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TROPES OF TRANSITION IN WOLE SOYINKA'S *DEATH AND THE KING'S HORSEMAN*

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Abstract:

*This paper examines the role of non-verbal communication as an index of the pace and progress of plot in African ritual drama, using Wole Soyinka's *Death and the King's Horseman* as a representative model. The purpose is to attempt an analysis of the resource of traditional dramatic motifs, especially dance, as tropes of movement and meaning in African ritual drama. The play has received distinguished critical attention is Soyinka's major, and perhaps, unique contribution to modern ritual drama; this paper examines tropes of transition in *Death and the King's Horseman* especially in the context of the Yoruba social semiotic of dance.*

Introduction

1. Symbolism in African Dramatic Discourse

In oral cultures, with their context-bound quasi-literary forms, the use of signs and symbols find their amplest outlets particularly in dramatic situations. This is because, such non-verbal tropes have their origins in a collectively shared matrix of social reference and, therefore, constitute an elaborate paradigm of social semiotics in their own right; it is also important to note that, in the context of ritual drama and enactment such non-verbal, quasi-literary devices are first and foremost histrionic, i.e., they constitute a distinct metalanguage in the elaborate idiom of drama and the stage and their modes of performance. One such idiom is dance. Often, dance functions as the avenue through which the subliminal consciousness of religious and secular experience is enacted and expressed. The line between secular and religious consciousness is often blurred in cultures of orality; the profane and the sacred will often co-exist and whichever earns free play may simply be a matter of either import or occasion. A dramatist working in the ritual mode will know how to handle such a loaded interplay of binary social and cosmic energies; Wole Soyinka, who is the finest mythopoeist and myth-maker that Africa has, carries that mediation through in a remarkable degree in *Death and the King's Horseman*. For instance, Ajayi (1986) reveals the role of dance kinesics in social and religious rites of passage; her work is a brilliant study of traditional dance communication in festival and rites-of-passage celebrations of the Yoruba people of Nigeria. The result is a colourful merging of multi-faceted codes as unified meaning-processors. It is important to keep up research in this area of cultural scholarship, the better to define precisely what characteristics make our dramas in Africa unique.

The Nigerian playwright John Pepper Clark-Bekederemo has opined that Nigeria (and the continent as a whole) is very rich and diverse in indigenous dramatic forms; he identifies the elements of African theatre as mime, costume, dance, interpolated expressions, spirit, trance, audience participation, songs and drumming (Clark, 1981). B. M. Ibitokun has done research in a related area using the Gelede mask-drama as case study (1993). As Oyin Ogunba (1978, p.9) asserted, the Greek concepts of drama possess definitional boundaries which are alien to performance philosophies of other cultures. Ibitokun rejects the classical Aristotelian position guiding the principles and characteristics of drama,

mainly tragedy and comedy, and makes an argument why Aristotle's model in *The Poetics* may not serve contemporary African. He makes a case for a need to found the study of African drama on an intrinsic epistemology of what constitutes "drama" in Africa (1993p.14). Ibitokun's study of traditional African feminism, as represented in the Gelede mask drama, affords us an insight into African ritual drama in one of its most dynamic forms – dance.

Dance is an expression of movement within space, so its gestures are also most likely to be determined – dictated sometimes, perhaps – by the very nature of the space itself. The idiom of language may seem to carry universal appeal in drama, done as it is in the universal currency of human speech; none the less, *gestus* in dance carries as much appeal, particularly because it, too, taps into a distinctive sociolect in the ritual effect of body language. Language in oral societies is poetic and is characterized by densely symbolic diction. Proverbs and idioms are intrinsic elements of African dialogue and these naturally are reflected in traditional drama and theatre; both the secular and the religious enjoy equal prominence in the deployment of language in the folk imagination. As Ogunba (1978) has noted, any "strict categorisation" of aesthetic guidelines for religious and secular art is alien to many African cultures:

In oral communities, there are no strict lines of division between secular and religious experiences and both are mostly governed by common social and religious aesthetic principles. Consequently, dramatic experience is realized as a sublimation of both the spiritual and the physical. It is always difficult to determine what a religious occasion is in a traditional African context. Such strict categorisation into religious and secular, or religious and political, seems alien to the spirit and nature of the traditional African. (p.14)

Among the Yoruba people of Nigeria this employment of symbolic dialogue is a major feature of traditional theatre. Non-verbal communication is prominent in Yoruba drama and theatre because the informing culture, like most others around the world, has never really considered words enough in themselves as self-contained vehicles of meaning. Theatre can in this sense, almost be defined as distinguishable from drama by the fact of the non-primacy of the verbal communication that is so central to drama; theatre – particularly what is called "total theatre" – is a panoply of visual and histrionic strategies in which "the mere words" may not always count for much. In non-scribal cultures such as the Yoruba, traditional theatre also drew its strength from other traditional fiestas and spectacles, such as masquerades, dance, drumming, costumery, etc. Wole Soyinka once referenced this pre-eminence of theatre in African drama:

*African drama is sophisticated in idiom. Our forms of theatre are quite different from literary drama. We use spontaneous dialogue, folk music, simple stories and relevant dances to express what we mean. Our theatre uses stylized forms as its basic accepted disciplines. I am trying to integrate these forms into the drama of the English language. (Lewis Nkosi, *Home and Exile*, London: Heinemann, 1965, p.108)*

