

SUCCESS AND FAILURE OF RITUAL: WOLE SOYINKA'S THEATRE

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Wole Soyinka has said that the task of the dramatist is to "find a language which expresses the right sources of thought and values, and merges them into a universal idiom such as ritual" (*ADO*, 60), and in his plays ritual has something of this universality. Moreover ritual fails and succeeds in most of his plays. In *The Strong Breed* an annual purification rite of the Niger Delta is cross-referenced, albeit elusively, with the Christian Passion, and a xenophobic village society displays the same guilt-ridden hysteria, the readiness to sacrifice the stranger within, associated with modern nation-states. Soyinka's adaptation of *The Bacchae* is an exercise in comparative mythology that reinterprets Euripides's play in the light of Yoruba cosmology, and *Death and The King's Horseman* explores the relevance of indigenous ceremonial traditions in a colonial political context. First and foremost, however, the rituality of these plays is deeply African. Each play depicts an interruption, involving a substitution, of an indigenous ritual sequence, and it is often through this very diversion and corruption of the rite from its proper course that it acquires a "universal" and largely spurious archetypal identity. Nowhere is this more in evidence than in the play *The Strong Breed*.

The eponymous heroes of this play are the families of hereditary carriers who year after year ceremonially carry away from the community the accumulated pollutions of the past twelve months. Eman, the protagonist, who earlier in his life abruptly departed from his home in the middle of an initiation rite, has now totally absconded from his native village and ritual heredity following his wife's death (like his own mother's) in childbirth. He has found employment as a teacher and healer in another village and formed a relationship with Sunma, the daughter of the head man Jaguna, but as the New Year approaches in an atmosphere of great menace and foreboding, it transpires that he has not

escaped his ritual duty. Because this village is unable to produce its own voluntary carriers, strangers are forced into the role, and Eman, because he harbours the only other resident stranger, the terrified idiot boy Ifada, finds himself pressed as a substitute into the familiar task. But the rite goes disastrously wrong when Eman, who has misunderstood its very different character in this version, panics and flees from its unexpected cruelties, and it ends with his pursuit through the village and his death in an animal trap on the path to the river. During the fatal pursuit, episodes from the past flash through his mind and are enacted on the stage. In the final flashback Eman is symbolically confronted by his dead father, who warns him away from the river (now, of death) to which he carries the year's evils for the last time. At Eman's death Ifada consoles the broken Sunma while her pitiless father and his henchman Oroge are deserted by the remorse-stricken villagers.

Appropriately for one who depicts a mechanical piacular rite emptied of all moral content, Soyinka is meticulously concerned in this play with the business of ritual mechanics and the excessively literal-minded habits of thinking that inform them. For example, according to the prevailing ritual values, Eman and Ifada are unwittingly contaminated and made "untouchable" as soon as they lay hands upon the sick girl's effigy. Trapped in these mechanical mental habits, the villagers, once their elders have fixed upon Ifada as carrier, proceed to expropriate their ills to him and, by a paranoid logic, to see everything he does thereafter as evidence of his "evil" and as a justification of their behaviour. Soyinka's purpose in these instances is neither to authenticate nor to ridicule ritual superstitions but to create the illusion of a wholly self-apprehended world, experienced from within, and to present its confusion of moral and ritual values in terms of its own customs and beliefs. *The Strong Breed* is one of the few plays by Soyinka to perfect a genuinely inside perspective. In this play the options are the rival moral codes and ritual traditions of different villages, relative only to one another, and no "enlightened" or "modern" external view, closer to the dramatist's own, is brought to bear critically upon them. The only critical self-apprehension is provided, ironically, by the cynical expediency of the ruling elders. So long as it does not become public knowledge, they are prepared to overlook a broken taboo (Ifada's entry into Eman's house) suggesting that they themselves do not believe wholeheartedly in the ritual but, to preserve their own interests, perfunctorily go through its morally meaningless motions. At the same time, the extreme, paranoid literalism of the villagers serves as a vehicle for Soyinka's own more rarefied moral symbolism. The mechanical business with the effigy, by identifying Eman with Ifada, anticipates the fulfilment of his ritual destiny, and Soyinka turns to symbolic advantage the idea that the ritual protagonist is also a literal carrier of infections that can be trans-

mitted to others. In a society where no one is willing to bear responsibility, guilt remains trapped in the community, symbolized by the tainted effigy that, in a vicious circle of contagion, is passed around from person to person and avoided like a disease. The ending of *The Strong Breed* is ambivalent, and the mood one of grimly guarded hope. Though Eman sacrifices himself in Christ-like fashion for an ungrateful community, the redemptive value and regenerative potential of his voluntary substitution for Ifada are thrown into doubt by his peculiar lack of both knowledge and volition.

