

## Tragedy in African Theatre

By

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### ABSTRACT

Tragedy in African theatre re-presents a significant study into the intricacies of indigenous value system, communal codes of conduct, prevailing spiritual visions, and their expressions on the nature of death of the tragic figures in the works of African playwrights. This study, however, is to identify the interpretation of what constitutes tragedy in African convention, its centreplace and its seeming "surprising profanities" as exemplified in Wole Soyinka's *Death and The King's Horseman*. The traditional Africa is undoubtedly communal. The passivity and conformity of the African under a compelling authority can be explained in accordance with his affirmation of self-will and perception of collective spirit. His penchant for honour is far more intricate and demonstrably cultural. John Iliffe observes that, in respect of these attractive features, one cannot neglect the place of honour among the most glaring enigmas in African thoughts: Understanding African behaviour, in the past and the present, must take account of changing notions of honour, which historians and others have neglected. Until the coming of world religions, honour was the chief ideological motivation of African behaviour. It remained a powerful motivation even for those who accepted world religions. It is this 'culture of honour' that evokes other issues relevant to the question of worldview and behavioural norms. An interesting shift in the representation of black Africa in Western Philosophical thought is assuredly on the knowledge that...honour, in its many forms, is a theme running through African history at all its recoverable stages and is still an important motive for African behaviour (John Iliffe: 367). In line with this signification, it is instructive to note that in traditional Africa, eccentricity

though strange yet is excusable. This accounts for the innate passion for individual relevance and beneficent rivalry. All elements of African culture, if studied explicitly, will show an intermingling of the agreeable and the disagreeable, the homely and the vulgar. Despite this seeming contradiction, strong kinship ties claim precedence over ideological traits. This insight that permeates the African world, as noted by Wole Soyinka, has been one of the elements that aroused derogatory interpretation from Western Scholars. Ernst Mayr in his study of race and the concept of equality calls attention to the underlying reality. He posits: When people make derogatory statements about members of other races, they often do not refer to biological traits at all, but rather to putative character traits (92). To him, the correlation between any negative trait and a certain racial group bears no scientific evidence. It is not difficult to understand that such a relationship cannot be demonstrated. Dan Sperber puts it succinctly: In order to account for the fact that (cultural) representations are interpretable, one must assume the existence of an underlying system: for example, a language, a code, or an ideology (24). The worldview and group-consciousness in a more traditional society which are considered solely an irrational impulse, are undoubtedly deep rooted in cultural Philosophy, what Claude Levi-Strauss referred to as 'cultural architectonic' (128) – the traditional societies thought-system whose characteristic feature 'is its timelessness...to grasp the world as both a synchronic and a diachronic totality' (263). If we are to understand the expressivity of the basic codes of traditional African thought-system and conventions, as Levi-Strauss puts it elsewhere, there is a need to first understand that its institution is shaped by reciprocity of perspectives. To him, this

reciprocity of perspectives, in which man and the world mirror each other and which seems to us the only possible explanation of the properties and capacities of the savage mind, we thus find transposed to the plane of mechanized civilization (222). The establishment of social order along with regulatory policies, which is one of the principal elements of democratic communities, constitutes a significant institutional framework in which individuals, ethical issues, and what Colin Falck calls 'apprehension of reality' (116) are one with the native philosophies. As rightly observed with some greater precision by Levi-Strauss, it is, presumably, not a coincidence that the expressive – contemplative view of the so called 'savage mind' has in it a logical order, not a parochial out-pouring. In his text entitled *The Savage Mind* (1976) Levi-Strauss, not to talk of the significance of his choice of reference – 'the thought of people we call 'primitive'' (2-3) and 'the savage mind' (222) can be said to exemplify the widely held views and interpretations of many Western writers such as Joseph Conrad and Daniel Defoe as to early cultural contacts with remote regions. Howard Gardner 's view with which I myself am in agreement seems a reasonable supposition. In his words: Any honest evaluation of *The Savage Mind* must acknowledge that it is an enormously erudite and recondite work which moves uncontrollably out of focus even after numerous readings. Levi-Strauss is a master stylist who seldom misses the opportunity for a double entendre or a paradoxical opposition, and is not beyond stretching a point in order to turn a neat phrase (141). Having enthused that the 'savage thought can be defined as analogical thought' (263), Levi-Strauss posits his arguments in light of the Yoruba Communal System that, The Yoruba seem to have been able to throw more light than ethnologists on the spirit of institutions and rules which in their society, as in many others, are of an intellectual and deliberate character...without ever losing sight of the

