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Axe 8: Langues, identité et préservation de valeurs culturelles traditionnelles et ancestrales

Reshaping cultural paradigms. A reading of Soyinka's *Death and the King's Horseman*

Abstract: This study reveals the major role played by culture in sustaining cosmic order for the welfare of the society in Yoruba land. Culture represents the social consciousness of a people. For Nketsia Kobina Nana (2013), culture and consciousness are interchangeable. *Death and the King's Horseman* dramatizes a cultural practice in Yoruba land in precolonial time that has generated the clash between the British culture and the Yoruba culture. The article not only portrays the Yoruba attachment to their culture and traditions but also questions the Yoruba tradition of ritual suicide perceived as contrary to human rights and dignity. The play is based on real events that happened in Nigeria in the Yoruba land in 1946. It dramatizes the refusal of the British district officer to allow Elesin Oba (the horseman of the king) to perform his ritual suicide that follows the death of a king to accompany him on his journey. By portraying the Yoruba culture and the Yorubas' struggle to preserve their cultural identity in spite of the opposition of the alien forces, the study shows that no culture should capitulate to another culture. The article proceeds to show how a cultural clash has helped to redefine cultural paradigms.

Keywords: Yoruba culture, colonialism, ritual suicide, cultural clash, tradition

Repenser les paradigmes culturels. Une lecture de la pièce théâtrale *Death and the King's Horseman* de Soyinka

Résumé : Cette étude révèle le rôle majeur joué par la culture dans le maintien de l'ordre cosmique pour le bien-être de la société au pays Yoruba. La culture représente la conscience sociale d'un peuple. Pour Nketsia Kobina Nana (2013), la culture et la conscience sont indissociables. La pièce « *Death and the King's Horseman* » met en scène certaines pratiques culturelles en pays Yoruba pendant la période coloniale et illustre le conflit entre la culture britannique et la culture yoruba. L'article illustre non seulement l'attachement des Yorubas à leur culture et à leurs traditions, mais interroge également la tradition yoruba du suicide rituel, perçue comme contraire aux droits de l'homme et à la dignité humaine. La pièce s'inspire de faits réels survenus au Nigéria, au pays yoruba, en 1946. Elle relate le refus de l'officier britannique de district d'autoriser la population autochtone à accomplir le suicide rituel du cavalier du roi qui doit accompagner le roi dans son dernier voyage après sa mort. En décrivant la culture Yoruba et la lutte des Yorubas pour préserver leur identité culturelle malgré l'opposition des forces étrangères, l'étude montre qu'aucune culture ne devrait capituler devant une autre culture. Par ailleurs, l'article met en lumière comment un choc des cultures a contribué à redéfinir les paradigmes culturels.

Mots-clés : culture yoruba, colonialisme, rituel, choc des cultures, tradition

Introduction

Culture is a common blueprint that characterizes the way a person lives, thinks and interacts. It involves material things such as food, clothing, tools as well as art. It also includes non-material elements like language, beliefs and traditions. Culture is transmitted from one generation to another and constantly evolves due to adaptation, innovation and interaction between communities. Soyinka's *Death and the King's Horseman* constitutes a good exploration of the impacts of colonialism in Nigeria in the Yoruba land. Part of the impacts are the clash of culture and identity. The play is centered on the determination of the Yoruba to pursue their tradition of ritual suicide of the king's Horseman (an official with a high rank in the royalty) in spite of the disruptive pressure of the British district officer who perceives it as a criminal offense. This explains the clash between the traditional Yoruba culture and the British imposed colonial order. For Promise Ogochukwu, the play is Soyinka's "...most famous play" (P. Ogochukwu, 2014, p.13). Ama Ata Aidoo shows a big concern on the play as she declares that *Death and The King's Horseman* "is on the list of the ten books I'd want with me" (A. A. Ata, 2014, p. 43). For Toni Morrison, her admiration for Soyinka totally "increased when exposed to his work in drama- *Death and the King's Horseman*..." (M. Toni, 2014, p. 40). The play displays the unwillingness of a king's horseman to perform the ritual suicide after the completion of the rest of the ritual killings by the members of the community. This shows in a way the unbearable weight of longing and loss coupled with a moment of existential crisis between the Yoruba tradition and the tragic protagonist. The latter's dilemma has generated the need to reshape the Yoruba cultural paradigms. This article answers the following questions? What is the place of culture in the Yoruba land? What is the perception of the Yoruba ritual suicide by the colonialists? What is Soyinka's aim in writing *Death and the King's Horseman*. It is divided into three main parts through a sociological, psychoanalytic and postcolonial lens. First it provides some key aspects of the Yoruba culture in the play. Second it explores the cultural clash and resistance dramatized in the play. Finally, the article shows Soyinka's need for a redefinition of the Yoruba cultural paradigms through the play's resolution.

