

**CULTURAL MEMORY AND AESTHETICS IN *DEATH AND THE KING'S
HORSEMAN* BY WOLE SOYINKA: A CRITICAL ANALYSIS**

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Abstract

This paper explores the aesthetics and the cultural experiences in contemporary Africa through an in-depth analysis of Soyinka's *Death and the King's Horseman*. The play lies within the ambit of cultural and historical affirmation and is formed by the symbolic heritage embodied in the rites which served as mnemonic triggers to initiating meaning associated with what happened in the myth-ritual based on a historical fact that a dead King must be buried with the king's horseman of his stables. Hinging on the theory of cultural memory, the play investigates the mythology of being, death and the world of the unborn in order to create a secular social vision. This vision draws on the metaphysical experience of the Yoruba worldview. While shaping perception and memory through the language, social norms, beliefs and values, the play scrutinizes loyalty to tradition and the relationship between life and death and also probes deep into the metaphysical traumas of the society in transition, as well as the role of the committed individuals in such rites of passage. Using a qualitative research methodology, the study involved the analysis of the cultural memory and aesthetics as the basis for interpreting Soyinka's *Death and the King's Horseman*. It highlights how Soyinka with the aid of language, ritual, and storytelling challenges colonial perceptions of traditional practices as primitive or superstitious. Furthermore, the paper argues that Soyinka's work not only preserves traditional African experiences but also offers a framework for navigating the paradigm of 'ritual matrix' or 'metaphysical template' upon which the play *Death and the King's Horseman* are formed.

Keywords: Cultural memory, cultural identity, tradition, aesthetics, Ogunnian hero.

Introduction

Cultural memory is the act of recalling events that are related to objects, places, and experienced by people in a social framework or between groups that experience these events. It is a framework that elucidates the relationship between the past and the present. At its most basic level, it explains why, how, and with what results certain pieces of information are remembered. These forms embed cultural symbols and motifs that reinforce shared values and historical consciousness, thus

contributing to a collective sense of identity and belonging. Cultural memory therefore, refers to the collective practices that societies use to build and uphold their relationship to the past, living in the present, and preparing for the future. Communities, groups, and minorities have their own cultural memories, and ways of understanding them form the starting point for cultural sustainability and well-being. As society changes, the objects and practices of remembering also change; on the other hand, new practices of memory create conditions for understanding human diversity, social change and political debate. Individual and collective identities, and the boundaries and struggles associated with them, are essential for social change.

Aesthetics, the philosophical study of beauty and taste, on its part, examines the nature of art, beauty, and the sensory experience of the world. It involves understanding how individuals perceive and respond to beauty and how these perceptions shape human experiences and cultural expressions. The study of aesthetics delves into why certain forms are pleasing to the senses and how cultural contexts influence these perceptions. Philosophers such as Immanuel Kant and Friedrich Schiller have contributed significantly to the field, exploring concepts such as the sublime, the beautiful, and the role of aesthetic judgment (Scruton, 2012). The concept of beauty in aesthetics is multifaceted, encompassing both subjective and objective elements. Subjectively, beauty is in the eye of the beholder, meaning that individual preferences and experiences play a crucial role in aesthetic judgment. Objectively, there are certain universal qualities, such as symmetry, balance, and harmony that are widely recognized as beautiful across different cultures. These dual aspects of beauty highlight the complexity of aesthetic experiences and their deep connection to cultural contexts (Dutton, 2014). It also examines the role of art and artistic expression in society. For art serves as a powerful medium for conveying cultural narratives, encapsulating the values, beliefs, and historical experiences of a community through various forms of art, such as painting, sculpture, literature, and music.

