access into each other's mental and social framework and to exchange ideas on what are more or less similar convictions. The motivations are subtly dramatized as polarized, whereas they arise from a single concern: good governance. In the end, each group gets better defined and comes into a sharper knowledge of its own limitations and capabilities. The group consolidates at the expense of the individual Amusa is mobbed at the market-place, Simon becomes an object of scorn and derision, Jane cannot enjoy her social evening, Iyaloja

forfeits her son's intended , Praise Singer loses his peace of mind, Elesin and Olunde die tragically. The social system is, however, strengthened as the group becomes a force of discipline and control on deviant members. (Ibid).

Unmistakably, coming from the greater part of this, work in Soyinka's play is of the self-assured kind:Soyinka is keen on investigating how people and gatherings try to advocate for themselves in different courses towards upgrading their economic wellbeing and characterizing for their general public the bearing it must take after if arrange, commonality, advance and improvement must be accomplished (Ibid:7).

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### **Chapter Three**

#### **Festival Complex in *Death and the King's Horseman***

Soyinka's use of the tragic paradigm of Yoruba mythology to define notions of subjectivity and issue calls for positive social change emerges most distinctly in his classic play, *Death and the King's Horseman*. It is also this work that most

clearly illustrates his use of “tradition” as a site for inter-modernist and intra-modernist struggles for the sign. The following pages present an analysis of this work as a key to Soyinka’s vision of postcolonial dramaturgy( Beier,1975:32).

*Death and the King’s Horseman* presents dramatic conflict as multilayered and complex rather than a Manichean contest between well-defined heroes and villains. Tensions between Elesin and his community serve as the fulcrum around which the play revolves. Embedded within this larger plot, however, are other smaller but related conflicts over the colonial strategy of assimilation, and the tyranny of patriarchy among the imperial and colonized alike. The play tells a story based upon a well-known folklore that inspired other plays by two popular Nigerian dramatists Duro Ladipo and Baba Sala. What makes Soyinka’s version distinctive is its political setting in Nigeria’s twentieth-century colonial world (Ibid.).

The historicity of the moment captured by the play complicates its tragic paradigm in interesting ways. By 1944, when the event it describes occurred,<sup>12</sup> Oyo, where Elesin’s sense of being and belonging was invented and mythologized, had undergone significant hegemonic changes. No longer the imperial nation it once was, Oyo had been annexed to the British Nigerian empire. Framed by the overlapping modernities of their world, its people found in their residual mythologies, the resources to re-invent and re-establish a community whose signifiers of being had significantly changed. This made ‘tradition’ all the more urgent as a site for reproducing an indigenous cultural world, and the import of Elesin’s role all the more poignant. The community’s determined efforts to excavate and reinstate the political importance of Elesin’s identity and place in its traditions must be understood in this light (Ibid.).

The play opens amidst the seductive strains of Oyo music intended to cement our identification with the proud and passionately committed Elesin. The dramatist, employing a meta-theatrical device, portrays a drama in search of an audience. Closely followed by his drummers and Praise Singer, the protagonist struts towards the market place a venue where he can maximize audience identification with his performance of the ultimate sacrifice. The Praise Singer's enchanting invocation sets up the promise of a ritual of death (Ibid:33).

PRAISE SINGER: 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: [slows down a bit, laughing] A tryst where the cockerel needs no adornment.

PRAISE SINGER: O-oh, you hear that my companions? That's the way the world goes. Because the man approaches a brand new bride he forgets the mother of his children.

ELESIN: When the horse sniffs the stable, does he not strain at the bridle? The market is the long suffering home of my spirit and the women are packing up to go....You are like a jealous wife. Stay close to me, but only on this side. My fame, my honor are legacies to the living; stay behind and let the world sip its honey from your lips.

PRAISE SINGER: Your name will be like the sweet berry a child places under his tongue to sweeten the passage of food. The world will never spit it out(Soyinka,2003:7).

As Elesin plunges into his self-motivating rhetoric, which equally attracts our identification, we notice how well prepared he is for his death. As a master rhetorician, he weaves proverb with metaphor to dispel any fear or doubts that his prescribed mission might generate. In an Oyo world destabilized by foreign influences, he asserts his determination to stay the course prescribed him by tradition (Duerden,1975:89)

ELESIN: The world was mine. Our joint hands  
Raised housepots of trusts that withstood  
The siege of envy and the termites of time.  
But the twilight hour brings bats and rodents-  
Shall I yield them cause to foul the rafters?

As if to reassure himself and his spectators, he casts his role in terms of the imperatives of honor:

ELESIN: Life has an end. A life that will outlive  
Fame and friendship begs another name.  
What elder takes his tongue to the plate,  
Licks it clean of every crumb? He will encounter  
Silence when he calls on children to fulfill  
The smallest errand! Life is honor.  
It ends when honor ends (*DKH*, p. 38).

