

**Modern African Drama and the
Philosophy of Life After Death:
Lessons from Soyinka's *Death and the
King's Horseman***

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Abstract

This paper seeks to identify the place of the philosophy of life after death in modern African drama. This is predicated on the need to accentuate the role of drama in fostering the belief system of the people and their values which go a long way in informing their way of life. The philosophy of life after death in Africa is based on African cosmology that death is not the end of life but rather, the beginning of a new phase of life. It stresses that, the soul of man in death transits from the physical to the spiritual essence of being, to join and commune with the ancestral spirits of dead relatives. Using the content analysis method, the paper analyses the philosophy of life after death from the perspective of African Traditional Religion, particularly the Yoruba cosmology using Wole Soyinka's *Death and the King's Horseman* as a paradigm. In achieving this, the paper adopts the Mythodramatic theory advanced by Soyinka which is anchored on myth and the existence of spirit entities as well as reincarnation. The paper thus submits that drama has adequately reflected the theme of life after death as exemplified in Soyinka's *Death and the King's Horseman*. Though life and death are antithetical and cannot come to someone at the same time, when

one comes, the other is certainly bound to follow as revealed by Soyinka that the soul of man is in transition from the world of the living to that of the dead, a journey which Elesin, the horseman is prepared to undertake but is thwarted by personal attachment to the material world and the influence of western religion and culture. The paper therefore recommends that the living should be in a state of constant preparation, readiness and willingness for life after death by purging their soul of all that is against nature and humanity and by detaching their soul completely from materialism in order not to be distracted.

Introduction

Modern African drama has over time championed socio-political, religious, cultural and economic issues of the African society. Also, the African cosmology and ontological worldview with particular emphasis on life, death and the reality of the afterlife have adequately found expression in modern African drama. This may not be far from the fact that death and the afterlife are thus perceived differently depending on global religions, cultures and civilizations since the need for drama to represent the African conception of death and life after death. The Euro-American worldview of life for instance, consists of discrete stages, starting with conception and ending with death which marks the end of life and existence. This is because, on dying, the dead person literally ceases to exist. From the African perspective however, death is understood as an inseparable and continuous life process connecting the physical and the spiritual. Consequently, Baloyi and Makobe-Rabothata defines death as, "a natural transition from the visible to the invisible or spiritual ontology where the spirit, the essence of the person, is not destroyed but moves to live in the spirit ancestors' realm".¹⁴⁸ While the Western culture perceives death as the end of human existence, the Africans holds that death is a transition

¹⁴⁸ Baloyi Lesiba and Molebogeng, Makobe-Rabothata, *The African Conception of Death: A Cultural Implication* (South Africa: University of South Africa Press. 2012), Pg. 235.

from the material to the immaterial essence of existence. This, Mbiti puts succinctly thus, “people do not cease to exist once they are physically dead, instead, they transcend to the spiritual world to live in the community of the living dead”.¹⁴⁹ Life after death is a belief which is in tandem with African culture and religion. Although Christian religion believes in life after death as embedded in the concept of heaven and hell conveyed in the Scriptures (Holy Bible), gaining access to either of these places is dependent on the quality of life lived in the material world which is occasioned by judgment as can be seen in the Holy Bible, “And it is appointed unto men once to die, but after this, the judgment”.¹⁵⁰ The foregoing clearly establishes the concept of life after death according to the Christian religion based on the belief in God Almighty.

However, life after death is fully corroborated in the culture and religious beliefs of the Africans. This is captured in the general worldview of the tripartite cosmic envelope which according to Soyinka cited in Olusegun Adekoya is, “the gulf of transition”.¹⁵¹ Life after death or “the living-dead” is anchored on the concept of ancestors and reincarnation. For instance, *Death and the King’s Horseman* builds upon the true story to focus on the character of Elesin, the king’s Horseman of the title. According to a Yoruba tradition as portrayed in the play, the death of a chief must be followed by the ritual suicide of the chief’s horseman, because the horseman’s spirit is essential to helping the chief’s spirit ascend to the afterlife. Otherwise, the chief’s spirit will wander the earth and bring harm to the people. The first half of the play documents the process of this ritual; with the potent, life-loving figure Elesin living out his funeral days in celebration before the ritual process begins. At the last minute the local British colonial ruler, Simon

149 Mbiti John, *African Religion and Philosophy* (London: Heinemann Educational Books, 1969), Pg. 236.

150 See the Hebrews 9:27 in the King James Version of the Holy Bible.

151 Olusegun Adekoya, “Two Minds, One World: Soyinka and Walcott Meet” in Itibari M. Zulu (Ed.), *Journal of Pan African Studies* (JPAS), Issue 1, (2018), Pg. 582.

Pilkings intervenes, and the suicide is being viewed as barbaric and illegal by the British authorities. This is at variance with the Yoruba cosmology which believes in the existence of death as the bridge between the physical and the spiritual essence of being; it holds that the world is split into two realms, *Aye* and *Orun* which are closely intertwined. Put succinctly, Emma Peters explains that, “the *aye* is the tangible, visible world that beings experience every day; the *Orun* is the spiritual invisible realm inhabited by gods, ancestors and spirits... All deities contained within the Yoruba pantheon are believed to periodically enter the *aye*, and thus can interact and provide guidance, or interferes maliciously in human affairs”.¹⁵² It is believed that two important deities, *Ifa* and *Esu/Elegbu* are essentially the gatekeepers between *Orun* and *Aye*. *Ifa*, actually a Yoruba system of divination is presided over by Orumila its mystic founder who also sometimes may be referred to as *Ifa*. Furthermore, Peters aver that, “it is a central belief of the Yoruba that *Ifa* provides them a means by which to understand the forces that influence their lives on a daily basis. They can still be communicated with and are an important source of guidance within Yoruba culture. This can be achieved in one of two ways (i) via masked diviners known as the *egungun* or (ii) by speaking with living relatives who are often believed to be partial reincarnations of departed ancestors. As an example, a female child that a diviner realizes is an incarnation of her departed grandmother, she would be named *Yetunde*, literally “mother-has-returned” – the grand mother is believed to remain in *Orun* but part of her, her *emi* literally “spirit” or “breath” will reside in the child”.¹⁵³

152 Peters Glory Emma, “Concept and Essence of the Supernatural in Relation to African Worldview. A Study of Clark’s *Ozidi* and Soyinka’s *Death and the King’s Horseman*”. (Master of Arts (M.A) Dissertation submitted to the University of Nigeria Nsukka, 2014), Pg. 84.

153 Peters Glory Emma. “Concept and Essence of the Supernatural in Relation to African Worldview. A Study of Clark’s *Ozidi* and Soyinka’s *Death and the King’s Horseman*”. Pg. 84.

Similarly, the Alekwu spirits of the Idoma people of Benue State is a good example of life after death because, Alekwu is regarded as the reincarnated spirits of dead folks. Advancing further, Emmanuel Inedu submits that, "Alekwu is one of the most crucial and vibrant aspects of the Idoma people's rich cultural, social, religious and mythic belief system that has stood the test of time and weathered the storm of westernization and infiltration of the newfangled alien religious beliefs which have sadly shut down and nearly annihilated most cultural practices. The Idoma believe that the living and the dead together constitute the membership of the society. As members, the ancestors occupy much the same position as the elders do for the living"¹⁵⁴. Consequently, Alekwu for the Idoma people is the domain of the living-dead manifesting as spirits in order to influence the activities of the living and the unborn by ushering the safe entry of the unborn into the world of the living as well as caution, correct, punish and protect the living. This paper therefore critically examines the philosophy of life after death as it affects the contemporary Nigerian society looking at the tragedy of Elesin and his spiritual voyage into the living-dead as the comforter (Horseman) of the King as presented by Wole Soyinka in the play; *Death and the King's Horseman* (1975). To properly put into perspective the thoughts in this paper, it is imperative to first clarify key concepts in the title.

