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*African Dynamics in a Multipolar World*

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## **THE PERFORMING BODY: KINESIC CODES IN WOLE SOYINKA'S DRAMA**

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## Abstract

*The powerful presence of the theatricalised post-colonial body, suggests that foregrounding corporeality can be a highly positive, active strategy for staging traditional enactments such as ritual. As a culturally coded activity, dance, for example, has a number of important functions in drama: not only does it concentrate the audience's gaze on the performing body, but it also draws attention to proxemic relations between characters, spectators, and features of the set. Splitting the focus from other sorts of proxemic and kinesic codes, dance renegotiates dramatic action and dramatic activity, reinforcing the actor's corporeality, particularly when it is culturally laden. Wole Soyinka's plays, our raw material, abound in bodies and voices, in spectacle and movement and colour; in multiple settings, flashbacks and dramatic re-enactments.*

**Key words:** Soyinka, post-colonial, drama, body, ritual, dance.

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Drama is the most primal mode of artistic expression, mediated by no pigment, print, or lens, it communicates directly through the raw material of the pulsating human body, its rhythmic movement, sounds, and presence (WRIGHT 1993, p.23). Besides Derek Wright's definition there is another worthwhile quoting. In an article called "Nietzsche, genealogy, history" Michel Foucault (1977) argues "the body is the inscribed surface of events (traced by language and dissolved by ideas), the locus of a dissociated self (adopting the illusion of substantial unity) and a volume of disintegration" (p.148). According to Helen Gilbert and Joanne Tompkins (1996) in their full-length study of post-colonial drama however, Foucault's definition of the body omits a crucial performative fact: the body also moves:

*In the theatre, the actor's body is the major physical symbol: it is distinguished from other such symbols by its capacity to offer a multifarious complex of meanings. (...) it interacts with all other stage signifiers – notably costume, set, and dialogue - and, crucially, with the audience. It is not surprising, then, that the body functions as one of the most charged sites of theatrical representation. (p. 203)*

Furthermore, and referring to metamorphic bodies, they state:

*The powerful presence of the theatricalised post-colonial body, despite (and sometimes even because of) its derogations, suggests that foregrounding corporeality can be a highly positive, active strategy for staging resistance to imperialism. Traditional enactments such as ritual and carnival demonstrate that the performing body can help to regenerate and unify communities despite the disabilities, disintegrations, and specific disconnections of the individual bodies involved. (p. 23)*

If we are to encourage the slow, perplexed growth of a more adequate humanism, the ritual processes still at work in our own societies urgently need to be understood and revalued. Soyinka's theatre makes a formidable contribution to this understanding, through its cultural history, showing an indigenous theatre that has expressed itself for centuries in the form of the festivals and ceremonies that still punctuate Yoruba life. In ceremonial masques where personality transformations were conjured by costume, and vocal projections and distortions by masks, the effect was a powerful combination of the

consecrated and the comic, involving both ecstatic possession and satiric entertainment, solemn and acrobatic dance. It is in one such masquerade, the *egungun* procession of the dead, that the roots of traditional Yoruba drama are conventionally located.<sup>1</sup>

It has been argued by Nigerian writers and critics that the *egungun* is the model, in its bifocal vision of festival dramaturgy, for the two kinds of drama in Soyinka's own theatre: the popular and the hermetic, satiric comedy and metaphysical tragedy, ritual as both a universal and an esoteric idiom. But most important of all Soyinka is not so much for reading as for staging, for performance. His plays abound in bodies and voices, in spectacle and movement and colour; in multiple settings, flashbacks and dramatic re-enactments; in characters made exotic and compelling by their eloquence and laughter, their gift for improvisation and mimicry. Enhanced by the use of lighting and sound effect, the presence of skilful singers and dancers, the lyrical power of language, Soyinka's plays cannot but be entrancing for an audience, and even more so especially, for actors.

In many cases, transformations of the post-colonial body are theatricalised through rhythmic movement such as dance, which brings into focus the performing body. For the description of dance as a culturally coded activity I am indebted again to Gilbert and Tompkins (1996), as they say:

*Dance has a number of important functions in drama: not only does it concentrate the audience's gaze on the performing body/bodies, but it also draws attention to proxemic relations between characters, spectators, and features of the set. Splitting the focus from other sorts of proxemic and kinesic – and potentially, linguistic – codes, dance renegotiates dramatic action and dramatic activity, reinforcing the actor's corporeality, particularly when it is culturally laden. Dance is a form of spatial inscription and thus a productive way of illustrating – and countering – the territorial aspects of western imperialism. Dance's patterned movement also offers the opportunity to establish cultural context, particularly when the dance executed challenges the norms of the*

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<sup>1</sup> The following articles are useful sources of information about the two phases of the *egungun*: "Yoruba Theatre" in *Introduction to African Literature*, rev. ed. Ulli Beier (London: Longman, 1979), pp. 269-280; Oyin Ogunba, "Traditional African Festival Drama" in *Theatre in Africa*, ed. Oyin Ogunba and Abiola Irele (Ibandan, Nigeria: Ibandan University Press, 1978), pp. 3-26.