empirical significant for which provisionally, they stand (133). As noted above, it is obvious that culture is one of the determinants of what can particularly be termed native theory. Its only essential requirements – myths and languages – revolve around the people's methods of socialism. Social linkages and lineage organisations help to monitor most effectively every individual actions to ensure that they do not innocently collude with the priorities of the community and thereby necessitate a falling apart. These priorities to a greater extent see to it that any question of appropriation or collusion is fundamentally therapeutic not mainly as an attractive tool of protest but also as a sophisticated cultural self-interrogation to sustain a certain level of equity. Cult authorities, village assemblies and associations, title and secret societies, on the one hand have been more evocative in terms of settling issues and managing conflicts within the community. The vested interest of some of these societies is to counter any radical challenge to the stability of conventional social structures. It is precisely this fabric of details that Bill Freund posits in his intriguing study of 'community – linked' societies among the Ibo. Freund notes: Igbo villages have been described by historians and anthropologists as democratic communities where each household head is capable through individual effort of earning coveted title, position and wealth. However, Igbo communities did not lack for inequality, slavery and forms of social oppression. Title societies functioned as agencies of the richest and most powerful forces and as such contained an incipient form of class rule (31). The above detail pinpoints a crucial norm that belies what must be understood later as cult of individualism which is an attempt to 'unsettle the imbalance' and a claim to truth within the hegemony. In this regard, individual self-assertion poses a challenge to the 'conventional ethos'. In a very real sense, this internal contradiction, that is, individual's will against insidious class rule, collective

ideology, or bourgeois form of repression is not meant to be considered as a disruptive logic but rather as a form of articulation that functions as a prerogative to political and cultural change of the community. This issue of collusion has inevitably been interpreted solely as asocial, un-african and potentially self-destructive by some African writers who do not see it as a productive form of normalization. It is considered that the persistence of one's individual opinions and claims are inconsiderable. It is precisely on this ground that several theories on traditional African society and thought-system collide. In his book *On African Socialism* which is in many ways one of the theses pointedly responsible for the emergence of this category crisis, Leopold Sedar Senghor, in his attempt to define traditional African society as "collectivist or, more exactly communal, because it is rather a communion of souls than an aggregate of individuals" (49) concurrently shows that there is no clear agreement on what constitutes traditional African thought-system. Senghor states in the latter part of his postulation: The African has always and everywhere presented a concept of the world which is diametrically opposed to the traditional Philosophy of Europe. The latter is essentially static, objective, dichotomous; it is, in fact, dualistic...It is founded on separation and opposition, on analysis and conflict..Negro-African society puts more stress on the group than on the individuals, more on solidarity than on the activity and needs of the individual, more on the communion of persons than on their autonomy (93-94). In due course Senghor incidentally presents a pluralistic society that considers a diversified view of an individual from ethno philosophical ideology as illogical and unnecessary counterpart. Conversely, in emphasizing the social units as culture-defining prerogative, Senghor simply offers a theory that showcases traditional black African society in the context of absolutism through what Hazard Adams would call a "recognition of particularity as real" (19) to