Conceptual Framework

Modern African Drama

Modern African drama is the literary tradition which builds on what pioneers such as Hubert Ogunde started in Nigeria. Hubert Ogunde who premiered the emergence of travelling theatre in Nigeria with his play-lets, contributed immensely to

154 Inedu Emmanuel, "Idoma Culture and the *Alekwu* Belief: James Alachi's *Enekole* Considered" in Sunday Enesi Ododo & Jonathan Denen Mbachaga (Eds.), *Theatre and Sociocriticism. The Dramaturgy of James Alachi. A Festschrift*, (Maiduguri: Society of Nigerian Theatre Artists (SONTA), 2014), Pg. 162.

the development of modern drama in Nigeria. Some of his notable scripts include: *The Garden of Eden* and *The Throne of God, Bread and Bullet*, Yoruba Ronuamong others. By the 1940s, a group of literate traders in the South-Eastern market of Onitsha, Nigeria began what was termed the Onitsha Market Literature. The activities of this group saw the birth of what is credited to be Nigeria's first literary drama through EneHenshaw in his *This is Our Chance*. This according to (Adelugba and Obafemi marked the beginning of modern African drama. In their words, "the origin of the contemporary literary theatre tradition must be traced to the drama of Henshaw, which Yemi Ogunbiyi has also described as a more refined form of Onitsha market literature in language and style. Henshaw's contributions, argues Ogunbiyi, "lay, ultimately, in the area of example - the example of simple plays, simple characterization, of uncomplicated plot and even predictable resolutions".¹⁵⁵ However, the birth of serious modern drama in Africa and Nigeria is said to have started in 1960 when Wole Soyinka wrote *A Dance of the Forests*, a play commissioned for the celebration of Nigeria's independence. Soyinka was trailed by first generation playwrights like: J.P Clark, Zulu Sofola, Ama Ata Aidoo in Ghana, Ngugi Wa Thiongo in Kenya. Other notable Nigerians include; Wale Ogunyemi, and Ola Rotimi. Most of their plays mirrored the socio-political problems of the newly independent Nigeria. After the first-generation writers came the second generation of playwrights like: Femi Osofisan, Olu Obafemi, Bode Sowande, Kole Omotoso, Iyorwuese Hagher, Tess Onwueme, Tunde Fatunde, Segun Oyekunle and Sam Ukala.

Modern African drama therefore refers to the plays written by Africans in the post-colonial era to the present. Although, these writers are often categorized into first- and second-generation writers, their works are deeply rooted in protest against alien infringement on African soil, government and

¹⁵⁵ Adelugba Dapo and Olu Obafemi, "Nigeria" in Banham, Martin (Ed.), *A History of Theatre in Africa*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), Pg. 151.

cultural values as well as the attack on dysfunctional society, bad leadership and other social vices which bedeviled the African society. According to Utoh cited in Mgbowon Fumilayo Kemi "African playwrights took a trip into the past with the aim of unearthing the rich culture, philosophy, folktales, poetry and other art forms which the colonialists had tried to bury under the guise of colonization"¹⁵⁶. Modern African writers therefore depict the need to retain the people's culture and re-create from it a set of new values.

The African Philosophy of Life after Death

In Africa, life after death is considered the destination of the soul of man. For instance, while Christianity and Islam accept the reality of heaven (paradise) and hell (eternal damnation) as the experience of life after death, Africans on the contrary have reincarnation and the incarnate being as the philosophy of life after death. Reincarnation for the African is a process of reformation through which man's soul translates from mortality to immortality and back to mortality. It is a kind of spiritual recycling of human essence (soul). In this light, Africans believe that there is life after death and the dead are re-born through a process of reincarnation. Consequently, Ozumba opines that, "The concept of immortality is closely linked with reincarnation. For the Africans, spirits are reincarnated. Both good and bad spirits. The good spirits are welcomed while the bad spirits called Abiku, Ogbanje, Ndew... are either exorcised or rejected. The Africans through divination or other esoteric means claim to be capable of detecting which spirit has reincarnated ..."¹⁵⁷. To this end, Africans believe that life is a continuous process, a journey without beginning and end. On this premise, analyzing the world of Mada (Eggon)

156 Mgbowon Fumilola Kemi, "Aesthetics of Yoruba Culture and Religion: An Examination of the Cultural and Religious Conflicts in the Plays of Wole Soyinka" (M.A Dissertation Submitted to the University of Fort Hare-London, 2015), Pg. 47.

157 Ozumba Godfrey Okechukwu, "African Traditional Metaphysics" *QUODIBET Journal*. Vol.6, No3, (2004), Pg. 10.

people of Nasarawa State, Salehas quoted in Peters observes that,

the world of the living and that of the dead are intricately linked in the culture we are dealing with. The one (spiritual) influences the other (human). The dead having acquired a new status by their transformation into the metaphysical realm are believed to have been endowed with certain supernatural power by virtue of their nearness to the Supreme Being. (The Mada believe in a supernatural world of ancestral spirits, other gods all under the control of a Supreme Being). The ancestral spirits are capable of supplicating and interceding on behalf of the community. They not only influence the community; they also serve as important Mechanisms for social control. They are sometimes invited as divine figures to inflict punishment on the unruly, the prone to non-conformity attitudes and antisocial members of the community ...¹⁵⁸.

The African philosophy of life after death otherwise referred to as reincarnation is closely related to fate and destiny. Destiny is a form of declaration between the Almighty God, the Supreme Being and the immortal beings. Before one is born, it is believed that one would have made a choice of what one would like to become on earth, and it is even held that, one usually made the choice on when one would return to meet the maker. Based on this, Boston as quoted in Peters while discussing the Igala and Igbo religions assert that, "in both the Igala and Igbo religions a person's destiny in this world is believed to depend upon a choice made in the presence of the creator in the spirit world before the person was born. One spirit may decide to become famous in the world of the living; another may choose a life of obscurity or even one of misfortune. Once this destiny has been chosen and approved by the creator

¹⁵⁸ Peters Glory Emma. "Concept and Essence of the Supernatural in Relation to African Worldview. A Study of Clark's *Ozidi* and Soyinka's *Death and the King's Horseman*". Pg. 25-26.

its outline cannot be altered. And in talking of divine assent the creator appoints a particular ancestor of the person concerned to act as spiritual guardian (*ojo or chi*) and to ensure that the destiny is fulfilled. Both the Igala and Igbo believe that there are parallels between the life on earth of the appointed guardian and the destiny that the guardian supervises ...".¹⁵⁹

In the African worldview, the issue of destiny is permanent. The Igbo believe that one's destiny is written on one's palm. The implication therefore is that one's destiny can hardly be altered. If it is written that one would die as a pauper, it will come to pass. If it is written that one's early life would be ridden with misfortunes but at the "evening" of one's life, one would become great, this also must come to pass. In this vein, Opatá states that, "for the Igbo of Nigeria, three principles could be isolated as operative in the shaping of a person's life. These are; *akaraka*; literally meaning lines of the hand, that is lines found on a person's palms; *chi*, that is a person's personal guardian spirit, or the invisible pilot of the day to day activities of human beings; and the physical/psychic endowments of the persons concerned. The Igbo say: *Ife sina chi*, meaning that the things which happen to one are determined beforehand by the dispositions of the person's guardian spirit. At the same time, that the Igbo strongly affirm that they are also quick to point out that, *onyekwe, chi yaekwe*; meaning that if one says yes, the person's *chi* will concur...".¹⁶⁰ African worldview about life and death does not quite differ from other world religions. For instance, in Christianity there are issues of life and death, heaven and earth, heaven and hell, saints, angels, other celestial bodies and Jesus Christ. All of them would like to see that the Almighty God would succeed in His daily duties.