The relationship between aesthetics and cultural identity is significant, as aesthetic expressions often serve as markers of cultural heritage and identity. In many cultures, traditional art forms and aesthetic practices are integral to the preservation and transmission of cultural knowledge. These aesthetic practices are essential for maintaining cultural continuity and fostering a sense of belonging within a community (Okeke, 2015). Thus, aesthetics plays a crucial role in shaping cultural narratives by influencing how stories and histories are told and perceived. Cultural narratives are often embedded in aesthetic forms, such as myths, legends, and folklore, which use symbolic imagery and language to convey deeper meanings. For instance, the use of vivid imagery and allegory in indigenous storytelling traditions helps to communicate moral lessons and cultural values. These aesthetic elements enhance the narrative's impact, making it more memorable and engaging for the audience. Aesthetics, therefore, plays a vital role in shaping cultural narratives by influencing how stories are told and perceived, contributing to cultural identity and heritage, and enhancing our everyday experiences. Understanding this relationship provides valuable insights

into how societies construct and maintain their cultural identities and how individuals engage with the world around them.

The paper, therefore, highlights the significant role of aesthetics in both preserving historical cultural memories and in adapting to contemporary societal changes. Traditional aesthetic forms, such as those found in festivals and literature, play a crucial role in maintaining cultural heritage and continuity. The goal of aesthetics is part of a paradox in that it simultaneously teaches that details are important while maintaining focus on the whole. Modern thinkers emphasize on the creative and symbolic aspects of art. This aspect involves the study of “effect,” which illuminates the deep structure of literary works. Here, it is concerned with the criteria of artistic judgment where the artist’s creativity is expressed through skill, and the audience is engaged in appreciating the creative work.

Coming down to aesthetics in traditional Africa, the traditional African aesthetic conception of beauty is that the African conceives beauty not only as symbolic aspect of art but also in the context of situations - a composition that is rarely natural for it is a form phenomenon that can be arranged, cultivated and acquired through changes that occur in the natural process of life whereby the communal pattern of life in Africa and indeed Nigeria is built on the metaphysical continuum, which Soyinka (1976) described as a communion between the three worlds. When the system lends itself expression in communal events such as traditional festivals, rituals, rites of passage etc, symbolism usually emerges as the vehicle of communication in the performing and creative arts. Symbolism is a feature in the aesthetics of performance in African theatre concepts, manifested in symbolic features such as the use of costumes.

The aesthetics of performance is shrouded in mystery and can only yield the desired artistic experience if the symbolic elements are weaned of their hidden or secret messages. The corporate use of other art forms, such as dance, music, mime, and movement, may serve as the key in the unraveling of such hidden treasures in the midst of time. Here, the traditional experience involves the harmonious ensemble of dramatic performances like music, poetry, and dance, as nearly every aspect of human knowledge is disseminated orally. While some are sung, others are spoken in narrative forms (proverbs, idioms, and riddles) and yet others are uttered on special occasions. Aesthetically, “the language of the plays and use of traditional speech elements like proverbs, idiophones, ironies, personification and other imageries make them relevant” (Ogungbesan, 2018, p. 241).

Soyinka’s works are praised for their close exploration of culture. His play draws attention to the experiences of individuals in colonial Nigeria. With it, he shows how indigenous people who worked for the British Empire were often ostracized. The play explores the lack of understanding and disrespect shown by the British residents and settlers towards the African culture and customs.

Specifically, Soyinka uses African proverbs, ancient wisdom and cultural values and refers to Yoruba myths. To Soyinka (2007), “the past is the ancestor; the present is the living and the future the unborn. The existence of a gulf to be bridged is crucial to the Yoruba cosmic ordering” The gulf is what must be diminished by sacrifices and rituals appealing to the cosmic power which guards the gulf and through *the Fourth Stage*, Ogun mythopoetic aesthetics is evolved to bridge the gulf of disintegration between the human community and the deities of the Yoruba world view. Ogun’s initiative for a reunion with man “leads to his self-sacrifice, an act which opens a channel between the gods, and the world of the dead, the living and the unborn”.

