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# THE LEAJON

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The Leajon is an academic journal of interdisciplinary studies, aimed at promoting research in all academic disciplines to include Arts and Humanities, Social and Management Sciences and Environmental Sciences, Medicine, Education etc. It specially encourages and scholarly articles and researches done with African mindset as the basis for intellectual breeding, emancipation and development within the continent.

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# DEMOCRACY IN NIGERIA: SUCCESS OR FAILURE

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## Abstract

*The thesis of this paper is that the success or failure of Democracy is a measure of the approximation and complementation between the practice of democracy and the principles of democracy. Democratic experiments in Nigeria as exposed in the different Republics appear to mar the principles of democracy than marry them. The logical conclusion, hence, is that Democracy in Nigeria is a failure. However, the paper concludes that there is a probability of success of democracy in the Yar'Adua/Johnathan's regime. It submits that this probability can only be realizable through the strengthening of all the institutions of governance to abide by the stated democratic principles so as to maintain a vibrant and vivacious polity.*

## Clarification of Concept: The Notion of Democracy

Theorists are very unanimous on the lack of unanimity in the definition of Democracy. George Orwell as quoted by Giovanni Sartori maintains that:

*In the case of a word like democracy not only is there no generally agreed definition but the attempt to make one is restricted from all sides.... The defenders of any kind of regime claim it is a democracy, and fear that they might have to stop using the word if it were tied down to any one particular meaning. (Democratic Theory, 3)*

Such claims to democracy anchored on their ideological biases include the classic Athenian conception, the Marxist-socialist conception and the liberal-representative conception.

The classical Athenian conception, from where the term derives its etymological nuance considered it to be the rule of the people. 'Demos' and 'kratia' are the two Greek words meaning 'people' and 'rule' which are married together to produce the literal 'rule of the people' which Athenian democracy stood for.

Anthony C. Areji (33) observes that in Ancient Greece, the 'Demos' were the poorer people and hence, democracy, taken literally would mean the rule of the poor over the rich. This meaning corroborates with the Marxian-Socialists conception of democracy as the rule of the working class. They identify the people with the proletariat the poor and alienated of the society.

In contention with Areji's position, Zaato M. Nor (93) and Mazi Orizu Nwokeyi (26) in their different accounts observe that 'the people' in the definition above were the free-born male adults whose ownership of a certain amount of property was a necessary condition for citizenship. Thus, in this classical understanding, democracy connotes the rule of a few persons. Deducibly, monarchies, dictatorships and all shades of totalitarian regimes could pass for democracy.

I wish to argue against the contentions above, that the philosophical foundation and the conceptual infrastructure of classical Athenian democracy is best captured in Pericles' Funeral Oration, after the defeat of Sparta at the battle of Thermopylae, thus:

*The constitution by which we live does not emulate the enactments of our neighbours. It is an example to others rather than imitate them. It is called democracy because power does not rest with the few, but with the many, and in law, as it touches individuals, all are equal, while in regard to the public estimation in which each man is held in any field, his advancement depends not on mere rotation, but rather on his true worth; nor does poverty dim his reputation or prevent him from assisting the state, if he has the capacity. Liberty marks both our public political and the feelings which tough our daily life together... our life in the state free from illegality, owing mainly to respect for the authority of the*



# DEATH AS A CENTRE OF SOYINKA'S DRAMATURGY: A READING OF WOLE SOYINKA'S

*Death and the King's Horseman and The Road.*

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## Abstract

The Yorubas share with many other African people the fundamental belief in the continuity of life, and the relevance of the dead to the life of the living, and future generations. Soyinka's concept of mutual transference of domicile extrapolates the transcendence of the soul in that dire quest for spiritual and material fulfillment. This quest often precipitates tragic consequences. There is a pervasive presence in symbols and imagery, as the reminders and evidences of death in almost all the actions of the plays under study here: *Death and the King's Horseman* and *The Road*. However, the essence of death in the two plays is given mutually exclusive interpretations: Professor's death is a penalty for his hubris he is completely destroyed by his obsession to his mystical quest, while the ritual death of Elesin Oba is of primordial restorative essence to the larger society. Herein resound Wole Soyinka's concern and interest in regenerative sacrifice and continuity.

