

Aesthetics of Yoruba Culture in Soyinka's *Death and the King's Horseman*

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ABSTRACT Culture and religion are two main fibres that sustain the continued existence of a community. However, issues of cultural intersection and the negative effects of cultural shock as a result of colonialism result into diverse forms of confusion in African societies. Considering the relevance of culture, this study investigates the aesthetics of Yoruba culture in *Death and the King's Horseman* by Soyinka. An identification and illumination of the significance of the Yoruba culture in the present society situation serves as a basis for restoring, re-establishing and propagating the Yoruba culture as a panacea for societal cleansing. This study is anchored on post-colonial theoretical framework which explains the unpleasant disruption of the rich values inherent in the Yoruba culture. The study concludes that there is need to resuscitate the best and the progressive aspect of the culture of the Yoruba people in order to redeem the vanishing value systems in an era of globalization.

INTRODUCTION

The role of culture and religion in every society cannot be underestimated. Culture is seen as a defining trait of an individual's distinctiveness. Culture is the collaborative programming of the mind which differentiates the members of one group of people from another (Hofstede 2015: 51). Religion, on the other hand, is an organized system of beliefs, ceremonies, practice and worship that centres on one supreme God or the value of the deity that provides groups of men with a solution to the question of ultimate meaning (Ally and Striegher 2012). "It is the strongest element in traditional African culture which exerts great influence upon the conduct of the African people". Culture and religion are however interwoven, as they both influence each other. According to Omobola (2014), "religion is closely bound up with the traditional way of African life, hence religion shapes the lives of Africans, and at the same time life shapes religion as well." This binding is clearly expressed by Idris (2016), who identified culture as "partly human, partly spiritual and partly materialistic. In the humanistic aspect, culture consists of ideas, values, knowledge, philosophy, laws, and morals and so on. In its spiritual aspects, it consists of system of beliefs and religious practices." In its materialistic aspect, it consists of items and consumer goods made by man as different

from things found in nature. Religion is a collection of cultural systems. Thus, it is difficult to separate the word *religion* from culture.

According to Singh (2013), culture is not static, it develops and changes as the belief system and ways of life of different groups adjust under the pressure of other cultures through colonisation experience, globalization, the mass media and other agents to create new identities. These new identities are grossly in contrast to the indigenous native culture, tradition, legacies and value systems. Thus creating a kind of imbalance, confusion and reoccurring conflict between the newly acquired western life and the traditional African culture. These are noticeable in a postcolonial country like Nigeria where Western culture has had significant effect. Singh (2013: 21), asserts that the "postcolonial experience of most Asian, African and Southern American countries plays an important role in understanding the history and culture of these countries." These histories, cultural practices and intercepting influences are expressed and predicted in literature. Literature mirrors the society such that it reflects the various aspects of human life (social, political, economic, religion, culture and history) in literary form. It exposes and gives more insight to many cultural systems in societies around the world than any other form of writing because the experiences of life which constitute culture are presented in literary works

in a distinctive way. Adejumo (2010) citing Ogun-sina (2006: 15), submitted that “literature plays an important part in shaping or crystallizing the views held by members of the society, views about the world, about man, and about society; it is in light of views such as these that the social order is both maintained and changed”.

Objectives

This study therefore aims at examining the aesthetic of Yoruba culture in *Death and the King's Horseman* written by Soyinka. The specific objective of this study is to identify and discuss the culture of the Yoruba tribe and their respective significances. In the remaining parts of the paper, section 2 presents a literature review focusing on colonization, culture and religion in Africa, section 3 presents the discussion with respect to the objective of the study. The Conclusion is presented in section 4.

Colonization, Culture and Religion in Africa

It is a known fact that the majority of the African countries (except Ethiopia) were once controlled by imperialist/ colonialist coming from different parts of the world. It is, thus, safe to say that the traditional culture and religion of these countries must have been, in a way, affected by colonialism. These impacts have been seen affecting culture and religion of different sections of these countries in different ways. The effect of colonisation on Africa's traditional religion is seen in the views of colonialists that African traditional religious practices are fetish, barbaric, ritualistic and demonic. The mode of worship, time of worship, and non-recognition of supreme beings are seen as some ways in which colonisation had influenced African traditional religious practices (Ekeke and Chike 2010).