Elesin's choice of the market place as a site to publicly reclaim the power and honor vested in his traditional identity as a member of the Abobaku is significant. In a colonial world where traditional sources of authority have yielded

to imperial masters, he needs the market women's affirmation of his exalted place in the residual patriarchy and political dispensation of Oyo, a place about to be memorialized by his performance of ritual suicide. The Praise Singer's invocational opening notes that Oyo was once whole and pure with a stable culture complete with its own corpus of myth and rituals. In a rambunctious opening glee to a troubling opera, he even suggests with great pride that Oyo is a place where Elesin's impending suicide is an illustration of its cosmic coherence. Elesin's sacrifice signifies a commitment to cultural persistence unsullied by the monumental changes that have swept over Oyo from within and without changes wrought by war, European slave traders, and British colonialists (Ibid:90.).

PRAISE SINGER: ..the great wars came and went; the white slavers came  
and went, they took away the heart of our race, they bore away the mind and muscle of our race. The city fell and was rebuilt; the city fell and our people trudged through mountain and forest to found a new home but- Elesin Oba do you hear me?(*DKH*, p. 41).

Tejumola Olaniyan in his sophisticated and analytically rigorous study of Soyinka's *Death and the King's Horseman*, has rightly described the Praise Singer's persuasive antics as "navel gazing, the aesthetics of the pristine and the naïve." The compensatory nature of the singer's cajoling indicates both despair and desire. The despair of a depoliticized residual colonial power as it gropes to recapture its moment of grandeur and significance, and the desire for a more meaningful identity than the museum hall curiosity it now represents. Yet the ritual suicide, vested with the whole community's aspirations for cultural autonomy, is not to be. For Elesin notices a pretty woman in the market place and asserts the

lingering power of his place bestowed by tradition, by demanding her hand in marriage, despite the fact that she is betrothed to someone else. We are immediately exposed to a contradiction as Elesin, that advocate for the retrieval and sustenance of indigenous tradition, insists on conflating a dying ritual with a marriage ceremony (Ibid.).

ELESIN: you who stand before the spirit that dares  
The opening of the last door of passage,  
Dare to rid my going of regrets! My wish  
Transcends the blotting out of thought  
In one mere moment's tremor of the senses.  
Do me credit. And do me honor.  
I am girded for the route beyond  
Burdens of waste and longing. (*DKH*, p. 43)

Intimidated by his power, the women grant his wish. It is at that moment that our identification with Elesin is deliberately complicated. The arrogance he displays in cajoling and imposing iconicity on his identity in the absence of a communal consensus on the appropriateness of his marriage sets us up for the tyrannical contradiction in Elesin's mission. For at that moment, the collective subjectivity Elesin invokes and promises is jettisoned for a solipsistic subjectivity. His patriarchal significance is underscored, not by consensual wedlock but by the terror generated by his authority. He takes a bride, a woman already objectified as someone else's, in a world where gender, class and ethnicity are signifiers of subjection. The mute bride is the body underlining his phallogocentric essence (Ibid.).

The wedding is held and consummated, thereby postponing the death ritual.

When at last Elesin gets ready to resume his prescribed mission of suicide as promised at the beginning of the play, the Praise Singer sets the stage for the transition from marriage to death in highly symbolic and embroidered language. As Elesin dances a trance faster than the music, avowing his resolve to die, the Praise Singer assumes the persona of the dead king as he sings (Jeyifo,2001:12)

How shall I tell what my eyes have seen? The Horseman gallops on before the courier, how shall I tell what my eyes have seen? He says a dog may be confused by new scents of beings he never dreamt of, so he must precede the dog to heaven. He says a horse may stumble on strange boulders and be lamed, so he races on before the horse to heaven.

It is best, he says, to trust no messenger who may falter at the outer gate; oh how shall I tell what my ears have heard?

Just as the audience is lulled into a sense of conviction that Elesin will die, the colonial state intervenes. Simon Pilkings, as imperial Britain's representative in Oyo, descends on the scene to stop the ritual's proceedings, and arrest and imprison Elesin. Elesin's Oyo is under the dominion of a Colonial District officer, who is playing host to the visiting Prince of Wales. The imperial visit demands that the colonial officer, Pilkings, be able to demonstrate unquestioned acceptance of his rule by the Crown's African subjects (Ibid.).

Wole Soyinka intends that the *corpus* of modern African literature be read in the light of his elaboration of the specific cultural sensibilities, the specific modes of thought and feeling which in Soyinka's view, characterize the 'African World' and are best apprehended in the vast storehouse of paradigms and figurations of creativity, reality and social responsibility discoverable in the mythology, plastic

arts, dance, music and idioms of ritual performance of African peoples. Several of these pre-suppositions are relevant to the framework of his most famous play *Death and the King's Horseman*, especially those to do with the nature of the abyss and the efficacy of bridging rituals. (Ibid:13).

