

The Folk Element in African Drama

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Abstract: *The folk element in African literature and drama owes its richness to the various language group of the continent. Wole Soyinka, the famous Nigerian playwright infuses Yoruba culture in almost all of his plays. His plays present the Yoruba idiom of ritual. The ancestral practice of a ritual however gets a different treatment whereby the human society is brought to a new level of communal consciousness. Two plays by Soyinka, which are The Strong Breed and Death and the King's Horseman, employ Yoruba performance idioms with Western techniques and stylistic influences. In both the plays the ritual sequence is interrupted and substituted. This leads to a host of questions like did the ritual complete the cycle of purgation? Or why does the community fall silent at the death of the performers of the rite? My aim in this paper is to answer these questions and also present the dramatics of the Yoruba theatre.*

Keywords: Yoruba, Ritual, Soyinka, Community, Cleansing

1. Introduction

Soyinka's employment of Yoruba performance idiom with western theatrical technique displaces the communal context into the universal realm. *The Strong Breed* and *Death and the King's Horseman* are two such plays based on the performance of a ritual which eventually gets interrupted. However, substitution for the interruption is offered that ruptures the rite proper resulting in a tragic end.

The interruption and the subsequent killing of the carrier or performer of the rite compels the community into questioning the metaphysics of the ritual that leaves them with a guilt laden conscience. The plays ground the questions like has performance of the rite after interruption completed the cycle of purification? The central concern of this paper is the way in which Soyinka imbibes the Yoruba dramaturgy for exposing the universality of a tragedy.

2. Main Text

The Strong Breed and *Death and the king's Horseman* present the idea of a ritual sacred to the Yoruba community. In both the plays the performer of the rite suffers a dilemma of being unfit for the ritual. However the performance of the rite is important as it would ensure purgation of the entire community or communities from sins, guilt etc.

It is suggested that in the Yoruba community the ritual practice are loosely organized around the Ifa oracle. In traditional Yoruba thought existence is conceived as a continuum, as a religious circuit of passage through a world of ancestor-spirits, into which this world's dying are reborn and from which outgoing spirits get stuck halfway between worlds for which the living perform certain rites to ensure the continuity of the cycle.

In *The Strong Breed* the villagers perform the ritual of sacrificing its strangers for cleansing the community of sins as the New Year rings in. In the play *Eman* a western educated stranger is compelled to become the "carrier" of sins. However he offers himself as a substitute for Ifada, the idiot who is chosen for the task. In the other play *Death and the King's Horseman*, the king dies and as a custom his horseman follows after him for the journey to the other world. Elesin who is the horseman of the dead king is

assigned to perform the ritual of sacrificing himself which again involves substitution.

It is seen that in both the plays the act of ritual undergoes an interruption. The interruption for a time being hangs the whole community or communities in the limbo of uncertainty. The rejuvenation of the community depends on the sacrifice of the carrier or messenger whether willing or unwilling. In such a case the interruption becomes ominous.

In *The Strong Breed* and *Death and the King's Horseman* both *Eman's* and *Elesin's* task of performance are interrupted. *Eman* who in ignorance offers himself later flees realising the heinous consequences. *Eman*, whose father was also a carrier in his native village, thought that the rite involved just a show of strength and suffering. The knowledge of the awaiting death made him abjure the ritual and flee. *Elesin* in the other play is very close to his end and the finality of the ritual when it is interrupted by the white couple, *Pilkingses*. They think they have rescued a life but for the natives they have disturbed and interrupted the journey between the worlds.

It is hinted that the main tendency of Soyinka's plays is to place communal redemption with the solitary sacrificial heroism of special individuals rather than with acts of corporate will. The plays also link redemption with a process of personal and communal self-discovery. In both the plays the solitary sacrifice is a compulsion rather than willingness. *Eman's* need for sacrifice arises because the community cannot produce its own carriers. In a fit of anger he says- "A village which cannot produce its own carrier contains no men." (*TSB*, 352)

This already signals at the debasement of the community whose supervisors have not understood the moral purpose of the rite or are too selfish to sacrifice their own breed. Even *Elesin's* desire for the daughter of the market woman just the night before the ritual show his inability to renounce desire which is wrong since the messenger should be purged of all his desires -

Elesin: The world I know is good...bounty, of hives after bees have swarmed.

No goodness teems with such open hands. Even in the dreams of deities.

Women: And we all know you'll leave it so. (*DKH*,1.156)

This shows the betrayal of the entire community to their ancestors.

In both the plays it is seen that the performers are western educated man who however return to their roots willingly or ignorantly to perform the rite. Eman, who left his native village to escape the “carrier” rite as he is the strong breed of his father, finds himself entangled in the same in another village and community. Olunde, the son of Elesin who returns to his village after studying medicine in the west volunteers to become the messenger since his father didn’t perform it. In both the plays Soyinka shows a cyclic relationship to the past. In *The Strong Breed* the father of Eman says-

“Your own blood will betray you son, because you cannot hold it back.” (TSB, 136)

This shows that the community has a strong hold over the individual’s life. Once inside it the individual is automatically tied in the knot of past, present and future.

The western view on the cycle of ritual is very scientific. The West couldn’t find a semblance between the community and the individual will. According to this approach the sacrifice of the individual cannot be seen beneficial for the community as it directly doesn’t do it. The sacrifice doesn’t physically show saving the community and so in *Death and the King’s Horseman*, the Pilkingses find the sacrifice of Elesin as a waste and cruel and so rescues him.

However, the whole ethics of Soyinka’s Yoruba plays is to use the ritual of sacrifice to bring the community and individual to self-knowledge. In the tragic form Soyinka tend to place social redemption not with the collective will but with the exemplary sacrificial suffering of the protagonist who bring human society to new exalted levels of communal consciousness. The death of the carriers in the end of both the plays is followed by complete silence of the two communities. In *The Strong Breed*, the return of the villagers from the site of Eman’s killing is described as “subdued and guilty”. They “looked up at the man and words died in their throats”. The women have the custom of raising curses at the dying man but non could do so. Even in *Death and the King’s Horseman* when Elesin discovers the dead messenger as his son he strangles himself to death. In both the cases the original carrier dies but it brings only blood guilt to the community. In material terms the society is not regenerated by deaths of these figures but is simply better off without them. The closing impression is that no future exists for the rite to continue nor it had purified the community. They leave no successors behind and hence the ritual is ruptured.

3. Conclusion

This paper has explored and examined the dramatics of Soyinka’s Yoruba theatre. In his plays the act of ritual is to bring the individual and the community to self knowledge. The rituals interrupted and substituted however are performed which hardly brings any rejuvenation. Instead the whole community is guilt laden at the unwilling deaths of the carriers. The consciousness thus formed is drastically different from their earlier inception. Thus the rite gets

complete in bringing the community to the knowledge of the worthlessness of the act.

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