In Sierra Leone, Limba religion is the indigenous belief of the Limba people, and it is one of the African traditional religions affected by the imperialist western religion. Coulter (2015) posited that the missionaries successfully influenced the government to pass a law that anyone found trading on the Sabbath should be brutally dealt with. Conteh (2007) summarized the effect of colonisation on Limba religion as including; non-public practise of the religion, the change of names from traditional ones to Christian names (they are made to believe that

as long as they carry their un-Christian traditional names, life will always be difficult for them). The cultural heritage of consulting with ancestors is frowned upon, and many aspects of their language which have to do with Limba culture are dying out because the church views them as evil influences. The negative impact on the Limba traditional religion is seen to have destroyed the foundation of the culture and the young Limbas are also being deprived of their cultural heritage. Homes are being divided because the older people stick to their past while younger people embrace Christianity as their new found way of life. In the Igbo community, the systems of taboos and rituals for ordination that controlled the lives of the Igbos, as noted by Onyeidu (1999), which comprise “swearing on oath, making of blood pacts, trials by ordeal, oracles, vows, secret societies and the meticulous observation of customs and traditions, are no longer strictly observed because of the influences of Christian doctrines.” This also explains why there are so many criminalities in African societies today. People now take oath according to their religious inclination and no longer on the basis of their original rich cultural heritage. This, undoubtedly, has provided room for moral decadence and other evils in our society (Ugwu 1999).

The Yoruba religion was also not left behind. In the early twentieth century, the traditional religions of the Yoruba people altered significantly as a result of colonisation. Where the modes of worship conflicted with Western mores, the ruling colonial powers placed restrictions on religious practices. Night gatherings, so vital to the worship of *Ogun* and the practice of *Ifa*, were severely restricted. The marriage customs of the Yoruba permitted polygamy and incestuous marriages, as well as the practice of marrying a dead male relative's widow and adopting his children. “Europeans also insisted upon burying the dead in communal graveyards rather than the traditional Yoruba practice of burying them in the house, thus interfering with communion between the Yoruba and their dead relatives” (Oyeniyi 2012). In Oyeniyi's (2012) words, colonisation aided by missionary activities was a disruptive force, rocking traditional society to its very foundation.

METHODOLOGY

This paper employs an interpretative analysis of Wole Soyinka's *Death and the King's*

Horseman play with attention to the playwright use of Yoruba culture and religion. The Yoruba tribe is one of the main tribes in Nigeria; they are group people who occupy states in the south western part of the country. These include Ekiti, Lagos, Ogun, Ondo, Osun, Oyo, and part of Kwara and kogi States. The majority of Yoruba people are native speakers of the Yoruba language.

Author's Profile- Wole Soyinka

Akinwande Oluwole Soyinka is known as one of the most decorated African playwrights in the twentieth century. He can be regarded as one of Africa's pungent literary artists who has written profusely to sustain the African cultural norms and values. This outstanding Nobel prize winner was born on 13th July, 1934 in Abeokuta, Nigeria Protectorate, now Ogun State, Nigeria. He was a professor of Comparative Literature at the University of Ife, Nigeria, now Obafemi Awolowo University. *Death and the King's Horseman* (1975) is one of his notable plays. He is also considered a distinguished poet, critic, novelist and theatre director. "Soyinka has strong feelings and roots in Yoruba culture, an element of life that has filled much of his works. Hence he seeks to make the worldview of his native Yoruba relevant to his work as an artist who uses Western forms" (George 2003). "Soyinka can be considered a victim of colonialism, as he witnessed Europeans trying to change his Yoruba culture to fit their own, thus, he acknowledged the dangers and evils of colonialism in every life that has been hurt from its effect" (Wilson 2008). One can quickly perceive that Soyinka is greatly rooted in his indigenous Yoruba territory and is a citizen of the world at the same time.