Eman fails, of course, and his death is of doubtful benefit. But in end-of-year ceremonies the sense of failure that periodicity builds into all ritual and the temporary character of something that has always to be done, cyclically, again are complemented by the New Year's traditional mood of reassessment. Thus the play's ending looks both ways, suggesting simultaneously a short-sighted repetition and a long-term reevaluation of the past. On the other hand, the radical effect of the crucified Eman on the villagers and their desertion of their leaders imply that, in the local context, an established order has been shaken; it is possible that the village has cleansed itself, in a final exorcism, of its own cleansing rite as it exists in its present form. Thus Eman's death in the extreme perversion of a tradition meant to rescind the time of a single year may have wound back the clock on decades of corrupt malpractice and may portend their effective annulment as it simultaneously effaces his own 12-year apostasy.

The carrier reappears in Soyinka's adaptation of *The Bacchae of Euripides: A Communion Rite* (1973) in which his cleansing ceremonies have been perverted, almost beyond recognition, into "unspeakable rites": the metaphoric "killing" of the old year is brutally literalized in the annual flogging to death of an aged slave. The outrage can be ended and expiated only by the equally unwilling sacrifice of its deviser, King Pentheus, who, in one of his many ritual and mythological identities in the play, himself becomes the carrier's dismembered effigy in the rite's crowning perversion and exorcism. In the opening scene the priest Tiresias forlornly hopes that, by taking upon his own shoulders the detritus of the dying year and receiving himself the effigy's merely "symbolic flogging", he will be in a position not only to contain therapeutically the impending rebellion that the abuses have long provoked, but also to personally "taste the ecstasy of rejuvenation long after organizing its ritual" (CP 1, 143). In this way he hopes to restore to the rite something of the moral logic that restricts its effective power of purgation to ordeals voluntarily undertaken. But as in *The Strong Breed*, the ceremony has for many years been an expression of and an excuse for the evil it is intended to expel: habituated to violence under Pentheus brutal, disciplinarian regime, the overseers of the rite can no longer "tell the difference between ritual and reality" and the old prophet is, in Diony-

sus's words, almost "flogged to pieces at the end, like an effigy" (CP 1, 241,243). At the death of Pentheus, Tiresias ruefully observes that the perversions had been pushed too far for the merely token violence and symbolic blood of the original rite to have any remaining cleansing power in Thebes. In the play's apocalyptic finale wine spurts from Pentheus's severed head in a miraculous reverse-transubstantiation and floods the fields into a new fertility, turning Euripides's tyrant from an object of divine nemesis—or the pure, motiveless Dionysian joy in destruction—into an offering to the future, his sacrificial blood the revolutionary energy of the new age. In the light of the king's necessary but unwilling entrapment by the god, this transformation appears as forced and wished symbolism, but Soyinka has in this instance forsaken the moral logic of ritual for the political logic of revolution.

Interrupted ritual and substitution are again the subjects in *Death and the King's Horseman* (1975), only here the drama is based upon an actual historical incident. In January 1945, a month after the death of the Oyo king, or Alafin, his horseman, called Elesin, was to join his royal master by committing suicide but was prevented from fulfilling his ritual duty by the British district officer, Captain J. A. MacKenzie, whereupon Elesin's son, Murana, a trader living in Ghana, returned home and took the unprecedented step of dying in his father's place. Partly to debate the different cultural values attached to sacrifice by the British and Yoruba, Soyinka moves the episode back into World War II and makes it coincide with a royal visit by the Prince of Wales, who is shown risking his life to make a gesture of solidarity with his imperial subjects. More innovatively, Soyinka turns Elesin's son, who in reality was still very much part of the local traditional world, into a Western-educated doctor. Olunde, as he is called in the play, was smuggled abroad for medical training at the instigation of the district officer and in the teeth of his father's opposition. Four years later, he has returned to complete his father's burial rites. The district officer and his wife, here called Simon and Jane Pilkings, are two well-meaning but misguided and myopic cultural chauvinists, given rather short shrift by Soyinka's slight characterization. They can make sense of self-sacrifice in secular and empirical contexts, where there is some practical, commonsense benefit of safeguard for the community (Jane tells Olunde of a British captain who blows himself up with his ship to prevent lethal gases poisoning the coastal population), but not as an act performed to maintain some nebulous metaphysical continuum. Though capable of construing "murderous defeats" in the random slaughter of war as "strategic victories", they have no sense of the moral triumph of the controlled individual sacrifice, with its corollary principle that some must die so that others may live. Too obtuse to penetrate the paradoxes of Yoruba proverbs and crassly insensitive to native custom and belief, the Pilkingses' automatic incli-

nation is, as Olunde tells Jane, to trivialize and desecrate what they do not understand.

