

A Titanic Resolution of Will: Cosmology and Duality in Soyinka's *DKH*

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**Abstract:**

Wole Soyinka, in his essay “The Fourth Stage,” defines the different stages in the life of the soul in Yoruba belief – pre-birth, life, post-death – and presents an intermediary stage of transition from one to the other. In *Death and the King’s Horseman*, Soyinka uses his own theory of Yoruba cosmology to inform his writing, and *Elesin Oba and Olunde* can be read as not belonging to the normal Yoruba populace, but rather exist purely in the fourth stage of transition since they are destined for death from birth. The main metaphysical conflict of the play, in essence, is *Elesin*’s sense of self-preservation as a “living” man, an ideological point of view that he ought not have due to his position. With this in mind, the play is a tragedy because a) *Elesin* betrays both his individual honor and his duty to the community which forces his son to take his place, and then commits non-ritual suicide without realizing his philosophical shortcomings, and b) although the interactions between the colonialists and the Yoruba natives highlight clear differences in societal and cultural mores, Pilkings’s attempt to save *Elesin* (politically motivated, to be sure) suggests a common humanity that transcends race, but ultimately fails due to a lack of understanding of Yoruba ritual actions. Therefore, Soyinka manipulates his characters to draw an ideological connection between “conflict with the self” and “conflict with community.”

**Essay:**

Wole Soyinka's *Death and the King's Horseman* and his philosophical essay "The Fourth Stage" are foundationally linked with the Yoruba cosmology. Written a year after the play, the essay can thus be read as a sort of post-script for the tragedy's exploration of Yoruba cosmology, and so explains why Soyinka diverges from tradition in a few instances. The most important of these moments is Soyinka's presentation of a stable state of transition between stages of life (pre-birth and life, life and post-death). In an ideological system that is essentially pre-destined, the main conflict in *Death and the King's Horseman* is a paradox of caused by this pre-destination clashing with attempts to take autonomy over one's own fate (Idowu 181); the ritualistic themes therein bind the individual and the community in a cycle of damage and growth defined by change and a hope for the future. Elesin Oba's and Olunde's symbolic reversal of roles demonstrates a concept of transference of responsibility within Yoruba cosmology and the reversal process coincides with a breakdown in ritual mores and conflict in the Yoruba community.

In order to analyze *Death and the King's Horseman* a basic understanding of Yoruba religious cosmology is required to grasp the religious nuances of the play. E. Bolaji Idowu provides an invaluable catalog of Yoruba theological beliefs, including the claims that: Yoruba rituals may be designed to express cultural ethics and imply moderation or even abstinence from ritual impurities such as "sexual intercourse, wine, flesh, and even bread" (Idowu 149); good character which is defined as being chaste, hospitable, selfless, kind, harmless, truthful, and predictable of action, is praised and directly correlates to earning a "good destiny" (Idowu 157-164, 179); consciousness of action is believed to be determined by *Ifá àyà*, the "oracle of the heart" which guides the Yoruba individual in ethical dilemmas (Idowu 154); and death, despite

being largely pre-destined and so “inevitable and unpreventable,” is believed to be brought upon prematurely or violently through one’s “own inordinate actions” (Idowu 188). Each of these aspects of Yoruba theology will be examined in Soyinka’s play.

Soyinka’s play must also be paired with an analysis of “The Fourth Stage” because his personal philosophy is slightly different from tradition Yoruba beliefs. The most important of these differences is idea that the Yoruba corpus of mythology is actually a “collective memory” assembled as motifs for the tragic experience (“The Fourth Stage” 149). Furthermore, Soyinka describes Yoruba tragedy as being characterized by the “fragmentation of essence from self” and is an attempt to understand the “chthonic realm” where willpower and psyche are merged with death and birth (144, 142). Lastly, Soyinka posits his theory of a state of transition between the “stages” of the soul’s existence – between pre-birth and life, and life and post-death – and how tragic terror of change evaporates in these moments of metaphysical abyss (149). *Death and the King’s Horseman* embodies Soyinka’s personal philosophy of Yoruba cosmology and becomes a tragedy accordingly.

