

**Portrayal of Yoruba Metaphysical World in Soyinka's *Death and The King's Horseman* and the *Strong Breed***

*By*

**Imam Abdulkadir**

**ABSTRACT**

This paper investigate Yoruba metaphysical world has portrayed in Wole Soyinka's *Death and the King's Horseman* and *The Strong Breed*. It involves an examination of the Yoruba myths, how and why they have been incorporated in the two texts. The study set out to achieve its objectives through utilisation of Sociological Theory, Myth Criticism and Stylistics. The content analysis of the plays involves close textual analysis which links details of style and characterisation to the metaphysical theme. The conclusion of the study is that Soyinka uses myths and rituals as raw material for his creative work. Soyinka however, does not bow fully to the prescriptions of his' people's myths and rituals. He introduces a new dimension to the people's social order. At the end of the plays, he has replaced the old order of subjection of the individual's will to societal prescriptions with individual choice and freedom.

**Introduction**

Drama is an artistic expression in which the participants - actor and audience relive their experiences, such experiences could be personal or communal or both. The human experiences are relived in drama directly by the actor and vicariously by the audience through the actor. Joe de Graft (1979) establishes that the roots of African drama lie in a community's religion - the body of beliefs and ritual practices which in the view of the members of the community ensured their moral sanity and communal survival. Human life is charged with such threats associated with elemental phenomena as lightning, darkness, floods, cold, holocausts, drought, earthquakes, storms etc., as well as interior forces of hunger, thirst, and suffocation. There are threats too from one's fellow creature's beasts as well as people of ill will, hatred and envy. Moreover, there are threats that are deep within our own souls - forces like pride, anger, greed, lust, jealousy, fear etc. It is the awareness of these threats which led ancient people to those rituals of apprehension, propiation, purification, and exorcism of which impersonation was often a cardinal feature (p.4) The same awareness dominated the drama in such widely different cultures as those of fifth-century Greece (B.C) and medieval Europe. In both cases (ritual and

medieval European drama) the aim was to restore the society to health and sanity as de Graft states:

Drama... is - a reaching out by the whole man toward sanity through vicarious experience, whether as an impersonator who himself assumes the identity of the inimical forces or their more powerful opposites, or as a celebrant who seeks identification with an impersonator acting as a mediator between him and the forces concerned (p.5).

The Yoruba metaphysics recognises four areas of human existence: the worlds of the ancestor, the living, and the unborn, and the abyss of transition (gulf). In most African metaphysics the first three worlds are clearly defined. The relationship between the three worlds can only be understood if viewed in a cyclic reality so that neither the child nor father is a closed or chronological concept. In some circumstances the child issues from the father while still in others, the child is older than the father. This is the principle behind instances in which a child in African society greets an elder person as though s/he were herself/ himself the adult. Consequently, the world of the unborn is older than the world of living as the world of living is older than the ancestor-world. Similarly, the world of the unborn precedes the ancestor-world in this cyclic reality. (Soyinka, 1976) Soyinka further notes that the fourth area of existence is less explored in African metaphysics. He refers to this fourth space as 'the dark continuum of transition which 'houses the ultimate expression of cosmic will' (p.26).

This is better clarified as is evident below, by examining the essence of Ogun. The basic cornerstone of Yoruba thinking, Roscoe (1971) observes, stems directly from their conception of the pantheon (in itself a divine, though 'human' representation of cosmic order) as a grouping and balancing of forces in which all subsists by elemental strife. The three significant deities here are Obatala, Sango and Ogun. According to Yoruba belief, Obatala is the god of creation, the father of peace and laughter, who was sent by Oludumare, the Supreme God to come down and create the earth. However, under the influence of too much palm-wine, his work was bungled up and he created the blind, albinos and hunchbacks. As punishment for this error, Obatala was imprisoned in the city of Ife and when creation began to suffer, he was released from prison and his sufferings enable him to emerge morally triumphant and purged of guilt. He is therefore in Wole Soyinka's words, associated with virtues of social and individual

accommodation: patience, suffering, peace, and all imperatives of harmony in the universe, the essence of quietitude and forbearance; in short, the aesthetics of the saint. (Soyinka,1976)

Sango is the Yoruba god of lightning and thunder, who, like all Yoruba gods, led an earthly life among people before his death and deification. He was the king and founder of modern city of Oyo. (Roscoe, 1971) It is in Sango's hands that Obatala faced torture and imprisonment. Sango places himself beyond reciprocation and beyond caring. According to the myth thus, Sango is associated with destruction; the awesome essence of justice.