## Introduction

The subject of death has assumed an absorbing permanence in Soyinka's plots and themes, such that to extricate it from a discourse or study of his works invites a charge of "Trudging the lifelong road to a dread/Judicial sentence" (39). Death is a very involving topic because it is a central issue in all religions of the world. To philosophize about death is to bring to bear on this mystique all critical and expository philosophical tools. In every human society, past and present, the subject is enigmatic, and despite the volumes of revelatory literature about death, it remains impenetrably obscure. An evaluation of Soyinka's major works plays, poems, essays and novels - reveals that his composition is built on the framework of Yoruba religion and lore. His plays are termed 'metaphysical' because of the peculiar nature of their themes based on an inquisition or transition, and, are scripted centered upon death and the dead. His interest in the worlds of Daniel O. Fagunwa and Amos Tutuola (Yoruba Worldview encapsulated in their spirituality and cosmogony) is further demonstrated in his essay, "The Fourth Stage" in which he develops the theory of Yoruba tragedy by examining the ideas that underlie the Yoruba concept of being, and in particular the ideas underlying Yoruba theology. Traditional Yoruba life is dominated by religion. The Yorubas are surrounded by gods and spirits with whom the lives of mortals interact. The cornerstone of this traditional African world-view is that the world of the living, the dead and the unborn interpenetrate one with the other, as though, indeed, they were the same world.

In Wole Soyinka's creative and critical writings, we find a replication of G. Wilson Knight whose interpretation of literature discovers metaphysical, spiritual and moral patterns. Soyinka's conceptual interpretation proffers continuity between spiritual and material worlds which find expression in tragedy and heroic actions. He thus confesses that "Yoruba tragedy plunges straight into the "chthonic realms", the seething cauldron of the dark world, will and psyche, the transitional yet inchoate matrix of death and becoming" (22).

Soyinka's tragic lore is severally akin to the French deterministic concept of tragedy that Agosti avers presuppose man's idea of freedom of choice which:

"...is always a symbolic revelation of a triumph that borders on the eternal. This has been emphasized by ... Satre and his contemporaries who aimed at a sense of tragedy perceived within the framework of a deterministic system that is socially relevant and culturally based" (23).

These views are in harmony because in African theatre, culture is the epicenter of ethical and



philosophical thoughts.

Soyinka's dramaturgy and the social relevance of his themes veer into the contemporary and topical, to regenerate society into an awareness of its ethos and distinctiveness, because the vision that emerges from his plays, as Agovi adds, "...culture-based and relevant to African values and assumptions" (27). It is pertinent that creative writers contemporize these facts of our existence, so that vital aspects of man and his relationship with his creator would not be lost in the deep recess of history. Like Greek dramas, Soyinka's plays concern themselves with foremost issues of contemporary times. For instance, the issue of man's relationship with governing deities has contemporary relevance in Nigerian society. Greek gods, like Yoruba gods and spirits in Soyinka's plays involve themselves in the lives of mortals, either for ill or for good. The assemblage of spirits of dead men and women in *A Dance of the Forests*, mark a beginning of the playwright's drama that seeks for metaphysical interpretation of the meaning of death.

What Soyinka weaves around this theme of death in his plays, as Athol Fugard, in his play *Sizwe Bansi is Dead*, is the concept of heroism or anti-heroism. They inadvertently pose questions on what strength of character, complexes, cultural and social norms, and other personality inflexions define man, nay, the African man. Thus, Osofisan in his preface to Iji's book "...deduces rightly from the plays that the picture of humanity which we are offered is of a complex, self-contradictory duality, composed equally of positive and negative attributes" (vii). Osofisan's deduction coheres well with Sizwe Bansi's pretended death to achieve his humanity. In *Sizwe Bansi is Dead*, the playwright captures the rejuvenate essence of death as a recuperative experience to outlive man's assault to his kin in the apartheid enclave. If Sizwe Bansi had not 'died', he would not have found life in Port Elizabeth. Death is inextricably linked with life, as the well-spring from which all essences evolve, viz a viz, the paradoxes of human existence. The dynamism of Soyinka's plot and dramaturgy rests on the dialectic interplay between the living and the dead. He artistically weaves an axial transitory web between life and death through that dubbed as "the histrionic sensibilities of the Yoruba pantheons in association with human actions".