In Igala worldview, Boston in Peters states that, "The ancestors are called *Abegwu* by the Igala... These terms are used

¹⁵⁹ Peters Glory Emma. "Concept and Essence of the Supernatural in Relation to African Worldview. A Study of Clark's *Ozidi* and Soyinka's *Death and the King's Horseman*". Pg.18.

¹⁶⁰ Opatá Damian Ugwutikiri, *Essays on Igbo Worldview*, (Nsukka: A.P. Express Publishers, 1998), Pg. 152.

for the deceased members of patrilineal (sic) kin groups... who are believed to retain a close interest in the affairs of their descendants and to intervene on occasion for either good or ill according to the kind of relationship that has been maintained between the living and the dead. A person who lived a good life and does not neglect to make regular offerings to his ancestors will be blessed by them so that his affairs and family life prospers. A person who incurs the wrath of his ancestors through quarrelling within the family or through the neglect of the proper offering may be visited with sickness or other misfortune by them".¹⁶¹ Among the Yoruba of Nigeria, it is believed that man has a continuous life process which forms a cycle, and that; past, present and future are pertinently conceived and woven together. According to Wole Soyinka "life continues within its manifestation, the ancestral spirits, the living and the unborn ... the past is the ancestor; the present is the living, and the future is the unborn. The deities stand in the same situation to the living, as do the ancestors and the unborn, obeying the same laws, suffering the same agonies and the uncertainties, employing the same Masonic intelligence of rituals, for the perilous plunge into the fourth area of experience, the immeasurable gulf of transition".¹⁶² Reincarnation therefore is the general cosmic reality which explains the African worldview of the afterlife. This is an aspect which depicts the reality of the African. It upholds the belief in tripartite existence of the world of the unborn, the living and the dead. The dead is believed to have an abode in the spiritual realm where the ancestors rest while monitoring the living by ordering their activities and guaranteeing protection.

The incarnate being therefore is the physical presence of spirits in human communities. This presence is made manifest

161 Peters Glory Emma. "Concept and Essence of the Supernatural in Relation to African Worldview. A Study of Clark's *Ozidi* and Soyinka's *Death and the King's Horseman*". Pg.17.

162 Wole Soyinka, *Myth, Literature and the African World* (London: Cambridge University Press, 1976), Pg. 35.

by 'masquerades'. Masquerades in Africa are regarded as ancestral spirits who come out occasionally to commune with the living. Consequently, the incarnate being is a very important aspect of reincarnation because; it is the physical vehicle of reincarnation. Thus, based on the concept of incarnate being in Africa, Miachi quotes AtahIgala thus, "our incarnate beings are efficacious. They have coercive spiritual powers over the living and they can make or mar their present or future life. They have all the powers of the dead which they are and we give to them the regard and respect that we give to our living or dead elders, and, indeed, more".¹⁶³

By the above concept, incarnate beings are not human beings who put on masks in disguise or pretense. Miachi had an encounter with some special women who by their age and status were disposed to discuss the incarnate being phenomenon among the Igala, and according to them, "The incarnate beings are like human beings because they have heads, hands and legs. Some of them talk to us although in languages that are not very clear and understandable to us But they are not human beings. According to our male elders, the incarnate beings are our ancestors. They do not live with us; they live inside the ground, in the bush where only our male elders can reach them.... We, women cannot continue to talk more about this matter because according to our culture, we are not supposed to know about the identity of the incarnate beings ... It is sacrilegious and very risky for us to know and to talk about our incarnate beings ...".¹⁶⁴ In African worldview, incarnate being phenomenon is sacred, sacrosanct, revered and holy. The knowledge of incarnate being phenomenon is never disclosed to children, women, and the uninitiated. Incarnate being phenomenon is the heartbeat of the people's worldview and existence as well as the link between the natural and the

163 Miachi A. Tom, *The Incarnate Being Phenomenon in Africa Culture: Anthropological Perspectives on the Igala of North-Central Nigeria*, (Ibadan: Kraft Books Limited, 2012), Pg. 198-199.

164 Miachi A. Tom, *The Incarnate Being Phenomenon in Africa Culture: Anthropological Perspectives on the Igala of North-Central Nigeria*, Pg. 201.

supernatural powers. Peters quoting Illah asserts that, "Masquerade (incarnate beings) is one of the atavistic modes because it is believed to involve the return of an ancestral collectivity to partake with the living, apart from reincarnation through which the symbiotic balance necessary for the regulation of the social ethos is maintained between the living and the dead. Within this framework, every member of the living is a potential median agent in the sense that he must die and join the ancestors ...".¹⁶⁵ The uniqueness and sacredness of incarnate beings in Africa is quintessential. Similarly, Alekwu ancestral spirits of the Idoma people of Benue State also suffice as a very good example of an incarnate being which checkmates the socio-political, religious and cultural worldview of the Idoma as well as family morality.

Theoretical Framework

This paper adopts the Mythodramatics theory as propounded by Wole Soyinka. This theory finds its footing in myth which is one of the vehicles of African worldview. One of the remarkable components of African drama is the presence of supernatural beings, ancestral spirits, deities, and all other forms of spirit essence. According to Armstrong Keren "myths are universal and timeless stories that reflects and shapes our lives, they explore our desires, our fears, our longings, and provide narratives that remind us what it means to be human".¹⁶⁶ Also, according to Adeyemi, "myths are unique in that they are accounts with an absolute authority that is implied rather than stated; they relate or narrate events and states of affairs surpassing the ordinary human world, yet basic to that world; the time in which the related events take place is altogether different from the ordinary, historical time of human experience. The actors in the narrative are usually gods or other

¹⁶⁵ Peters Glory Emma. "Concept and Essence of the Supernatural in Relation to African Worldview. A Study of Clark's *Ozidi* and Soyinka's *Death and the King's Horseman*". Pg.54.

¹⁶⁶ Armstrong Karen, *A Short History of Myth*, (Edinburgh: Conongate Books Ltd, 2005), Pg. 1.

extraordinary beings who contributed in certain ways to changing human conditions".¹⁶⁷

The Mythodramatics theory therefore according to Soyinka upholds the importance of a people's myths and legends in their dramatic creations. This is because in myths, the "theatrical manifestation becomes a formative element of the social structure and perpetuates cultural values from one generation to another to continuously recreate and sustain African drama".¹⁶⁸ This paper finds it accurate to discuss; *Death and the King's Horseman* as a play which is built on, myth as it relates to the socio-political and religious worldview of Africans, particular as it relates to the Yoruba cosmology in the representation of the throes of Elesin.