Soyinka empowers Africans to reclaim their identities. He also explores the psychological and cultural consequences of colonial rule. In the play, his depiction of the conflict between cultural authenticity and colonial arrogance resonated deeply, for it explores the profound impact of colonialism on indigenous practices and beliefs. As a captivating example of cultural retrieval, in particular to traditional Africa and the intrinsic expression of its setting, it unveils what is, or is not, the true incentive for great tragedies. This is a substantial and meticulous attempt to stress the significant place of African mysteries and potentials on the world stage. It is a daring projection of “a culture whose reference points are taken from within the culture itself” (Preface: vii).

Methodology

The study adopted a qualitative method of research, which involved the interpretation and analysis of the cultural memory and aesthetics as the basis upon which the interpretation of Wole Soyinka’s *Death and the King’s Horseman* was evolved. The structural makeup of the qualitative research design method encompasses both the historic and analytic methodologies. While the analytic method entailed analysis of the relevant written and printed literary/archival sources, the historic method was used to trace the genesis of the cultural memory and history as well as the intricacies surrounding aesthetic aspects of the play. Using the qualitative method of research, which involves gathering facts from play texts written by the playwright, the study reveals that the culture of every society determines how the people of that culture embrace their norms and values and also their belief system.

Plot of *Death and the King’s Horseman*

The play begins with Elesin, a prominent chief and the horseman of the late King, preparing for his duty for which he has been born. A ritual suicide where, according to tradition, he, as the King’s horseman, must accompany his master, the late King who died a month ago, to the world of the ancestors. Elesin is ready and takes his journey from the market, followed by Olohun Iyo (his praise singer) and his drummers. He dances and enjoys the praises of Olohun Iyo. He also goes out of his way to demonstrate in poetry the riddle of the “Not-I-Bird,” which recounts his fearlessness in the face of death. The women are seen dancing around him. But just before his departure, Elesin “notices a beautiful girl at the market and decides to marry her before leaving the

world. Though the girl is engaged to the son of Iyaloja, the “mother of the market”, she does not want to refuse his wish. The departure ceremony is then turned to a bridal ceremony, and a bridal chamber is quickly prepared in the market stall for Elesin.

When the District Officer Pilkings learns about the prepared ritual suicide from his black sergeant Amusa, he orders Amusa to arrest Elesin. But Amusa is prevented from carrying out the order as the market women and the young girls make a mockery of him. Amusa returns to report the failure of his mission to Pilkings, who leaves immediately to command the operation himself. Meanwhile, Olunde, Elesin’s eldest son, who studies medicine in England through Pilkings’ help against his father’s will, having been informed of the King’s death, returns home to bury his father, but is shocked to see his father, Elesin brought alive and in handcuffs. In shame and humiliation, Elesin falls at his son’s feet but Olunde refuses to recognize him. Pilkings, uneasy, gives Elesin a message that his son Olunde, regrets his reaction and would like to have his father’s blessings before going back to England. Soon afterwards, and following Olunde’s written demand, Elesin receives a courier package while in his prison cell, and the package turns out to be the face of his dead son Olunde, who committed the ritual suicide in his stead. In shock, Elesin strangles himself, and his young pregnant wife closes his eyes.

Cultural Memory and Critical Analysis of *Death and the King’s Horseman*

The sacred myth in *Death and the King’s Horseman* occurred in Oyo in 1946 during British colonial rule, when the Horseman of an important Chief was prevented from committing ritual suicide by the then colonial authorities. According to Yoruba tradition, the death of a Chief must be followed by the ritual suicide of the Chief’s horseman, because the horseman’s spirit is essential in helping the Chief’s spirit ascend to the afterlife, which will lead to the stability of the whole community. If this is not done, the Chief’s spirit will wander the earth and bring harm to the people. This section investigates the mythology of being, death, and the world of the unborn to create a secular social vision that draws on the metaphysical experience of the Yoruba worldview. Here, Soyinka embraces the Ogun myth through which he believes that life continues within its manifestations, embracing the ancestral spirits, the living, and the unborn.