The Ogun myth encompasses the totality of Yoruba metaphysical world. When the original godhead and primogenitor of both god and human beings was by his slave's rebellion fragmented into multiple godhead; there was unrest among the gods. None of them felt complete in himself and therefore a journey to seek human beings began. But the way was impassable owing to long isolation from the world of human beings. So the gods tried and failed to break this primordial barrier. It is Ogun, who at last 'armed with the first technical instrument forged from the ore of mountain-wombs clears the primordial jungle', plunges through the abyss and the other gods follow. Later he was crowned the king of Ire and led his people to war and like Obatala, he took too much palm-wine and slew his own men. Ogun, Soyinka (1976) observes, is the symbol of challenge. The principle instinct in man constantly at the service of the society for its full self-realization. He is also the master craftsman and artist, farmer, warrior or essence of destruction and creativity, a recluse and a reluctant leader of people and deities.

Significantly, Ogun becomes a key figure in understanding the Yoruba metaphysical world because of the reality of the gulf, the fourth area of existence. As Soyinka notes, 'The gulf is what must constantly be diminished (or rendered less threateningly remote) by sacrifices, rituals, ceremonies of appeasement to the cosmic powers which lie guardian to the gulf (p,31). Ogun makes the first fundamental bridge across this gulf and therefore he is the 'father' of those who seek the way.

The information on the four areas of existence and the vital roles played by the three important deities lead to another important aspect of the Yoruba metaphysics: the moral order. Wole Soyinka constantly asserts that since society co-exists with nature, regulating its

existence by natural phenomena with evident process of continuity - sea tide, waxing and waning of moon, rain and drought, planting and harvesting - the highest moral order is seen as that which guarantees a parallel continuity of the species; that which makes the entire society survive. (Soyinka, 1971; Louis Gates, 1975) Moral order in this sense should not be reduced to a society's code of ethics dictating its people's conduct. It should rather be understood within the framework of what Wole Soyinka terms as metaphysics of the irreducible: knowledge of birth and death as the human cycle; the wind as a moving, felling, cleansing, destroying, winnowing force; the duality of the knife as blood-letter and creative implement; earth and sun as life sustaining verities, etc. These provide the matrices within which customs and conventions, personal relationships and even communal economics are formulated and reviewed. Moral disorder in Yoruba world-view, like in all African world-view, threatens not only the shared reality but also the existence itself since the individual is intertwined in the fate of the entire community. It is within the metaphysics of the irreducible that cosmos balance is maintained. Obatala, Roscoe (1971) observes, balances Ogun (creator versus slayer) as Ogun balances Sango (in competing degrees of the sense of justice) just like birth balances death. There is balancing of cosmic forces and this way, harmony is maintained.

The Yoruba's are reputed to have the biggest number of divinities (god). No one knows the actual number but ranges from 200 to 1700 and even more, have been suggested. (Mugambi, 1990) Since, according to Yoruba tradition, the Orishas (gods) were initially unhappily separated from human beings, Yoruba myths are stories about the efforts made to cross the gulf, which brought about the separation. (Soyinka, 1976) In mythological terms, the orishas eventually descended from the sky and spent their lives in relationship with human beings as kings, chiefs, leaders at war etc. Soyinka transfers this mythic world into his literary texts. This is evident in the many references he makes to various gods in *Death and the King's Horseman*. These gods dictate and direct every human affair so that the Praise Singer says to the Elesin:

'In their [ancestors'] time the world was never tilted from its grove, it shall not be in yours', the Elesin twice replies, 'The gods have said No' (p,10).