1. Theoretical Frame work

To conduct this research, the sociological theory is explored to show how the Yoruba society functions. As the play deals with the issue of ritual suicide, the sociological theories of criminal behaviour is worthwhile for the analysis. This study will also use the theory of socialist realism whose proponents write to show "insights into the social problems and developments of their time" irrespective of their social class" (C. David, 2006, p. 57). Moreover, as *Death and the Kings Horseman* portrays the Yoruba cultural practices to suggest a change, it is equally important to use the psychoanalytic theory to examine the author's psyche. The psychoanalytic theory includes "broader cultural and social phenomena, including primitive beliefs, superstition, religion, the nature of civilisation etc." (C. David, 2006, p. 71). The study equally uses postcolonial theory to reveal the power dynamic between the Yoruba people and their colonial masters (E. Said, 1978).

2. Methodology

This study is mainly based on the direct method. So, all the relevant sources to this study are collected from the library and the internet. Soyinka's *Death and the King's Horseman* constitutes the main source used to explore the place of culture in the Yoruba land, the Yorubas' perception of the ritual suicide of the king's horseman as well as Soyinka's view on the old Yoruba ritual practices.

3. Aspects of Yoruba Culture

In 1871, Tylor referred to the word culture as “a complex whole which includes knowledge, beliefs, art, morals, law, customs, and other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society.” (K. N. Nana, 2013. p.175). This perception of culture highlights the belief that culture and social existence overlap. In Africa, each society has its own culture that determines the consciousness of its people. As the word culture embodies a people's beliefs and arts, African writers inspire from their cultural beliefs to write their literary works. The latter's content includes among others, proverbs, songs, dance, riddles, African languages, historical events. For instance, Soyinka's drama is deeply rooted in his rich Yoruba culture. To understand Soyinka's plays, a heavy background knowledge in the Yoruba culture is a sine qua non. The Yoruba culture is rich in different ceremonies that involve among others the naming ceremony, marriage ceremony, the irregular ritual ceremony during the funeral of a King and his horseman and the big yearly festivals generally organized to thank the different gods and the ancestors. The main and common characteristics of these celebrations are drumming, singing, dancing, feasting and sacrifice. Part of the Yoruba traditions is their belief in various gods and spirits. The latter two receive regular worship and sacrifices for the welfare of the whole community. Some of the Yoruba gods are the ancestors who have been elevated to the rank of deities. The Yorubas worship them through the medium of the Egungun masks conceived to immortalize them and allow the living to interact with them during the theatrical performances.

The Yoruba people have their own world view. To put it simple, the Yoruba world view is an overall perspective on the Yorubas' life which includes their culture, beliefs, experience and their common values. The Yorubas also have their own cosmogony which is both a code of conduct that guides the actions of people (what to do or what to avoid). It is also an action system that determines what people do overtly and covertly. According to the Yoruba belief, existence comprises two distinct parts: a world populated by men and an invisible world of spirits. The first world is composed of three worlds: the world of the living, the world of the dead and the world of the unborn. The Yoruba cosmogony (composed of death, birth and reincarnation dogma) constitutes the way these worlds interact. The ritual suicide of the king's horseman is performed to maintain the balance between the different worlds and assure a better life for the dead king in the new world.