Death and the King’s Horseman is a well-known play written by Wole Soyinka in 1975. The story told in *Death, and the King’s Horseman* is based on a historical event that occurred in 1946, where a royal horseman called Elesin was duty-bound to commit the ritual suicide according to Yoruba custom. This act was stopped by the British colonial powers, specifically by a British district officer, much like the character of Simon Pilkings in the play. Soyinka grew up in colonial Nigeria under foreign rule. Like Olunde in the play, Soyinka left Africa to study in England, and in the play, is seen to present Olunde’s dual culture to exemplify similar influences. Also, Soyinka’s examination of religion appears to have been inspired by his life, as his father was an Anglican minister and the headmaster of a religious school.

Elesin Oba, the king's horseman, is the main character in the play. Part of his duty as the king's horseman is to commit suicide following the king's death. As the play begins, it has been one month since the death of the king. In the time since the king's death, Elesin has been preparing for his journey to the afterlife. Elesin's position as the king's horseman has afforded him a luxurious lifestyle that he very much enjoys. He has access to the finest foods and other luxuries. He is adored by the women in the market, whom he charms with his stories, dancing, and jokes. On what is to be his last day among the living, the women dress him in beautiful clothing, which he adores. He is seen as an honorable man who is deeply committed to the traditions of the Yoruba people. This is communicated through the words of the Praise-singer, Iyaloja, and Simon Pilkings. Elesin decides to take one last wife before he dies, which defies traditional death customs. The bride he chooses is already engaged to Iyaloja's son, suggesting that Elesin is actually more selfish than the praise heaped on him by other characters indicates.

Eventually, Elesin dishonors himself in both the living world and the afterlife by not committing ritualistic suicide. He initially attempts to blame everyone: Pilkings, his bride, and the gods, for his inability to follow through with his suicide, but eventually admits that it was his own desire to continue the life he loves that did not allow him to fulfill his duty to the Yoruba people. By tradition, the Yoruba people still need a horseman to accompany the King into the afterlife, so Olunde, Elesin's son, steps into this role and commits suicide. This action by Olunde further dishonors Elesin because sons are not supposed to take over their father's roles in such a manner. Elesin is so distraught by this that he commits suicide himself using the chains he is imprisoned by. Iyaloja states, "he will arrive stained in dung" from the King's stallion into the afterlife, emphasizing that his dishonor will follow him in death.

The play, whose material is derived from history, examines transition and change, self-sacrifice and loyalty to a long-established ideal in the face of inevitable cultural transformation. It also uses the events of the story as an extended metaphor, a deliberate attempt at cleansing history by way of acting out history and, at the same time, changing the popular imperial historical view about Africa being barbaric. To achieve this, Soyinka uses both African and European characters in the text to explore his ideas on leadership, tradition, and the differences between people. Here we are introduced to Olunde, Elesin's eldest son. Tradition dictates that he is to be the next king's horseman. He views his time in England as a positive attribute, as it allows him to defend Yoruba culture while still understanding the values of the English. Olunde sees the importance of one man sacrificing their life for the good of others. He disowns and insults his own father for not fulfilling his duty of sacrifice to maintain the spiritual order of the Yoruba people. In the end, he sacrifices himself to fill the role his father would not.

Soyinka, on his part, draws on African tradition, employing singing and dancing throughout the

play, which explores personal anguish about life and death, as well as the impact of destructive external forces. Its symbolic dialogue examines cultural and religious issues. Elesin's hesitation leads to his imprisonment, where, ironically, he commits suicide. His last act is one of shame rather than honor. Typical of tragedy, the play explores the idea of fate: It is Elesin's destiny as King's Horseman to follow the King to the afterlife. Elesin understands this finally when he is jailed and unable to carry out his duty. Here, the play explores personal sacrifice through the idea of shared responsibility. However, it can equally be argued that Elesin's psychological and emotional torment makes him a conventional tragic hero. In the play's resolution, Elesin has not only doomed himself, but his son and the future of his local community, for the sinister cloaked object is revealed as Olunde's dead body. At this, overcome with grief and guilt, Elesin strangles himself with his own chains.