Dance on the Yoruba stage outside of ritual was seen only as a prelude to something more profound, and Wole Soyinka was taking a major step in utilizing dance as the central vessel of communication in *Death and the King's Horseman*. In point of fact, however, it may not be correct to suggest that Soyinka was the first Yoruba dramatist to utilize dance as a serious vehicle of commentary for tragedy; Duro Ladipo's *Oba Koso* (1964) is enacted through dance. The play is an example of what

is known in African theatre scholarship as “Yoruba opera”, a play enacted in song, chants and dance and whose vehicle is a fusion of Yoruba incantatory music and poetry and the vigorous Yoruba *bata* drumming. The Yoruba opera is different from the European opera in a number of ways. The Western opera is performed by actors who are also primarily singers – tenors and sopranos particularly; in the Yoruba version the actors in opera may not be trained musicians as such, but are often well versed and skilled in the delivery of traditional chants, songs and invocations, which will often come in the trilling, strident falsetto of Yoruba *rara* poetry. Like Western opera which is a combination of a libretto and a score, Yoruba opera of the literary kind has a fixed, written script, but many of the songs may be improvised from a limitless pool of traditional songs. Drumming is rare in Western opera but is central to the Yoruba; dance can occur in the Western, in the Yoruba it is an integral part of the fusion of song, chant, speech and dance. Western opera has the recitative form, through which the plot is carried forward and which may also be delivered as ordinary speech; it also utilizes *arias*, or the *virtuoso* deliveries in song which enrich the musical *affect* of the subject or theme of love or death or life through pathos. Yoruba opera similarly shuttles back and forth between the written text and both song and its accompanying drumming and dance. Often, lines are also delivered in ordinary speech. There is an orchestra in both traditions of opera, but the Western is a bit more elaborate and set; the Yoruba opera ensemble consists mainly of *bata* drummers

Ladipo’s *Oba Ko So* is a tragedy, the finest in the Yoruba language; it is not a risk to suggest that *Death and the King’s Horseman* was heavily influenced by it. (Incidentally, there is a scene in each play which recalls the other; it is the hanging scene, first of Sango and then of Elesin Oba. In the legend of Sango the king was supposed to have hanged himself from an *oyan* tree; in the stage rendering the hanging is always enacted as self-strangulation. Elesin Oba’s own self-strangulation is similarly redolent of the same ungovernable, self-destructive, daemonic energy which rips Sango apart.) It may be posited that Soyinka’s play is a *stepping up* in formal technique for the Yoruba opera, from Duro Ladipo’s folk mode to the formal latitudes available to a Royal Court Theatre-trained dramaturg. Without any question, however, dance is very central to both plays, not just as a sop to “African theatre” or something “thrown in”, but as an integral trope in the elaborate social semiotic which Soyinka has built for his communication of his long-standing preoccupation with a definition of the concept of Yoruba tragedy and ritual as a philosophical outlook.

2. Analysis of the play

The play opens with the pomp and pageantry which characterizes a great celebration; it is an occasion that calls for celebration indeed, because the late King’s chief companion is about to embark on a ritual dance which will culminate in his voluntary suicide, so that according to tradition, he can accompany his royal friend and master to the ancestral realms. In the olden days in Yoruba kingdom of Oyo as well as in a number of others including Ile-Ife, an Olokun Esin (Custodian of the Reins of the King’s Royal Stable) was appointed with the coronation of each new monarch; he was a glorified second who figuratively held the reins of power even as the king reigned. The ceremonial chief horseman lived a life of royalty of a kind; he could have everything he wanted for the entire tenure of his office. However, he enjoyed such custom, including near-devotional attention from the townspeople and the king’s court, because he knew and understood that when the king passed on his horseman also had to follow him.

That is the sociological background to the perfervid atmosphere of the opening scene in *Death and the King’s Horseman*; Elesin Oba has enjoyed the boon of office and now it is time to earn it. His

mind can entertain no doubts or ambivalence, and that single-mindedness is also the sole prerequisite for the ritual act of self-immolation which he has a duty to perform. His action will necessarily ensure cosmic cordiality between the worlds of the living and the dead and a general harmonization of the spiritual and physical universe. The community is anxiously awaiting this last brave act which, apart from the religious significance, will also represent a source of pride and honour to *Elesin's* family and the community at large. *Elesin* enters the stage to an atmosphere of joyful and infectious dance celebration, and he is escorted by his drummers and praise-singers. The stage direction describes him as 'a man of enormous vitality', who 'speaks, dances and sings with that infectious enjoyment of life which accompanies all his actions'.