assert his hypothetical canon. As a result, perceptive differences and synthesis which should be given greater emphasis as the acceptable sustenance of peace in traditional society are not accrued a specific rationale. In this sense, Senghor's reading, disappointingly a muddled interpretation of what constitutes 'African Socialism', stops short of African central vision. Biodun Jeyifo, quoting the Yoruba Ifa gnostic testament accurately presents the true African conception of 'diversity of its forms': "Ori kan nuun ni/iyato kan nuun ni" (That is sameness in communion: difference in aspirations constitutes uniqueness of personalities). This perception, to me, is of importance in understanding the intrinsic concept of socialism in traditional Africa and the place of Personhood in its making and quantification of the tragic. If, as Senghor would make us believe, "Negro-African society puts more stress on the group than on the individuals...more on the communion of Persons than on their autonomy" (94), the acknowledged Polemic on the resultant disturbance in the traditional social fabric at the death of an individual and the many definitions of the tragic seem rather out of place. I am of the opinion that Senghor's view, like those of many other 'analysts' on the characteristic structure of black African society is at best unclear and, much more, reductive. I.A. Menkiti, in his more modest study, presents a clearly-defined argument. As for Menkiti, the various societies found in traditional Africa routinely accept this fact that personhood is a sort of thing which (is recognised, but) has to be attained, and is attained in direct proportion...through the discharge of the various obligations defined by one's station (176). This strategic point, with a brisk reference to personhood within the confine of communal life which is relevant to our concerns here, is also evident among the Kuranko People of Sierra Leone. According to Michael Jackson, in Kuranko the word *morgo* denotes (...) an individual who stands out against his or her social background. A

true person thus does more than merely conform to social rules, he realizes or exemplifies social ideals. The Kuranko words *lembe* and *igbiliye* mean “respect”, but they imply more than a slavish or automatic regard for convention. In Kuranko thought a person’s moral commitments to others are apportioned differentially (...). According to this form of “distributive morality”, it is the relative social position of an individual which decides the manner in which (the impact of his death) will be evaluated (16-25). In a sense, there is a need to reaffirm at this point the lop-sidedness in some of the fixed interpretations regarding the impacts of death in social traditions without a look at the deceased moral commitments. This does not mean that age or status plays no role in the impact of death in the traditional system; it is just that it is not prominently essential. The earlier easy generalizations that “The death of a stranger, slave or a child will go almost unnoticed; it will arouse no emotion, occasion no ritual” (28) as put by Fred T. Smith quoting Robert Hertz, are bound to be subjective. There is, of course, some reason to suppose that the magnitude of funeral ceremonies represents the parameter to substantiate the impact and social class of the deceased. I suspect the conventional tendency to see the traditional African class system as necessarily a marker of distinct impacts of the tragic. This touches the point that Wole Soyinka’s (1976) essay “The fourth stage (Through the Mysteries of Ogun to the Origin of Yoruba tragedy)” provides one interesting way of measuring the substance of what constitutes the tragic in traditional Africa. “Tragedy”, as put forth by Wole Soyinka, “is the most insistent voice that bids us return to our own sources” (140). He sees the collective experience of a people as the means to interpret what can be taken as tragedy. To illustrate this, he brings it to light under Yoruba mythology, ritual and worldview. There are a number of similarly perceptive comments that tell the impacts of religion and how it is much more active in the conception

of death. Soyinka’s thesis, stated simply, is that cultural norms define the world-view of a people. According to Soyinka, tragedy is “the stricken cry of man’s blind souls as he flounders in the void and crashes through a deep abyss of a-spirituality and cosmic rejection” (145). He also attempts to correlate ancestral worship with ‘the anguish of severance’ displayed in death and suicide. Soyinka speaks of the chthonic realm as where “the deities stand in the same situation to the living as do the ancestors and the unborn, obeying the same laws, suffering the same agonies and uncertainties, employing the same masonic intelligence of rituals” (148). It is this defined space that he interpretes as ‘the fourth stage, the vortex of archetypes and home of the tragic spirit.’ Death is a stage of transition, “a recurrent exercise in the experience of disintegration, and this is significant for the seeming distancing of will...experienced in depth, a statement of man’s penetrating insight into the final resolution of things” (151). Ogun’s selfless foray into the unknown, which is a form of self-sacrificial death, clearly shows the African cosmic view which is restorative, creative, revolutionary and a means to the attainment of dignified self. What materializes into suicide is Ogun’s infused spirit and communal concepts of heroism. Obviously the tragic is deciphered more strongly when tradition and individual aspirations are deeply linked. The argument on what constitutes tragedy and the role of Personhood is still significant in contemporary African literary discourse. To Menkiti, on the true incentive for great tragedies, ‘as far as African societies are concerned, personhood is something at which individuals could fail’ (173). Thus it goes without saying that the implicit suggestion of personhood is to associate it with irrationality and a breach in the accepted rules of social conduct. This preference shares a common perception with the Kikuyu ideal ways of thinking. As posited by Jomo Kenyatta in his book *Facing Mount Kenya* (1965), in Kikuyu community, ‘individualism and self-seeking