The play opens with Elesin at the height of his power; as the “horseman” Elesin is by definition slated for death to guide his deceased king into the “chthonic realm,” or afterlife, and his social position provides him with honor and claim to the world’s sundry pleasures. He is the pride of the community, son to every mother, and in the first couple of pages Elesin displays an acceptance of his duty to die:

The market is my roost. When I come among the women I am a chicken with a hundred mothers. I become a monarch whose palace is built with tenderness and beauty... This night I’ll lay my head upon their lap and go to sleep. This night I’ll touch feet with their feet in a dance that is no longer of this earth. But the smell of their flesh, their sweat, the smell of indigo on their cloth, this is the last air I wish to breathe as I go to meet my forebears. (6)

Along with the apparent acceptance of his fate, Elesin also expresses both nostalgia for the market he has called home all his life and a desire for sensory experiences on his last mortal evening. His character is lauded by the Praise-Singer, and the women of the city follow him through the streets as a sort of honored retinue. Yet, Elesin quickly experiences his first of three moments of hesitation. He stalls by telling the tale of the Not-I bird in which every person is afraid of death and even the “immortal[s] should fear to die,” but bolsters his own ego with the claim that “my rein loosened, I am master of my Fate. When the hour comes watch me dance along the narrowing path glazed by the soles of my great precursors. My soul is eager. I shall not turn aside” (9-10). Canonically suspect to pre-destination just like every person, Elesin presents himself outside of the normal bounds of humanity by having autonomous control over his actions and the *Egungun*-type ekphrasis contradicts itself because it is a way to put-off a duty that he is supposedly not afraid of. Already it can be seen that Soyinka’s personal idea of the tragic hero differs in fact from Yoruba ideology since rituals are meant to express ethical purity but Elesin isn’t full-heartedly welcoming his ethical duty.

Likewise, Elesin’s two other moments of hesitation are examples of the same ritual ethical shortcomings and also show how his character is not that of the “ideal Yoruba” per Idowu’s summary of Yoruba belief: the rage that Elesin displays at not being properly dressed diverges from typically serene ritual practices and the expectation of kindness and predictability, causing his retinue to be “more baffled than ever” (11); his desire for the young bride-to-be is the most overt instance of hesitation seen and does not abstain from the ritual impurity of sexual intercourse. Soyinka provides his own explanation for Elesin’s doubts about his destiny in “The Fourth Stage,” saying “just as man is grieved by a consciousness of the loss of the eternal essence of his being and must indulge in symbolic transactions to recover his totality of being”

(144-145). Elesin is not lamenting his impending death, but rather the loss of his worldly pleasures and so seeks to experience his three favorite aspects of life one last time.

The debate between Elesin and Iyaloja over the girl also demonstrates that the world of the *King's Horseman* has Soyinka's transitional fourth stage as an emphasis; Elesin defends his argument to wed the young girl by saying:

All you who stand before the spirit that dares  
The opening of the last door of passage  
Dare to rid my going of regrets! (16)

As Elesin is “already touched by the waiting fingers of [the] departed,” Iyaloja has no choice to allow the union, stating a hope that the child would be “neither of this world nor of the next. Nor of the one behind us” (16-17). Likewise, the bedsheets at the consummation ceremony are described as having “no mere virgin stain, but the union of life and the seeds of passage” (32). These examples of dialogue show Elesin's unique position as both traveler along the “passage” mentioned, but also the passage itself and everything in between. Mark Ralph-Bowman sums Elesin up as “both the mediator between the dead and the living as well as mediation itself. He is both act and actor” (Ralph-Bowman 84). With these few examples as evidence, it becomes clear that Elesin exists not only in the world of the living but as a duality with the transitory state even before the ritual takes place.

The concept of *Ifá àyà* mentioned by Idowu is important because it essentially the same as the Western concept of an ethical consciousness. However, it is apparent that Elesin's *Ifá àyà* is not an internal voice of reason but is, in fact, Iyaloja; the leader of the women takes on the responsibility of reminding Elesin of his ethical duty to the people of his community – which is to say, “commit death:”

Iyaloja: The living must eat and drink. When the moment comes, don't turn the food to rodents' droppings in their mouth. Don't let them taste the ashes of the world when they

step out at dawn to breathe the morning dew...Eating the awusa nut is not so difficult as drinking water afterwards...we must go prepare your bridal chamber. Then these same hands will lay your shrouds...Prepare yourself Elesin. (18)

Iyaloja cares not for Elesin's doubts and hesitations by now and is pointed in her commands to him. Importantly, she reminds him of his duty to the community from outside his persona, calling into mind the catastrophes of the people should he fail (58); her role appears at the end too as she shames Elesin for his failure and turns to guide the young bride into the unknown future and even then Elesin is aware of her importance to him, asking for understanding from she who was "present at my defeat. You were part of the beginnings. You brought about the renewal of my tie to earth, you helped in the binding of the cord" (56). Throughout the play then, Soyinka is modifying or outright refuting traditional Yoruba beliefs and practices as Idowu summarizes them.

Ultimately, and despite Elesin's bravado and embodiment of Yoruba ideals, he still fails in his duty. The Praise-Singer tells him that in his hands were

Placed the reins of the world...yet you watched it plunge over the edge of the bitter precipice. You sat with folded arms while evil strangers tilted the world from its course and crashed it beyond the edge of emptiness – you muttered, there is little that one man can do, you left us floundering in a blind future. Your heir has taken the burden on himself. (62)

Elesin has failed not only his individual ethics as guided by Iyaloja but also his community, king, and ancestors. The consequences of the catastrophe aren't fully known but it is sure to bring pain and despair to his people. Yet, Olunde is shown to have taken up his father's mantle and kills himself for the good of the whole. This reversal of roles between Elesin and his son is important because it directly concerns individual willpower and a sense of common humanity links bloodlines and embroils Pilkings and Jane into the affair.