There is already here, a distinct sense of disharmony in the image of the youthful lover of life standing on the thin edge of the transitional gulf. There is an eerie feeling when we see this vibrant, vital man, dancing, who is going to take his own life. *Elesin* hastens away from his retinue of drummers and praise-singers as he heads steadily for the women's stalls in the market place. The urgency inherent in his dance here significantly highlights the internal conflict going on in his mind. Rather than seek the mystic direction to the world beyond, we have a premonition even so early that *Elesin* prefers to call out to flesh; the drumming and invocations therefore seem to be a desperate effort to remind and recall him back to his tasks and hasten him along the way. The kinetic ambivalence of his dance in this early section reveals the hero's reluctance to accomplish his duty. As he arrives at the women's stalls, they run to do his bidding and he is soon decked in resplendent robes of every texture and variety. The women are naturally wary of annoying *Elesin* 'this day of all days' (p.16). As he dances to the dictates of the drums, his dance gestures in this state express the fusion of the deeper logic of time space and action. In other words, *Elesin's* dance magnifies the semantic content of other sub-codes and these meanings are reflexively delivered in his dance dynamics. As will be revealed, the most significant of these sub-codes is the spatial one, the market grounds, which provides the iconic stage for *Elesin's* dance. As a spatial code, the market is transposed into the larger human arena of the earth. *Elesin's* dance in the market grounds, therefore, symbolizes generic Man about to depart the world and bidding farewell to life.

An understanding of the symbolism encoded in the image of the market within the Yoruba system of cosmic consciousness will further shed light on the importance of this spatial code. In traditional societies, the market grounds occupy a central position in the metaphysical consciousness of the people. For the Yoruba people, the market grounds represent the lone, common meeting point of all members of the community. Hence all the living, poor and rich, young and old are united by the common service of the communal market. In this sense, the market represents the larger cosmic arena of the living; it is a metaphor for the space of the living, or the world into which man is born, and where he transacts his divinely appointed tasks and departs at twilight or dusk when he dies. A Yoruba proverb says, "Aiyé l'òjá, orun n'ìlẹ̀" (The world is a marketplace, heaven is home). Human existence is thus seen as a temporary state – a sojourn – one of the tripartite stages of the cyclic rotation of existence. Within this larger context of consciousness, the market assumes a supernatural dimension as a trope for Soyinka's pet theme of the in-between spaces in the cosmic experience of transition. Although the traditional Yoruba world view recognizes only the three stages of the world of the living (man), the dead (ancestors) and the unborn (the seed or hope of the future; "abiku", etc.), Soyinka has theorized a "fourth stage", or the "chthonic realm", the gulf of transition" and the "home of the tragic spirit":

Yoruba metaphysics holds the view of there being three major areas of existence. What you might call the traditional Yoruba sensibility is constantly in touch with and aware of these three. It's the world of the unborn, the world of the dead, and the world of the living. There is a mutual correspondence between these three areas. But I believe there is also a fourth which is not often articulated but which I recognize as implicit. It is not made obviously concrete by the rituals, by the philosophy that is articulated by the Ifa priests. This is the fourth area -- the area of transition. It is the chthonic realm, the area of the really dark forces, the really dark spirits, and it also is the area of stress of the human will.

(Quoted from "Class Discussion" (1974) in In Person: Achebe, Awoonor, and Soyinka, ed. Karen L. Morell, pp. 117-118. See also "The Fourth Stage" (1973) in Myth, Literature and the African World (1976), pp. 140-160.

For Soyinka the elusiveness of the Yoruba tragic experience inheres in this space which is suspended between three alternative realities, and its most central character is the threat of psychic dissociation which it imposes upon the tragic spirit daring or crossing that "gulf". In *Death and the King's Horseman* as in Soyinka's two essays cited above, that space of transition is represented by trance, or the loss of any consciousness of self, especially as carried through or brought upon through dance; trance and dance are two inseparable halves in Yoruba traditional religion, particularly in the worship of Obatala (Orisa Ala, Oosa Ala, Oxala, etc.)

The time of day within which the action is set also has a relevance to the thematic direction of the dance. Twilight or dusk is a universal symbol for the approach of death. That the action is set at dusk is an indicator of the end of the market day and a metaphor for Elesin's dance, at that hour, as his farewell to life as he approaches the transitional gulf. Aware that his last hour is rapidly approaching, Elesin hastens to the women's stalls saying:

The market is the long-suffering home of my spirit and the women are packing up to go...pg10

To further strengthen the idea of transitoriness encoded in the image of the market, the word 'passage' also contributes to the significance of the dance as a trope of flux, traffic and transition, as opposed to the idea of settled sedentariness. The word 'passage' projects the idea of a corridor between points, it connotes a space of transition; in this case, it is a symbol of the gulf of separation and departure. Clearly, therefore, in the market scene Soyinka, the theorist of tragedy in the fashion of Friedrich Nietzsche, is laying the ground plan and the template for his demonstration, through Elesin Oba, of his theory of the "Fourth Stage"; Elesin Oba's "self-dissolution" (Soyinka's own expression) will be aborted by the colonial intervention, but he belatedly carries it through much later when loss of face proves to be worse than voluntary ritual suicide.