DISCUSSION

Soyinka amplifies the beauty and significance of his Yoruba culture in *Death and the King's Horseman*. He uses this paradigm in his works to remind the world of its beauty with the focus on how to preserve the elements of his culture that still exist. In *Death and the King's Horseman*, Soyinka shows the aesthetic value of Yoruba culture using the following: clothing as necessity and a cultural symbol, drumming, belief in the existence of gods and death as a religious rite.

Clothing as Necessity and Cultural Symbol

Clothing is a significant factor in human development. This development came as a result of the efforts of man to cover his nakedness and protect himself from shame and the harsh elements of life (Oyeniyi 2012). The idea of covering the body started from man when man decided to cover his nakedness with leaves which were the first immediate materials available to him. Man later graduated to the use of animal skin (hide and skin) which progressed into tanning (Steele 2015: 21). Tanning, according to Bloom et al. (2014), involves "a series of processes whereby raw skins and hides are converted into more durable commodities." These processes are aimed at rendering the skin or hide durable by making it not putrefactive and at the same time yielding a product with technical characteristics suitable for a wide variety of purposes (Akinbileje 2010). In *Death and The King's Horseman*, it is crystal clear that Yoruba traditional attires are no longer merely used as attires to adorn the body occasionally, but have also become the status symbol of wealth, socio-cultural and religious identity of individuals. In our contemporary society, clothes have not lost their traditional savour, although there has been a lot of improvement in their production, design and use. Just as Oyetade (2004) unveiled the idea that human beings would have been ridiculously exposed without cloths, Soyinka, through the character portraiture of Elesin (the king's horseman), showed that a man that is about to perform an important communal assignment deserves nothing but the best attire as a matter of urgency.

The Yoruba traditional clothing is an all-encompassing fashion fabric in the cultural context. Though there are foreign influences in the use of these traditional wear like *aso-oke*, (traditional wear) the Yoruba nevertheless, have succeeded in adapting the traditions of other cultures to meet their needs, while still upholding their cultural identity (Adejumo 2010). This is most vividly expressed in the use of Yoruba traditional clothing. The fabrics are made from either natural or man-made fibres, cellulose or non-cellulosic fibres. Most of these traditional fabrics are very expensive; as such, they were restricted in use. In the traditional past, they were mainly used by Kings, Chiefs, Princes, Princesses and *Oloris* (King's wives), and other promi-

nent persons that could afford them (Akinbileje 2010). Soyinka presents this clothing distinction through the character of Elesin in *Death and the King's Horseman* thus:

ELESIN: Words are cheap. 'We know you for
A man of honour'. Well tell me, is this how
A man of honour should be seen?

Are these not the same clothes in which
I came among you a full half-hour ago.
(He roars with laughter and the women, re-
lieved, rise and rush into stalls to fetch
rich cloths)

IYALOJA: Richly, richly, robe him richly
The cloth of honour is *alari*

Sanyan is the band of friendship
Boa-skin makes slippers of esteem....
(Elesin stands resplendent in rich clothes in
rich clothes, cap, shawl. etc. His sash
is of a bright red *alari* cloth. The women
dance round him... (Soyinka 15 and 16).

A cursory look at the conversation throws more light to the importance of dressing in the Yoruba society and a signifier for the Africans. Dresses are not just worn anyhow, but communicate a lot, as African language. Diyaolu (2010) submitted that the "Yoruba people, among other tribes, attach considerable importance to their appearance to the public. To them, it is socially necessary for both men and women to be well attired on ceremonial occasions, and the dress must be appropriate to the occasion. This is perhaps the reason why the Yoruba say *aso la nki, ki a to ki eniyan*, meaning (It is the cloth we should greet before greeting the wearer), and *eniyan lasoo mi*, that is (people are my cloth)".