The play ends with two deaths and little restoration of order as the future of the village is ambiguous; a dubious future awaits as the Yoruba culture suffers a devastating blow. The "emptiness" the praise-singer mentions may refer to the end of the line of King's Horsemen. With this, Soyinka conveys the significance of an individual's actions on others' futures. Thus, *Death and the King's Horseman* is extremely interested in exploring what it means to be dutiful and honorable—to oneself, to one's people, and to one's spiritual beliefs. Given that duty is what drives Elesin in his attempts to commit suicide and is also what drives Pilkings' attempts to stop Elesin, it's worth considering how the respective duties of these two men and their two cultures mirror each other.

Iyaloja, 'Mother' of the Market, is obviously the one who projects the values sacred to the drama, and by her, the in-group viewpoint and overriding interests are expressed. To her the resolution with the successful sacrifice of the Elesin – an Elesin – is complete relief, although it is not the way she would have wished it; for it is the son, rather than the father, that has been sacrificed. But the substitution is seen by Iyaloja as overturning the order of things, for the pressure is to the effect that the community is satisfied that the ritual has taken place. This 'public opinion' is endorsed right at the scene by the Praise-Singer and Iyaloja. The Praise-Singer's 'invocations' is mentioned in the stage direction, but not provided. But Iyaloja does speak. Hers is the voice of 'public opinion' which Elesin does not despise, and which readers honor as the voice of the traditional culture itself.

In the play, there is a celebration of the Ogunnian archetype, which mythologizes the past. In Elesin, we see the Ogun spirit as Elesin is expected to accompany the spirit of his dead king through self-sacrifice (ritual suicide) to the world of the dead. Even though Elesin, on the outside, wishes to commit the ritual sacrifice, unconsciously, he doesn't want to give them all up yet, hence his delay, which results in his not being able to commit the required suicide. With this failure, Olunde is now presented as the tragic messianic archetype who willingly/voluntarily sacrifices his life to purify the land. This brings the play to the point where actions are evaluated in terms of

social significance for the play's action were built up towards a cultural revolution, as what would have been a normal transition from one reign to another becomes a crisis of huge proportions because of the colonial authorities, who by their actions introduced 'an alternative that is of direct consequence for the subsequent development of the story' (Barthes, 94). With this intervention, the age-old practice of ritual suicide by Elesin as part of the funeral ceremonies of his king is put to an end.

Aesthetics in *Death and the King's Horseman*

Music and Dance: Music, song and dance appear frequently in the play, especially in the African scenes like the market scene, where we witness the use of songs embellished with poetry. What starts as singing by a character turns into poetry, which the other characters fluently join in. An example is when Elesin recounts the story of the 'Not I Bird' to the market women and young girls. In the story, Elesin chants that death comes calling, but the people deny that they can hear Death's calling out of fear. He explains that he alone is unafraid of Death. He will not say "Not I" to death when death comes calling. He says he will not reproach Death because he goes to keep his friend and master, the King, company.

Poetry: The ability to manipulate words in a pleasing manner with a good tune and rhythm of language is an essential attribute of the Yoruba oral poet. *Death and the King's Horseman*, according to Ogunbiyi (1981), has a sweet poetry. Its incantatory lyricism is original to Yoruba poetry, as the play reads like a long piece of poetry whose every line has a message it wants to convey. Soyinka uses poetry as a tool of expressing the intensity of feeling and the deepening of the dramatic effects of refreshment. An example of intense feeling poetry is when Elesin sees the young girl he admires at the market just before the night of his death. He asks the women,

Elesin: Tell me who was that goddess through whose lips I saw the ivory
pebbles of Ota's riverbed... For those whose ripples shamed the river's
coils around the hills of Hesi Her eyes were new-laid eggs glowing in
the dark (DKH, p.19).