From this point, Elesin commences his riddling dance across the market grounds. His story is the proverbial hunting of Man by Death, personified in the Not-I bird, a mystical image of death. The riddle depicts the constant flight of man from the bird. Elesin reaches the climax of the story as he reveals how he, the all-time hero, makes the ultimate sacrifice by confronting the bird. Rather than escape like the bird's former victims, he embraces the bird and invites it to dine with him. Thus placated, the bird flies happily away. During the duration of the enactment of the Not-I riddle, *Elesin's* dance no longer shows any gusto or vigorous kinetic response to the drumming as his story leads the audience to believe. This laxity in *kinesic* response is an intimation of the internal conflict

which Elesin is undergoing. In Yoruba, “Not-I” translates as “*Emi ko*”; its self-abnegation is a loaded trope for moral abdication or evasion, more grievous than, say, the American civic charge of “passing the buck”. Elesin recognizes that the task he has to perform is not one that is open to individual choice, so he embraces the moral enforcement of the riddle. Clearly, then, the riddle of the Not-I Bird is a parable about the sweet-and-sour letter of the office of a ritual carrier who comes in the mold of a Yoruba custodian of the reins of the king’s stables; Elesin Oba has lapped up and fed fat on the perks and sinecures of that office, now when its duty of fealty beckons there is little or no avenue left open to him by way of individual choice or assertion. He has supped and basked in the graces of the king, now it is Elesin’s turn to play enthusiastic host to the bird of death. The Yoruba have a proverb on that moral relationship in the duty of fealty which is about a bird: “Eiyele kii ba onile je, ba onile mu, ko wa d’ojo iku ko ye’ri” (A house pigeon does not wine and dine with its owner and abandon him in death).

The dilemma confronting Elesin Oba is not merely “literary” or “dramatic”; we need to bear in mind that Soyinka’s play was inspired by an actual historical incident in mid-century (c. 1946) in which a sitting Olokun Esin in the present-day kingdom of Oyo somehow defaulted in honouring the ritual need to die with his *Alaafin* king. More recently rumours of a similar incident have enjoyed national publicity and been received with guffaws. An unconfirmed “Abobaku” (the King’s ritual second, like an Olokun Esin) to the late Ooni of Ile-Ife Oba Okunade Sijuade was rumoured to have absconded upon hearing of his liege lord’s passing; for weeks in the month of August 2015 the story made both the newspaper and Internet rounds. Later a response surfaced on the Internet that deserves to be quoted at some length:

Quite a number of no-truths and distortion has been written regarding the eloping of an entity called ‘Abobaku’. In Ile-Ife, the person so referred to is called ‘Saarun’, head of the ‘Emeses’ who are stewards to a reigning Ooni. The Saarun is the head and closest aide who must go everywhere the Ooni goes. It follows in the days of hold (sic) that upon the demise of an Ooni, his most trusted aide and steward will (sic) be interred with him to continue his life of service to his master and as well show his loyalty.

I personally know (sic) the Saarun that served late Oba Adesoji Aderemi (late Chief Yaya Arasanmi) (sic) While Oba Aderemi passed away in 1980, his late Saarun passed on in 1987, and seven clear years afterwards. The current Saarun will not be buried with late Oba Sijuade as the practice has since been stopped in Ile-Ife. So there is no need to elope. I am a proud son of Ile-Ife and I am well grounded in the traditions and cultures of my people. It will not happen. Lanre Akintilo
(<https://www.naij.com/518810-ooni-ife-burial-truth-alleged-abobaku.html>; accessed Saturday, October 24, 2015, 24.10.15)

If we suspect reluctance and indeterminacy in Elesin Oba in the play’s opening scenes we should understand why the playwright has factored that emotional response from a votary into the rites of passage he has to perform. However, the audience is unprepared when at the end of the just concluded riddle about the Not-I bird Elesin’s mood undergoes a sudden change as he catches a glimpse of a young maiden, and his dance suddenly suggests the action of a strutting cockerel. Elesin seems to have forgotten that he had just called himself a master of his fate when he declared:

When the hour comes, watch me dance along the narrowing path glazed by the sole of my great forebears. My soul is eager I shall not turn aside (pg.14)

Despite Elesin's verbal resolutions however, from his gestures at this point his dance begins to suggest a dramatic change from a spiritual dance of death to a belated dance of life, redolent of sensuality and hedonism in gestural style and mood. And so, Elesin is confronted by the first major obstacle on the path to his victory in the form of the betrothed virgin. His submission to this temptation immediately recalls the warning of his praise-singer that Elesin should

... *beware. The hands of women also weaken the unwary...* (pg.10)

But the protagonist makes a pact with his fate when he responds to his praise-singer that:

... *the smell of their flesh, their sweat, the smell of indigo on their cloth, this is the last air I wish to breathe as I go to meet my great forebears.* (pg.10)

3. Kinesics of Dance in *Death and the King's Horseman*

The evaluation of dance semantics in *Death and the King's Horseman* reveals a *structure* which may be appreciated as three inter-related movements. The first and the most important of these movements is the *Hero's dance*. The second is the *Complementary dance*, represented by the dance gestures of all other ritual participants. The third is what may be termed the historical *Indexical dance*. These three gestural forms collectively contribute to the kinetic content of the play.

3.1. The Hero's Dance

This dance embodies the thematic nucleus of the plot which propels and unites the entire action of the play. The hero's dance may be appreciated at two distinct levels: these are the *mystic* and *human* levels.