The fact that Yoruba people attach so much importance to clothing is represented in Yoruba proverbs. Yoruba proverbs, among many others, illustrate the importance and the value which the Yoruba, like any other ethnic group in Nigeria, attach to issues in different contexts. However, in this context, Yoruba proverbs will be discussed as related to traditional clothing. It is pertinent to note that the use of clothing-related proverbs is not out of place because Yoruba people perceive proverbs as walking sticks of the language, *bi oro ba sonu owe la fin wa a* (proverbs are used to search for words that are missing). Proverbs play crucial roles in imparting meaning and understanding to a given situation. It is a formidable factor in discussions in order to build up an argument or to support a cause. Richards (2002), in his study, defined prov-

erbs as "a rich source of imagery and succinct expression, encapsulating abstract ideas and allusive wording, usually in metaphorical form." Sheba (2000) defined proverbs as words of wisdom meant for only the wise to unfold, thus revealing the lost ideas (Akinbileje 2010).

Suffice to say that some proverbs are purely indicative of the premium value placed on clothing in the Yoruba community, which further buttress what Soyinka tries to portray in his play:

Irinisi ni iseni lojo

A good dress-sense commands respect
*Bi a ba rinrin iya, ti a woso ise wo lu, ig-
bakigba ni won fi I bomi fun ni mu*

If we walk disorderly and dress raggedly into
the town, an unwholesome calabash will
be used to serve one drinking water.

*Eni to kan akanpo ewu ti kuro ni ile san tabi
ko san*

The nobility of someone who is dressed in gorgeous garments is without qualms.

Akinbileje (2010) explained that the measure of respect that is accorded an individual, more often than not, is determined by the quality and value of his or her outlook. Personality here means the total outlook or appearance of a person: it includes clothing and its accessories. The underlying philosophy of these proverbs is admiration and honour. Among the Yoruba, greeting is accorded a very important value; a man or woman is greeted respectfully according to his age, status or dress code. Sometimes a well-dressed person is acknowledged in a gathering, and his vocal contribution accepted while other people who are casually dressed are often ignored or placed lower than the well-dressed. No wonder Elesin Oba (the king's horseman) refuses to be carried away by the women who eulogised him and sang his praises when he was not clothed with a garment of honour to distinguish him from the multitudes (Soyinka 14 and 15).

The first proverb centres not only on the dress but the general comportment of a person. It refers to whatever look a person wears that sums up the way that a person is accessed. Diyaolu (2010) buttressed the fact that, "the dress of an individual is an assemblage of modifications of the body or supplements to the body (Oyeniye 2012). It includes a long list of possible direct modifications of the body such as coiffed hair, coloured skin, pierced ears, and scented breath, as well as garments, jewellery, accessories, and other categories of items added to the

body". The first proverb informs us that the outward appearance of a person speaks volumes on what the general opinion of people will be shaped. A person can be assumed to be of a proud or humble personality based on his disposition or passed off as a humble personality. It is a general perception that someone who dresses well and covers his or her nakedness properly is tagged responsible. This proverb explains that people of questionable traits and unwholesome businesses will not find such decent people appealing; hence they will find it difficult to approach them with their dirty 'theatrics'. One can easily infer through the first proverb that to be less vulnerable in a world like ours, people should dress in the same way they want to be addressed. The other proverbs also reiterate the idea that clothes are signifiers of a person's status and dress sense.

Drumming

Drumming in Yoruba culture is seen as the basis of Yoruba traditional music. It is found in the courts of the Yoruba monarch, the house of the noble and royal families. The Yoruba gods also have their individual drum which they listen to and enjoy. Onongha (2014) gave a reason for this. In his words "appropriate drums must be used for particular *orisa*, otherwise, they [the devotees] will incur the wrath of their tutelary deity". It can be accompanied with songs, chants and dance during ceremonies and worship. Drums are used in worship to evoke the presence of the deity. According to Euba (1990) "Drumming is the one imbued with the greatest spiritual significance. Drum ensembles are generally of two main categories namely: sacred and social. Even though these two categories are not mutually exclusive, Yoruba sacred ensembles are dominated by uni-embranophonic (single headed) membrane drums. Prominent examples include cylindrical drums like *igbin*, *ipese*, and *ogidan*, each of which, like most sacred drums, is associated with a specific spirit or deity".