African Drama and the Philosophy of Life after Death

There are plays that are written based on the existence of the African philosophy of life after death. Although these plays may not be many, they have properly projected the tripartite existence of the human soul as advanced by Wole Soyinka. These plays are often adapted from communal realities such as; myths, history, legends and folklores. According to Ahmed Yerima, "a good example is when Soyinka takes the historical legend of the Elesin of Oyo in 1945, in his play, *Death and the King's Horseman*, and lifts both the ritual acts of willing death, and the refusal of the Elesin to die to the level where the play attains an international struggle of man with his metaphysical being. Soyinka uses the legend of the Yoruba chief to unveil the cosmic world of the living, the dead and the unborn".¹⁶⁹ It is from these realities that the play, *Death and the King's*

167 Adeyemi, Sola. "Zulu Myth and Ritual in Selected Plays by Mbongeni Ngema and Gcina Mhlope". (M.A Dissertation submitted to the University of Natal, Pietermaritzburg, South Africa, 1999), Pg. 41.

168 Wole Soyinka, *Myth, Literature and the African World*, Pg.148.

169 YerimaAhmeh, "Effective Communication-Developing Scripts from Myths, Legends and National Folklore for National Spirit and Oneness" in *Fragmented Thoughts and Specifics. Essays in Dramatic Literature*,(Ikeja: Books plus Nigeria Limited, 2003), Pg. 48.

Horseman (1975) is created as a reenactment of the reality of life after death in the Yoruba cosmology. Life after death in this play is referred to as the world of the dead. This world is presented as an entity where spirits commune and are ready to receive the king and Elesin his horseman.

In Yemoja Ahmed Yerima, averred that life after death is showcased as majestic for fortunate beings. Adapted from the Yoruba myth of the water goddess, the myth holds that, "Yemoja portrayed as a beautiful woman is forcefully married to her father, and her own son makes love to her. In her bid to escape from him, she falls down and becomes a pull of water and a river".¹⁷⁰ Consequently, life after death in this play is perceived to be a natural force or element which enhances life and productivity, because water is instrumental to life and survival. Yemoja is made to constitute the author and force of the water body. This may be due to her charming beauty and female gender, bestowed with the ability to give birth to a new life.

Similarly, Ahmed Yerima's adaptation of the original version of Yerima is a transportation of a rather immoral or incestuous woman into the story of a beautiful creature, universal figure, and deity. The play unveils the afterlife of Yemoja who is considered to be a water goddess. This position is further advanced by Yerima thus, "I reorganized the myth into a more functional one, which I hope would portray Yemoja as the goddess of beauty, fought over by other hero-gods worshipped in the diasporas".¹⁷¹ In the play, Yerima presents Yemoja as the water goddess as her movement between the sea and her vacation in the human world suggests same. Yerima traces this vacation to Yemoja's infidelity with the god of creation-Obatala, a mischievous act engineered by Esu, a literal figure of evil and betrayal who is a failed suitor of Yemoja. Yemoja's subsequent fear of an imminent humiliation by the sure defeat of her lover, Ogun in a duel with Sango, Obatala's mercenary, withdraws

¹⁷⁰ Yerima Ahmed, *Yemoja*, (Ibadan: Kraft Books, 2002), Pg. 49.

¹⁷¹ Yerima Ahmed, *Yemoja*, Pg. 49.

into the sea, obeying the divine call to take a place of leadership as the water goddess. Life after death is symbolically represented in Yemoja's death. Her death signals her entry into the realm of the spirits to be one of the deities, a force which would later influence the activities of humans according to their communal belief in the waters as a spiritual entity.

Wole Soyinka again comments on the philosophy of life after death in his play, *The Strong Breed* (1975). In this play, he dramatizes the carrier ritual in an unnamed community where two strangers live along with the natives. The first stranger is Eman, the school teacher and the second is Ifada, an idiot. At the end of each year, a rite is performed to expel evil of the outgoing year in order to approach the New Year with a sense of purification. This necessitates the search for a carrier who will be sacrificed in order to dispense the evil of the ending year. According to the culture, a stranger is most suitable for the carrier ritual sacrifice, and Ifada is the choice. However, Ifada is unwilling and Eman has to perform the sacrifice as he belongs to the strong breed. As such, the sacrifice is captured succinctly by Old Man thus:

Old Man: My son, it is only a strong breed that can take this boat to the river year after year and wax stronger on it.¹⁷²

Consequently, the willing sacrifice of Eman depicts the essence of life after death as viewed by Soyinka. Similar to the ritual suicide of Elesin in *Death and the King's Horseman*, death and the afterlife is the conscious transition into the supernatural world in order to protect and preserve the living as can be seen in the selflessness of Eman, a strong breed. The play, *The Strong Breed* suggests that death is the gateway to the afterlife, and the afterlife is a crucial element of providence for the living. This is because in the play, Soyinka presents a ritual based on Yoruba festival which ushers in the New Year in the sense that life after death is the determinant for success and or failure in

172 Wole Soyinka, *The Strong Breed*, (USA: Oxford University Press, 1973), Pg. 23.

the land of the living. This is vividly portrayed in the sacrifice of the carrier whose death liberates an entire community.

Similarly, Femi Osofisan on a reactionary drama, strengthens Soyinka's view on the philosophy of life after death in his play, *No More the Wasted Breed*. The play may suggest a violent rejection of the capitalist tendencies of the gods on whose account failure or success is attained in the land of the living, but it has concretized the reality of life after death. The play, *No More the Wasted Breed* (1999) begins as Saluga attempts to stop Biokun from performing the carrier ritual. The priest of Olokun comes in accompanied by Olokun and Elesu transformed into old man and old woman discussing the need for Biokun to carry out the ritual. Saluga on the other hand insists that Biokun should not carry out the ritual. Biokun later discovers that his mother caused the sea cult's death. The mother touched his father as he was ready to perform the carrier ritual. This according to the tradition is a taboo as no woman is allowed to touch the carrier while undertaking the ritual. Consequently, Biokun's mother was killed while the god and the goddess took his father to the sea. This led to the realization, as Biokun becomes aware that Olokun and Elesu intend to compel him to take the role of his father as the carrier. Angry about the manipulative antics of Olokun and Elesu, Saluga accuses the god and goddess for taking sides with the most influential in the community to exploit the poor and the helpless. Provoked by Saluga's utterances, Elesu strikes him down which also provokes Biokun. This conflict strips the gods of their respect and dignity; thereafter, Olokun realizes the truth and orders Elesu to revive Saluga. The play ends as Olokun the god and Elesu the goddess retreats into the waters permanently to source for an alternative means of survival while Erindo, Biokun's son revives from his illness, joins Biokun and Saluga to celebrate victory for the living¹⁷³.

While the gods and spirits continuously exploit the living in Soyinka's *The Strong Breed*, in Osofisan's *No More the Wasted*

173 See Osofisan Femi, *Morountodun and Other Plays*, (Lagos: Eesto Printers, 2002).

Breed, the living were able to correct and reorder the relationship between the occupants of the world of the dead, the afterlife. Consequently, life after death is made up of both good and bad spirits and they offer whatever is at their disposal to the living in the process of communing. This implies that, the tripartite worlds are interwoven. Thus, life after death or the divine, unseen immortal world of the afterlife is particularly superior to the world of the living.