To better understand the events in *Death and the king's Horseman*, it is worthwhile to have a background knowledge on the Yoruba world view on death. The philosophy of the reincarnation dogma defends that; death is never perceived as the end of existence but a transmission from one state of being to another, a migration from one world to another. Unlike the other rites of passage like naming ceremony, the enthronement of a king and circumcision, death includes the metaphysical aspects of existence. So, the living, the gods and the unborn interact closely and freely. According to the Yoruba doctrine of the transmigration of souls, dead people are born again in the families of their offspring after their stay in the world of the dead which excludes the concept of hereafter. The new reborn children are named “Babatoundé” (S. Johnson, 1921). This Yoruba term means father has revisited the world of the living which infers that in the Yoruba context; a person never dies. Dead people are even called to interfere in the affairs of the living. The Yorubas generally organize festivals to thank the gods and the ancestors. This is possible during the theatrical performances in which people impersonate the gods and spirits. When the actors become possessed during the performance, their voice and actions reflect those of the gods or spirits being impersonated. During this specific time, the medium mounted by the spirit enters a state of trance and the audience will make direct requests to the gods and spirits. The two latter will speak to the audience to predict the fate of the community and give tips on how to act. So, for the Yorubas,

death is a transition from the world of the living to the world of the dead. It is viewed as a rite of passage and a shift that connects humans to spirits and gods. Soyinka views it as the "endless cord that links us all to the great origin" (S. Wole, 1975, p. 18).

According to the Yoruba cosmogony, man and gods used to live in the same world. The advent of corruption compelled the gods to withdraw from the human world. But the historical and close relationship between man and gods leads the way to the renewal of the relationship. For the welfare of the latter, Ogun commonly known as the god of iron and creativity builds a path that symbolize the "gulf of transition". Soyinka calls the latter "The Fourth Stage" that serves to ensure the continuity of a free interaction between the three different worlds. The Fourth Stage links the three worlds together and constitutes the fourth area of living. Soyinka calls it the area of transition. So, death constitutes the ultimate medium for man to transcend the areas of the gods. In this cosmic circle, the dead have a great influence on the living and decide on the number of the unborn who will visit the world of the living. The play materializes the Yoruba cosmology through the different characters. For instance, Elesin's bride stands for the world of the living. The child in her uterus represents the world of the unborn. The dead Monarch is a visitor to the world of the dead and the king's horseman is the transitional area of existence (M. Maduakor, 1987). After Olunde and his father had committed suicide, Iyaloja (the market woman) showed the link between the three worlds. Addressing the new bride she declares "Now forget the dead, forget even the living. Turn your mind only to the unborn" (S. Wole, 1975, p. 76).

Death and the King's Horseman is a dramatization of the Yoruba world view on death. Soyinka uses the sequences from a historical event to create the plot for the play. The latter reveals the cultural significance of a king's funeral ceremony in the Yoruba tradition. For instance, in December 1946, the monarch or Alaafin of the ancient Oyo state (Nigeria) Oba Siyenbola Oladigbolu passed away. According to the rigid cultural requirements of the Yoruba state, when a monarch dies, he will travel with his most valuable objects like his horse and his dog. The latter two are generally slaughtered in the process. According to the tradition, each Yoruba monarch has his horseman. The latter is a tragic protagonist whose role is twofold: First, he serves as the commander of the king's cavalry during the king's life, and second, he is expected to take his own life when the king dies, to enable the King to cross the fourth stage. The horseman's horrible chore is perceived as "the fatal call of duty" (J. D. Eldred, 1973, p.126). In fact, as the king is dead, Olokun Esin Jinadu (the horseman of the king) is destined for an ultimate sacrifice to "guide the Alaafin's horse through the narrow passage of transition" (G. L. Henry, 2014, p. 57). This is what happened to a horseman's father before him and will happen to his son after him. For an Elesin, ritual suicide is a rite of passage to the world of the ancestors that is linked to the world of the living and the unborn. This is why the whole life of an Elesin is a preparation for this ritual which is the ultimate condition to maintain the world on course.

In *Death and The King's Horseman*, Soyinka uses specific words like "journey", "voyage" and "crossing" to emphasize the theme of the ritual passage. The latter is explained metaphorically through the dance as Elesin says "Dear mothers, let me dance into the passage" (S. Wole, 1975, p. 41). The day of the ritual suicide, the Elesin will listen to the death music until he reaches the stage of a trance. The death music constitutes a stimulus that incites Elesin to take action. During his life, the Elesin represents a mediator between the world of the living and that of the ancestors. Iyaloja refers to him as the intercessor of the living in the world of the dead (S. Wole, 1975). So, once appointed, the Elesin "commissions the splendid gown in which he is going to die, when the appointed time comes." (S. Wole and B. Ulli, 2001, p. 175). The day of the ritual suicide, the Elesin will wear his death gown and dances across the different streets accompanied by the drummers

and the praise singer. During this episode, the population will give him the highest honors as a farewell. When the sun starts to set, the Elesin goes home to share his last moments with his beloved ones. But as the sun sinks, the Elesin will lean back and die willingly. The ritual suicide of the king's horseman is handed down from one generation to another to ensure the continuity and balance in the cosmos and assure order in the Yoruba land. To sustain this tradition, the older son of the horseman replaces his father following his death.