3.2. The Mystic Level

This is the level which expresses most pertinently the ritual content of the dance. To understand and fully appreciate the mystic dimension, an excursion into the universe of the Yoruba mind is necessary. As earlier mentioned, the plot is based on the necessity for Elesin to accompany his royal friend and master on the journey to the world beyond by voluntarily taking his own life. In the Yoruba system of cosmic interpretation, existence is understood as a continuous state of being. The soul is believed to revolve between three states of existence, the world of the unborn, the world of the living and the world of the ancestors. Of the three worlds, that of the ancestors is considered to be the most ideal, possibly because it is the nearest in cosmic hierarchy to the world of the gods. Moreover, the traditional reverence for age hierarchy in this culture and the mystic powers which attend the state make the beings of the ancestral realm a prestigious group; for instance, ancestors are believed to have the powers and prerogatives to influence the lives of their former earthly societies for good or ill. Ancestors, however, are mostly benevolent and act in the capacity of protecting their families and communities.

In rare cases an offended ancestor may visit his wrath on his earthly community with very disastrous consequences for the living. One of the causes of such phenomena may be the failure of his community to perform expected burial rites or the outright neglect of certain aspects of the ritual ceremony. An awareness of these unwelcome possibilities is the reason behind the community's anxiety to ensure that Elesin does not bungle his ritual duty to the departed king; everyone is therefore at pains to indulge his every wish and cajole him on the journey towards physical dissolution, so that his spirit may accompany that of his king on the transition to the ancestral realm.

From the mystic angle, therefore, Elesin's dance simulates his progression towards the transitional gulf in culturally codified gestures. His dance kinesics may thus be seen as a leitmotiv for his anguish in the transitional passage, which would necessarily convey him to the ancestral stage. The mystic level of this dance features two distinct stages which reveal his spiritual struggle. This part is represented in his dance gestures, beginning from the opening of the play to the meeting with the betrothed virgin. From the opening of the play, Elesin's dance gestures display a laxity of movement which immediately suggests this reluctance. He fails to respond to the music and the drumming of his praises in the market place. He is fully conscious of his actions and is obviously still situated in the material world. This is informed by the sensual images of his speech. As he hurries along, he insists that the 'smell' of the women's 'flesh' and 'their sweat' are the last memories he wants as company on his mystic journey.

However, from the moment of the enactment of the Not-I riddle, Elesin's dance becomes progressively involved in the ritual ceremony. Still, it is obvious that Elesin's spirit is burdened with an unfinished transaction with the living and this becomes more evident when he makes his unexpected demand for the young virgin. Up till this point, his dance gestures have been loaded with ambivalence, a kinesic indication of his reluctance and lack of enthusiasm for his duty. From the moment of physical satiation however, Elesin's dance appears progressively entranced but it is obviously from the heaviness of the fatigue attendant on his motions; despite his 'transfigured' countenance one suspects that the necessary 'transubstantiation' from the physical self to the spiritual may have been compromised by his contact with the virgin. Guided by the mystic messages of the *Gbedu* drums, Elesin begins to 'see' and trace the mystic road to the ancestral world. In sympathy with Elesin's dance, the atmosphere is correspondingly charged with potent spiritual presence; in the most poignant sequence of the play, Elesin can now only hear voices very faintly as he begins to lose all consciousness of his surroundings. More importantly, the hero's dance at this mystic level reveals the symbolic conflict more dramatically, as expressed in the dance dynamics. In particular, the meeting of the hero and the young virgin represents the climax in the struggle between the forces of life and of death as a reflection of the hero's state of mind. At the moment of confrontation with the virgin, the mystic progression of Elesin's dance makes a sudden turn from the dance of death to that of life. Rather than continue the spiritual ascent towards physical dissolution and mystic elevation, Elesin is suddenly plunged back to earth, to the most carnal physical level. The result is a loss of the spiritual link with the mystic messages being dictated by the *gbedu* drums. Aided by his already weakened resolve, the nuptial communion completes the process of mystic disorientation and leads to his final tragedy.

The mystic essence of the dance is thus realized as that intangible but potent awareness of unseen forces and situations. It is the very opposite of physical or material presence, this intangibility making it all the more disturbing, so that, in spite of the quietness of the night in the District Officer's impoverished prison cell, Elesin knows that 'the world is not at peace'. As a dramatic device, the mystic message encoded in the dance which would be otherwise inaccessible to the audience is realised in the mimed kinesics of the dance. Dance, therefore, functions in a major capacity as a de-mystification device; it is also the medium through which the entire ritual plot finds meaning and is decoded to the audience.