These quotes represent the moment that marks Elesin's tragedy. The moment he laid eyes on the beautiful girl and longed to have her, Elesin started losing grip of his will to commit the ritual suicide. The dominant rising and falling of voices in the play is of Yoruba poetry. Olohun-Iyo, which means 'the man with the sweet voice' has the ability to manipulate words in a pleasing manner. Elesin's response to his praise singer, market women, and even his captors is not a mere contribution to the conversation of the moment but a poetic statement on the larger burden of life. His poetic sense is also a demonstration of his ability to sing his own elegy (DKH, p.41).

Riddles: Elesin and the Praise-singer dialogue in the introduction shows a lot in riddles which are used to paint the picture of a true African society in the play. Here, we witness Elesin recounting

the story of the 'Not I Bird',

Death came calling. Who does not know his rasp of reeds?
A twilight whisper in the leaves before the great araba falls?
Did you hear it? Not I! swears the farmer. He snaps his fingers
around his head, abandons a hard-worn harvest and begins a rapid
discussion with his legs (DKH, p. 11)

The riddle is Soyinka's way of saying that the farmer in his fright abandoned his farming tools and "took to his heels", a picture of an African saying. Also, Elesin and Iyaloja use riddles in the play to communicate. Iyaloja speaks in riddles to mystify Pilkings while communicating with Elesin. In one of her speeches, she says,

Iyaloja: Not yet, it drags me on the slow, weary feet of women
Slow as it is Elesin, it has long overtaken you It rides ahead of
your laggard will (DKH, p.71)

In the riddle above, Iyaloja is talking about the corpse of Olunde being brought forward by the women to Elesin for him to utter the final words before he is laid to rest. Her choice of riddle is well understood by Elesin but leaves Pilkings in total confusion about what has been said. Hence, Pilkings exclaims,

Pilkings: What is she saying now? Christ.
Must you people forever speak in riddles? (DKH, p.71).

This shows he is at a loss about what is being said as he cannot comprehend the message. **Proverbs:** Soyinka's use of proverbs in the play is very profound and helps serve as a trademark on the play as African literature. To the Yorubas', proverbs are "the horses of speech" through which communication is found. In the play, Iyaloja uses proverbs a lot. She used it to scold Elesin in his cowardice of defiling the rituals of his suicide. She says,

Iyaloja: How boldly the lizard struts before the pigeon when it
was the eagle itself she would confront (DKH, p.67).

In this proverb, Iyaloja mocks and scolds him for remaining at the prison yard of Pilkings rather than performing the ritual that will ensure the continuity of his community.

Language: The language of the play is mainly English. The play has a lot of Yoruba words in English sentences written in rhythmic free verse laced with Yoruba proverbs. Soyinka wrote the play in the third-person omniscient perspective in certain scenes or narrations. This allows the reader to have insight into the greater historical situation of the play. Soyinka, through language, alters historical facts by placing the responsibility for Elesin's failure squarely on Elesin's shoulders instead of that of the colonial masters as provided by history. He does this so he might focus on the issue of the individual's duty rather than on the issue of colonialism.

Pidgin English, a legitimate contact language with its own grammatical structure, is a variation of English language characterized by multiple syntactic, phonological, and morphological errors. Here, the speakers have little or no exposure to the rudiments of the language as a way of speaking. This is exemplified in the speeches of Amusa and is predominantly spoken by most of the uneducated Africans. Also used is the African language and the Yoruba language, which is the traditional language of the people, full of idioms mostly used by the aged in the society. The language is used in the characters of Elesin, Iyaloja, the women and praise-singer. Some of the speeches of these characters were scripted from Yoruba into English with the addition of some Yoruba expressions like “Olohun-Iyo” (sweet talker). ”alari”, “robo”, “ifawomi”, “opele” and “elegbara”. They are used in the play text to sustain their original meanings since they do not have direct equivalents in the English language. Thus, the dialogue in the play is well developed and sustained till the end.