were ruled out' (180). The above viewpoint indicates that if we are to understand the motivating factors behind the inherent significance of individualism or personhood in tragic themes, there is a need to first understand what has shaped it and the factors that determine its predominance. To this reader, the decided focus of E. Bolaji Idowu on behavioural management, subjectivity and notions of transgressiveness in traditional society, is an excellent re-examination of this field of enquiry. He keeps his thesis subtle and pointed: For the absolute demand, sacred values, or the unconditional imperative, there is no other source or origin than the tremendous pressure of the group which has been built into the very texture of the individual person's being. Society, therefore, had to devise or invent a means of keeping rebellion-prone man in check so that its machinery may run undisturbed. The means was achieved by the invention of certain codes of behaviour...This artificial principle – 'a complex of residual habit' operating in man – is [...] vox populi: vox dei...that which speaks in man is only the collective 'voice' of society (44-45). This argument, from the standpoint of traditional African life, states the essence of man as an extension and vital link with 'those who have gone to live in the spirit world of the ancestors' (Idowu:45). It is altogether interesting to reiterate the African consciousness with a distinct social perspective. I would certainly agree with Idowu's opinion that "what happened in consequence of the phenomenon called death was only that the family life of this earth has been extended into the after-life or super-sensible world" (184). What this concept of death reveals is the extent to which disequilibrium of communal life is denied. Here the deceased individual in the transitional period is said to influence dynamic reintegration rather than actually constitute a total separation from the social system. Bolaji Idowu is not alone in making the connection between the causative effects

of religious dynamism on the characteristic outlook regarding death and traditional African thought. For Geoffrey Parrinder (1975), African thought is pluricultural. At no point could it be separated from religious and philosophical contexts. More significantly, the mystery of death and belief in survival and triumph over death which inevitably acquire a central importance in the dynamism of African world, are profoundly projected as living philosophies in a tightly knit community's judgment. To be absolutely clear, rather than rendering a contradictory logic of the above stated pluralistic tradition, Parrinder concurs: Like every race of mankind in every age Africans have many religious beliefs. Some of these are philosophical, in that they consider great questions such as the meaning of life, the origins of all things, the purpose and end of life, death and its conquest. These are often the subject of myths, which are philosophy in parables. More narrowly religious life is shown in rituals, dances, sacrifices and songs (15). In this regard, Parrinder attempts to examine certain conventional characteristics of the African world and the systems of meaning which inform them. It is precisely here that I also find Robert Farris Thompson's view more adequate. To him, morality, religious aspiration, embodiment of character and perfect composure, discretion internalized as a governing Principle are related to all of African socio-cultural structuring with one additional factor exerting an enormous influence on its communal system of thought: demystification of death and the re-affirmation of African culture of audacity. Thompson presents his point graphically: The Yoruba remains the Yoruba precisely because their culture provides them with ample philosophic means for comprehending, and ultimately transcending, the powers that periodically threaten to dissolve them. That their religion and their art withstood horrors of the Middle Passage and firmly established themselves in the Americas (...) reflects the triumph of an inexorable communal will (16).