Soyinka accomplishes these *phases of transition* through the use of the different dance forms associated with the worship of Yoruba divinities. The most vigorous of those dances belongs in the

worship of Sango, and *bata* drumming, or another instrument in its lieu, accompanies it; a *bata* dancer dances vigorously, energetically, in celebration of the vitality of life. That is the Elesin Oba who embraces his destiny at the beginning of the play with aplomb. The dance of Orisa Ala is not so vigorous but it, too, entails a lot of nuanced movement and body torsions. The dance of Orisa Ala is the most prone to *egun* or trance – it is inseparable from trance; when it attains such a level it becomes more languorous, and the dancer is all a body of sinewy fluidity whose movements can be seen to come from the world beyond. The Elesin who is to dance into the other world *could not have done so* outside of the agency of the kind of music and spirit possession which belong to the votaries of Obatala; the song, “Alele le, awo mi lo” (Night is falling, time for the initiate to make his exit), which may be associated with the Ogboni cult, is really a signal that such a stage of possession has been attained or is about to be attained. Lastly, there is also Ogboni music whose signature instrument is the *Gbedu* drum; an elder of Elesin Oba’s calibre in the Yoruba society of his day had to have been a leading light in the Ogboni, the preeminent male cult of his people. It is the music of the Ogboni which is continually referenced through the *Gbedu* drumming in the play, but the playwright has needed to weave in and out of at least three different *liturgical* dance traditions in order to represent the different phases of transition in music and dance. Even if the specific instruments associated with particular liturgical music and dance traditions are not available the orchestra or ensemble generating the accompanying Yoruba music will still need to play in their liturgical modes.

4. The Physical Level

This is the level at which the human dimension of the hero's struggle can be appreciated; from this angle the spiritual and mental conflict to which *Elesin* is subjected is revealed. The root of his dilemma stems from his awareness that the decision to die or not to die is no longer his own choice to make, but the part of him that craves life is not so willing to let *go*! In this sense his dance should be seen as a mental struggle between Elesin's sense of *bounden duty* to his community and his natural and human aversion to the idea of suicide. In Elesin's ambivalence is contained the playwright's insight into the nature of being in the midst of tragic crisis, “In the symbolic disintegration and retrieval of the protagonist ego is reflected the destiny of being” (1976: 27). The Elesin Oba whom we see is *dancing*, and there is no way to tell what turmoil is going on in his mind. But even so early the mind of the ‘protagonist hero’ is conflicted already, and the destiny of his world – his society – on whose behalf he has set forth, is compromised even though they themselves have no idea; the psychic rupture only becomes known later. Elesin's ‘disintegration’ is both a human and a ritual fact, but there is no ‘retrieval’, a loaded term which only avatars in their roles on behalf of humankind are imbued with. An Ogun or Obatala, a Thor or Prometheus may go into disintegration – into ‘dissolution’, torn apart by ‘cosmic winds’, but their essence as gods always ensures their inevitable re-assembly or ‘retrieval’; not so for mortal man – when he reneges or fails in his ritual duty to myth as Elesin does, the consequence is not his alone to bear but also his society's. The tragedy of Elesin Oba occurs not at the point when he spies a young woman whom he insists on sleeping with nor when he strangles himself in shame and frustration, it does precisely at the point when his *quester* spirit – his ‘protagonist ego’ – is sundered in the ‘cosmic winds’ (Soyinka's own expression) of his own ambivalence, equivocation and reluctance, all of which the audience can only faintly suspect couched, as they all are, in Elesin's own quibbling.

Although this spiritual conflict is not expressly voiced, the women nevertheless can detect Elesin's reluctance judging from his dance gestures; it is this which inspires their suspicion of his weakening resolve. In their anxiety, they question Elesin:

- Women:** You will not delay?
- Elesin:** Where the storm pleases, and when, it directs the giants of the forest when friendship summons is when true comrade goes.
- Women:** Nothing will hold you back?
- Elesin:** Nothing. What! Has no one told you yet? I go to keep my friend and master company. Who says the mouth does not believe in "NO, I have chewed all that before?" I say I have... (p.15)

Despite the reiteration of his vows, his true state of mind is revealed in a moment of unguarded utterance. As Iyaloja prepares to present Elesin with the bride, she says:

Now we must prepare your bridal chamber. Then these same hands will lay your shrouds... (pg.23)

Elesin's response betrays his irritation and he scolds Iyaloja:

Must you be so blunt? (recovers) Well weave your shrouds, but let the fingers of my bride seal my eyelids with earth and wash my body... (pg.23)

In this instance, Elesin is at his most vulnerable. He misses his last chance for an intervention with Iyaloja, who had only intended to jolt him back to reality with her calculatedly brutal language, "Now we *must* prepare your bridal chamber (read: "because you so insist"). Then these same hands will lay your shrouds (read: "surely"). The *naming* of the unspoken and dreaded duty brings Elesin into closer communion with his fearful fate. At this point the mental disorientation of the hero is most dynamically portrayed. Just as it represents the climax in conflict, so does it symbolize the highest point in the battle between the spirit and the flesh, Elesin's sense of duty to his king and the community is at war with his natural inclination towards self-preservation. Elesin has relished life where it is all sweetness, buoyed by agencies whose names he has not cared to find out; now those same forces have turned against him, for it is the tasting of life which makes the parting from it so difficult. Man (in this instance, the generic Elesin) will not willingly take his own life (unless that life has proved unbearable); where body and mind are in harmony, the idea of death is an alien and disturbing proposition, a point which is highlighted in the reactions of the various victims of the Not-I riddle. Fate, or plain circumstance, contrives to bring the hero of tragedy down by turning all the odds against him, so much so he will begin to prefer death to life; thus, death of the soul *within* is usually a fore-runner of the physical death which we as mere mortals lament only long after the tragic severance itself has taken place *within*, in the tragic hero. At the beginning of the play Elesin had replied Olohun Iyo in one of their numerous repartees on the nature of being and duty:

Life is honour, it ends when honour ends (pg.15)

Having failed his people, *Elesin* is stripped of all that has made life worth living, that is, the respect of his people and his honoured position as an elder. Finally, confronted by the sight of his son's corpse, his shame completes his mental and spiritual downfall. He takes his own life at this point.