At a later stage in the play, the Elesin says to the white man (Mr. Pilkings), 'You advise all our lives although on the authority of what gods, I do not know' (p.64). The gods thus wield power

over human dealing so that all leadership is in their name. As Wande Abimbola observes, such authority is not the case just in Soyinka's literary texts but also in Yoruba life. He writes:

'In indigenous Yoruba culture, Ifa has governed almost every aspect of Yoruba life from the birth of a child through his or her childhood days to marriage and old age and finally death' (Blakely, p.6).

Ifa is both the name of the god of knowledge and wisdom as well as his divination system (the oracle). This orisha also known as Orunmila, gives divine guidance and counsel, through his oracle to those who consult him - and many consult him on important matters. Hence Soyinka's reference to the deity in *Death and the King's Horseman*:

'And Ifa spoke no more that day....

But for Osanyin, courier-bird of Ifa's heart of Wisdom' (p.13)

Other mentions of orishas are evident in the following citations:

'That Esu-harassed day slipped into the stew-pot' (p.9).

'I saw the ivory pebbles of Oya's river bed' (p.19).

'Not even Ogun-of-the-farm toiling dawn till dusk on his tuber patch ...

Not even Ogun with finest hoe he ever

Forged at the anvil could have shaped the buttocks ...' (p.19).

'When the river begins to taste salt of the ocean, we no longer know what deity to

Call on, the river-god or Olokun' (p.44).

It is observable in the above citations that Soyinka's work is so steeped into Yoruba mythology that it takes a matter of fact approach in the deployment of the orishas. The names of the gods are not given typographical highlight to show that they are foreign to the language of the play. Soyinka's reader would therefore, need to dig deep into Yoruba mythology for the knowledge that the names stand for gods and to understand the function of each deity. Thus, Esu is the orisha of chance, accident and unpredictability. Esu is responsible for carrying sacrifices from humans to the Sky God. He is also known for his phallic powers and exploits. He is said to lurk at the gateways, on the highways and the crossroads, where he introduces

chance and accident into the lives of humans. (Coulander, 1973) This being Esu's character, the Elesin appropriately refers to 'Esu-harassed day to mean a day plagued by misfortunes.

Oya is both the name of a river as well as the deity who plays patron to it. Oya was one of Sango's wives and she is the orisha of the Niger River. Ogun, whose myth is explored shortly after this, is the orisha of iron, and consequently the patron orisha of all humans for who iron has particular significance, such as smiths, hunters, and warriors. The quotation above makes reference to Ogun as the patron of farmers who use iron hoes to accomplish their tasks. In the last quotation, Soyinka just refers to the river-god without mentioning the name and refers to Olokun by name. This is because each river in Yoruba land has a patron deity. For instance, the wives of Sango, Osun and Oba, are orishas of rivers bearing those names. (Abimbola, 1994) Since in the quotation the river is not specified, the orisha name is not specified either. However, the orisha of the ocean, Olokun is singled out for she is the only deity that presides over seas and oceans.

Unlike in *Death and the King's Horseman*, *The Strong Breed* displays a paucity of references to particular orishas. Even then the relationship between gods and people is still portrayed as crucial. When the Old Man fears what might become of the ritual cleansing, his Attendant replies, 'The gods will not desert us on that account' (p, 103). Consider yet another citation: when the 'chasers' do not seem to be able to control man, the carrier, the latter gets thirsty and as he heads to the stream for water, the following is the dialogue:

Jaguna: And it works so well. This surely is the help of gods themselves Oroge.

Don't you know at once what is on the path to the stream?

Oroge: The sacred trees.

Jaguna: I tell you it is the very hand of gods. (p.11S)

A short while later, Jaguna explains, 'When the carrier steps on the fallen twigs, it is up in the sacred trees with him' (p.117). What is evident in the extract is not just the strong claim on the help of gods, but also another element of Yoruba mythology - people's relationship with the environment. Abimbola (1994) observes that in traditional Yoruba thought, there is a deep respect for nature as an important part of the universe. Two reasons are responsible for this place of nature in the thought system: There is a belief that when the orishas finished their assignment on earth, most of them turned themselves into objects of nature such as trees, rocks,

hills, mountains, rivers, lagoons, and the ocean. Moreover, the Yoruba believe in the ancient covenant between human beings and nature.