Similarly, *Nwokedi*, is another play that revolves around the philosophy of life after death. The play is set in the village of Osioma and the NYSC camp in Bakalori and it opens with Nwokedi Junior who plots against his father's (Nwokedi Snr) going back to the Parliament. Hence, a member of the Ekumeku age grade, Ozoemena Nwakanma, which Nwokedi belongs to, is chosen to replace Nwokedi Snr. This creates enmity between father and son (the Nwokedi's). At the NYSC orientation camp, Nwokedi suddenly realizes that he must be present at the end of year Ekpe festival as the next in line to behead the sacred Ram. He leaves his friends, Habiba and Fingesi behind and heads for Osioma. Back to the village, Nwokedi meets with his in-law, Senator Arikpo who had killed Ezinna, Nwokedi's twin sister and her two children. The news provokes Nwokedi but is calmed by his mother, Mrs. Nwokedi. At the end of the play, the Ekumeku youths come in and seize Senator Arikpo, drags him to the shrine where Nwokedi is waiting to slaughter the Ram; Arikpo is laid beside the goat, while Nwokedi raises his machete, Nwokedi Snr. makes to save Arikpo while his son, Nwokedi Jnr. mistakenly beheads his father. The anger propels Nwokedi who immediately beheads Senator Arikpo.¹⁷⁴

The play reveals the importance of the end of year Ekpe festival of the Ngwa people of Abia by Nwokedi abandoning his national service to attend as the one to usher in the New Year by sacrificing the Ram in order to ensure productivity, success and prosperity of the people. However, the spirits rather prefer that the bad duo of Senator Arikpo and Nwokedi Snr be

174 See Irobi Esiaba, *Nwokedi*, (Enugu: Abic Publishers, 1991).

sent to them for the recompense of their sins against the community and humanity in general. From this perspective, life after death is portrayed as full of rewards or karmic effects. This is because; life after death ensures that through death, both the good and evil make their entrance into the afterlife. The manner of the passage into the afterlife is symbolically attached to the quality of life during existence in the world of the living as well as the reward to expect in the afterlife in relation to the folks of the dead still in existence in the world of the living.

Synopsis of Death and the King's Horseman

Elesin is a prominent chief and the King's Chief horseman. The King died a month ago and is to be buried tonight. According to the local law, his dog, his favourite horse and his horseman must accompany him to the world of ancestors. Elesin is ready but just before his departure, he notices a beautiful girl at the market and decides to marry her before leaving this world. Though the girl is engaged, Iyaloga, the "mother" of the market, does not dare refuse the wish of the dying man. The District Officer, Mr. Pilkings learns about the ritual suicide from sergeant Amusa while practicing with his wife Jane, the tango for a ball at the English club. Amusa hands him his report on a piece of paper, for he refuses to speak to the couple wearing an African costume of death cult (*Egungun*), a costume that for him has the power of death. Mr. Pilkings then orders him to arrest Elesin. Amusa's action is turned into fiasco by the market women and their daughters and Elesin's wedding night undisturbed, flows "smoothly" into the preparations for dying. At the same time, the ball at the English club advances successfully, honoured by the presence of Royalty, the Prince on a tour of the colonies. While the Pilkingses entertain the company with their native disguise, Amusa arrives to report the failure of his mission. Pilkings leaves to command the operation himself and Jane talks to Olunde, Elesin's eldest son, who studies Medicine in England against his father's wish and through Pilkings' help. Informed of the King's death, he has come home to bury his father and

asks Pilkings not to interfere, but in vain. While he seems to hear distant drums announce his father's death and leaves to see his dead body, Elesin is brought in alive and in handcuffs. The shock is deep on both sides. Elesin, humiliated and painfully ashamed, falls at his son's feet, but Olunde refuses to recognize him.

The last scene takes place in Elesin's improvised prison. Pilkings, uneasy, gives him a message from Olunde, who regrets his reaction and would like to have his father's blessing before going back to England soon afterwards, on Olunde's written demand. Elesin's people are let in with a burden, a courier by which (whom) Elesin should send the waiting king a message to tell him that he may set out on the journey alone, without him. When Elesin asks to see the courier, the face of Olunde, dead, is disclosed. The whites are shocked and Elesin, by one quick movement, strangles himself. His young wife, who accompanied him to prison, closes his eyes. The play ends on the conviction that Elesin is going to be the eater of leftovers as Olunde will ride the King in the next world.

Analysis of Death and the King's Horseman

Death and the King's Horseman is a play that reenacts a crucial aspect of the Yoruba cosmology. The play recounts the history which revolves around the Yoruba worldview of the rites of passage into the afterlife. It is believed that a chief's death must attract a ritual suicide of his horseman in a bid to strengthen the afterlife. Hence, the physical life (*Aye*) of the horseman is entirely a preparation towards the journey of the chief and the life which awaits both after death from the physical world (*aye*) into the afterlife (*orun*). Sadly however, an event occurred which sought to distort this age-long tradition and belief system. Following the event in this play, Olagoke Ifatimehin explains that, "The event is premised on the Yoruba custom which stipulates that following the death of the *Alaafin*, the chief of his stables is expected to carry out a ritual suicide in order to accompany him to the ancestral world where the inhabitants of that realm await to welcome the *Alaafin* into their fold. This

way, the cycle of Yoruba life is not distorted. In 1946 the chief of the king's stables failed to play his role with the passing of the king, and by implication puts the Yoruba race at the brink of extinction, so to speak".¹⁷⁵ The play therefore is an interplay of history and the mythical aspects of the Yoruba in conveying the crucial nature of life after death. Historically, Ifatimehin quoting Adeniran states that,

History confirms that the real event occurred during the reign of Ladigbolu I, after being on the throne for some 33 years. His horseman, Elesin-Oba (Jinadu) had all along been given some preferential treatment because of the belief that such favours were necessary as a pay-off for the personal sacrifice to be made by the horseman who would be expected to follow the king on his death through suicide. On the death of King Ladigbolu the horse-man made some visits here and there, dressed in white and began dancing through the streets towards the house of BashorunLadokun. All those who saw the event knew that he was preparing to commit suicide. Rather than be allowed to complete the process of dancing to the Bashorun's house and eventually poisoning himself, the British Colonial Officer at Oyo ordered his apprehension and he was detained. As soon as the town's people got to know about the arrest, the horseman's youngest son (Murana) killed himself because he could not stand the stigma of being the son of a coward, a betrayer of tradition and botcher. This is the story that sourced Death and the King's Horseman".¹⁷⁶

In this dramatic creation, Soyinka established contrast in characterization by allowing Olunde, Elesin's son to be more focused and determined in the play while Elesin whose

175 Ifatimehin Olagoke Olorunleke, *Contrapuntal Significations in Wole Soyinka's Death and the King's Horseman*, <http://dx.doi.org/10.4314/ejotmas.v6i1-2.1> accessed 22/04/2020, Pg. 13-14.

176 Ifatimehin Olagoke Olorunleke, *Contrapuntal Significations in Wole Soyinka's Death and the King's Horseman*, Pg. 14

shoulder the debt of honour in ritual suicide hesitates to crossover to the afterlife. He is caught in pessimism, between a new bride and the threshold of the afterlife. Elesin's hesitation to proceed with what is at hand is captured in the following dialogue:

PRAISE-SINGER: Far be it for me to belittle the dwellers of that place but, a man is either born to his art or he isn't. And I don't know for certain that you'll meet my father, so who is going to sing these deeds in accent that will pierce the deafness of the ancient ones. I have prepared my going, just tell me: Olohun-iyó, I need you on this journey and I shall be behind you.

ELESIN: You're like a jealous wife. Stay close to me but only on this side. My fame, my honours are legacies to the living; stay behind and let the world sip its honey from your lips.

PRAISE - SINGER: Your name will be like the sweet berry a child places under his tongue to sweeten the passage of food. The world will never spit it out.

ELESIN: Come then. This 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.

PRAISE - SINGER: They love to spoil you but beware. The hands of women also weaken the unwary.

ELESIN: 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 great forebears.¹⁷⁷

177 Soyinka Wole, *Death and the King's Horseman*, (Ibadan: Spectrum Books Limited, 1975), Pg. 10.

The time of the day is dusk when the market women are packing their wares and closing from the business of the day. While Elesin shows the commitment to go on this spiritual journey, his quest to have a bride for the night indicates his hesitation to honour the debt of this ritual suicide.