5. The Complementary dance

The Complementary dance, as the title suggests, is made up of those dance features which complement the gestures of the hero and collectively enhance the semantic content of the total dance movement. The complementary dance will be analyzed as it relates to other sub-codes as a unified communication medium.

The major actors here are the market women led by the *Iyaloja*. Their dance, even more than that of the hero, is a reinforcement of the mystic content of the ritual dance. Usually, traditional culture reserves a position of high authority for a select group of women who are spiritually endowed with mystic powers for the protection of the community against evil forces. Despite their relative physical weakness, their seemingly mysterious powers in the process of conception and birth bestow on their gender much awe. Furthermore, women in traditional society are perceived to be more amenable to the logic of the supernatural; therefore, they enjoy considerable regard as "our mothers". 'Iyaloja', the title of the leader of the market women in *Death and the King's Horseman* 'Iyaloja' translates as, 'mother of the market grounds' or 'doyenne of market women'. Considering the role of the marketplace within the cosmic consciousness of the people, it becomes clear why *Iyaloja* is addressed by the other women as the mother of the "teeming world market"; the market is their own domain where their word is law. It should not be difficult to appreciate why their dance, done as a *college* around *Elesin* in demonstration of their endorsement of him, both broadens and enriches the spatial arena of *Elesin's* dance.

One is compelled to think, therefore, that if the dance of the market women was joyous and celebratory at the beginning, from the time *Elesin* begins to hanker for virgin blood the market women's dance will have to *signify* some sort of reluctance or lack of coordination, to signify a relationship between themselves and *Elesin* which has suddenly gone awry. In similar fashion the praise-singer's masterly invocations of *Elesin's* honorifics in his *oriki* or lineage praise poetry in no-time give way to barbed criticisms. Both the women's dance and *Olohun-iyo's* chants – the latter particularly – are intended initially to encourage and speed *Elesin* along through his rites of passage; *Iyaloja* plays midwife, the mistress of ceremonies, and that is why *Elesin Oba's* moral failure at a critical point in the rites of transition hits the leader of the market women the most. The young virgin girl whom *Elesin* has set his eyes and mind on is betrothed to *Iyaloja's* own son; she is torn – *torn, not conflicted like Elesin* – between her duty to custom and society and her love for her son and her own desire for the best for him in the choice of an untainted life partner. In the end, *Iyaloja* becomes truly majestic in the way she so adroitly negotiates the horrible pass in which *Elesin* has placed her and accepts that *Elesin Oba* can have the young woman.

The semantic content of her dance, therefore, is both protective and cajoling. Accompanied by the women, *Iyaloja* cajoles, flatters and pleads with the hero, using subtle and sometimes unveiled rhetoric to re-orientate him back towards his duty. For her, nothing is to be spared to ensure *Elesin's* happiness on his last day with the living in order to aid a favourable intercession with the ancestors. *Iyaloja* avers:

Only the curses of the departed are to be feared. The claims of one whose foot is on the threshold of their abode surpasses even the claims of blood. It is impiety even to place hindrances in their ways (pg.21).

The other half of the Complementary dance is made up of the dance semantics of the praise-singers and drummers. Their role, in addition to producing a musical background to *Elesin's* dance, also features a kinetic contribution to the ritual progression of the dance. In traditional society, more so among the Yorubas, drummers are often also dancers. The very act of drumming (especially where the instrument is light enough to be hung over the shoulder by a strap, thus aiding ease of body movement), requires accompanying specialised, eloquent body and facial gestures which combine with the drumming to communicate the unspoken message of the dance.

Because in *Death and the King's Horseman*, the dominant thematic medium is realised through dance, kinesics and all other sub-codes are reflected or understood through the gestural dynamics of the actors. Thus, the dance of the praise-singer and drummers becomes a mode of articulating their different roles or contributions to Elesin's ritual passage. While the praise-singer aids Elesin's dance through his exhortations and incantations (designed to cajole the hero), the drummers, especially through the ritual *Gbedu* drums direct his dance in coded mystic overtones. In addition to his role as praise-singer, Olohun-iyó acts in the capacity of a medium for the spirit of the departed king. As *Elesin* becomes entranced towards the end of his dance, *Olohun-iyó* is heard articulating the words of the deceased king. If at the instance of his possession by the spirit of the late king, it is not clear to the audience whose voice is being heard, such doubt is certainly dispensed with later, during the dialogue between *Elesin* and the praise-singer:

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.*

Elesin: *A dog does not outrun the hand that feeds it meat. A horse that throws its rider slows down to a stop. Elesin Alafin trusts no beasts with messages between a king and his companion.*

Praise-singer: *If you get lost my dog will track the hidden path to me. (pg.42)*