*coloniser. In this way, dance recuperates post-colonial subjectivity by centralising traditional, non-verbal forms of self-representation. (p. 239)*

To the Yoruba people, located largely in the southwestern part of Nigeria dance is an important and versatile art form that is fully integrated into the culture. The communicative and expressive properties of dance are maximally employed and deployed in different intersocial and aesthetic activities of the people. At significant events, such as end-of-year rituals and festivities, religious observances, rites of passage, political ceremonies, and professional activities, dance not only serves as a popular convivial accompaniment but also serves to illustrate the meaning and underline the symbolism of those occasions. Equally enjoyed for its recreational and its aesthetic pleasures, the dynamic form of dance functions to visually and kinaesthetically enhance and complement the aesthetic as well as the symbolic impact of other art forms, whether verbal or non-verbal, bringing out their full significance and meaning.

The channel of communication most commonly acknowledged in dance is the 'visual', which in fact, until quite recently, was the only channel through which dance was believed to communicate. True enough, the first impact of the dancer on an audience is the physical image of the body in continuous motion creating patterns in space. But also contributing in no small measure to the dancer's image is the perceived total presence enhanced by other visual symbols like costume, mask, make-up, and hand props: symbols in their own right, they lend added significance to the dancer's physical appearance.

Dance is also an integral part of African ritual. Addressing metaphysical beings or powers, it is a poetic, non-verbal expression continually created and re-created by countless performer/interpreters over generations. In its formulations of time, space and dynamics, dance transmits a people's philosophy and values. A primarily vehicle for communicating with the spirit realm, it is at the same time perceived to be an instrument of the gods through which they communicate with the phenomenal

world. As such, ritual dance is an unspoken essay on the nature and quality of metaphysical power. Indeed, for the Yoruba, dance – in certain contexts – is metaphysical force actualised in the phenomenal world.<sup>2</sup>

Wole Soyinka intends that the *corpus* of modern African literature be read in the light of his elaboration of the specific cultural sensibilities, the specific modes of thought and feeling which in Soyinka's view, characterize the 'African World' and are best apprehended in the vast storehouse of paradigms and figurations of creativity, reality and social responsibility discoverable in the mythology, plastic arts, dance, music and idioms of ritual performance of African peoples.

Several of these pre-suppositions are relevant to the framework of his most famous play *Death and the King's Horseman*, especially those to do with the nature of the abyss and the efficacy of bridging rituals.

The first scene opens with a praise-singer and drummers pursuing Elesin Oba, as he marches through the marketplace, an open-air space with quite specific semantic connotations. It is an important place of communication; it is perhaps, in Yoruba and African culture, the quintessential public arena, and not just a place of commerce.

We gradually discover that he is the "King's horseman" – whose pride and duty is to follow the dead king to ride with him to the "abode of the gods".<sup>3</sup> In the words of Joseph, the "houseboy" of the British district officer, "It is native law and custom. The King die last month. Tonight is his burial. But before they can bury him, the Elesin must die so as to accompany him to heaven" (*DKH*, p.28).

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<sup>2</sup> In Yoruba thought the phenomenal world is *ayé*, usually translated simply as world. *Ayé* is a domain where people reside temporarily. In addition, it includes a number of spirits who can become manifest in human or animal form. The realm of the gods and ancestors is known as *òrun*, a permanent otherworldly reality. The relationship of *ayé* to *òrun* is expressed in the proverb "The world is a market, the otherworld is home." (*Ayé l'ojà, òrun n'ilé*).

<sup>3</sup> Wole Soyinka, *Death and the King's Horseman* (London: Methuen Drama, 1975), p. 62. Henceforth referred to in the text as *DKH* followed by page numbers.

The ritual suicide, enjoined upon the keeper of the King's stables forty days after the King's death, is not only to give the King a companion into the other world, but also a way of affirming a sense of cosmos for the culture in general. When Praise-Singer affirms to Elesin that their world "was never wrenched from its true course" (*DKH*, p.10), he affirms it in the confidence that stability is due to attending to the rituals of the ancestors. This affirmation is made to Elesin to keep him in constant awareness of how important it is for him not to fail in the ritual suicide. The preparations for the ritual are both psychological as well as physical, and the music and the drumming that follow Elesin on his every appearance are meant to groom him psychologically for the ritual of transition.