For his endless courage and determination to carry out the noble role of a horseman, the Elesin has as many privileges as the King during his life time. He is highly honored for his title as he declares: "In all my life as Horseman of the King, the juiciest fruit on every tree was mine. I saw,/ I touched, I wooed, rarely was the answer no". (S. Wole, 1975, p. 18). For his important position, the Elesin is given everything he desires to live a life of dignity because the Yorubas believe that "nothing must be withheld from one who has such a great mission" (J. D. Eldred, 1973, p. 128). As a horseman of the King and a traveler to the world of the departed, Elesin's anger is feared because it denotes the ancestor's fury. He is allowed to go to the market place to collect any goods or any woman when necessary (S. Wole and B. Ulli, 2001). The endless privileges given to the Elesin give him the possibility to marry a young girl the day of his ritual suicide as a way of prolonging his sensuality which is the expression of his being. Despite the fact that the girl is betrothed to Iyaloja's own son, Elesin succeeds to get the new bride as a response to his last request because this wedding is a "ritualistic union between life with death" (G. L. Henry, 2014, p.57). Iyaloja approves Elesin's request on the day of his death because she believes that his request is the ancestors' request as she declares: "The voice I hear is already touched by the waiting fingers of our departed. I dare not refuse" (S. Wole, 1975, p. 21). The idea behind this wedding is to compensate the loss of Elesin through the planting of the seed that will give place to something extraordinary.

This implies that when Elesin successfully performs the ritual suicide, the child that will come from his last wedding will be an important regenerative link between the living and the ancestors. According to Elesin, the child that will derive from the union will be Elesin himself as he told Iyaloja "let my going be likened to/ The twilight hour of the plantain " (S. Wole, 1975, p. 20). This means that Elesin will come back the same way the plantain constantly renews its existence. This idea reflects the Yorubas' perception of tragedy because "tragedy in Yoruba mythology and culture is not perceived as the termination of existence. Yoruba tragedy exists in a world that believes very much in the interflux and almost equal partnership or collaboration between the living and the world of the ancestors." (S. Wole and B. Ulli, 2001, p.187-188). This denotes that the aim of the Yoruba rituals is rebirth or regeneration. In fact, the protagonist willingly commits ritual suicide in the name of the whole community and for its welfare. Soyinka views ritual drama as a powerful embodiment of "a cleansing, binding, communal, recreative force" (M. Obi, 1987, p.275). So, when a horseman successfully performs the ritual suicide, the community will experience regeneration.

Part of the privileges granted to a Horseman are honor and respect. For instance, Iyaloja, on behalf of all the women apologizes for offending the horseman of the king to avoid the curse of a traveler. She says: "... he forgives us. What a fearful thing it is when the voyager sets forth but curse remains behind. (S. Wole, 1975, p. 16). Here Soyinka depicts some aspects of the Yoruba cosmos which constitute an unavoidable and threatening fate. As a result, man remains in a close relationship with the nature in a fear driving existence. His life is governed by the fear of the supernatural displeasure due to the violation of the law of the universe, the fear of the social norms that shape the society, the fear of the social taboos and the fear of mysterious creatures. Each member of the society is aware of the code of conduct that hold society together and believes that harmony is only guaranteed through a perpetual connection with the supernatural. So as an agent on transition, a

horseman's anger denotes the anger of the divinities. Additional privileges given to a horseman is his promotion to a higher rank. In fact, when the king dies, his Horseman is promoted to the rank of the King. In *Death and the King's Horseman*, Elesin Oba becomes Elesin Alafin. The word Alafin is a Yoruba term attributed to monarchs of a high rank. Elesin's new position is confirmed through the words of the Praise-singer when he addresses Elesin during his dilemma: "Elesin Alafin, can you hear my voice?" (S. Wole, 1975, p. 41). This also denotes the new link between the spirit of the deceased Alafin and that of his horseman that form a spiritual union.