There is no doubt that there exists a relationship which is both generic and genetic between culture, its outlooks regarding death and a people's psychology of solidarity. One of the intriguing cases that comes to mind in regard to this 'cultural unicity' as Charles Binam Bikoi would call it, was exemplified in the Yoruba cultural expressions and selective patterns of sacrificial death and compulsory suicide to attain 'a mythic, glamorous status'. As John Iliffe astutely notes, at the Alafin's death not only were slaves and attendants killed to serve him in the next world, but his official mother, his eldest son and the son's mother, three other princes, the hereditary master of the horse, the chief eunuch of the royal quarters, and several other notables were required to commit suicide after processing through the streets distributing largess and taking leave of their households at ceremonial feasts. Any who evaded this duty would be killed by relatives to avoid collective disgrace (68). It must be stressed from the outset that every tradition, not to refer to its 'strength and catalyst', uniformizes the personal, political, and social codes of conducts in line with its own concept of morality. The above stated example, to state the ideas more simply, characterizes the popular forms of cultural parameter to check a deeply ingrained suspicion of undue ambitions and despotism in the agelong monarchical structure. In this connection, to cite the words of Busuyi E. Mekusi, "Death...is seen not as a terminal phenomenon, but a form of transition from the world of the living to that of the dead, where perpetual communication is guaranteed" (54). In this case, death is considered to be a positive force which deserves to be received not with grief but with joy in the words of Reuben Adeleye Abati. To Abati, in this conception, "Death (is) the mid-wife of life" (63-64). A central concern of such death and suicide, as put forth by Iliffe above, is to articulate most effectively the political and cultural bounds of propriety. And it hardly needs be added that the art of suicide, as one of the expressions of

protest and resistance, is not particular to 'super-individuals'; rather, it is a way to discredit one's oppressor, liberate oneself from torture. This philosophy is not strange to the moral ideology of the African. On the one hand, death and suicide can be a practical measure by the state for certain crimes; on the other, and by far the most significant observation, death and suicide are therapeutic, meditated actions in which the subject himself is in full control as the producer. A point that may incidentally throw light on this hypothesis is the understanding of forms and functions of death and suicide in African Worldview. Iliffe's supposition, which I would like to quote extensively, is valid enough on this last point: Suicide was a common response to enslavement, cruelty, and offended honour. In the Atlantic trade, many slaves killed themselves before embarkation, drowned themselves by jumping overboard, refused food and starved to death...The cape colony averaged between fifteen and twenty reported slave suicides a year during the eighteenth century, overwhelmingly by foreign-born males who hanged themselves. Some were escaping cruel punishments for crimes or desertion... Fear of being sold to brutal masters was another motive... some were moved by humiliation and loss of liberty (131). In considering this phenomenon with some substantial account, Iliffe further cites W.S. Allen's report of 7 February 1883 on how one of the slaves stabbed himself with a knife in his belly and the bowels came out, intending to kill himself, rather than being kept in shackles. Within varying degrees of representative works we have had the opportunity to study, what is particularly explicit is the striking similarities in cultural ideology and religious belief as the guiding principles in the complex themes of death and suicide. A continuous dialectic is not only desirable but necessary for a fuller understanding that the will to die or commit suicide is not as a result of external cataclysmic experience, but is rather

embedded in the shared ideology represented by what Abati would refer to as a people's 'philosophical inclinations' (80) and 'a reflection of cultural reality' (88). According to Abati (1990), citing Ruth Aisenberg, "Death has more than one meaning, context is important" (60). One cannot but agree with Abati's assertion in the above quotation. This has to do with the fact that most of the opinions on the phenomenon, especially from the stand-point of different religious doctrines and racial backgrounds, are diverse. Many of the writers who have tried to explain the concept of death only raise concerns about its purpose. Thus, the diverse opinions on death, if Arnold Joseph Toynbee (1981)'s observation is adopted, fall into two distinct categories – the One-way or Unilinear perspective and the Cyclic view. To those who hold the Unilinear Perspective, death is the ultimate end to human life on earth. It is considered to be a complete annihilation. This view is prevalent in Islamic thought, Christianity and Judaism. The Cyclic view, on the other hand, holds that life is repetitive. To them, death is 'a momentary disappearance which is revived again in another form'. Swami Rama of the Himalaya, in his Introduction to M.V. Kamath's *Philosophy of Life and Death* (2006), sums up this view thus: (Birth) is but one bend of the eternal stream of life. In its continuity the stream of life rushes through many avenues and finally meets the ocean. Coming out of one avenue is called death and going through another avenue is called birth. So is the case of human life...(Death) is merely a game of hide and seek which can never mystify the wise one who knows how to look to himself and beyond (Introduction, xi). Swami Rama further expresses the perspective of those who hold the Cyclic view of human existence such as the Budhists, the Greeks, the Yoruba, the Hindus and the Chinese Birth and death are like two commas in the sentence of life. The sentence of life begins from eternity and is everlasting and never ending... As one changes one's pillow cover or book cover, so one casts off one's