### **Dialectics of Death in Soyinka's Drama**

Soyinka's concern with the idea of death stems from his obsession with the concept of sacrifice and public accountability. This theme of sacrifice leads into that of martyrdom, which for Soyinka means the chosen death. This idea is reflected in his plays: *The Road*, *The Strong Breed*, and *Death and the King's Horseman* etc. In all these plays, the human person is treated as an ontological being set in a qualitatively historical and mythic time, controlled by worship and belief, sacrifice and mediation. The person is linked to all the forces of the earth, affecting and being affected by them; seeking for one's own destiny, and one's own tragic fulfillment.

In his understanding and characterization of death in his plays, Soyinka's sympathies lie with the humanistic conception. In this perspective, he sees death as an integral part of the human procreative process. Loss through death has the positive impact of counterbalancing, that there may be space or room or sustenance for the evolving specie. Without death and the subsequent creation of space, the human race inadvertently suffers total extinction. In the same vein, the 18<sup>th</sup> Century English poet, William Blake in one of his Prophetic Books indicated in his prose work, *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell (1790)* that "without Contraries is no progression".

The context of action in *Death and the King's Horseman* is on the implied essence, and most overtly, the process of death: death for the preferment, sanity, stability and continuity of the human race. The whole play is a ritual performance. A King is dead, and we are called upon to watch the ritual ceremonies of his burial. Elesin Oba, the King's horseman is to commit ritual suicide, but he inadvertently allows the reins of this responsibility fall on his son, Olunde. The ceremony begins in a converted stall in the market where the Elesin is decked out with proper attire for the occasion.

The play's primary concern is projected forcefully in its title: the issue of ritual death and the essences of this act to open up the vestiges of knowledge for the living through the dead to the unborn. This assertion corroborates Femi Euba's opinion of the playwright's exposition of the Yoruba cosmology in the play. He thus indicates that:

In *Death and the King's Horseman*, Soyinka uses Elesin-Oba's traditional commitment to death to explore the Yoruba metaphysical world-view of



death in relation to the world of the living which Elesin is in the process of leaving traditionally, and the world of the unborn which anticipates a continuity of tradition by future Elesins (394).

Elesin Oba's death wish as he prepares for ritual suicide links birth, life and death into a seamless continuity: "Life has an end. A life that will outlive Fame and friendship begs another name" (15). From Elesin's requiem, we can see that in Soyinka's dramaturgy, if death has no meaning, then life can have none either. It is in this regard that Gerald Moore maintains that, "...if death can be made into a total gesture of being, then a man's end can sometimes have dignity that was never apparent in his life" (47). Aboyade foregrounds this opinion that Soyinka relishes with his creative mien because through this theme, he draws his audience and readers into understanding this mystery. He indicates that the theme of the play "...is about death ...an important rite of passage. It is a state of transition, which in the Yoruba psyche binds the dead to the living and the unborn" (140). Chinweizu et al further corroborates this view giving it a broader perspective that:

... the African world is a world defined by common, received cosmographies which embrace in their conception of human society the spirit world of the dead and the unborn as well as the world of the living. It is a cosmography which takes for granted inter-penetration by these realms and intimate interaction between their human and spiritual inhabitants (22).

The theme of ritual death is further implied in the various exchanges between Elesin and major characters Praise Singer and Iyaloja. When Iyaloja calls Elesin "the intercessor of the living to the other world" (21), and as one "...who now bestride the hidden gulf...into the resting-home of the great forebears..." (22), the nature of Elesin's rite of passage is made obvious, and further bespeaks of the playwright's preoccupation with this *modus* to extra-terrestrial knowledge and understanding.

The festival of the *egungun* masquerade is itself an acknowledgement of the incident of death, and a lucid reminder that the dead always mingle with the living into a rejuvenate process to cleanse and revive society. The *egungun* dance commences at the death of the king, as an integral part of the ritual processes for the burial of the king. This process culminates in the death of the king's horseman. Serjeant Amusa indicates to the District Officer, Simon Pilkings that the *egungun* dress is "...uniform of death" (25), "...it belong to dead cult, not for human being" (24).