4. Cultural clash and resistance

In *Death and the King's Horseman*, Soyinka explores the Yoruba cultural heritage and its struggle to survive the assault of alien forces. The play displays the cross-cultural misunderstanding between the British colonialists and Yoruba people. It opens with a big view of the Yoruba market place as a way to show the greatness and vitality of the Yoruba culture. The cultural clash starts when the British officer intervenes to prevent the ritual suicide of the King's Horseman at the right moment of the transition. This is simply because the British law allows nobody to die to accompany a deceased monarch to join the ancestors. The district officer perceives the ritual suicide as strange and barbaric practice. It is also a criminal offense viewed by the colonizers as throwing life away (S. Wole, 1975). The district officer firmly believes in the prolongation of life that is to say even a senseless life must be extended by any means required. As strangers, the colonial couple cannot understand the indigenous culture. In fact, at the time when Elesin was deeply involved in the ritual of meditating himself to death, the district officer orders his arrest for criminal intent because for the white officer, (dat kin' ting must stop" (S. Wole, 1979, p. 36). The treatment given to Elesin by the district officer, reflects the one given to people who attempt to commit suicide in Britain to help them change their minds. Moreover, for the white administration, the Elesin is committing a crime against the Queen of England because his crime deprives her of one of her residents. However, the district officer's intervention could not prevent the Elesin from accomplishing his traditional task as a horseman. What matters was Elesin's weakness. (S. Wole and B. Ulli, 2001, p.184)

The decision of the district officer to stop the Horseman from performing his traditional duties has provoked the anger of the community about both Pilkings and Elesin. The former was hastily compelled to contain what has escalated into a riot. As a result, a group of women led by Iyaloja obstructed the white man's constables during the arrest of Elesin and continuously insult them. In a stage direction, Soyinka shows the treatment leveled against the two constables by the women during the arrest of Elesin: (*With a sudden movement they (the women) snatch the batons of the two constables. They begin to hem them in.*) (S. Wole, 1975, p. 37). Iyaloja treats both the district officer and his constables like evil-smelling goats, cats, pigeons and jackals. The reaction of the women to counter the colonial district officers' decision aims to prevent future disastrous consequences because to prevent Elesin from committing the ritual suicide will generate other deaths in the Oyo state (S. Wole, 1975). As for Elesin who fails to accomplish his duties, Iyaloja cruelly addresses him: "I gave you warnings" (S. Wole, 1975, p. 69).

Olunde's reaction against the white officer's decision to stop the ritual festivities is not impassive. As the first son of the King's Horseman, Olunde is the future Horseman according to the tradition. Yet he succeeds to get out of the traditional confinement imposed to him by the tradition and went to England to study medicine with the help of the colonial district officer (Pilkings). The main reason that motivates Pilkings to send Olunde to England to study medicine is to uproot him. His departure has been the subject matter of misunderstanding between Elesin and the district officer. However,

Olunde's stay in England only broadens his understanding of the western culture and lifestyle but does not impact on his perception of the Yoruba cosmology. Olunde's struggle to defend his culture in front of the British colonialists in spite of his western education foreshadows his determination to commit ritual suicide when necessary. When he hears about the King's death, Olunde heads back home to bury his father a month later according to the tradition. Upon his arrival, Pilkings was reassured that the educated Olunde will help him to calm down the population. However, his stay in England did not impact on his cultural beliefs. He instead uses his background knowledge of the western culture to show the colonialists' bewilderment with the ritual suicide of the Horseman. Addressing Jane Pilkings (the wife of the district officer), Olunde says: "I can see you are shocked by the whole business. But you must know by now there are things you cannot understand- or help" (S.Wole, 1975, p. 58). Furthering his criticism of the westerners' attitudes towards the Yoruba tradition, Olunde reminds the colonizers: "You forgot that I have now spent four years among your people. I discovered that you have no respect for what you do not understand." (S. Wole, 1975. p. 50). In this statement, Olunde aims to challenge the western lifestyle perceived by westerners as the best while African culture remains inherently barbaric. Olunde compares the ritual suicide of the horseman to the atrocities caused by World War II to denounce the cultural relativism and biases used by colonialists to assess other people's behaviours. For instance, Olunde denounces the way the colonialists criticize the occasional ritual suicide of the King's Horseman in the Yoruba land while glorifying their countless casualties of World War II.