Ritual: Soyinka’s drama incorporates traditional Yoruba rituals. Rituals that have survived in the community’s memory or as envisioned in the collective recollection of the people. In the play, Soyinka tries to capture the ritual phenomenon in the late hours of its transition to history. There is the myth-ritual that a dead king must be buried with the head of his stables. This myth is sacred and Elesin-Oba is expected to commit suicide, which will lead to the stability of the whole community. The ritual leading to this suicide means a lot to the people because in celebrating the ritual of Elesin, the whole community is involved.

This is similar to the Ogun myth that believes life continues within its manifestations, creating a re-union between the worlds of the ancestral spirits, the living and the unborn. Through *The Fourth Stage*, Soyinka guards his concept of tragic action in the ritual dramas and myths associated with the three principal deities in the Yoruba pantheon, such as Ogun, Obatala and Sango. Here we see a transitional passage between human and divine, birth and death and the disparately apprehended time sequence like past, present and future (Soyinka, 1988). Through submergence in the ritual, members of the community emerge with a new consciousness of themselves as individuals and as a group. He therefore used the ritual format to express his consciousness of socio-political imperatives

The use of spectacle, dance, drumming and singing in *Death and the King's Horseman* creates a serene atmosphere in the ritual. Also, part of the dialogue is sourced from the cryptic language of rituals. It is in the play that Soyinka explicitly deploys ritual both as an organizing principle and as a surgical instrument for prizing open a people's collective consciousness at a critical moment of their historical development. This particular lead ritual in the play imports archetypal/mythical significance in that the reliance of Yoruba myth and ritual is Soyinka’s way of commenting on the tragedy of foreign intervention on the fulfillment of a society’s ambition.

Folktale: This is the story of the Not I Bird which is the butt of Soyinka's criticism of Elesin. It is a dramatic irony that the speech is made by Elesin himself. The story illustrates how people fear death's calling but Elesin is willing and proud to die for his community. Even with all his boasting, Elesin could not answer death's call because of his inability to fulfill his spiritual obligations. Instead, his cowardice triggers the bravery and daring nature of Ogun in his son Olunde who takes on the responsibility of his father, and commits ritual suicide in his place so as to restore the honor of his family and bring balance to the order of the universe. Elesin in killing himself much later, condemned his soul to a degraded existence in the next world. The symbolic function of the story is that of a mythopoeic reconstruction of the cultural behavior of the Yoruba people as represented in the character of Elesin Oba.

Legend: The play is built on a historical fact which centers around the king's horseman who must be buried along with his master, the dead king through a ritual sacrifice in order to ensure the stability of the whole community. This history is married with that of the Ogun myth, whereby Ogun descends to earth to bridge the gap between the human world and the deities, a reunion which leads to his self-sacrifice and opens a channel of communication between the gods, the worlds of the dead, the living, and the unborn.

Conclusion

The need to examine the way in which Soyinka has contributed towards the vindication of traditional African culture has been the main thrust of this research. The play *Death and the King's Horseman* is used by Soyinka to probe deeper into the metaphysical traumas of the society in transition as well as the role of the committed individual in such rites of passage. It also scrutinises loyalty to tradition, the relationship between life and death, and the understanding of fate as specific to different cultures. Also, Soyinka, through traditional materials, represents the concept of the gods and the roles they play in the continuous functioning of the society. Here, Soyinka's "creativity emphasizes the view that the world of the gods and ancestral dead sustains a spiritual strangle-hold over the living world with a view to safely midwife an envisioned unborn future that corrects the mistakes of the past. So, an Ogun hero is therefore the political leader that Soyinka envisions for the Nigerian society because such a hero/leader derives from the heroic qualities of Ogun, which the incarnate being possesses and demonstrates.

It is recommended that artists and cultural practitioners should critically engage with the cultural narratives embedded in their works and to use the understanding to produce art that resonates with and challenges cultural values and norms. This entails not only a deep appreciation of traditional cultural symbols but also a willingness to innovate and incorporate contemporary aesthetic trends. By doing so, practitioners can create more meaningful and impactful works that reflect the complexities of modern cultural identities and contribute to a dynamic cultural dialogue.

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