The play, *Death and the King's Horseman* presents a total sense of African tragedy enunciated in relation to core cultural values, philosophy and ethics. This sense of tragedy stresses the overriding importance of the community over the claims of the individual. This sense of tragic lore is expressed in the play in distinct cultural terms, where culture is an encapsulation of ethical and philosophical thoughts. This play therefore appropriates, as Agovi adjudges, that "...tragic situations in ...African theatre are conditioned by deep-seated respect for life, its continuity and survival" (24). In this regard, Aboyade adjures that "outside the play, the oral tradition of the people is full of instances when men who have done dishonorable things prefer suicide to continue to live a meaningless life, however rich materially. The brave act of suicide, in fact, is regarded as a means of redeeming their honor" (138).

The import of the death-centered plot in Soyinka's plays, Jones declares is "...concerned with the fate of man in his environment; ...the real meaning of progress; the necessity for sacrifice if man is to make progress; the role of death even the necessity for death in a man's life" (64-5). Jones' avowal here advances beyond the sociological problems, veering into eschatological premises, questioning whether there is a positive meaning to death. Yes!, Jonathan Swift dares affirm, indicating that "it is impossible that anything so natural, so necessary, and so universal as death, should ever have been designed by Providence as an evil to mankind". It is apparent that Osofisan in tacit support of Jones' premises adduces, that, for the insistent need for communal cleansing and restoration, Soyinka's thematic preoccupation is the "ceaseless probing of the meaning and the machinery of societal self-renovation, both on the individual and the collective planes" (156).

In his play *The Road*, Soyinka invests this spirit of inquisition and enquiry on his protagonist, Professor and imbues in him, the metaphysical conceit that is the hamstring of the play's thematic concept. In the play, Professor searches for the meaning of the death on this side of the threshold, but, regrettably, his search is in vain. Professor's search re-directs and focuses the reader's attention to



the playwright's vision. It is interesting that this enquiry is death-related.

In this play, death is given a holistic attention, probing into the nature of death on the meaning of death and its essence. The play is replete with concise imagery and symbols of an automobile crashed parts, graveyard, the coterie of drivers who are the couriers of death on the road etc., the most poignant being the object of the Professor's search, The Word.

The central theme of the play is stated by the playwright as "... part psychic, part intellectual grope of Professor towards the essence of death" (iv). Due to the complexity of the play, *The Road* can be read on several levels. However, Nkoyo Edet's summation avers that "it is seen as a human journey through life which has been perceived and symbolised in the traditional thought system of Yorubas" (82). This analysis is sanctioned by critics when viewed against the background of Soyinka's use of his traditional myths in all his works. Soyinka uses the road in its metaphysical sense, but, associated through classical literary tradition, with the metaphor of life, as a journey.

The play is inspired by Soyinka's awareness of the deadly realities of the road in his country. He sees the road as a deadly phenomenon, in view of an unusual number of road accidents that results in the death of the noble, innocent and weak. This concern instigated the publication of an opus designated "Poems of the road". In one of these poems all which concern death on the road "Death in the Dawn", Soyinka tells how he escaped death, like Kotonou in *The Road*, in a road accident.

In the play, the road is a vehicular motif to waste a ritual process of flesh dissolution unto an ultimate waste of human life death. Since the theme of death is uppermost in Soyinka's mind, the road is described in the most savage terms "it is a market of stale meat, noisy with flies, and quarrelsome with old women" (11). Scene after scene, Soyinka graphically presents horrible and ghastly images of death in its many facets. Side by side with tragedy and the myths, we have grim pictures of death at speed, and its results: "where is Zorro who never returned from the North without a basket full of guinea fowl eggs? Where is Akanni, the Lizard? Where is Segide Ope? Where is Sapele Joe...?" (21), all heroes of the road, who have gone through the highway of transition unto death in a most tragic manner: "... a madness where a motor car throws itself against a tree Gbram. And showers of crystal flying on broken souls" (10-11). The souls may be airborne in a shower of crystal, but the bodies rapidly decay. Soyinka portrays the messiness of death and the incongruities it produces, in several passages. Say Tokyo Kid recalls, in racy language, the scene of accident that he had come upon: "you know, just last week I passed an accident on the road. There was a dead dame and you know what her pretty head was spread with? Yam porrage! (27-28). This image reveals a smashed human skull and the exposed brains in a most ghastly fatal nature.