The stage direction says: "He is a man of enormous vitality, speaks, dances and sings with that infectious enjoyment of life which accompanies all his actions" (*DKH*, p.9). His entrance is, in fact, marked by music and dance: a man of very high station presents himself dancing; this alone signals the paramount importance of kinesic signs in which rhythmic movement has a very high status, not just for the young, but also for mature and high-ranked personages. In the light of this impending demise, "that infectious enjoyment of life" may seem a peculiar state of mind for someone preparing for his own death. Dance and music are also in this context synonymous with death. Dancing is the vehicle by which one joins the ancestors. A trancelike dance is the culminating expression of Elesin's final readiness to step into the abyss. On a review of Soyinka's premiere production of the play in Chicago (1979), Gerald Moore wrote:

*On a wide, bare stage a lone figure dances to the antiphonal singing of male and female choruses. He dances from the condition of life towards the condition of death. He has moved beyond words and is now 'darkening homeward' to the urgent music of other voices.<sup>4</sup>*

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<sup>4</sup> Quoted by James Gibbs, *Critical Perspectives on Wole Soyinka* (Washington D.C., Three Continents Press, Inc., 1980) pp. 126-127.

It is significant that in this scene the drumming provides a completely coherent text which Elesin reads and which guides him in his actions. Here we see then the importance of semiotic communication within a unified semiosphere where all codes and signs cohere and make sense. The trance-dance itself is a well-known performance form associated with Yoruba religion. The trance-dancer, or in Soyinka's formulation in "The Fourth Stage", "the possessed lyricist" is the mouthpiece of Yoruba tragic drama and the medium between the worlds of the living and the ancestors:

(...) his [the possessed singer's] somnabulist 'improvisations' – a simultaneity of musical and poetic forms – are not representations of the ancestor, recognitions of the living or unborn, but of the no man's land of transition between and around these temporal definitions of experience.<sup>5</sup>

Transition is therefore the major preoccupation of the play and it is embodied in the tragedy of Elesin. Harmony can only be achieved in this spiritually wholesome universe through a well ordered and well executed ritual observance as accepted by the people. Transition has a series of planes: death is one, continuity in communal growth is another. A break in the link between the dead and the living is a disruption of transition. Elesin is thus expected to perform the duty of bridging the gulf between the dead, the living and the unborn. He is mentally prepared for the final rite. He will be sung into a trancelike state when he will cross the abyss. This final night is his most honoured and he is given lavish treatment so that in the most vivacious moment of life he dies. In his dance-dialogue with his Praise-Singer, he discloses his preparedness to embrace the phenomenon of death using the riddle of the "Not-I bird". Through this riddle he images the traditional act by warding off evil, specifically death, by snapping the fingers round the head, as performed consecutively by the farmer, the hunter, the courtesan, the Mallam, his good kinsman, Ifawomi, and the palm-wine tapper in his story. He

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<sup>5</sup> Wole Soyinka, *Myth, Literature and the African World* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1976), p. 148. "The Fourth Stage" was published as an appendix to this compilation of a lecture course Soyinka gave while in Cambridge in 1974-1975. The essay was written in honour of G. Wilson Knight, who taught Soyinka at Leeds.



assures the Praise-Singer and his community that his own reaction to the “Not-I bird” was completely different:

**ELESIN:** [...]. Not-I  
Has long abandoned home. This same dawn  
I heard him twitter in the gods' abode.  
Ah, companions of this living world  
What a thing this is, that even those  
We call immortal  
Should fear to die.  
**Iyaloja:** But you, husband of multitudes?  
**Elesin:** I, when that Not-I bird perched  
Upon my roof, bade him seek his rest again  
Safe, without care or fear, I unrolled  
My welcome mat for him to see. Not-I  
Flew happily away, you'll hear his voice  
No more in this lifetime – you all know What I am.  
(*DKH*, pp.13-14)

The tale of the Not-I bird, into which Elesin launches, is a performative tour-de-force communicating equally on a physical and musical level. The following stage direction must be kept in mind throughout Elesin's narration of the story:

ELESIN executes a brief, half-taunting dance. The drummer moves in and draws a rhythm out of his steps. ELESIN dances towards the market-place as he chants the story of the Not-I bird, his voice changing dextrously to mimic his characters. He performs like a born raconteur, infecting his retinue with his humour and energy.  
(*DKH*, p. 11)

The opening line, “a brief, half-taunting dance” indicates to what extent and with what subtlety kinesic signs can communicate in African movement aesthetics. It is a physical reply to the admonitions of the Praise-Singer. Particularly the participle adjective “half-taunting” suggests a subjunctive mood which normally one associates only with verbal messages. A visual equivalent to this mood is provided in the next sequence in which Elesin feign “insult” yet only wishes to be garbed in rich clothing, which the women hasten to adorn him with: “Elesin stands resplendent in rich clothes, cap, shawl, etc. His sash is of a bright red *alari* cloth. The women dance around him” (p.17). The scene

serves to underline Elesin's vanity and his universally understandable desire to delay his own death somewhat. Elesin's weakness for profane pleasures, expressed most clearly in his demand for a young bride, is communicated here with visual signs which also set up the connotative field of death and burial. Especially for a Western audience, which associates death with somewhat darker hues, the image of bright red is unusual, if not positively disconcerting.