body. Casting off the body is called death and assuming a new garment is called birth (Introduction, xii-xiii). All the views notwithstanding, man has never seen it as a familiar aspect of nature that he needs to take for granted. He could not entirely underestimate the power of death and its reality in his everyday life. Thus, sorrow is exhibited by man as the dominant attitude to the manifestation of death and the moment of dying. There is bound to be a feeling of loss and grief at the passing away of a loved one. As a result of the existing agonizing fear and anxiety that the body would become lifeless, deteriorate and decay, death is strongly portrayed as a tragedy. The depiction of the moments of sorrow and its psychological effects which is the subject of thanatology, the study of death is found in the collection of Passages, Phrases and Proverbs of both ancient and modern literature. For example, in the Egyptian Book of the Dead (c. 3500 BC), quoted by John Bartlett (1968) death is depicted as a moment of captivity: Death is before me today As a man longs to see his house When (I would be) in captivity (3). The feeling of exasperation and dejection at the thought of suicide is accurately depicted in William Shakespeare's *Hamlet*. In the play, the eponymous hero Hamlet, in his wish to eliminate his grief at the cost of his life, reflects on the after-effects of death: To be, or not to be: that is the question: Whether 'tis nobler in the mind to suffer The slings and arrows of outrageous fortune, or take arms against a sea of troubles, And by opposing end them? To die: to sleep; No more; and, by a sleep to say we end The heart-ache and the thousand natural shocks That flesh is heir to; 'tis a consummation Devoutly to be wished. To die, to sleep; To sleep: perchance to dream: ay there's the rub; For in that sleep of death what dreams may come When we have shuffled off this mortal coil, Must give us pause (Act 3, Scene I). The moment of tragedy is also creatively affirmed in African and Oriental literary traditions. Wole Soyinka (1988) in response to Biodun Jeyifo's question

on his irreconcilable antinomies and ‘a deeply and profound tragic and pessimistic outlook’, remarks that tragedy is a reflection of the human condition which the human spirit must overcome and enrich himself through the example of ‘those who succeed in overcoming the moment of despair, those who arise from the total fragmentation of the psyche, the annihilation of even their ego, and yet succeed in piercing them together, piece the rubble together to emerge and enrich us by that example’ (Introduction, xvii-xviii). As further put by Soyinka, the role of the writer is not to ‘ignore the tragic aspect of human experience, that tragic face of truth...That is part of the property of the experience, and that is part of the richness of art and literature’ (Introduction, xviii). The ‘antinomic tension’ at the thought of death, using classical Greek and traditional Yoruba tragic Principles, is aptly captured in Soyinka’s (1988) *Death and The King’s Horseman* when the once boisterous Elesin becomes numbed and shouts down the Market women at a mere playful mention of his last moment on earth: ELESIN: Enough of that sound I say. Let me hear no more in that vein. I’ve heard enough... I am bitterly offended (Scene one, 154) A little way further in the play, the fear of death and its psychological trauma again become obvious in Elesin’s attitudes. He chides Iyaloja ruefully at the hints of his impending death: IYALOJA: ...Now we must go prepare your bridal chamber. Then these same hands will lay your shrouds.