The setting is symbolic of the fact that the market is a temporary place of merchandise, in the Yoruba cosmology, the market is a semblance of the physical world and the twilights where the women close their stalls appear to be the preparation to usher the living into the afterlife. This is captured succinctly by Ifatimehin thus,

This is a sign of the arrival of twilight, not only for the market which is a symbolic microcosm of the world for the Yoruba, but of a civilization, of a culture, of a people; aye l'ojaorunni'le. The women who pass through the market on their way home loaded with baskets connote that once the market (world) is over, each would go home (Orun) with one's loaded baskets (deeds). Elesin's market is about to close".¹⁷⁸

However, Simon Pilkings interferes with this rite of passage by ordering the arrest of Elesin Oba. The order to arrest Elesin constitutes the obstacle that stands between the land of the living and the afterlife. In the light of this discourse, Pilkings's interference may not be seen from the perspective of colonial arrogance but the domineering nature of the Christian religion and its belief in death as the end of mortal life and its aftermath of judgment. This contradicts the worldview of the Yoruba cosmology that believes in life after death and reincarnation. In the play, Pilkings attacks the very essence of the Yoruba people and the entirety of their cultural universe. Amusa, for instance, noted as a good and reliable police officer even though serving the white man, Mr. Pilkings has deep respect for his

¹⁷⁸ Ifatimehin Olagoke Olorunleke, *Contrapuntal Significations in Wole Soyinka's Death and the King's Horseman*, Pg. 20.

tradition as shown in his reverence for the Egungunmasque used as costume by his boss, Mr. Pilkings. On the contrary, Joseph who is the houseboy of the Pilkingses has been totally eroded of his tradition by Christianity, religion of the Pilkingses.

Wole Soyinka in this play symbolically creates his characters to represent the cultural dichotomy, dominance of Christianity, the sacrosanct of African ritual and human attachment to mortality and materialism. Characterization in the play is holistically accurate as there is consistency in personal ideologies of the characters, piety, loyalty and social status. The following constitutes the major characters whose personalities and contributions sustain the plot to achieve the intention of the playwright.

ELESIN: He is the protagonist created by Soyinka to represent the contemporary African society. Furthermore, he is a chief, a member of the African royalty, local elite. He is a helper, assistant and confidante to the late king. A character revered by the market women and Iyaloja. His dignity and status are represented by his utterances in parables and proverbs suggestive that he is not an ordinary character. Elesin despite being an honourable man is equally deceitful. In a contradictory manner, Elesin laments how everyone rejects the NOT-I bird, a metaphor which personifies death, yet he doesn't want to face death. His personal dread for death is depicted in his love for affluence shown in rich adornment and likeness for sensuality (his love towards women and particularly, the maiden who is to be married). His attachment to the world of the living discourages him against the debt of honour, by engaging in the ritual suicide to anchor the spirit of the late King to the afterlife.

THE PRAISE SINGER: he is like an acolyte of Elesin. He is a symbol of African royalty, a jester, sage and a bard whose job is to brighten the mood of the Oba by singing praises and advising him. He is always with Elesin until his arrest by the District Officer.

IYALOJA: is the mother of the market, a respectable woman who is portrayed as women leader who leads the market women and girls to ridicule Amusa and his men. She is a firm believer and adherent of tradition who insists that the ritual suicide of Elesin is not obstructed. In the later part of the play, Iyaloja become disappointed in Elesin's cowardice and lambast him for not accomplishing the purpose of his existence, to usher the wandering ghost of the late king into the afterlife. Thus, the play is a threshold for life after death. Her character is created by Soyinka to be a brave and fearless woman.

SIMON PILKINGS: Mr. Pilkings is the name of the District Officer. He represents colonial powers in African territory, a stereotyped name which represents an arrogant colonial master. His character is presented as a foil, specifically due to the disregard for African culture. This is portrayed in the event of his desecrating a mask, the sacred *Egungun*. He wears the *Egungun* without any reverence even after several appeals by his servant and steward who is a Christian convert. He is an arrogant, insolent and domineering character who symbolically represents Soyinka's perception and portrayal of the British colonial masters. He is not sensitive to his wife's advice and suggestions. For instance, his wife, Jane advised him against the use of the word "bastard" but he ignores her. He is sometimes a racist as he generalizes and attributes any negative behaviour or perception to all Africans by using "they". He is presented as the play's main protagonist.

JANE: Jane is Mr. Pilkings's wife. Her character bears some semblance with that of Mr. Pilkins. Although, while Pilkings is authoritative and narcissistic, Jane is rather pessimistic. Jane is careful about the consequences of their actions, particularly as it relates to her husband. Jane shows some disregard also for African culture when she laughs off Elesin's curse at Mr. Pilkings when he sent Olunde away from him. However, her character is more considerate than that of her husband. She equally cares about how the locals might feel about her

husband's actions. She is more or less the sober and rational part of Pilkings. This may be an attempt by Soyinka to establish balance in characterization.

OLUNDE: his character is consistent. Even as he is given the opportunity to study overseas, the African ideals in him still find expression. In fact, the essence of his return to Africa is to ensure that the process of the ritual is concluded. This is shown in the resentment he holds against his father, Elesin when they meet in Act 4. He is very dutiful and shows concern by knowing what to do to repair the damage made by Elesin. Olunde is a determined character who gathered a lot of information about the arrogance of the British people during his stay in Europe.

AMUSA: is the District Officer's Police chief. He is a helpless African controlled by the imperialist powers. Amusa is caught up between the web of obeying his tradition and culture or the foreign powers. He is confused as to where to pay his full allegiance. This is captured when Iyaloja and the women harass him and his boys. He believes in his tradition by showing respect to Egungun when he refuses to look at Mr. Pilkings in wearing the Egungun costume, as it has deep African connotations to death.

JOSEPH: he is a steward boy to the Pilkings. He is a Christian convert who still maintains regard for the African culture. Mr. Pilkings at a point doubts Joseph's Christian faith as a result of how he showed reverence for Egungun costume. He is also a go-between for the Pilkings when they sought to understand somethings about African culture.

In his introductory note to the play, Soyinka warns against seeing the play as an image of a "clash of cultures", or as a cruel dilemma the district officer would experience. He describes the conflict of the play as largely metaphysical, contained in the human vehicle which is Elesin and the universe of the Yoruba mind - the world of the living, the dead and the unborn, and the numinous passage which links it all:

Transition".¹⁷⁹ The play, to a large extent is basically a reflection on life, death and the meaning of the passage between them. Elesin, a man full of energy and love of life, and his friends speak about joys and sorrows of life and about the fact that the inner peace, brought by a sense of the order of the world, is stronger than the desires of earthly life, than the sadness of separation in the following dialogue:

ELESIN: ...You all know what I am.

PRAISE SINGER: That rock which turns its open lodes into the path of lightning. A gay thoroughbred whose stride disdains to falter though an adder reared suddenly in his path.

ELESIN: My rein is 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.¹⁸⁰

On the contrary, he does falter in the end, at the sight of a young beauty, trying not very successfully perhaps, to convince his friends of the purity of his intentions thus:

ELESIN: Who speaks of pleasure? O women, listen! Pleasure palls. Our acts should have meaning. The sap of the plantain never dries. You have seen the young shoot swelling. Even as the parent stalk begins to wither. Women, let my going be likened to the twilight hour of the plantain. ... I am girded for the route beyond Burdens of waste and longing. Then let me travel light let seed that will not serve the stomach on the way remain behind. Let it take root in the earth of my choice, in this earth I leave behind.¹⁸¹

Though Elesin refuses the idea, the King's fear proves to be justified. Over Elesin and Olunde's bodies, at the end of the play, Iyaloja (the mother of the market) appreciates Olunde's

¹⁷⁹ Soyinka Wole, *Death and the King's Horseman*, Pg. v-vii.