This covenant compels mutual respect. They believe that every object of nature has an ancient name, which is used to communicate with it and command it to do their will. Abimbola's explanation lays the basis for Jaguna's optimism and faith in the sacred trees in helping to trap the carrier. It is as though nature would fully cooperate with the human community to ensure the well-being of the other. Besides, the sacred trees might also be deified to aid humans from their position as gods.

### **Ogun and the Tragic Characters**

Soyinka argues that Yoruba tragedy acts out the suffering caused by the gulfs in existence and by the painful acts of will or assertion performed to bridge them. His assertion presupposes an essential relationship between the Yoruba tragic drama and the Ogun myth. Soyinka in 'The Fourth Stage: Through the Mysteries of Ogun to the Origin of Yoruba Tragedy' asserts:

The first actor ... for he led others ... was Ogun, first suffering deity, first creative energy, the first challenger, and conqueror of transition. And his, the first art, was tragicart... (p.34)

Soyinka's strong assertion is that modern African tragic drama 're-creates through the medium of physical contemporary action' the first experience of Ogun through the transition abyss. Thus, in the discourse that follows below, we attempt to relate the tragic characters in Soyinka's two texts with the character of Ogun. We seek to establish ways in which Eman in (*The Strong Breed*) and the Elesin in (*Death and the King's Horseman*) are modelled on the character of Ogun.

Eman, Soyinka's protagonist in *The Strong Breed*, is a saviour too. When we encounter him at the beginning of the text, he is at a 'modest clinic'. He runs a medical clinic, which ensures a kind of redemption in its endeavour to restore people's health, therefore bettering the physical lives of the members of the society. He offers his medical services even when he is rejected: Sunma observes, 'you are wasting your life on people who really want you out of their way' (p,83). When the girl who goes round with a carrier comes to him and claims to be 'unwell',

Eman responds, 'But I have never seen you here. Why do you come to the Clinic?' (p.85) It is Eman too who clears the bush for the handicapped Ifada for a farm, just as Ogun clears the first bush with his iron knife when the god and human population wishes to expand their dwelling. (Coulander, 1973) records this part of Ogun myth thus:

...orishas and humans alike ...hunted, cleared the land so that they could plant, and they cultivated the earth. But the tools they had were of wood, stone, or soft metal, and the heavy work that had to be done was a great burden. Because there were more people living at Ife than in the beginning, it was necessary to clear away trees from the edge of the forest to make more room for planting. (p.33)

The rest of the account has every orisha trying unsuccessfully to clear the bush with his poor tool and it is a voice of despair and disappointment when they (orishas) say to each other, 'what kind of a world are we living in? How can we survive in this place? Their survival is ensured by Ogun who emerges with tools of new technology (the Iron Age) to save them from modern problems of overpopulation which old means (technology of the past) cannot solve. Eman who is modelled on Ogun is equally progressive-minded. He takes the initiative to think and act for Ifada whom despite his incapacitated self must have a means of livelihood hence the need for a farm. He encourages Ifada to like fanning. Eman is unlike Sunma who. thinks Ifada should be very thankful for merely 'being allowed to live' (p.83). Perhaps Eman's ability to provide remedy or wholeness to incompleteness is more evident in Sunma's plea. In the initial pages of the text, she pleads with Eman to take her away from the village as she 'demand[s] some wholesomeness' which can only be granted by or through Eman. She tells him,

'I swear to you; I do not mind what happens afterwards. But you must help me tear myself away from here. I can no longer do it by myself ...' (p.88).

Her inability to save herself in the situation is the inability of the conquered self, which authenticates Eman's role as saviour. She desperately clings to him,

'you see; I bore myself to you. For days, I had thought it over; this was to be a new beginning for us. And I placed my fate wholly into your hands ...'(p.91).



Evidently, Sunma's redemption lies with Eman. However, given the Yoruba communal aspect of life, Sunma's individual plea is rejected for Eman must stay in the village to contribute his share to the wellbeing of all people.