In the Yoruba context, Elesin's abortive transition impacts negatively on the Yoruba cosmos. The failure of the Horseman to perform the ritual suicide is a cultural disruption that will generate a dark future due to the lack of resources for renewal. As a result, Elesin's child (Olunde) is not qualified to perform the role of the future horseman. Elesin's suicide is worthwhile for the Yoruba community because on one hand, it brings respect, integrity and inviolability for the Yoruba culture under perpetual assault by the British colonialists. On the other hand, the Elesin's suicide has a political significance because its success or failure determines life and death respectively in the Yoruba land. This is what explains Iyalaja's temper when Elesin fails to facilitate the King's smooth transition to the world of the dead. As a consequence, the King will never reach the ancestors but will be wandering in the void. The Yorubas' view this as an abomination and a severe menace to the communal wellbeing. During his solitary confinement, Elesin explains to the district officer the gravity of his action as follows:

Elesin: the night is not at peace ghostly one. The world is not at peace. You have shattered the peace of the world for ever. There is no sleep in the world tonight".

Pilkings: It is still a good bargain if the world should lose one night's sleep as the price of saving a man's life.

Elesin: You did not save my life District Officer you destroyed it. (S. Wole, 1975, p. 62).

Fueled by disgust for Western hypocrisy and bewildered by his father's dishonor, Olunde chooses suicide to restore his society's honor and atone for his father's perceived betrayal and failure. His prompt decision to commit suicide before his time constitutes his meaningful assertion of the Yoruba culture. His sacrifice becomes more significant than his father's as it shows his deeper conviction. His determination reassures the society that adopting the western life style cannot prevent people from assuring their traditional duties. The district officer's attempt to interfere with the Yoruba people's own traditional practices by preventing the King's Horseman from performing the ritual suicide only contributes to give it all its tragic significance. In *Death and the King's*

Horseman, Soyinka shows that the external factor that meddles with the Yoruba culture does not undermine it, rather it only strengthens it unintentionally. The full account of Olunde's significant and deliberate accomplishment of the role of a Horseman can be seen through Iyaloja's speech when she delivered Olunde's dead body to his detained father who fails to perform the ritual suicide as follows:

Iyaloja: (*moves forward and removes the covering*). Your courier Elesin, cast your eyes on the favoured companion of the King. (*Rolled up in the mat, his head and feet showing at either end is the body of Olunde*). There lies the honour of your household and of our race. Because he could not bear to let honour fly out of the doors, he stopped it with his life. (S. Wole, 1975, p. 75).

This episode pushed Elesin to strangle himself with the chains on his hands and committed suicide in spite of the district officer's helpless attempt to rescue him. Though Elesin's suicide intervenes lately, his determination to redeem himself has given the opportunity to offer the dead King two horsemen instead of one: a traditional and a modern one. Soyinka shows the power and validity of the Yoruba worldview and the way it resists the various assaults in the hands of the western colonialists. Thus, the district officer's interference ended up strengthening the cultural values of the Yorubas.

5. Redefining Cultural Paradigms

Death and the King's Horseman is Soyinka's consistent and unapologetic use of ritual for ideological purpose. The play shows both Soyinka's deep attachment to his culture and his social criticism of some Yoruba cultural practices. It reveals the explicit use of ritual as a means to awaken people's collective consciousness at a given time in history. So, the conflict in the play revolves around an acute political and psychological fear generated by the ritual of self-suicide. As a dramatization of a historical event in the Yoruba land, the play is a call for seminal reflections on a communal deadlock. A people's political unconsciousness is linked to their culture as it forms the vehicle of a people's way of life. The play questions the blind adherence to the indigenous customs that alienate the individual freedom highly defended by Soyinka. It also shows Soyinka's concerns for freedom and his responsibility in the society as an artist and a member of that society. Referring to criminal offence in society Soyinka declares that "when I saw what was happening, I found it difficult to be silent to the point of criminality." (G. L. Henry, 2014, p. 51). Even though the ritual suicide of a Horseman is a legal and highly recommended practice due to its importance in the Yoruba land, a common reader might sympathize with the tragic hero. The failure of the King's Horseman to perform the ritual suicide shows Soyinka's criticism of this practice. Elesin's bewilderment and hesitation, his courage and his failure denote a crisis and transformation of beliefs that go back and forth between the Yoruba culture and the foreign influence. His life instinct is apparent through his desire to take a new bride the day of his death. During his preparation for the ritual suicide, Elesin was attracted by the things of the world of the living and feels irritated by the frequent reminding of his death for the welfare of the cosmos. Despite the fact that Elesin dances puts himself into a trance, his devotion to the pursuit of life neutralizes his zeal for action. As a result, the thanatotic is abruptly replaced by the erotic as Elesin's becomes interested by the thing in the world of the living as he declares: "The world I know is good" (S. Wole, 1975, p. 17). Furthermore, Elesin reminds people that to be a Horseman is not his choice. It has been imposed on him by the community as he said "I was born to keep it so" (S. Wole, 1975, p. 17). In reality, the intervention of the district officer to arrest Elesin is a pretext that serves the latter to hide his unwillingness to perform the ritual suicide. To face the series of unrelenting prosecutions from