The importance of drums in Yoruba traditional ceremonies and worship cannot be overstressed. They serve as the media through which the people are delighted in communing with their God and gods. Yoruba drums communicate, like most African musical instruments, though they vary, and the untutored ear cannot understand the rhythms of drums. To the inexperienced ear,

the complex rhythms produced by various drums in a performance may be difficult to comprehend. This, we see in the character of Joseph when Pilkings and Jane do not understand the sound and meaning of drumming in the community which to them constitutes noise while to the drummers and the indigenous people, it has a vital role to the wedding ceremony of Elesin and the ritual. Pilkings asks Joseph: "What's the drumming about?" (Soyinka 32). His response is that he does not know. He does not know the meaning because he is inexperienced. However, to those who understand the language of the drum, the sound produced by each drum is unique, and the resultant music of the patterns of the individual member drums is still more exclusive. The rhythm of the Yoruba drum music is not only interpreted by way of dancing; it can also be interpreted textually. This means that the drum, especially the leading drum, is capable of playing phrases or even sentences verbalized by a chant. This is possible because when a Yoruba master drummer recites the *oriki* (praise) of an *Orisa* (deity) on his drum, he does not merely play a set of rhythms like most other drums do within an ensemble; he verbalizes his knowledge of the *oriki* and of the *Orisa* on his drum. The tonal characteristics of the Yoruba language make the reproduction possible (Idowu 2005).

The Yoruba drum is interrelated to vocal music, though in many cases, the "voice" is not that of human beings but of the drums (Onongha 2014). He highlighted two roles of drums in traditional Yoruba religion: "One function is to enable the worshippers of the gods to bridge the gap between the visible and invisible worlds and bring them into direct contact with all those supernatural forces that control the fate of man. Apart from their role as instrumental accompaniment to recitations, chants and songs during religious ceremonies, drums provide the medium through which the worshippers are in constant communion with their gods". Drums arouse people's emotion especially when they are praised. The Yoruba traditional drum music has "the ability of fusing a community together. It does this by requiring, engendering, and fostering a corporate spirit of togetherness both in the fashioning of the materials for music-making and in the actual making of music" (Onongha 2014).

Belief in the Existence of the Gods

The playwright's allusions to the Yoruba divinities are suggestive of his deep acknowledgement of the numinous space that is dominated by the Yoruba pantheon, which informed the Yoruba universe and general cultural setting. As seen in the words of Elesin:

ELESIN: Death came calling...
 Forwards or backwards now he dare not move
 To search for leaves and make *etutu*
 On that spot? Or race home to safety
 Of his hearth? Ten market-days have passed
 My friends, and still he's rooted there
 Rigid as the plinth of *Oranmiyan*...
 Tremble like wet wings of a fowl
 One day he cast his time-smoothed *opele*
 Across the divination board. And all because
 The suppliant looked like him in the eye and asked,
 'did you hear that whisper in the leaves?'
 'Not I', was his reply; 'perhaps I'm growing deaf
 Good-day'. And *Ifa* spoke no more that day
 The priest locked fast his doors
 ...He wonders if *Elegbara*
 Has tricked his buttocks to discharge
 Against a sacred grove (Soyinka 11, 12 and 13).

According to Oyeniyi (2012), *Elegbara* is the name for Yoruba, *Esu-Elegbara*, (the trickster god) who is best known as the 'trickster' deity. It is said that the first offerings are made to him so that he will not disrupt the proceedings with his mischief. He is also known as the god of choices that sits at the threshold of every decision and offers the options that decide man's future. He is also said to be the messenger between God, the *orisa* (deity) and man.