Eman by birth belongs to a family of carriers, to a 'strong breed' that can 'take this boat to the river year after year and wax stronger on it. I [Eman's father] have taken down each year's evils for over twenty years' (p.103). The imagery of the boat and the carrier denotes a purification and for people who depend on Eman for the washing away of the evil of the old year and therefore assurance of wholeness (as opposed to incompleteness caused by their sins) in the New Year. As Sunma puts it, the New Year 'is the time for making changes in one's life' (p.89) but the individual change requires communal cleansing, which must be ensured by one person - Eman.

Elesin Oba, the tragic character in *Death and the King's Horseman* is also comparable to Ogun in several ways. Iyaloja describes him as he 'who now bestrides the hidden gulf and pause to draw the right foot across end into the resting-home of the great forebears' ( p,22). The archetype on whom Elesin is modelled (Ogun) is always described, in Soyinka's interpretation of Yoruba mythology, as breaching the 'gulf between the gods or/and ancestors and human beings. Therefore, Elesin is a great task as Iyaloja further describes him as 'stand[ing] at the gateway of the great change' (p.23). As Ofemun (2003) notes, Ogun and in deed all orishas, function within what Nietzsche describes as the chthonic realm, the fourth stage in Soyinka's terms. This is a zone in mythic spaces which is distinct from but which encompasses the world of living, the dead, and the unborn. It is an in-between world, in which all the suffering of gods and humankind are experienced, transformed and re-inscribed for the fortification of human will. Soyinka clearly observes that this chthonic realm is periodically in need of a challenger, a human representative, to breach it on behalf of the wellbeing of the community. In terms of drama, as it developed from ritual, the stage came to represent the symbolic chthonic space and the presence of the challenger (the protagonist, the tragic hero) within it is the earliest physical expression of people's fearful awareness of the cosmic context of their existent.

Given a secular interpretation, the 'gateway', the gulf of transition, the chthonic realm, within which Elesin operates (stands), is a zone of difficult choices and hard decisions. In the making of these difficulty decisions, uncertainties are breached, an act, which thereafter affects

the present and re-shapes how the community relates to the past and the future. Thus for the intended change to be attained, Elesin's cooperation and self-sacrifice like Eman's, is mandatory. As already observed, Ogun is at the heart of changes in the society. The society in the world of the text (*Death and the King's Horseman*) is in the throes of political colonisation and cultural imperialism.

### **The Scape Goat Theme**

Aesthetically, Soyinka employs techniques which add up to the message he intends to communicate in relation to a comprehensive view of the ritual cleansing in *The Strong Breed*. Of these techniques is flashback. The first flashback puts Eman together with his old father and in this we are treated to the knowledge of the task he (Eman) is charged with by birth. In the flashback, Eman's character growth is evident from the idiotic child who at first argues that he is 'totally unfitted for [the old man's] call' to adherence of his father's warning: 'Stay longer and you will answer the urge of your blood' (p.104).

The second flashback takes the play to a time in the past with Eman, a teenager and her equally young bride, Omae. This flashback develops the plot by filling in the gaps with details of Eman's life's story. More significantly, the flashback scene serves to inform on the origin of Eman's character strength. He leaves the initiation camp to protect his and Omae's moral principles against the pretentious and immoral tutor. His behaviour displays bravery, courage, strong will and above all, maturity. This is evident not only in the abrupt decision to leave the training centre but also in the unemotional resolute break from his village, his father as well as his love, Omae. His character thus portrayed, the society, through the reader or the audience, can rely on Eman to take them through the ritual cleansing without wavering.

Lastly, the play makes use of a flashback in which information about Omae's death at child delivery is provided. This scene is done with such artistic care that we not only have character merge (Eman in the past as well as a carrier) but also a merge of settings. Thus even though Eman is a carrier in a different land from his homeland, he walks to his dead wife's grave in his current state (as carrier). The stage directions read thus:

Eman, as carrier walking towards the graveside, the other Eman having gone. His feet sink into the mound and he breaks slowly on to his knees, scooping the sand in his hands and pouring it on to his head. ( p. 117).