Iyaloja, Elesin declares: "I need understand. Even I need to understand" (S. Wole, 1975, p. 69). In his attempts to understand, Elesin blames the district officer due to his unexpected decision to stop him from committing the ritual suicide. This decision perceived by Elesin as "the hand of the gods" ends up destroying the remaining traces of will and duty in him. His failure in the accomplishment of his duty reflects his own peace of mind. The dilemma of the horseman is not only individual and collective but also social and psychic (G. L. Henry, 2014). Elesin himself declares: "My will has outleapt the conscious act" (S. Wole, 1975, p. 18). Elesin's deification of mind and will appears through his struggle with fate. He suffers from an internal conflict between his personal desire and the weight of the tradition. As a result, Elesin decides to take a new bride the day of his ritual death for his self-satisfaction rather than the harsh exaction of the tradition which constitutes his tragic flaw. As a tragic hero, his failure results from the convergence of the forces of good and that of the evil which generate in him the common fear facing any tragic hero.

Elesin's failure to perform the ritual suicide at the right moment denotes that the Yoruba unbroken order has now been violently torn. To paraphrase the Praise-singer, the world has been diverted from its true path (S. Wole, 1975, p. 10). Elesin's decision aims to change the course of history by moving the world away from its moorings. It was this change in history that the play aims to teach the new generation in this culture. In an interview with Ulli Beier Soyinka shows the necessity to revisit a given culture as time goes when he states: "a culture constantly transforms itself and a situation arises when an ageold custom becomes difficult to carry out and eventually becomes unacceptable" (S. Wole and B. Ulli, 2001, p.177). Elesin's dilemma as a communal dilemma of preservation of old order in the face of change is implicitly portrayed in his role of the king's horseman (G. L. Henry, 2014). So, the ritual suicide of the King's horseman that is a profound expression of cultural identity in the Yoruba society is suddenly removed from its original context and judged by an outside legal system. Through his decision to prevent Elesin from performing the impending ritual suicide at the right moment, the district officer intends to break the tradition because Olunde who is next in line as king's horseman has received western education. Moreover, Elesin's suicide did not come as expected which means that it will not assure the communal cohesion and survival. Explaining the outcome of Elesin's late action, Iyaloja declares: "He has gone at last into the passage but oh,/ how late it all is. His son will feast on the meat and throw/ him bones. The passage is clogged with droppings from the/ king's stallion, he will arrive all stained in dung" (S. Wole, 1975, p. 76). In this quotation, Iyaloja announces the end of the tradition of human sacrifice in the Yoruba land since both father and son died. For this tradition to survive, everything is centered on the bride who might be pregnant. Even if it is so, there exist no female horseman in the Yoruba culture in case she gives birth to a baby girl. According to the prescription of the tradition, if she bears a male child, the latter is not qualified to take the role of a horseman since he is not Olunde's son.

Conclusion

The article depicts the strength of African culture in general and Yoruba culture in particular through the determination of the indigenous population to defend their cultural practices that are about to be destroyed by the British colonialists. Their struggle denotes a people's quest for identity and dignity and shows that no alien force should denigrate and judge a particular African tradition to stop it from existing. For the Yoruba community, the ritual suicide of the King's horse a month after the King dies is a sine qua non for the welfare of the cosmos. The decision of the British district officer to prevent the ritual death has strengthened the protagonist's decision to reject a duty imposed on him by the tradition. The play aims to criticize and incite people to rethink some cultural

practices in order to bring change. Elesin embodies the spirit of this change to shows that no culture is static.

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