The overall impact of Scene 1 is based on a complete shift in the normal organisation of Western theatre. The scene is verbally, musically, gesturally and philosophically an encounter with the Yoruba world communicated in its performance aesthetics. For all the colourful evocation of a bygone age, there is no trace of idealisation or of a folkloristic transposition of cultural texts; the integrated performance forms have been refashioned into a fictional ensemble which gives expression to the impending conflict and tragedy.

The transition to Scene 2, the verandah of District Officer Pilkings's bungalow, is constructed around a contrapuntual strategy. It is important to remember that Soyinka demands "rapid scene changes" (p.8) so that the drumming of Scene 1 is almost abruptly interrupted by tango music "playing from an old hand-cranked gramophone" (p.23). The juxtaposition of two culturally different musical codes carries a variety of connotative associations.

The spatial signs provide an equally harsh contrast. The performance space of the market in the previous scene is characterized by circularity, fluidity and constantly changing arrangements created by Elesin, his retinue and the market women. In Scene 2, however, the perspective alters significantly. The audience is confronted with a frontal, linear perspective. This contrast of two types of theatre space has almost a programmatic function: the circularity, multifunctionality of African theatre is contrasted with the fixed structures of Western proscenium staging which places the spectators in

almost the position of a voyeur, looking in on the “Space of Guilt” as Roland Barthes termed the proscenium stage.<sup>6</sup>

Structurally, the scene revolves around three different types of texts – verbal, visual and acoustic – and the difficulties of intercultural communication they can invoke. The first text is visual: the appearance of the Pilkings in *egungun* costumes. Throughout the scene it becomes clear, even to a spectator without knowledge of Yoruba culture, that the Pilkings’ “fancy-dress costume” is for Sergeant Amusa and the house-boy Joseph, a cultural text; it is an ensemble of signs which changes according to the wearer of the dress and according to the context in which it is worn. The messages this text conveys can thus have radically different, even existentially important meanings. The functionalisation of the potentially highly dangerous *egungun* dress (traditionally it is thought to be dangerous, even fatal, to touch an *egungun*) as *fancy-dress* is not just an expression of ignorance on the part of the Pilkings, but is a visual concretisation of the colonial policy to break and destroy the *egungun* cults.

The play highlights the fact that colonialism has not destroyed local pre-contact customs or traditions and it is described by Femi Osofisan as the one in which “Soyinka succeeds most in recreating the complete, credible world of African ritual [because] here the ritual form is not merely recast, but the playwright invests it with a dialectic, and his personal vision intervenes for a crucial interrogation of history” (1982, p.77). As previously stated in this article the play outlines the events leading up to a frustrated ritual suicide which involves Elesin, the guardian of the dead king’s stables. The ritual suicide, enjoined upon the keeper of the king’s stables a month after the king’s death, is not only to give the king a companion into the realm of the ancestors, but is also a way of affirming a sense

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<sup>6</sup> Cf. For example Roland Barthes on the semiotics of the Western stage as a place of artifice and deception: “The Italian-style stage is the space of this lie: everything takes place in an interior which is surreptitiously opened, surprised, spied upon, savoured by a spectator hidden in the shadow. This space is theologically, a ‘Space of Guilt’”- Roland Barthes, “On Bunraku/The Written Face”, *The Drama Review* 15.3 (T50) (1971), pp. 76-82 (p.79).

of cosmos for the culture in general. Elesin's failure to do so will result in the king cursing his people for the humiliation they have caused him. Thus, Elesin's duty to die is inextricably associated with the continued health and viability of his community. When Praise-Singer affirms to Elesin that their world "was never wrenched from its true course" (*DKH*, p.10), he affirms it in the confidence that stability is due to attending to the rituals of the ancestors. This affirmation is made to Elesin to keep him in constant awareness of how important it is for him not to fail in the ritual suicide. The preparations for the ritual are both psychological as well as physical, and the music and drumming that follow Elesin on his every appearance are meant to groom him psychologically for the ritual of transition. In the crucial dance at the end of scene III in which Elesin enters a trance-state, it is noticeable how images of passage dominate the exchanges between Praise-Singer, representing the voice of the dead king, and Elesin himself:

PRAISE-SINGER: If you cannot come, I said, swear  
  You'll tell my favourite horse. I shall  
  Ride on through the gates alone.  
ELESIN:                          Elesin's message will be read  
  Only when his loyal heart no longer beats.  
PRAISE-SINGER: If you cannot come Elesin, tell my dog.  
  I cannot stay the keeper too long  
  At the gate. (*DKH*, p.42)

As in music, the use of repetition, such as the phrase "If you cannot come" serves to create a simultaneity of action. The transitional passage before which the Elesin falters is inherent in all black musical forms. According to Henry Louis Gates, Jr., Soyinka's dances are darkly lyrical, uniting with the music of the drums and songs of the chorus to usher the audience into a self-contained, hermetic world, an effected reality. Soyinka's greatest achievement is just this: the creation of a compelling world through language, in language and of language. But his mastery of spoken language is necessarily reinforced by mastery of a second language of music, and a third of dance. "Where it is

possible to capture through movements what words are saying” he says “then I will use the movement instead of the words.”<sup>7</sup>

A play, among all the verbal arts, is most obviously an act of language. Soyinka allows the metaphorical and tonal Yoruba language to inform his use of English. Long ago, the Yoruba defined metaphor as the “horse” of words: “If a word is lost, a metaphor or proverb is used to find it”. The horse metaphor implies a transfer or carriage of meaning, through intention and extension. It is just this aspect of the Yoruba language on which Soyinka relies. The extended use of such densely metaphorical utterances, searching for the lost or hidden meanings of words and events, serves to suggest music, dance and myth, all aspects of *poesis* long ago fragmented in Western tragic art. In *Death and the King's Horseman*, languages and act mesh fundamentally. A superb example of this is the Praise-Singer's speech near the climax of the play, in which he denounces in the voice of his former king, the Elesin Oba:

*PRAISE-SINGER- Elesin Oba! I call you by that name only this last time. Remember when I said, if you cannot come, tell my horse. What? I cannot hear you, I said, if you cannot come, whisper in the ears of my horse. Is your tongue severed from the roots Elesin? I can hear no response. I said, if there are boulders you cannot climb, mount my horse's back; this spotless black stallion, he'll bring you over them. Elesin Oba, once you had a path to me. My memory fails me but I think you replied: My feet have found the path, Alaafin. I said at the last, if evil hands hold you back, just tell my horse there is weight on the hem of your smock. I dare not wait too long. (...)*

*Oh my companion, if you had followed when you should, we would not say that the horse preceded its rider. If you had followed when it was time, he would not say the dog has raced beyond and left his master behind. If you had raised your will to cut the thread of life at the summons of the drums, we would not say your mere shadow fell across the gateway and took its owner's place at the banquet. But the hunter, laden with a slain buffalo, stayed to root in the cricket's hole with his toes. What now is left? If there is a dearth of bats, the pigeon must serve us for the offering. Speak the words over your shadow which must now serve in your place.*

(DKH, pp. 74-75)

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<sup>7</sup> Personal interview with Wole Soyinka by Henry Louis Gates, Jr, 5 Oct. 1979, some quotes in Henry Louis Gates, Jr. “Being, the Will, and the semantics of death” in *Perspectives on Wole Soyinka: Freedom and Complexity*, ed. Biodun Jeyifo (Mississippi: UPM, 2001), pp. 62-76.

In this stunning speech, the language of music and the music of language are one. In one sense, the music of the play gives it its force, the reciprocal displacement of the language of music with the music of language. It is important to emphasize at this juncture the crucial weight Soyinka attaches to music as an indispensable vehicle of the ritual transition. In the "Author's note", he warns producers against reducing the play to a simple conflict of cultures, and he recommends that they instead face the "far more difficult and risky task of eliciting the play's threnodic essence". In fact, the dramatist argues, the play "can be fully realized only through an evocation of music from the abyss of transition." The underlying assumption here is a mutually propelling relationship between poetry and music in tragic art. Soyinka takes particular care to distance himself from the Nietzschean conception of antagonistic separation of music and language, (though his theory derives great inspiration from Nietzsche's *The Birth of Tragedy*) for "the nature of Yoruba music is intensively the nature of its language and poetry, highly charged, symbolic, myth-embryonic".