The action implied that Eman anoints himself to go his wife's way, to die. Such should be the case for when we meet him again, in what seems to be a continuation of this flashback, he is pleading with his father to wait for him. Since his father is already dead, their union leave very little room for speculation. As observed in the stage directions, 'he [Eman] makes to hold him [his father]. Instantly, the old man breaks into a rapid trot. Eman hesitates, then follows, his strength nearly gone' (p.118). It is after this that he pleads 'wait father. I am coming with you... wait ... wait for me father' (p.188) and those being his last words, he dies. Thus a flashback propels the play forward to the death of Eman, which is the intended climax of the ritual that Soyinka designs.

Another technique employed in *The Strong Breed*, is foreshadowing in which a symbolic miniature cleansing ritual parallels and anticipates the major one. A girl who describes herself as unwell drags behind her an 'effigy by a rope attached to one of its legs' (p.84). She is isolated from the rest of the community: 'I play alone,' she says. 'The children won't come near me. Their mothers would beat them' (p.88). Her sickness like the evil of the society is undefined throughout the play. Sunma's description of her creates the impression that her case is an offshoot of the community's: 'She is not a child. She is as evil as the rest of them' (p.6). After all, the whole community 'from the oldest to the smallest child [is] nourished in evil and unwholesomeness' (p.88). Of the effigy she carries, she observes: 'My mother says it will take away my sickness of the old year' (p.85).

The three elaborate flashback scenes also bring out another aspect of the ritual in *The Strong Breed* which cannot be overlooked, that is, the relationship between the present, the past and the future. Through this technique Eman meets with his father (who is already dead). In the ensuing dialogue, Eman's role is explained. Shortly after this dialogue, Eman has a vision in which he witnesses the cleansing ritual as performed by his father. He now has had both the theory and demonstration of the practice. It is left to him to play his part. The second flashback bears some complications so that there is character-merge when Eman, still as a carrier, has a conversation with his already dead wife, Omae. It is as though Eman is a formation of both his

past and his presenting the third flashback; we are treated to information that Eman has a son (by Omae) who too is a 'strong breed' (women die as they give birth to these carriers). Then Eman dies soon after a conversation with his father a case which creates the impression of a dramatic union of the present and the past. It is as though the dead (Eman's father) stretches their hand to receive the living (Eman) who must pass on into the next world. Thus with a calculated economy of words, the present (represented by Eman) merges into the past (the old man's world) and the future (Omae's son's world). This is a central idea in the Yoruba cosmology the present learning from the past, and the future having its foundation on the present.

The combined role played by Eman and Elesin has significance in the wider Yoruba cosmology. Just like in the world of the plays, the role is that of the saviour; it is the role of the victim for sacrifice. The two tasks of the two characters form the function of a community scapegoat. As has been observed at the beginning such role is meant to bridge the gulf and make transition in the area / stages of existence smooth. Only after Eman and Elesin have performed their duties can the living coexist in harmony with the dead. Also the events in rituals call to mind de Graft's views on the function of drama. The human community threatened by their own inadequacies as well as the hostile environment design 'those rituals of apprehension, propiation, purification and exorcism. The Yoruba society therefore opts for a ritual of propiation through Elesin to placate their dead king and for the continued wellbeing. Through Eman, the Yoruba society begs for purification and exorcism rituals to rid themselves of their human failings and guilt and look forward to a better future. Both rituals are clearly community rituals. The anxiety, aspiration and participation of the community in the plays are the same as that of the Yoruba community in the traditional rituals.

The study investigated the metaphysical theme as it is treated in Soyinka's *Death and the King's Horseman* and *The Strong Breed*. It aimed identified themyths of Yoruba mythology on which the two plays are founded. The task also involved inquiring into rituals employed in the plays while relating the same to Yoruba traditional practices. But the study did not merely seek to identify these myths and rituals. It also aimed at revealing the significance that the playwright attaches to these myths and rituals in artistic terms. This means that the myths and rituals have both aesthetic value in the literary sense as well as cosmological signification in

relation to the Yoruba metaphysics. The study has argued that the two texts are steeped into Yoruba mythology.

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