The play highlights the fact that colonialism has not destroyed local pre-contact customs or traditions .Soyinka succeeds most in recreating the complete, credible world of African ritual [because] here the ritual form is not merely recast, but the playwright invests it with a dialectic, and his personal vision intervenes for a crucial interrogation of history( Katrak,1965:24)

In *Death and the King's Horseman*, Soyinka turns away from the Western tradition and the play does not merely hang upon the framework of ritual: the play is the ritual itself. Technique and theme weld fluidly to yield a theatrical experience in which both actors and audience are meant to participate, and this participation extends farther beyond the province of the emotional to the psychological, beyond mere physical exhilaration to the deeper spiritual fulfilment. Hence, the dramatic elements alter accordingly: dialogue, for instance, deepens beyond the level of dramatic wit and becomes a celebration of the primal word, when language reverts to its pristine existence as incantation, and “the movement of words is the very passage of music and the dance of images”. Rarely before in all of Soyinka’s repertory has language or spectacle approached the tragic splendour of that moment when Elesin at the end of the third act dances slowly to a gradual death, the words beating against a background of keening female voices (Ibid.).

ELESIN: [ *His voice is drowsy*]

I have freed myself of earth and now  
It's getting dark. Strange voices guide my feet.  
PRAISE-SINGER: The river is never so high that the eyes  
Of a fish are covered. The night is not so dark  
That the albino fails to find his way (*DKH*, p. 59).

But the Elesin fails in his duty, and the cause, in Soyinka's interpretation, is to be discovered not only in the sacrilege of the District Officer's intervention, but also in Elesin's concupiscence, his tenacious love of earth and flesh, as he himself later confesses: "... my weakness came not merely from the abomination of the white man who came violently into my fading presence, there was also a weight of longing on my earth-held limb" (*DKH*,65) (Wright,1993:98).

Soyinka is not writing a polemic aimed at securing the practical reintroduction of ritual suicide; he is merely using the historical incident as a particularly vivid imaginative symbol of sacrifice in general and of traditional Yoruba communalism in particular. It is this metaphorical level of the play which is stressed by most of the critics and on which Soyinka insists in his prefatory note. This argument carries a great deal of force. The religious motive of Olunde's sacrifice is not intended to command the audience's approval on a literal level. Very few will be inclined to accept that the gods or "cosmic totality" really require self-immolation of the kind prescribed by Yoruba tradition. Olunde's sacrifice is to be seen as the metaphorical vehicle for a more universal tenor. It symbolizes the determination to be true to one's roots and to assert the value of higher duty against both the internal threat of materialistic self-interest (Elesin's tragic flaw) and the external threat of an imposed alien culture. Viewed as the freely willed sacrifice of

individual self on behalf of a religious principle, Olunde's decision achieves metaphorical universality and can command the respect of spectators with widely different views on religion and philosophy (Ibid.).

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## Conclusion

*Death and the King's Horseman* has proved popular with western playgoers and readers, being regularly produced and featuring on many syllabi. This is probably because it is one of the dramatist's more accessible plays, with its dramatization of British colonialism in Nigeria, its British characters and its theatrically exciting use of music, dance and trance ritual in the marketplace scenes.

In fact, the mainstay of Soyinka's play is dance and music employed in conjunction with enactments and re-presentations of events and actions in the past and present lives of the protagonists. So even as his dialogues are carried out in a foreign language and he employs the theatrical models of the west, he retains the traditional African concept of theatre as a comprehensive, total and celebratory experience in which all the arts integrate



Almost every character in *Death and the King's Horseman* at some point uses a traditional Yoruba proverb. Through his vast knowledge of Yoruba proverbs, Soyinka is able to endow his play with a strong Yoruba sentiment. Characters often employ Yoruba proverbs primarily as a means of bolstering their opinions and persuading others to take their point of view.[18]. Although respected by critics, Soyinka's plays are challenging for Westerners to perform and to understand, and they have not been popular successes." [1]. The play was performed at London's Royal National Theatre beginning in April 2009, directed by Rufus Norris, with choreography by Javier de Frutos and starring Lucian Msamati. His starting point for *Death and the King's Horseman* was a vivid episode from western Nigeria's colonial period, in which a British district officer intervened to stop the horseman of a dead Yoruba chief committing ritual suicide, as tradition dictated. Stylised and poetic, Soyinka's play explores the gulf in understanding between the horseman, who happily accepts his fate, and the Dickensian district officer, who views this potential suicide as barbaric. He resists the suggestion that *Horseman* is an essentially political play. The other, staged by the Oregon Shakespeare festival, has been playing since February to glowing reviews. Intriguingly, Soyinka sees another possible reason for this renewed interest: the rise of suicide bombing in the Arab world. Use the entire *Death and the King's Horsemen* calendar, or supplement it with your own curriculum ideas. Calendars cover one, two, four, and eight week units. Determine how long your *Death and the King's Horsemen* unit will be, then use one of the calendars provided to plan out your entire lesson. Chapter Abstracts. Chapter abstracts are short descriptions of events that occur in each chapter of *Death and the King's Horsemen*. Character and Object Descriptions provide descriptions of the significant characters as well as objects and places in *Death and the King's Horsemen*. These can be printed out and used as an individual study guide for students, a "key" for leading a class discussion, a summary review prior to exams, or a refresher for an educator.