Soyinka's most crucial alteration, however, is the addition of a wedding to Elesin's funeral ceremony. On his last night on earth the king's horseman succumbs to a sudden desire for a beautiful young girl who is betrothed to the son of the market-mother Iyaloja. Though shocked and full of foreboding, Iyaloja accedes to his request and offers up the virgin bride to his peremptory lust. The Elesin argues, disingenuously, that the unburdening of his physical desire will leave him lighter for his journey into the spiritual world and that the rare fruit of his union, "neither of this world nor the next", will be a liminal child of passage: the impregnation of the virgin, by the dying, with the unborn represents in miniature the whole Yoruba metaphysical triangle, the seamless human-spirit continuum that is to be kept intact by Elesin's transitional crossing. In reality, however, physical passion has no place in the metaphysical task of transition, which calls rather for abstinence, not the sensual indulgence that confounds the will. Because Elesin's mind is not on the other world, the "weight of longing" on his "earth-held limbs" ties him more strongly to this one. The rite is delayed, then aborted by the district officer, and he who was to join the ancestors ends by flouting their traditions and unnaturally reversing the normal cycle of existence. Properly, "the parent shoot withers to give sap to the younger" (P1, 207, 212), but here it seeks to renew the being it should relinquish. In the Yoruba worldview, which links everything in human experience, this refusal to go forward, sacrificially, into another existence breaks the bonds by which the old existence is regenerated, thus endangering the lives of the unripe (Olunde) and the unborn: "Who are you to open a new life," Iyaloja upbraids Elesin, "when you dared not open the door to a new existence?" (P1, 210). As in *The Strong Breed*, the initial breaking of precedent triggers a chain reaction that multiplies the ritual perversions, culminating here in Olunde's surrogate suicide. In the last scene Iyaloja hurls back at the horseman his earlier proverbs of strength and daring and presents him in the white man's prison the body of his son, 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. Before this vibrant drama is done, the whole cast has been drawn into the Alafin's funeral dance; it ends with the young bride, under Iyaloja's guidance, sealing the eyes of her husband of a single night and turning to face what little is left of the future now that "strangers [have] tilted the world from its course" (P1, 218).

Plainly, the ritual priorities of Elesin's traditional world have already been deeply affected by colonial materialism, so that his failure is not a sudden isolated episode but the culmination of a gradual historical process. The most important testimony to historical change is, of course, Olunde. Since his own views on sacrifice are defined exclusively in opposition to white ones, it is tempting to see Olunde's choice of suicide—which, being forced upon him by heredity, is in reality no choice at all—as a deliberate rejection of Europe and an assertion of cultural freedom. Nevertheless, despite the moral imperative to maintain a sense of his own society's differentness from Europe, Olunde is yet a force for radical change in that society. Though he has respect for the past, he knows that history, stubbornly resisted by his father in the form of Western education, does not stand still: he expected to go back to his overseas medical training after burying his father, for in the completion of this rite the old order that the father embodied would also be buried to make way for the new. Soyinka's changing of Olunde into a been-to is not a mere matter of cultural polemics but has to do with the paradoxical nature of the ritual process and its highlighting of one of the author's favourite motifs. The crucial paradoxes of *Death and the king's horseman* are, firstly, that Elesin must cross into the other world to renew this one; and secondly, that when he fails to do this, the son must die in the place and manner of his father partly to indicate that he did not intend to live like him. The business of the rite of transition is to keep in flux the currents of change from father to son, to bury the past so as to prevent it from becoming permanent, and to maintain a volatile balance of continuity and transition that resists stagnation.

The tragedy in *Death and the King's Horseman* and in each of the plays mentioned is that the violent alteration of the ceremonial pattern of substitution has the ironic effect of impoverishing the future to which the rite admits passage by wastefully consuming, as the sacrificial offering to that future, one of its most important dimensions. In *The Strong Breed* this dimension is the healing figure itself, whose free mind belongs to a progressive hereafter; and in *Death and the King's Horseman*, in the person of Olunde, the intermediary between Africa and the West, tradition and colonialism, and the figure personally involved in historical change and best fitted to ease the national rite of passage from colonialism to independence. In each play what should be the end is used up as fuel for the means and the future arrives empty.

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