¹⁸⁰ Soyinka Wole, *Death and the King's Horseman*, Pg. 14,

¹⁸¹ Soyinka Wole, *Death and the King's Horseman*, Pg.20-21.

bravery and refutes the horseman's inability to perform the honourable duty thus:

IYALOJA: ...He is gone at last but oh, how late it all is. His son will feed on the meat and throw him bones. The passage is clogged with droppings from the Kings stallion; he will arrive all stained in dung.¹⁸²

The praise-singer's last word to Elesin, still alive, concludes:

PRAISE-SINGER: Elesin, we placed the reins of the world in your hands, yet you watched it plunged over the edge of the bitter precipice. You sat with folded arms while evil strangers titled the world from its course and crashed it beyond the edge of emptiness.¹⁸³

There is also a colonial factor which is vehemently contested by Iyaloja and Olunde. For instance, when Pilkings hesitates to let the courier of Elesin's message to the dead king into his cell, Iyaloja posited, "White one, you have a king here, a visitor from your land. We know of his presence here. Tell me, were he to die would you leave his spirit roaming restlessly on the surface of the earth? Would you bury him here among those you consider less than human? In your land, have you no ceremonies of the dead?". Also, Olunde's talk with Jane against the distant sound of drums announcing his father's death contains many arguments of this kind, only expressed in a more intellectual, though increasingly passionate way. Reacting to Jane's refusal of ritual suicide as barbaric, Olunde ask, "Is that worse than mass suicide? Mrs. Pilkings, what do you call what those young men are sent to do by their generals in this war? Of course, you have mastered the art of calling things by names which don't remotely describe them".¹⁸⁴

From the foregoing, the play has dramatized Soyinka's commitment towards maintaining the status quo, the Yoruba

182 Soyinka Wole, *Death and the King's Horseman*, Pg.75.

183 Soyinka Wole, *Death and the King's Horseman*, Pg.75.

184 Soyinka Wole, *Death and the King's Horseman*, Pg.53-54.

worldview as it relates to the passage from the physical realm of existence to the afterlife. It is imperative to note that life after death is crucial, it is the source of the conflict of the play. By the preparation of the horseman (Elesin) to cross over to the afterlife, Joseph quickly identified the symbolic drumming and informs his boss about a ritual that is to take place. With this information, two worldview battles. The African (Yoruba) is to ensure that the Elesin performs the ritual in order to make life after death pleasant for the late chief. On the contrary, an alien worldview to that of the Yoruba tags the ritual "suicide" and declares it illegal thus a crime. The success of this conflict is achieved with Olunde's willingness to replace his father in order to honour the late chief. The success achieved with the passing on of Olunde and Elesin is to restate the position of Soyinka that the afterlife is as crucial as the physical world. In fact, life after death should not be taken lightly as there is the tendency of the dead to be reincarnated to the world of the living. The play stresses the fact that life after death is crucial; hence rites of passage should not be tampered with.

The play which is written in five scenes maintains fluidity of action without interval of which the first and the third scenes are set at the market and the second and fourth in white men's houses. The last scene is set in the prison cell improvised in the residency where the white and the African characters meet. The African and the European elements are alternated by sharp switches from one to another but always the effect is powerful, like in the passage from Elesin's ritual and spiritual dance and song to the Pilkings' tango dance to the sound of a gramophone, between the first and the second scenes. With the death of Olunde reinforcing the cathartic effect of the play, Soyinka seems to present, however that in reality the moral victory of the African is doubtful, for Elesin's failure has only partly been repaired and the world will remain disturbed. Moreover, one of the deaths was useless, for the gods demanded only the "old expired plantain", while the English, by their intervention; have "cut down the sap-laden shoot" to "feed" their "pride".¹⁸⁵ At

¹⁸⁵ Soyinka Wole, *Death and the King's Horseman*, Pg.76.

the end of the last scene however, the thoughts go to the unborn fruit of the union of Elesin and his young bride. This I think could be a call to try and keep the circle of life and the order of the world alive, a sign of hope. It may therefore be appropriate to state that in the play, the result for the community is catastrophic, as interrupting the ritual means the disruption of the cosmic order of the universe and thus the well-being and future of the collectivity is in doubt. As the action unfolds, the community blames Elesin as much as Pilkings, accusing him of being too attached to the material world rather than to fulfill his spiritual obligation. Events lead to tragedy when Elesin's son, Olunde, who has returned to Nigeria from studying medicine in Europe takes on the responsibility of his father and commits ritual suicide in his place so as to restore the honour of his family and the order of the universe. Consequently, Elesin kills himself, condemning his soul to a degraded existence in the next world. Thus, as observed earlier, the way in which the Yoruba people view the world must be understood before *Death and the King's Horseman* can be accurately interpreted. Yoruba culture has several key ideas that are presented using language, imagery, and different behaviours.

The Yoruba worldview sees life as representing a continuum rather than a direct difference between life and death for example, the ancestors are still remembered and this is shown in the *egungun* celebration where men dress up as ancestors, showing how greatly they are represented and how they are honoured as guides to the living. In the same way, the unborn are also seen as potential ancestors returning to life and are therefore very important. One way in which this perspective is presented is through Elesin's role of the King's Horseman and having to commit ritual suicide and thus remind the whole community that life is a continuum and it doesn't end as such with death, in the way that western thought dictates. This can also be seen in Jane's response to Olunde in scene four when he calmly tells her that his father is dead shows that she does not understand the concept of life, death and life after death based on the African perspective as she declares thus:

JANE: How can you be so callous! So unfeeling! You announce your father's own death like a surgeon looking down on some strange ... stranger's body! You're just a savage like all the rest.¹⁸⁶

Jane fails to realise that Olunde is not grief stricken as she would be if her father had died because in the Yoruba worldview, death is not an end rather it is just another state that the spirit goes through. Thus, it is perfectly possible to view this play primarily as being about life and how it is viewed in the Yoruba worldview. Hence, life after death is regarded as a crucial aspect of the Yoruba cosmology as projected by Soyinka in the play, *Death and the King's Horseman*.

The Contemporary Nigerian Society and the Philosophy of Life after Death

The contemporary Nigerian society may be adjudged to be religious than liberal or secular. This may be due to, the belief and adherence to the major religions expressed in the country. These include; African Traditional Religion, Christianity and Islam. The practice of these religions, particularly; Christianity and Islam are evident in the construction of large edifices dedicated as worship centers by individuals, groups and the state respectively. Also, there is a major funding window for pilgrimages to the holy lands of Jerusalem and Mecca by both the state and Federal Government of Nigeria. Needless to state the various national public holidays set aside for different religious festivals across the nation. From the foregoing, it is clear that the African Traditional Religion and other religions practiced in the contemporary Nigeria society are dominated by Christianity and Islam. Consequently, notwithstanding what religion dominates, there is a general belief in the philosophy of life after death. Specifically, there are major determinants believed to influence life after death. These include; fate or destiny and karmic ties.

¹⁸⁶ Soyinka Wole, *Death and the King's Horseman*, Pg. 55.