Olunde's point of view on the close association of death and responsibility can be seen in the metaphysical debate with Jane:

Olunde: I find it rather inspiring. It is an affirmative commentary on life.

Jane: What is?

Olunde: That captain's self-sacrifice.

Jane: Nonsense. Life should never be thrown deliberately away.

Olunde: And the innocent people round the harbour? (42)

Olunde's point here can be seen as validating the captain's sacrifice for what it is – the survival of hundreds of people for the price of one life – which is entirely contradictory to traditional Western perspectives on suicide. Jane seems to claim that suicide for any reason is futile, and as this statement coming directly before the discussion about the death and destruction of World War II it comes across as especially hypocritical. However, Olunde's claim that "my father has been dead in my mind for nearly a month. Ever since I learnt of the King's death. I've lived with my bereavement so long now that I cannot think of him alive" is to refer back to Elesin's dual-existence within the realm of the living and the stage of transition (46).

Of course, if Idowu's claim about Yoruba pre-destination is correct, then it must be assumed that Olunde was meant to return home and take his father's role all along. However, Idowu also posits the concept that inordinate actions can hasten personal death; if Soyinka's trend of slightly altering Yoruba beliefs remains true here, then it may be supposed that Olunde's death not initially pre-destined but rather occurred because of Elesin's actions. As such, Olunde's ritual suicide was meant to achieve two goals: the first was to ensure the salvation of the Yoruba people by guiding the King through the stage of transition and into the afterlife; the second was personal motivation for redemption in the hearts of family and friends. When talking with Jane about his father, Olunde states:



How can I make you understand? He *has* protection. No one can undertake what he does tonight without the deepest protection the mind can conceive. What can you offer him in place of his peace of mind, in place of the honour and veneration of his own people? (43)

To Olunde, who is a social outcast because of his controversial decision to leave home, earning the “honor and veneration” of his own people would be the greatest reward he could ask for. It may be surmised that Olunde gains this goodwill from Iyaloja, at least, seen in her telling Elesin to “cast your eyes on the favoured companion of the King... There lies the honour of your household and of our race” (61). With this in mind, it becomes apparent that Olunde doesn’t suffer from a “fragmentation of essence of self” and therefore cannot be considered a tragic character according to Soyinka’s own beliefs on Yoruba tragedy. Instead, his character becomes a bridge that successfully links the chthonic realm with the living and ushers the king into the next stage of being.

Olunde also exists as a duality that transcends cultures. James Booth argues that Soyinka’s presentation of Olunde as an African man in the image of the colonizer and the way his dialogue is framed in the “prose of common debate” raises “unmetaphorical questions about the motivations and beliefs of the characters;” essentially, his ritual suicide can thus be ideologically important in two contexts (539). The first is that Olunde “chooses to die” as an act of rebellion against the influence of Pilkings and Jane, upholding a greater argument against colonialism and raising “anti-imperialist sympathy” in the audience (539); the other is that because he had inherited his father’s bloodline and therefore his social position, the “unalterable cosmic law ordains” his death (539). Regardless, Olunde’s suicide can be distilled into what Soyinka terms “a titanic resolution of the will,” since he was not in the ritual trance nor did he have the full support of his community at the fatal moment (“The Fourth Stage 149). Instead, he

was alone and stood on the “spiritual edge” of physical existence and so ended his earthly journey for his community and a common humanity.

It becomes evident, then, that Soyinka’s personal philosophies influenced his portrayal of Yoruba cosmology in *Death and the King’s Horseman* than its actual doctrines, and although he writes about complex and often paradoxical questions, he doesn’t provide straight answers. He doesn’t inform the reader if Olunde’s sacrifice would satisfy the gods, and it is not apparent that it matters. The stage of transition has been experienced by both Elesin and Olunde, and their journey through the temporal realm is over. What matters at the end of the play is a sense of hope, of the future, of the responsibilities that Elesin’s seed will bear for the father’s sins. The individual has lost any meaning within a greater community and the two are bound irrevocably in a cycle of growth and damage. At the end of *Death and the King’s Horseman*, after the dissolution of the self and Olunde’s triumph through the agency of will, it is Iyaloja, the *Ifá àyà*, who acts according to her nature and provides the final advice before walking offstage:

Why do you strain yourself...He has gone at last into the passage, but oh, how late it all is...Now forget the dead, forget even the living. Turn your mind only to the unborn. (63)

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