For the Yoruba, language does not threaten the consummate ubiquity of music; on the contrary, it is its "cohesive dimension and clarification", which explains why language "reverts in religious rites to its pristine existence, eschewing the sterile limits of particularisation" (MLAW, 1976, pp.147-148). This will explain why, for instance, Soyinka goes to great lengths to make the poetic, sonorous-lacerating chants of the *Praise-Singer* and the pervasive intensive drumming (hear Pilkings, the white colonial district-officer, to his wife, Jane: "... I am getting rattled. Probably the effect of those bloody drums. Do you hear how they go on and on?" (DKH, p. 27) mutually underscore one another in a powerful, affective evocation of a ritualistic theatrical space. The following description is of the moment building up to the decisive core of the ritual:

*His [Elesin's] dance is one of solemn, regal motions, each gesture of the body is made with a solemn finality. The women join him, their steps a somewhat more fluid version of his.*

*Elesin dances on, completely in a trance. The dirge wells up louder and stronger. Elesin's dance does not lose its elasticity but his gestures become, if possible, even more weighty. (DKH, pp. 42, 45)*

Soyinka outlines the contours of this ritualistic theatrical space in his *Myth, Literature and the African World*:

The so-called audience is itself an integral part of that arena of conflict; it contributes spiritual strength to the protagonist through its choric reality which must first be conjured up and established, defining and investing the arena through offerings and incantations. The drama would be non-existent except within and against this symbolic representation of earth and cosmos, except within this communal compact whose choric essence supplies the collective energy for the challenger of (...) chthonic realms. (pp. 38-39)

It is this culturally symbolically charged space that District Officer Pilkings violates to arrest Elesin before he can take the decisive plunge. By the time of the interruption of the ritual suicide by the white man, an overwhelming sense of doom washes over the community. His failure is a mark of the discomposition of cosmos for them, and part of this discomposition is captured in the filial inversions that attend the meeting between Olunde and his father:

ELESIN: Olunde? (He moves his head inspecting him from side to side.) Olunde! (He collapses slowly at Olunde's feet.) Oh son, don't let the sight of your father turn you blind!

OLUNDE: (He moves for the first time since he heard his voice, brings his head slowly down to look on him): I have no father, eater of leftovers.

(DKH, pp. 60-61)

The father's bewilderment and the son's frozen shock are captured in their different reactions. The most important part of the scene is Elesin's collapse at the feet of his son, gesturing to an involuntary prostration. In Yoruba culture it is the young people who prostrate to their elders and sons to fathers, not vice versa. For a father to prostrate or fall before his son is a mark of role inversion and deeply shocking. The implied inversions that Elesin's failure is to have unleashed are presumably stopped when Olunde takes his father's place in sacrificing himself for the community. In the last scene Iyaloja, the market woman, hurls back at the horseman his earlier proverbs of strength and daring and

presents to him in the white man's prison the body of his son, who committed ritual suicide in his place, whereupon Elesin, unable to bear his shame and look upon the bitter fruit of his indecision, strangles himself with his chains. His suicide, however, is a futile, involuntary surrender to despair, not a purposive ritual act; it has therefore no sacrificial or restitutive value, and it comes in any case too late, after his son has charted the transitional passage for him.

IYALOJA: [...] He is 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. (*DKH*, p.76)

In *Death and the King's Horseman*, Soyinka turns away from the Western tradition and the play does not merely hang upon the framework of ritual: the play is the ritual itself. Technique and theme weld fluidly to yield a theatrical experience in which both actors and audience are meant to participate, and this participation extends farther beyond the province of the emotional to the psychical, beyond mere physical exhilaration to the deeper spiritual fulfilment. Hence, the dramatic elements alter accordingly: dialogue, for instance, deepens beyond the level of dramatic wit and becomes a celebration of the primal word, when language reverts to its pristine existence as incantation, and "the movement of words is the very passage of music and the dance of images". Rarely before in all of Soyinka's repertory has language or spectacle approached the tragic splendour of that moment when Elesin at the end of the third act dances slowly to a gradual death, the words beating against a background of keening female voices:

ELESIN:                   [ *His voice is drowsy*]  
I have freed myself of earth and now  
It's getting dark. Strange voices guide my feet.

PRAISE-SINGER: The river is never so high that the eyes  
Of a fish are covered. The night is not so dark  
That the albino fails to find his way. A child  
Returning homewards craves no leading  
By the hand  
Gracefully does the mask regain his grove at



The end of day ... (*DKH*, p. 43)

But the Elesin fails in his duty, and the cause, in Soyinka's interpretation, is to be discovered not only in the sacrilege of the District Officer's intervention, but also in Elesin's concupiscence, his tenacious love of earth and flesh, as he himself later confesses: "... my weakness came not merely from the abomination of the white man who came violently into my fading presence, there was also a weight of longing on my earth-held limb" (p.65).