Soyinka also employs the ingredients of the driver's experiences on the road to expose the catalytic role of the authorities on the recurrent tragedies on the road. The authorities in the form of policemen are represented in the play by Particulars Joe. The driver's common ethos with the authorities concerned with traffic, is to sandwich them with bribes, and, hoodwink them also with forged documents licenses, permits etc. Soyinka's treatment of the authorities of the law here is mainly satirical. Salubi's parody of the Lord's Prayer: "Give us this day our daily bribe, Amen" (6), is an apt demonstration of the greed level of the authorities on the line of duty.

Soyinka dwells on the Professor's quest to explicate his traditional theme of corruption of the Nigerian institution of state autonomy. Professor's quest is part of the entire analogy drawn upon the title of the play. As indicated earlier, the road is a metaphor of life as a journey, drawn with physical and metaphysical connotation. The physical road is the road to death, but the metaphysical road serves as the "link". This perceptibly informs Nkoyo Edet's observation that:

This level fits in with the vision of the road as transition, that is, a period of transition of individuals and nations. Closely associated with this is the idea of the road of progress. Above all, however, it is the road between life and death ... that so fascinates Soyinka (83).

In this sense, the road is also Soyinka's mythological "fourth stage" linking the living, the dead, and the unborn. It is a symbol of continuity, of eternal recurrence and of interterrestrial communication between divine and human essences.

Professor walks the physical road, in his quest for the metaphysical road the Professor's ubiquitous search for the Word can be found only in death. He quibs "there are dangers in the Quest



know, but the Word may be found companion not to life, but Death" (11). The Word is the divine Logos which metamorphosed itself through the divine fiat, into the world; it is synonymous with truth, light and life. Professor learnt the Word in the course of his association with the church. He was an active member of the community church, where he often read lessons during the Sunday services, and gave Bible classes to primary school pupils at Sunday school.

The Professor's quest for communion with the truth is impossible, since it would involve rational comprehension of the divine essence the full meaning, or essence of death. Soyinka sought the tranquescence of the soul in transition. The hero in the play ignorantly sought to deny the experiential import of knowledge; seeking that knowledge of the abstract without subjecting himself to the process of transmutation. Nkoyo Edet surmises that, also reflected here is the concept of martyrdom: the chose death, which to her corroborates "... with Professor's desire to know his death without dying, and his inevitable death caused by his desire to know beyond human knowledge" (99). What comes out again and again in all these Soyinka's metaphysical plays *A Dance of the Forests*, *The Strong Breed*, *Death and the King's Horseman*, and *The Road*, - is the concept of voluntary death, in order to learn its nature, or in order to defeat it. In the course of Professor's search for the Word, death is revealed.

The most persistent meaning for the Word in the play is Death, its mystery, and its essence. The search for this meaning, for the secret or essence of death is the purpose of Professor's quest and his burden. It is a quest that is fraught with dangers as Professor himself acknowledges. Professor's death at the end of the play is the logical outcome of his quest. He can find the Word, only through self-surrender or self-sacrifice. This context coheres well with Joel Adedeji, who avers that for Professor to understand ultimate reality, he is 'stripped of his excrescences', and "goes through self apprehension to confront his bid for transcendence" (108). His quest does, in fact, terminate in death; when Professor says that Murano is the Word, he means that Murano has tasted death, and has gained knowledge of its mystery.

If Wole Soyinka's plays and other creative works have been judged unpopular because of their intricate plot structure, characterization, and an obscure and elevated language, but David Cook argues that "... a popular audience can cut across language barriers, will grasp the meanings of an appropriately presented dramatic performance, and will always prefer drama that bites deep into local concerns,..." (92). This very brilliant blend of theme and technique, or essence and means, achieves unparalleled excellence to communicate. This what Izevbaye enthuses when he contends that Soyinka's work is successful "... not merely because of the themes and attitudes in it, but because in the play Soyinka achieves an unequivocal success in the union of theme and dramatic technique,..." (52).