ELESIN:

(exasperated). Must you be so blunt? Elesin’s reaction to the subject of death is exclusively common to all mankind. In Chikamatsu Monzaemon’s suicide-plays, especially *The Love Suicides at Sonezaki* (1961) the grim reality of death is given greater effect when the feelings of the lovers, Tokubei and Ohatsu, become pathetic and give way: OHATSU: I’m afraid. What was that now? TOKUBEI: That was a human spirit. I thought we alone would die tonight, but someone else

has preceded us. Whoever it may be, we’ll have a companion on the journey to the Mountain of Death...Normally, if we saw a spirit, we’d knot our clothes and murmur prayers to keep our souls with us, but now we hurry towards our end, hoping instead our two souls will find the samedwelling. Do not mistake the way, do not lose me! (54). This exhibition of despair pronounced in different literary traditions and cultural contexts goes on to show that thanatophobia is a universal phenomenon. It is this understanding that serves as the preparatory ground for this study.

#### DEATH IN AFRICAN PLAYS

The context in which death is portrayed in African plays is drawn primarily from the traditional African cultural beliefs, established social and moral order. In their representations of group consciousness, African playwrights and dramatists attempt to create a kind of symbiosis of art and worldview in which tradition, individual’s desire for self-realisation, identity, religion and value systems are brought to bear on their works. The approach to the traumatic psychological experiences of their characters, their central moral dilemma, conflicts and the eventual resolutions is the key to understanding the range of their themes. It is difficult to separate the tenets of traditional African thought, in which the Principles of cause and effect are deep-rooted, from the tragic conventions of African plays. There is a significant bond between the thematic structure of the plays and a Philosophical tradition of the ‘natives’, especially in relation to the nature of death. The neurotic anxiety, scepticism, mystery and emotional trauma associated with near-death experiences incorporated into their plays offer many penetrating insights into the expectations of society, individual self-projection, moral conflicts and moral conformity. The Portrayal of death as a process of self-creation, not mainly a morbid exaggerated situation, finds expression through the incidental treatments

of individual's quest for self-realisation and the moral norms that so often block his path. It is worth noting that many of these deaths have nothing to do with a desire to bring about social reform, anti-bourgeois revolt or incite revolutionary fervour, they only portray a withdrawal of individual's will. The variety of motifs behind the death of a character and attitudes expressed in the plays are made to correspond to the multiple views of social reality and intimate dimensions of human experience. The emotional responses to dying and death portrayed in some of the plays are mainly at the symbolic level. The expression of the characters in the plays echoes the reverberations occasioned by the pervasive fear of death, the idea of death and the activities designed largely to avoid the fatality of death, to overcome it by denying in some way that it is the final destiny for man. In pursuit of a meaning for his own role in the 'cosmic drama', man has to keep the feeling that he has absolute power and control, and in order to do that he has to cultivate independence of some kind, the conviction that he is shaping his own life. As portrayed in certain African plays then, death though typically tragic, is in relation to the communal principles, a process of transformation that signifies the point at which one stage of existence passes into another. In this regard, the trauma of transience is in line with the metaphysical order, the well-founded hope that death does not cut all bonds. It must be stressed from the outset that the portrayal of the great split between life and death is steeped in the symbolic level of idea. The expression in the plays of this tradition does not run along conventional modes. The moods and the emotional responses they cause can be predicated mainly on the level of pity and terror. Thus, the grief at the death of a character in such plays often has both a festive and a tragic aspect to it. A part of this 'festive aspect' is not unconnected with the significance of the reversal or violation of the natural order. Yet the quasi-metaphysical portrayal of death in the plays is never