Oyeniyi (2012) asserts that the West African *Esu-Elegbara* is "a figure of double duality, of un-reconciled opposites, living in harmony, the epitome of the paradox with the capacity to reproduce himself to infinitum". He describes him as the guardian of crossroads, master of styles and of stylus, the phallic god of generation and fecundity, master of that elusive and mystical barrier that separates the divine world from the profane; frequently characterized as an inveterate copula, connecting truth with understanding, the sacred with the profane, text with interpretation. He is also perceived to be the brain behind the link between the grammar of divination and its rhetoric (Ystranger 2011). In Yoruba

mythology, *Esu* (the trickster god) is said to limp as he walks precisely because of his mediating function: his legs are of different lengths because he keeps one anchored in the realm of the gods while the other rests in this, our human world. Alana (2004) explained that *Esu*, the unpredictable god of human conduct, can be both cruel and compassionate, and who reports back to the *Olodumare* (God) on matters relating to human activities. *Esu* acts as an intermediary between other gods and *Olodumare*, and indeed "receives a portion of the sacrifices offered to other divinities so that he might not stand in the way of the sacrifices".

Ifa (divination) is another god in Yoruba mythology. He is believed to have all seeing eyes that can decipher the thoughts and intents of the human heart no matter how deep and deceitful it looks at a particular period of time. Oyeniyi (2012) emphasises that "the divinatory process of *Ifa* (divination) is a complex and elaborate system, usually considered by many academic scholars, anthropologists, and meta-physicians to be one of the oldest and most accurate divination systems in the world". It is also pertinent to note that the *Ifa* priest in the Yoruba setting is called *Babalawo*, *Olodu*, *Elegan*, or *Oluwo*, which all means *Herbalist*

ELESIN: And take my good kinsman Ifawomi
 His hands were like a carver's, strong
 And true. I saw them
 Tremble like wet wings of a fowl
 One day he cast his time-smoothed *opele*
 Across the divination board. And all because
 The suppliant looked like him in the eye and asked,
 'did you hear that whisper in the leaves?'
 'Not I', was his reply; 'perhaps I'm growing deaf
 Good-day'. And *Ifa* spoke no more that day
 The priest locked fast his doors (Soyinka 11 and 12).

In the story of the Not-I bird recounted by Elesin Oba here, *Ifawomi* (divination) is the *Ifa* priest who serves as an intermediary between human beings and the gods. One can draw a similitude between this and the western religion. In Christianity, particularly the Catholics, it is fondly believed that distressed suppliants should send their request to God through Holy Mary. Their faith lies on the notion that Mary, being the mother of the saviour (Jesus Christ), occupies a privileged position of interceding and appeasing God than other deities. Yorubas too

believe strongly that requests channelled through these smaller gods have a way of appeasing the almighty as better intermediaries.

It is, however, inconceivable to digest the Yoruba culture through western theoretical models which is often tilted towards compartmentalisation in its myopic analysis. For a credible and holistic critique of an African discourse, several factors must be looked into. To corroborate this assertion, Dutta and Jamil (2013) rightly observed that there is similarity among all Yoruba forms and cultural manifestations. The arts combine with religion, politics, psychology, and medical practice to construct a complete system.

A cursory look at the dramatic work *Death and the King's Horseman* showcases a perfect blend of all these either in a grand style or introduced in a subtle way. African culture is complete as it parades several professionals who ensure that the society is in order. Sometimes, these roles are collapsed in such a way that they flow into one another, thus making the walls liquid. In Africa, it is never an aberration to find an astute religious leader combining the role of religious leadership with that of a local medical practitioner. Instead of doing guess work, he or she quickly conjures the ancestors or great forbears to know the history behind the patient's illness, the cure and methods of appeasement. After getting privileged information about the patient, this same person provides professional counsel that can help the patient in question recover soon and also dishes out counsel on how to avoid related occurrences. Such a person can also be a political analyst or a powerful individual who shapes public opinion.