Through symbolism and folklore in the story of the Not-I-Bird in *Death and the King's Horseman*, Soyinka emphasises the fear of death, and proposes Elesin to us as a bold voyager who is not afraid of death. This is in contrast to the subsequent events in the play when Elesin flinches at the moment he is expected to 'dance' to die with the Alafin.

Soyinka's characterisation is still his concern in his drama with characters and figures that go for sages in the various departments of life. In *The Road*, Professor presents a curious blend of contempt by his trade, and rationality by his name. He is a notorious character with his academic title earned through prowess in forgery. This is why Nkoyo Edet avers that "... he is a sort amphibious creature,..." (84).

The names of most the characters in the play are specially chosen to represent certain features of Soyinka's concern with change and transition. The title of "Professor" was common in the 40's and 50's, when every quack and commoner assumed the name: Professor of peugeot cars, as mechanic and Professor or Doctor of wrist watches. Oyin Ogumba agrees that "the name of Professor, therefore calls to mind a whole troop of people of modest ability who are in love with big, high sounding titles" (152). Soyinka's Professor is such a man, except that in his own case, he is Professor of forgery. Professor is a stock character, the magician and cheat, who uses foul means to over-awe his crew and adherents.

Existentialism in Soyinka's dramaturgy is encapsulated in Samson in *The Road*, and Elesin in *Death and the King's Horseman*. Life for Samson and Elesin is important, and everything possible must be done to preserve it. This explains Samson's insistence to sacrifice to Ogun, not in deference to religious piety, but rather as a kind of bribe or road tax which must be paid in order to avoid trouble.



Elesin on his part defied the prerequisites of tradition, and sought life of debauchery with a little bride. He flinches when he was to perform his destined role as the King's horseman unto the great beyond. Samson's voluptuousness is exposed when he vowed to Salubi to enjoy life to the lees, if he becomes a millionaire a tall dream: "God I chop life make I tell true. I go chop the life so tey God go jealous me ... (6-7). Ogumba remarks that Soyinka deliberately chose the name Samson for this character because "Soyinka's Samson (like the biblical Samson) has strength, even courage, but lacks a double share of wisdom" (152).

In contrast to the above-mentioned epicureans in *The Road*, Kotonu is a special man. The dramatist uses him to achieve the idealistic redeemer status in our society. He cuts the image of society's engine of recuperation, but lacks the patience and endurance the vocation requires. That is why Ogumba indicts that "... Kotonu keeps running into trouble on the road, despite his diligence and ability: ..." (154).

Characters like Say Tokyo Kid, Particulars Joe and Chief-in-Town are nominal labels to explain the double standard of contemporary society. Say Tokyo Kid is a Nigerian been-to of American extraction with the gangsterism of the Texan Cow-boys film stars. Particulars Joe is a typical crude policeman on the Nigerian or African scene, dubious and a great supporter of disorder and corruption on the highways with traffic. He supports Professor's antics with an aduring alure. Chief-in-Town is a classic semblance of moral debauchery amongst the elites of our society. They are the hirelings of the political class to rake havoc for little pittance, and feigned recognition by the powers-that-be.

### Conclusion

The relationship between the two studied plays rests on the interloping or sequentiality in the treatment of the subject of death. In *Death and the King's Horseman*, we are analysing the very process of death, with its greater significance to the larger community that is involved in it, while, in *The Road*, we are concerned with the essence and mystery of death. What constitutes the basic symbolic structure in the two plays studied here is the spiritual significance of Soyinka's concern with the Yoruba belief in the transitional stage between life and death. The images associated with the road and Elesin Oba in these plays, are thematically poignant indicators of Soyinka's obsession with the subject of death.

The theme of death does not only strike the very centre of Soyinka's dramatic vision, but, also constitutes a literary connect between dramatic art in Africa and the rest of the World. This places the works at an advantage of wider readership and comprehension, since death is a universal phenomenon.

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