intended to limit the living reality of human existence. Regardless of whether it is the mythical or the realistic aspect that predominates, the portrayal is based on the cultural experience of a people. African plays that are based on discourse about the existential meaning of death resound the claim that the fear of death is a threat to the foundation upon which man has erected his self-esteem. While the plays address themselves to this concept and broaden the dimensions of tragedy through the emotional responses of the Protagonists – how they meet death with indifference, trepidation and courage – provides an ideal determinant of the nature of catharsis. Indifference to death, which is one of the remarkable traits closely connected with the mysteries of traditional African religion, also finds expression in the plays. That death is accepted as the necessary condition for dynamic change does not mean that it is portrayed mainly as a permanently consoling and joyous experience. On the contrary, it is a dreaded foe. The prospect of a changeless state which is to last forever has no permanent attraction to some of the dramatic characters. The strength of the plays lies in the direction of communal belief that a man can be said to survive his death only to the extent to which he prepares the way for further progress along the same path in the life to come. To some of the Protagonists, death is the right way of meeting suffering. The portrayal of death in African plays is not fundamentally pessimistic, nor always destructive. Wole Soyinka's *Death and The King's Horseman* is perhaps the most significant play in the exploration of the interdependence of life and death, drawing on the great religious tradition and thought of the Yoruba. While death itself constitutes deepest fears of things falling apart, it is also an image of integration and integrity. Elesin Oba's sacrificial death defines his worth; it is his essential role to 'die to himself' in order to form a new sense of Being for the Community. The opposite of this choice is disintegration and upheaval to the Yoruba

Cosmology. Elesin's accustomed death, from which he subtly wants to disengage himself under the guise of Pilkings' interference and new bride, is not simply mandatory but larger than an individual's self-assertion; so even apparent separation is in reality a new form of connection. Death is not seen as "cutting off" but as gathering to the ancestors. Thus Elesin's 'movement' towards death is identified also with movement towards fuller life and communal cohesion in the order of the forebears:

PRAISE-SINGER: In their time the world was never tilted from its groove, it shall not be in yours. ELESIN: The gods have said No.

PRAISE-SINGER: In their time the great wars came and went, the little 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 find a new home but – Elesin Oba do you hear me?

ELESIN: I hear your voice Olohun-iyo.

PRAISE-SINGER: Our world was never wrenched from its true course.

ELESIN: The gods have said No.

PRAISE-SINGER: 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?

ELESIN: It did not in the time of my forebears, it shall not in mine (148-149). Unfortunately the contradiction in this peculiar belief of the 'natives' is seen in another light by Elesin. To be cut off is to be divorced from meaning, continuity, and connectedness. He retorts at the sight of a beautiful maiden:

ELESIN: The world I know is good.

WOMEN: We know you'll leave it so.

ELESIN: The world I know is the bounty of hives after bees have swarmed. No goodness teems with such open hands Even in the dreams of deities.

WOMEN: And we know you'll leave it so.

ELESIN: I was born to keep it so... (156-157). Being conscious of his part as an individual in the 'complex' connectedness, he finds that the vision that has accompanied all his activities no longer pleases him. He has never thought of death as real and frightening. When he hesitates to link himself through death to the 'endless cord that links us all to the great origin' (157) which will lead to the ultimate transition of the cosmic world of his people, his inaction causes an upheaval. To avoid total disintegration in the communal fabric, Elesin's first son, Olunde, voluntarily performs the expected ritual death according to the social structure, support and structured guidance of the elders in the community. Such death may indeed be a cause for optimism, but Olunde only offers it as a symbol of his own morality over his father's amoral concept of individuality, sensuality and hedonism. Elesin's eventual death, then, is an involuntary act backed by a false sense of heroism. It is only an all-engrossing personal grief at the loss of his son. His untimely death, which is a response to his own tragedy, adds nothing of value to the community. In Soyinka's own words, "The confrontation in the play is largely metaphysical, contained in the human vehicle which is Elesin and the Universe of the Yoruba mind-the world of the living, the dead and the unborn, and the numinous passage which links all: transition" (Author's Note, 145). In that context, it is not surprising that the death in *Death and The King's Horseman* in Yoruba traditional wisdom and mystery of existence does not only depict the understanding of the place of death in the process of transition, but also takes seriously its appropriateness as a logical component of African vision of cosmic unity.

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