Destiny or fate is a doctrine that states that human essence in the mortal is controlled by a higher power, an entity that is bigger than humanity. It is a doctrine that states that human life has been ordered and predetermined by these unseen powers which can either be the Almighty God considered to occupy the domain above human community or the gods and ancestral spirits that are living with man but remain mystically unseen. Consequently, fate and destiny detach man from any form of freewill and existential philosophies that may have been advanced by other schools of thought or religious organizations. For instance, Benedict Binebai advancing the position of the existentialists who believe in the freewill of human entity states that, "existentialists argue the fact that existence precedes essence... The destiny of man is placed within himself... it tells him (man) that there is no hope except in his action, and that the one thing which permits him to have life is the deed".¹⁸⁷ However, fate and destiny are like a force which dictates human actions, decision and choice in life. In fact, man is at the mercy of destiny. It is against this background that Binebai submits that, "fate and destiny have power over the determinist world of man. Fate lives and watches over human beings' struggle to destroy its control of human life in a determinist universe".¹⁸⁸

Fate is fully represented in drama if we accept that drama in the words of Julie Okoh is, "an imitative action in the sense that it is a re-enactment of human actions".¹⁸⁹ Therefore, the classical and modern representation of fate in drama is a reflection of human situation. This may have necessitated the position of Clive Krama on drama thus, "drama must be a

187 Binebai Benedict, "Destiny, Self-Reconstruction and Tragic Rage in Alachi's *The Gods are to Blame*" in Sunday Enesi Ododo, & Jonathan Denen Mbachaga (Eds), *Theatre and Sociocriticism. The Dramaturgy of James Alachi. A Festschrift*, (Maiduguri: Society of Nigerian Theatre Artists (SONTA), 2014), Pg. 95, 97.

188 Binebai Benedict, "Destiny, Self-Reconstruction and Tragic Rage in Alachi's *The Gods are to Blame*" Pg. 97.

189 Okoh Julie, "Fundamentals of Drama", in Henry, Leopold Bell-Gam (Ed), *Theatre in Theory and Practice for Beginners*, (Port Harcourt: University of Port Harcourt Press, 2007), Pg. 21.

reminder of experience that induces conformity".¹⁹⁰ In this light, the representation of fate in drama is a continuous reminder to man that his actions are watched and controlled by higher force(s). In the classical play, *Oedipus Rex* by Sophocles, the fate of King Oedipus is determined and physically announced. Although, humans try to reorder and chart a new course for King Oedipus, the spiritual forces succeed as King Oedipus exiles himself after plucking off his eyes as a result of the incestuous karma where he inherits his mother as they both produce children. On a similar plain, Ola Rotimi and AtuAlachi adapted this classical story to the Yoruba and Idoma cultures respectively. The latter's play is titled; *The Gods Are Not To Blame* while the former is, *The Gods Are To Blame*. In these plays, the tragic heroes, Odewale and Akanya both suffer the consequences of determining their actions and destinations as against the dictates of the gods. In the same vein, Wole Soyinka's *Elesin* in the play, *Death and the King's Horseman*, chooses to retract from his ordination as the chosen carrier to escort the late king into the afterlife. The decision of *Elesin* to have a rethink, admire a maiden and adorn himself in expensive apparels as well as the imperialists' intervention to halt the dictates of the gods did not go well as can be seen in the play as both *Elesin* and his son *Olunde* paid the ultimate price. Consequently, the Nigerian contemporary society and the philosophy of life after death are basically permeated by fate and destiny. To concretize this claim, *Binebai* quoting *UwemAffiah* observed that, "by his nature, man seems to have been endowed with intelligence, and the ability to speculate, conceptualize and rationalize. This is why he prides himself as being superior to all other creatures on earth. In spite of these, the affairs of his life, in most cases seem to be beyond his control. His actions often appear to have been poorly thought out and irrational. His behaviour and actions surprise those around him. A careful observation of man brings one to conclusion that he is controlled either by every powerful instinct within him, which

¹⁹⁰ *Krama Clive*, "Drama and Society" in *Henry, Leopold Bell-Gam (Ed), Theatre in Theory and Practice for Beginners*, Pg. 32.

he is incapable of regulating or by some powerful forces external to his being".¹⁹¹ Life therefore is a constant unending struggle between humanity and divinity, as well as the transcendental. On the one hand to keep controlling and ordering man in fate and destiny and on the other, the unsuccessful battle and strive to restructure and untie what divinity has ordained.

Finally, man's conformity or deviation away from the mystical force of destiny attracts rewards and punishments which is the karmic ties attached to the soul of man. Karma is argued to often be compared to Newton's law of cause and effect. However, karma is more of a recompense for actions carried out consciously in a later part of one's life. Karma according to online dictionary refers to a Sanskrit word which means, "Action, work or deed; it also refers to the spiritual principle of cause and effect where intent and actions of an individual (cause) influence the future of that individual. Good intent and good deeds contribute to good karma and happier rebirths, while bad intent and bad deeds contribute to bad karma and bad rebirths"¹⁹². Karma is thus the doctrine of moral causation. It is a major component of Buddhist piety. However, it is a universal element which puts man in check and to continuously remind man of his limitations and helplessness in determining the quality of life after death.

Conclusion

Death is a natural event which man often questions each time it occurs. In the realisation of the effects of karma, man is always apprehensive of death. This is because, life is perceived to be forever, materiality and temperance notwithstanding. This paper demonstrates the reality of the philosophy of life after death which is adequately demonstrated in Wole Soyinka's *Death and the King's Horseman*. The play relies on the African cosmology of the synthesis between the unborn, living and dead. *Death and the King's Horseman* accentuates the concept of

¹⁹¹ Binebai Benedict, "Destiny, Self-Reconstruction and Tragic Rage in Alachi's *The Gods are to Blame*", Pg. 100.

¹⁹² See Online Dictionary, <https://www.dictionary.com> Accessed 12/11/2019.

destiny and fate as the major force of the supernatural in controlling and ordering the steps and actions of man in preparation for life after death

Like other religions, Soyinka using the Yoruba culture dramatizes the need to submit to higher forces in man's voyage to life after death; a realm of the gods, ancestors and spirits who controls the unborn and the living. Soyinka frontally exonerates the spiritual forces like Sophocles and Ola Rotimi, by placing a demand on man to totally detach himself from materialism and distractions in the process of transition to life after death.

Recommendations

This paper has established that life after death is a philosophy that explains the fact that human existence transcends the physical, material or mortal essence of life. Furthermore, life is a continuous journey and communion between the unborn, living and the dead. The soul of man therefore is a limitless, undying entity which finds expression in the 'gulf of transition'. Concretizing this position is the reenactment of the story of Elesin, in the play, *Death and the King's Horseman* where the play presents the essence of selflessness and sacrifice as portrayed by Olunde and Iyalaja and the futility of materialism as shown in the life of Elesin. Consequently, this paper recommends that, the concept of life, death and afterlife should be put in perspective devoid of bias arising from religious dichotomy as in the case of Pilkings interference with the ritual suicide. Also, there should be an African consciousness even in our contemporary clime that life as an unending cycle should be regarded sacred in a bid to avert catastrophe and to enjoy the guidance of the divine or spiritual entity. Hence, death should not be regarded as a dead end to life. From the character of Olunde, we can see a model of loyalty, selflessness and honour. These are qualities lacking in both the social, political and the spiritual aspects of the life of many Africans; thus, there should be a conscious change for a better society.

Finally, the living should be in a state of constant preparation, readiness and willingness for life after death by purging their

soul of all that is against nature and humanity and by detaching their soul completely from materialism in order not to be distracted.