Soyinka is not writing a polemic aimed at securing the practical reintroduction of ritual suicide; he is merely using the historical incident as a particularly vivid imaginative symbol of sacrifice in general and of traditional Yoruba communalism in particular. It is this metaphorical level of the play which is stressed by most of the critics and on which Soyinka insists in his prefatory note. This argument carries a great deal of force. The religious motive of Olunde's sacrifice is not intended to command the audience's approval on a literal level. Very few will be inclined to accept that the gods or "cosmic totality" really require self-immolation of the kind prescribed by Yoruba tradition. Olunde's sacrifice is to be seen as the metaphorical vehicle for a more universal tenor. It symbolizes the determination to be true to one's roots and to assert the value of higher duty against both the internal threat of materialistic self-interest (Elesin's tragic flaw) and the external threat of an imposed alien culture. Viewed as the freely willed sacrifice of individual self on behalf of a religious principle, Olunde's decision achieves metaphorical universality and can command the respect of spectators with widely different views on religion and philosophy.

Olunde's ritual death to correct his father's failed ritual can, in fact, be read in many different ways: aesthetically, religiously, culturally and more important, politically. David Moody (1991) regards this corrective action as a ritual recuperation of performative agency and, consequently, cultural power:

His [Olunde's] death, senseless from the logic of the colonizer's economy, is literally pure 'play': a bodily sign of a culture's refusal to die. From the Pilkings' point of view, Olunde's death is a great waste; ... However, Olunde understands the importance

of the sign; and performs, quite physically, the reappropriation of his society's rites, and rights of passage. (p. 100)

The ambiguities of the state of transition which reflect upon the consciousness of Elesin and are also manifested in the need for supplementary ritual ideals are paralleled by the historical socio-political realities within which the traditional culture is shown to be caught. One dimension of colonialism was that it placed colonized cultures in the curious position of having to mediate traditional verities while absorbing the values of a dominating western culture. Soyinka's play itself is located at such a critical juncture. When the District Officer, Simon Pilkings, and his wife Jane appropriate confiscated *egungun* costumes, the sacred garb for a ritualistic death cult in order to attend a masqued ball, they show a gross representation of the fusion of various realities. By putting on the costumes, they reincarnate ancestral realities in the idiom of colonial power, thus, extending the notion of the liminality of transition into the space of socio-political relations. The impatient 'civiliser', Simon Pilkings, shows no respect for the sacred costumes because he can only read the Yoruba rituals as primitive and regressive. The play suggests, however, that these rituals have survived the onslaught of colonialism to outweigh easily what are to some degree their British equivalents.

According to Gilbert and Tompkins (1996) how and what the performing body signifies are closely related to the ways in which it is framed for the viewer's consumption. The most obvious framing, costume, is particularly resonant since it can (mis)identify race, gender, class and creed, and make visible the status associated with such markers of difference. The paradox of costume's simultaneous specificity and versatility makes it an unstable sign/site of power. In other words, items of clothing have quite specific connotations but these can be easily changed, extended, or inverted with a change in the wearer and/or the situation. A deliberately politicised approach to costume recognises that its apparent neutrality in fact conceals a rhetorical power, both as a semiotic code and in its close relationship to the body. Perhaps more important in post-colonial theatre, costume enables subversions

of colonial status (p. 244). The presentation of a 'traditional' costume like the Yoruba *egungun*, just as the use of ritual masks, confirms the validity of pre-contact performance modes. In the particular case of *Death and the King's Horseman* dressing up in the other's clothing provides a central spectacular moment that can repoliticise costume, culture, and even bodies. When Simon and Jane Pilkings wear the clothes of the colonised without cultural sensitivity, their bodies are marked by their continued appropriation of otherness. Finally, costume actively addresses the definition of colonised corporeality and can be used to resist hegemonic locations of the body.

As we said before, *Death and the King's Horseman* is Soyinka's first creative engagement with the question of colonialism. In this play, however, the contact of the two cultures is shown to harbour problems for both of them in terms of the conceptually shifting historical terrain on which each of them stands. Though the British administration is clearly in control, there is an uneasy sense in which that control is itself a reflection of powerlessness. For despite all his control over the means of force, Pilkings is constantly hedged in by the limitations of a lack of complete knowledge of the culture he is in charge of.

The ethical confrontation is crucial to Soyinka's construct of what he considers significant differences in the (colonizing) European and (colonized) African worldviews, and he is very meticulous in presenting his case. In Pilkings' expressive axiological scheme, values are either "normal", "rational" – otherwise known as European – or "abnormal", "irrational" – thus non-European. Within a conception of ethics governed by such arrogant and simplistic hermeticism, difference appears as little more than deviance, deserving more of repression, violation, and extermination than understanding: the politics of expressive identity.<sup>8</sup> Hence for the Europeans, revered ancestral masks of the Africans are no more than exotic costumes.