Thus, through the character of the praise-singer, another element of African drama, spirit possession, is demonstrated in *Death and the King's Horseman*. The enactment of the state of trance, or *egun*, is actually *Elesin's* and not *Olohun-iyó's* in his own role the praise-singer is astute and always clear-headed, and the most he ever comes near disequilibrium or discombobulation of any kind is when he almost breaks down in tears when it initially seems *Elesin* has finally crossed over successfully. The praise-singer represents a bardic tradition in Yoruba folklore which is founded upon the perspicacity of the poetic voice and vision – he cannot afford to 'lose it', otherwise the *affect* he should be *working up* in others and which should not work him up in turn would get out of hand. On the other hand *Elesin* is the vehicle for the ritual passage: he must be ridden, he must be possessed; for him dance is only meaningful when it culminates in a trance from which he is not expected to wake up. Through the Complementary dance, all other contributory codes such as music, rhetoric, trance, possession and those codes which are better appreciated through a stage performance are comprehensively delivered in the dance semantics of the participants.

6. Dance as index of Historical Foreground

In sharp contrast to the gestural kinesics of *Elesin's* ritual dance is another distinct dance movement which serves the main purpose of situating the action within a specific historical milieu. At the beginning of the fourth scene, (the only one featuring this dance movement), action commences with a poor rendition of music to the waltz of the gaggle of colonial expatriates celebrating the visit of a member of the British royalty. This reinforces the impression of 'tawdry redolence' already indicated in the stage direction. The waltz is a dance step from another clime, intrusive as the whole of the colonial enterprise was itself intrusive, and the musical accompaniment which generates its responses in the motions of participants is uninspiring and bereft of luster. And so, in the world of the play there is another binary opposition, this time between the *functionality* of African ritual music and dance on the one hand, and European 'period pieces' – 'airs' – and the *decadent*, newfangled dance steps that accompany them, on the other.

Also, there is a platform of comparison between the African ritual dance and that of the European historical index. There are distinct areas in which the two gestural movements differ. The first major area is on the level of temporal or historical codification. While the waltz furnishes a specific historical peg for delimiting the story – say, as having occurred during, just before or after the Second World War (WW II) – the very spirit of the ritual dance which is the leitmotif of the drama as a whole rather transcends the constraints of time or history by inscribing the events demarcated province of myth and ritual. While the ritual dance actively enhances the dramatic progression of the plot, the waltz is simply what it is, devoid of any relevant kinetic feature, a period piece and a time-marker which bookmarks, in temporal terms, the drama of the ages unfolding in a quiet part of Africa in the world.

7. Conclusion

As a trope, dance in *Death and the King's Horseman* as well as the various codes employed to carry the ritual enactment forward, serve eminently well – due to Soyinka's adroit deployment in carrying the theme of Yoruba tragic experience through. For instance, through the eloquent kinetic dynamics of the hero's dance, musical and rhetorical signs, and in particular the spatial code of the market grounds, the theme finds new levels of symbolic representation as other sub-codes and mores are *parlayed* into dance, in a way that all relegates the verbal dialogue to an alternative frame of reference. It is a credit to the extra-linguistic function of non-verbal forms in oral cultures that the character of Joseph, the African servant of the Pilkings, is able to discern from the distant spates of drumming, the exact stage in the ritual progression of Elesin's dance. As Elesin approaches the bridal chamber, the change in ritual direction is immediately signified in drumming, so that Joseph, in the far-removed residency, is able to inform his colonial master with the confidence of an insider that the drumming sounds like the death of a great chief and then, it sounds like the wedding of a great chief... (p.30)

The point being made here is that drumming and its elaborate metalanguage are not an idle supposition, they actually exist. The Yoruba are exceptional in that regard in the way their drumming insists at all times on tapping both *tone* and *meaning* out of every drumbeat, unlike the generation of mere acoustic *sound* which marks other drumming traditions. Nominally, the Yoruba call their two faced hour-glass drum, (*gangan, dundun*, etc.), the 'talking drum', an instrument which the late venerable scholar of Yoruba culture Ulli Beier once described as 'the most versatile pressure drum in existence' in practice, however, the Yoruba do not know how to drum *except* by making every drum – *every acoustic instrument for that matter* – to "talk". A guitarist in the Western tradition will generate 'licks' and 'riffs' when he twangs, a Yoruba guitarist or trumpeter will play out a tune, in sing-along mode; when a Yoruba drummer drums those who are versed in the language can render everything he is tapping out verbally. It is also the secret behind Yoruba dance both in its aesthetic appeal and its significance as a dramatic device, such as we have seen in *Death and the King's Horseman*. In social dance the Yoruba know how to decode and interpret music from its core, so that they will begin to sway, pirouette or just move the limbs in tune with what they have determined to be the central movement of the beat. The facility enables them not only to conserve energy when they dance, since their dancing can often be spare and barely perceptible, it also enables some quite improbable "stunts" which are unique to the Yoruba dance tradition, such as dancing sitting down, lying back in bed, or in virtually any other position that some may consider incongruous. In ritual dance as evinced in *Death and the King's Horseman*, dance becomes a trope, an elaborate metalanguage for ritual enactment and communication, and only the non-initiate will question the truth of what levels and latitudes of ritual communion it is capable of. In his analysis of dance as form in

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