With this serving as a backdrop, it is crystal clear that the universe of the Yoruba consists of compound existences simultaneously conceived as bipartite and tripartite. In its bipartite rendition, the universe consists of *aye*- the physical, temporal world of the living, and the heavenly expanse, the eternal, spiritual abode of the supreme being, *Olodumare*, 'the prime mover of things by whom the origin of our inhabited earth was commissioned.' Also inhabiting the heavenly realm is the *orisa* (secondary deities), through whom *Olodumare*, generally perceived of as distant and removed from human affairs, carries out his divine will on earth. Most *Orisa* (deity) are defiled ancestors. However, a few of them have identities quite separate from ancestorhood, and are believed to have existed in heaven before the creation of the earth. In this cate-

gory are *Obatala* (deity), the creator of human bodies and patron god of the deformed and *Esu* (trickster deity), the ambivalent god of chance, king of the crossroads, overseer of sacred institutions and the messenger of *Olodumare* and *Orunmila* (deity of divination). Other inhabitants of the heavenly realm are invisible to the temporal, and the two are not imperceptible to one another. Far from being polar existences, these two worlds interact at liminal crossroads called *orita* (junction) where three roads meet, and in other ritual and non-ritual contexts (Oyebade 2001).

Death as a Religious Rite

Death is said to be inevitable. It is generally believed that it is a debt everyman owes. Africans have a common belief regarding the concept of death and the hereafter, and this controls their lives and the natural world. According to Idowu (2005), the Yoruba believes that death is a creation of *Olodumare* the creator. He is of the opinion that *Olodumare* (God) made man for the purpose of recalling any person whose time on earth is fulfilled. Opoku (1993) maintains that death is not the end of life, but a transition from this world to the land of the spirits. To him, death does not sever family connections, but the dead become ancestors, and this should be considered an honour. He added that life after death foreshadows that the dead are not cut off from the living, for they may divulge themselves in dreams or appear to their living relations to give instructions, warnings or information. Death in the play signifies a transition from the visible world to the unseen. It is a way of escape from the visible world. Elesin acknowledges this:

ELESIN: 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? (Soyinka 10).

The rite of passage is necessary for the king and his horseman. The Yoruba people believe that a man joining his king in death is something worthy of admiration and respect. Africans love life, no matter the adversity they are experiencing, and no African will eagerly give in to death. In the case of the king's horseman, he is duty-bound to die in the form of a ritual for the communal benefit. This, we assume from Elesin's words: "I go to keep my friend and master compa-

ny” (Soyinka 13). Iyaloja and praise singer emphasize the importance of ritual death of Elesin:

IYALOJA: It is the death of war that kills the valiant,

Death of water is how the swimmer goes,
It is the death of markets that kills the trader
And death of indecision takes the idle away.
The trade of the cutlass blunts its edge
And the beautiful die the death of beauty.
It takes an Elesin to die the death of death...
Only Elesin... dies the unknowable death of death...

Gracefully, gracefully does the horseman regain

The stables at the end of day, gracefully...

PRAISE-SINGER: The river is never so high that the eyes

Of a fish are covered. The night is not so dark

That the albino fails to find his way. A child
Returning homewards craves no leading by the hand

Gracefully does the mask regain his grove at the end of the day...

Gracefully, gracefully does the mask dance
Homeward at the end of the day, gracefully... (Soyinka 46 and 47)

Hepburn (1998) proposed that the issue of ritual death is crucial; it is an age-old thing, and it involves human sacrifice. The essence of it is to appease the gods and conveys petitions to higher power. The fundamental point is that somebody or something must be given out so that others may live and be blessed. Other things given to the gods include meal and drink offerings.

CONCLUSION

The study reveals the cultural and religious practises of the Yoruba people that they hold in high esteem and their significance. It views culture and religion as vital to human existence. As exemplified by the playwright, the culture and tradition of the people remains part of their life and adds value to the society, and an attempt to disrupt this will lead to a total destabilization of the social system. The restoration of Yoruba people’s consciousness to this beautiful culture is indispensable for societal cleansing.

RECOMMENDATIONS

An identification and illumination of the significance of the Yoruba culture in the present society situation will serve as a basis for restor-

ing, re-establishing and propagating the Yoruba culture as a panacea for societal cleansing. The Yoruba culture should be promoted because it empowers people to make the society worth living in because it promotes positive values and norms that influence people’s behaviour.

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