It is of significant interest that Pilkings attempts to divest himself of colonial authority by suggesting that his ultimate justification for arresting Elesin comes from the native culture itself:

PILKINGS: I have lived among you long enough to learn a saying or two. One came to mind tonight when I stepped into the market and saw what was going on. You were surrounded by those who egged you on with song and praises. I thought, are these not the same people who say: the elder grimly approaches heaven and you ask him to bear your greetings yonder; do you really think he makes the journey willingly? After that, I did not hesitate. (*DKH*, p.64)

From this, we can see that Pilkings does indeed try to understand his natives. But through no fault of his, the native culture remains fixed in a mire of ethical confusion. Pilkings deludes himself. The confusion is less in the native culture than in the unyielding binary mode of apprehension with which Pilkings attempts to understand it. His closed, superstitious notion of ethics cannot imagine a culture whose proverbs, or aphorisms present themselves not as whole and eternally valid but as half-truths: *always* situational and contingent. Pilkings's stiff empiricist rationality simply cannot fathom that his "authoritative" saying –the proverb which he says authorizes his action- has been deconstructed several times in the text by other sayings that warn against abandonment of responsibility. The culture which says "the elder grimly approaches heaven ..." is also the culture which state the following:

ELESIN: What elder takes his tongue to his plate,  
Licks it clean of every crumb? He will  
Encounter  
Silence when he calls on children to fulfil  
The smallest errand! Life is honour.  
It ends when honour ends.  
(*DKH*, p.15)

Pilkings may indeed have learned "a saying or two" of the local culture, but a saying or two do not a culture make and, if we remember the poet correctly, a little learning is a dangerous thing. The appropriate response here comes from Olunde, talking to Jane of his experiences in Britain: "I saw

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nothing, finally, that gave you the right to pass judgement on other peoples and their ways. Nothing at all” (*DKH*, p.54). Olunde's suicide in the affirmation of the indigenous culture is the concrete expression of this sanction and a deflation of the colonialists' pretensions to ethical superiority. And once more the body stood for the voice.

*Death and the King's Horseman* has proved popular with western playgoers and readers, being regularly produced and featuring on many syllabi. This is probably because it is one of the dramatist's more accessible plays, with its dramatization of British colonialism in Nigeria, its British characters (even if they are stereotypes) and its theatrically exciting use of music, dance and trance ritual in the marketplace scenes. In fact, the mainstay of Soyinka's play is dance and music employed in conjunction with enactments and re-presentations of events and actions in the past and present lives of the protagonists. So even as his dialogues are carried out in a foreign language and he employs the theatrical models of the west, he retains the traditional African concept of theatre as a comprehensive, total and celebratory experience in which all the arts integrate. By serving as the receptacle for other art forms, dance heightens and enhances their – as well as its own significance, communication, and aesthetic value. This quality is most vividly demonstrated in Yoruba religious context where dance functions effectively as the language that bridges the chasm of communication between transcendental cosmic powers and human beings. Clearly, with the ancient Yoruba, the art of dance becomes the language of cohesion, displaying different works, fusing all other communication symbols together in a compact aesthetic experience. This composite aesthetic manifestation of dance constitutes an important poetics of and in Yoruba culture. It is a crucial vehicle for conveying, experiencing and reinforcing significant ideals that give a strong and enduring sense of identity to a people.

While the dancing body is by no means confined to the specific functions outlined in this paper, the examples of Soyinka's play illustrate its importance to post-colonial theatre. Interpreting dance as a

text in itself – and as part of a play's overall semiotics – provides an approach to drama that denaturalises notions of subjectivity as grounded primarily in dialogue. Dance thus emerges as a locus of struggle in producing and representing individual and cultural identity. As a site of competing ideologies, dance also offers potential liberation from imperialist representation through the construction of an active, moving body that 'speaks' its own forms of corporeality.

The main thrust of this study has been to examine the meaning of the verbal and the visual in Soyinka's theatre and its significance as an art form communicating cognitively and effectively the aesthetics of Yoruba culture. Semiotics, the study of the production and exchange of meaning in society has been instructive in this process, especially in the analysis of the body.<sup>9</sup>

Dance makes and becomes art in the way it unifies external intangible elements such as movement, rhythm, and space in the body to create a new cohesive form. This new form, the dance, becomes a powerful non-verbal communication symbol. This is because the body in its dual role as the primary tool of dance and a cultural indicator, is the tangible element able to turn cultural concepts into perceptible forms narrated rhythmic movement and contextualized in space. Hence, by analysing the Yoruba body attitude in communication, I hope this study has been able to focus on and discuss the visual and dynamic form, the narrated content, and the conceptual meaning of dance.

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<sup>9</sup> See more about the semiotics of the body in Omofolabo S. Ajayi, *Yoruba Dance: the semiotics of movement and body attitude in a Nigerian Culture* (Trenton: Africa World Press, Inc., 1998).

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